Targeting

by queenmab_scherzo

Summary

Steve and Bucky end up playing for rival college football teams.
In 1974, Dodgers pitcher Tommy John underwent the kind of surgical procedure that could revolutionize sports medicine.

It was an experiment at best, an act of desperation at worst.

John debuted as a rookie for the Cleveland Indians in 1963. His sinker ball forced countless batters into double plays. He was a two-time all-star and a two-hundred-game-winner. And in 1974, in the middle of a winning season and on the way to a National League Championship, he suffered permanent damage to his throwing elbow. His left arm.

Dodger physician Dr. Frank Jobe devised a radical surgery to replace the ulnar collateral ligament with a healthy tendon harvested from another part of the body—ideally, a forearm or knee. Dr. Jobe and Tommy John agreed to the operation without any pretense. The damage to his elbow was extensive, and the chances of a success were slim.

Success meant Tommy John would return to baseball as normal. Success would entail a full recovery of the athlete he once was, at peak professional performance. Success would heal whatever wounds his body had endured and restore his full potential. Failure could mean any number of outcomes, from an end to his career, to permanent damage to the ulnar nerve, to the serious complications that always accompany anesthesia and a surgical table.

The operation was a success. Today, it is known as “Tommy John surgery.”

Since 1974, dozens of professional and aspiring athletes have undergone the same procedure. Through experience and practice, it has become one of the most reliable operations in sports medicine, though it requires a substantial recovery period.

Some athletes claim that they can execute at a higher level post-surgery; they claim that their arm feels stronger, and that they can throw harder. As a result, it is not uncommon for young athletes and their parents to approach orthopedic surgeons and request a preemptive graft procedure to an uninjured arm in an effort to improve the power and control.

The belief that Tommy John surgery actually enhances physical capability, however, is a myth.

Once an athlete has recovered from the operation, he or she regains full use of a normal, healthy arm. Those who report better performance post-surgery have often spent years beforehand playing through fatigue, overuse, and injury. They have become used to working against their damaged body. This skews their perception of health versus enhancement.

Bucky has a better arm than Steve.

They’re both fifteen years old, both sophomores in high school, both habitually eat their weight in bananas and barbecue potato chips, both live alone with their moms in Brooklyn, unless you count Bucky’s stepfather, which he doesn’t.

And when they play catch at the park or by the long jump pit at school, there’s never any question. Bucky has the better arm.

He shrugs when Steve points this out. “I don’t have the accuracy you have.”
“You always hit me right in the chest.”

“Yeah, but that’s with you.”

Steve doesn’t press the issue. He doesn’t mention that they only play well together because they’ve been doing it so long.

Bucky is the kind of guy people actually want on their football team. He is the joker in the deck. He doesn’t move like other people, like he has to consider his next action, like his brain has to tell his body what to do. He moves with confidence—not the confidence of pride, but of expectation. His motion belongs in the world.

Sometimes Steve catches himself staring at Bucky when he is in motion. The steady pattern of his footwork. The lazy, perfect arc of his throwing arm, the Pythagorean precision. The way he can make even the most brutal tackle look beautiful.

The thing is, that’s not even the most impressive thing about Bucky Barnes. Sure, he’s physically gifted. But Steve knows what made him that way. Steve knows how many reps it took in the weight room and how many miles on the treadmill. He was there for most of it—not keeping pace, exactly, but acting as a spotter on the benchpress or manning the stopwatch on the short track. He does all the weight and agility training. Just not at Bucky’s level. Yet.

As one only can in high school, Bucky plays both offense and defense. He’s not the star of the team, and won’t be as long as they have a running back like Gabe Jones, but he has the kind of hybrid utility that always puts him in the right place at the right time.

And he has a great arm. But he doesn’t want to play quarterback.

It bothers Steve. He brings it up with his mother, who says “it’s alright. I’m sure you’ll be as good as him someday,” missing the point as usual.

Steve shares his concern with Peggy, too. “He’s so fast. I’d hate to waste his speed at quarterback.”

Steve agrees, but it’s really not a satisfying answer. Hasn’t she seen the way Bucky can hit the corner of the end zone from fifty yards away?

“I have,” she says. “Maybe the coach will use him for some trick plays.”

The cold logic of it frustrates Steve. He’s been playing catch with Bucky for almost ten years and hasn’t ever thought of him as a trick play.

Steve’s ear stings with the abrupt, intimate violence of his right earbud being ripped out of place. He whirls to face the perpetrator.

And wants both to sigh and to scream.

“Come on, Hodge,” he says. The pressure changes in the atmosphere of his circulatory system; the swift drop of oncoming storm clouds. “We’re all teammates, here.”

“We’re all teammates, here’,” Hodge mocks.

“What d’you want?”

Steve stands up. There are four rows of lockers lining the wall. His eyes reach up to the third. Gil Hodge can probably see the top of them.
“Just want to know what you’re listening to, Rogers.”

“You could have asked.”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?”

What do they call lightning when it only exists as a sharp breath between black clouds?

“…Looks like you still haven’t given my headphones back.”

Hodge ignores him, of course. He sticks it the earbud his own ear, and his face instantly contorts as if with acute gastric discomfort. “What is this?”

Steve casts an exasperated look around the locker room, but the only people who are paying attention are two of Hodge’s friends, who seem amused, but not amused enough to interfere one way or another. “It’s my pre-game playlist.”

“You listen to this before games?” Hodge prompts.

“Yes.”

“What is it?” he repeats.

“Creedence Clearwater Revival.”

A beat of silence. A distantly satisfying beat of silence.

Hodge snorts. “Was that English.”

“Come on, Hodge, give it back—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” he says quickly, gripping the wire. “We’re just having fun here, right? We’re all teammates, right?”

“What seems to be the matter here, kids?!”

Hodge’s eyes blossom, and Steve whirls around to find—

“Bucky.”

Steve isn’t sure whether to feel grateful or annoyed or something else, a deeply buried point of warmth. Bucky crosses his arms and squares his shoulders and grins a wild slow wicked smile, and Steve feels them all at once.

“Why don’t you go ahead and return Rogers’ property, now?” Bucky says, licking his top teeth.

“We were just having a nice conversation about music,” Hodge says, totally, blissfully, unabashedly at peace. “Weren’t we, Steve?”

“Yeah, but geez, man,” Steve adds, “I still haven’t had a chance to listen to your music.”

Hodge doesn’t seem to understand completely, but he does understand that he’s supposed to be angry.

“Better than yours, whatever this crap is.”

Bucky laughs, a little hysterical, a little this-is-the-only-thing-keeping-me-from-punching-you. “I
think the guy who threw five touchdowns in his last game can listen to whatever the hell he wants.”

“Yeah,” Hodge says with a sinister smile. “Maybe someday he’ll get to do it for a varsity team.”

“Maybe someday I’ll be just like you.” Steve shows his teeth. “Sitting the bench on a varsity team.”

Hodge’s face turns crimson. “Better than your bodyguard, here,” he says, nodding at Bucky. “How many passes did you drop last week?”

Steve doesn’t realize he’s leapt forward, he didn’t mean to attack Hodge or anything, but he must have done so, because the next thing he knows, Bucky is holding him back, a tenuous grasp on Steve’s elbow and the back of his shirt.

Steve satisfies himself by grabbing the wire to his headphones and yanking it away from Hodge. He whips around and shoves past Bucky toward the locker room exit.

“Steve—damn—you okay, man?”

“Okay?” Steve stops in his tracks, chest heaving. “I can take care of myself, you know!”

“Yeah, ’course I do, I was just—”

“I wasn’t gonna hit him or anything.”

Bucky wrinkles his nose.

Whirling around again, Steve stomps out of the locker room and only when he’s out in the cooler, fresher air does he regain his bearing. He pauses, takes a breath, regains his bearing, and sobers enough to be a little embarrassed about his outburst. The part where he yelled at his best friend, that is. Not the part where he threatened a senior fullback with just the medicine he deserved.

“You’re so cute when you’re mad.”

Steve glances up and catches Bucky’s teasing smile. He rolls his eyes. “I wasn’t gonna hit him.”

“You really were.”

Deep breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Steve Rogers, starting fights in the locker room.” And did Bucky really just “tsk” him?

“He’s got no business calling you out like that.”

Bucky laughs and slings an arm over Steve’s shoulders, steering them toward the wall of glass doors that lead outside. He tugs at Steve’s headphones and twists them around two fingers. “The 70s playlist?” he deftly changes the subject.

“I like rock music, Buck.”

“I’m not judging.”

“Really?” Steve smirks. “Because it sounds like you’re judging.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

"...Okay, maybe it's a little Remember the Titans. But—"
“Steve, trust me,” Bucky cuts in, uncharacteristically sober. “I meant what I said. If you keep throwing touchdowns like you did last week, I don’t care if you listen to Celine Dion before games.”

It’s the whole combination that makes Steve laugh; the five touchdowns from last weekend, the thought of Titanic pre-game rituals, the sudden jab of autumn air as they step outside, the way Bucky’s hip knocks against his. Whatever you call the opposite of lonely.

It takes some wheedling and some puppy-eyes (the only response Steve gets when he says “But I have so much homework!”), but fifteen minutes later, they are in line for subs at the Jimmy Johns two blocks away from school.

Bucky rattles off orders for the both of them.

“I can pay for my own food, you know,” Steve grumbles. As always, it does no good. Which is nonsense because Steve’s family could pay for Bucky’s education for the next decade without feeling it, but it’s not like Steve ever sees a cent—and Bucky knows that.

Steve also doesn’t mention how effortless it was the way his regular turkey club just rolled off Bucky’s tongue. It makes Steve think of his seat in the back row of AP psychology, in the corner, between Peggy and the wall of windows. They’ve been talking about the subconscious. The powerful awareness of thoughtlessness. It’s like storage, a treasure chest of the things you want to talk about but would rather not think about.

While Bucky waits for the order, Steve fills their drinks and stakes a claim on a corner booth for the two of them. He grabs a napkin to wipe the crumbs off the table. When they’re both settled on opposite bench seats, sandwiches spread between them, the conversation turns—inevitably—to football.

“Just glad we’re finally into the heart of the season, you know?” Steve says as he picks sprouts out of a glob of mayonnaise.

He always refers to the varsity team as “we” even though he plays JV. Maybe because it’s his school, after all—because they all wear the same colors; maybe because of that dormant conviction that one day he will be a part of them; maybe because Bucky is one of them. Steve could never extract himself from Bucky—he could never separate them into two identities. However, as always, his lack of personal involvement allows Steve to analyze the varsity schemes with a calculated efficiency.

“We need to prove ourselves against some better teams,” he says. “Burnside is doing well, but the line hasn’t been tested.”

“The teams we’ve been playing not good enough for you?” Bucky deadpans.

Steve’s cheeks grow hot. “I didn’t mean you guys weren’t any good, I just—the smaller schools aren’t as exciting, and …” he trails off when Bucky starts laughing. “—Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” His features stretch into an easy smile. “I’m messing with you. The newspapers have been way meaner than that, don’t worry.”

Steve thinks back to that morning, flipping through to the sports section, reading the headline about lethargic offenses. Words like young, inexperienced, unproven.

“Sorry.”

“Well?” Bucky prompts.
Steve looks up and knits his brow.

“We played someone good last night.” Bucky specifies. “How were we?”

Steve swallows down a stunned silence. “I mean, I think you guys look great this season. It’s kind of hard to judge, obviously, with the competition lacking so far. But the potential is there, especially on the offensive line, which is practically unheard of in high school ball.”

“Yeah.”

“This weekend I don’t want to see any cute tricky stuff. I want to line up in a pro-style offense and chip away. We’re a running team, after all.” Immediately, Steve wishes he could catch that last statement on a hook and reel it back in.

*I literally just told our star receiver that the team needs to run more.*

Letting out a shaky breath, he chances a glance at Bucky’s face—but he doesn’t look surprised or hurt or upset. There’s a gleam in his eyes; a softness in his crooked smile. The same look he gets on his face when he catches Steve’s old golden retriever sleeping under his feet.

Steve can feel his breathing accelerate. “What?” he asks.

“Nothing.” Bucky leans back in his chair, grinning now, toothy and sinful. “You’re right, that’s all.”

“… I am?”

“I’ve practiced so much blocking this week I’m starting to feel like a tight end.”

Steve’s lungs hitch and he nearly inhales his Coke, and tries not to make it too obvious that he’s choking to death.

Maybe he does it to show a little mercy, but Bucky just smiles and carries on the conversation. “Three weeks, though. That’s when we play Jefferson, and their defense sucks. I’m gonna tear them up.”

“Can’t wait,” Steve says hoarsely.

“Still wish you were the one throwing to me, though.” Bucky addresses his lap, fiddling with a seam on his jeans.

It’s something they haven’t talked about in weeks. It was better left ignored, honestly. The deep stabbing pain they had both felt when they read the try-out results. When they found “Barnes” right at the top of the varsity list, but scanned it three times before discovering “Rogers” buried on the second page of the JV roster.

Bucky had taken it much harder than Steve, at least visibly so. He’d kicked a chair across the locker room and cursed so loudly Steve tried frantically to shut him up before a coach or a P.E. teacher caught him anointing them with choice nicknames.

“It’s fine, really—I’m just a sophomore, it’s not—”

“It’s bullshit, is what it is!” Bucky had shouted. “Seriously? Will Burnside?! You could pass better than him blindfolded!”

“Come on Buck,” Steve had said with a half-hearted laugh, trying to calm him down, “I’m barely five-six, I wouldn’t even be able to see over the linemen.”
“And that’s my season down the drain. We’ll probably throw the ball like, twice.”

“There’s always next year.”

“It’s still bullshit.”

He’d cooled off eventually. Then they spent a couple weeks coming to grips with the fact that they’d be playing for different teams for the first time since fifth grade, but the mantra was always the same—next year.

Over the summer, they had gone their separate ways for two-a-days. Steve fought off the iron emptiness in his stomach. The heaviness, the cold knowledge that he still hadn’t proven himself, still couldn’t pull this off, still couldn’t translate the aching well of passion in his guts into hard statistics. Everything blooming against his sternum and nothing to show for it.

Here, now, entrenched in a corner of a chrome-trimmed sandwich shop, Bucky brings it up again. It’s not a sore spot, exactly. Just a sharp wistfulness. The space between them grows and shrinks all at once.

Praying that his voice won’t sound like it’s going through a cheese grater, Steve takes a breath before responding. “There’s always next year.”

Without looking up, Bucky’s lips crook into a little half-smile. “I’d have twice as many touchdowns if you were the one passing the ball.”

“Yeah, if a big linebacker from Queens didn’t snap me in half first.”

Bucky doesn’t answer. He takes a bite, chews, swallows, takes a drink. “Burnside fumbled twice last week.”

“Yeah.” Steve doesn’t know what else to say.

After another long pause, Bucky moves on. “I read a long thing online last night that said Monroe is going to take my spot and catch 1000 yards by the end of the season.”

“That’s just stupid.”

“You don’t have to flatter me,” Bucky grins. One of those bright-eyed shepherd dogs who brings the frisbee half way back just to taunt you with it.

Steve blushes, his thoughts temporarily fizzled out.

“I—I mean, a thousand yards? Stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Steve stammers. He thinks about zone blitzes and blocking ends and checkdowns. “Monroe will only have to catch half that to take your place.”

Bucky’s eyebrows shoot up before he bursts into laughter. “Oh, alright, alright, just like a quarterback, aren’t you? All talk.”

Steve would retaliate, but they both dissolve into undignified giggling.

“No one’s going to take your place,” Steve finally manages to say, his tone gentle. “You’re the best receiver in the state. People just like to stir up controversy.”

“They do,” Bucky says, nodding. He cocks his head and plays with one earlobe. “I dunno about all that ‘best in the state’ business, but. Sure.”
“Maybe if you were a little taller …”

“Oh, yeah?” Bucky smirks. “You’re a punk.”

“You have pretty good hands, though.”

Bucky’s bark of laughter makes Steve jump, but that doesn’t take away the warm, purring satisfaction that curls in his stomach. It’s his favorite thing, probably. Making Bucky blush like that.

Fair is fair.
Bucky and Steve's junior year of high school.

There is nothing more relaxing than playing catch in the backyard.

Well, figuratively speaking. Steve has never had a backyard, and Bucky has never had any kind of yard, but they make do with the sidewalk in front of the Rogers' Brooklyn condo, which features a patch of grass, two neatly-trimmed bushes, and light traffic.

They don't have the luxury of a rural prairie cornfield, so DUMBO will have to do.

There was a time when Bucky was the only person willing to play catch with Steve. When Steve felt like a burden and, in the eyes of most people, was a burden. A clumsy athlete and a desperate kid who thought he could play football. Bucky never treated him that way. In fact, more often than not, he was the one asking to spend more time with Steve.

Nowadays, Steve could probably ask any of his teammates and they'd jump at the chance to work out with him. Steve doesn't think to ask, though. He has Bucky.

Whenever the apartment gets a buzz in the middle of the day on a Sunday, Steve doesn't even ask who it is, he just ties his shoes and meets Bucky downstairs with a football. If it's raining, they opt instead for Madden on the Xbox.

Actually, one time they did play catch in the rain.

"This is stupid," Steve had said after the ball slipped through his hands for the third straight time.

"No, it's just good practice." Bucky's smile had shimmered through the sheets of rain. He hadn't dropped any passes yet.

"I'm not exactly a wide receiver, Buck."

"And I'm not exactly a quarterback."

Steve had taken that as a challenge. They had spent the next half hour running routes across the street, around the bushes, into the alley, and between parked cars. Afterwards, he couldn't feel anything below his knees from the cold. They didn't drop any passes, though. Steve scrubbed at his wet hair until it stuck up in every direction. When they went inside, cheeks flushed from the sudden spike in temperature, Bucky pulled wet leaves off of Steve's back and eventually ended up borrowing dry sweatpants and a hoodie from Steve's closet.

Steve has never lost a game in the rain since that day. He has Bucky to thank for that.

The October of their junior year, however, is dry and uneventful. It allows for a relaxing catch in
their, you know, "backyard." And they've been doing it so long, they can practically read each other's minds. It's the kind of ritual that makes them a terror together on game day—especially now that they're both playing varsity.

Steve wraps his fingers around the football's seams and lobs it across the street. "I heard Hamilton has a great run defense."

"I know," Bucky grins. "It's our turn to shine."

"I think I'm going to ask Coach Erskine if we can work on some post-routes in practice this week."

"You saying I need to work on my routes?"

"Oh, God, I didn't—no, I just thought—if Gabe struggles with the rushing game this week, I just think we ought to—to be ready for anything, you know. You're good, of course, I'm the one who—"

"Steve, it's fine, I swear." Bucky is laughing outright, now. "It's a good idea."

"Right."

"We're gonna roll over them this weekend."

"Right."

"Thanks to me, of course, because I can catch all the garbage you throw my way."

Steve rolls his eyes. "… Shut up, Bucky."

When the sun slants into late afternoon, they retire to the den with guacamole and microwaved mozzarella cheese sticks and four liters of Diet Mountain Dew. It's the fourth week of the NFL season and the New York Giants are hosting the Seattle Seahawks. It will end up a disappointingly average season, the kind where fans talk about David Tyree with both fond nostalgia and faint hopefulness, but also resign themselves to the typical lukewarm woes of late-season lags.

But now, it is only week four. Bucky and Steve have enjoyed three Giants wins so far, texting back and forth until Steve finally insists Bucky come over so they can enjoy the games together.

During week four, they begin a weekly tradition of setting aside homework, playing catch, and weight-lifting for three hours in order to watch New York complete what would end up a .500 season. During week four, they sprawl over the futon and shout at the Giants' coaches through the television screen. During week four, Steve finally admits he might like Peggy Carter.

It's in the fourth quarter, when Eli Manning throws his third interception and the Giants go down for good.

"Is this a joke?! I counted not two, not three, but four open receivers on that play," Steve complains. "You'd think Eli Manning could find one of them."

No response.

"Bucky?"

"I don't know." Bucky laughs breathlessly. "To be honest, I was—I was distracted, I guess."

Steve's heart skips a beat.
He glances at Bucky, whose eyes are fixed, unseeing, on the television screen, lips slightly parted. Steve frowns. "Distracted? From the Giants?"

"Yeah," he chokes out. "We've been losing for most of the game. Can't really focus, I guess."

Something gently tugs at Steve's throat. "It's that time of year."

The silence stretches between them. It is that time of year, the time of year when school work reaches its peak and football becomes all-consuming—everything to the point of nothing, a kind of chronic disease that you learn to live with, or worse, an addiction you can't go without. It's overwhelming to say the least.

Steve says the first thing that comes to mind which could lighten the mood. "I'm thinking of asking Peggy to the homecoming dance." He is not very good at keeping secrets, especially from Bucky.

Without speaking, Bucky reaches forward for one of the open Mountain Dew bottles and empties it into his glass.

Automatically, Steve gets up to retrieve a replacement bottle of soda from the kitchen. When he shuffles back into the den, Bucky hasn't moved. He sets the two-liter on the coffee table and flops back onto the futon, his knee knocking against Bucky's thigh.

"It's a good idea." Bucky takes a long drink, swallows, and makes a face.

"What?"

"You and Peggy."

"I'm kind of afraid to ask her."

"Afraid she'll say no?"

"More afraid she'll say yes, actually."

Though he smiles softly, Bucky still doesn't look up. "She's kind of scary that way, isn't she?"

"Mm." Steve takes a drink himself, then asks, "you gonna go to the dance?"

Bucky huffs again with laughter. "Maybe." His face burning red, he ducks to stare at his hands. "I don't know who I'd ask, though."

Some teams have statisticians; some school newspapers have that one kid who gets in too deep when it comes to the sports opinion column; some teammates watch the local news together to see the highlights; some football dads send footage in to ESPN to make the Top Ten plays of the week; some schools have boosters who organize fundraising that could rival political campaigns.

MacArthur High School has Peggy Carter.

"Honestly, Steve, ten for twenty-three?" she says wearily. Her lunch bag lies forgotten and crumpled to one side, and the local paper stretches before her, covering the textbook she swore she was going to study. But here they are.

"Sorry." Steve can't think of anything else to say.

"Look, I don't know what your excuse is this week—"
"—no excuses, Peg—"

"Do you want to lead this team to the state tournament?"

"Yeah! We can—"

"Then you need to lead them, Steve."

Coach Erskine is great, but Peggy lights the fire when they need it.

Steve attempts his best puppy eyes. "It won't happen again. I promise."

She rolls her eyes. Her eyeliner is a little smudged, but you can only tell from up close. Steve can also tell when she's trying not to smile.

"I'm sure it won't," she concedes. "That kind of performance isn't going to cut it against a good team like Hamilton."

"How's it going, kids?"

Bucky flops into the seat next to Steve, bumping his shoulder as he stuffs change into his pocket. His cafeteria tray holds a sub sandwich and a small mountain of potato chips.

"Going alright," Steve says, stealing a chip.

"Whoa, you have your own!" Bucky protests, stealing one of Steve's in return.

"Don't you dare distract him, Barnes," Peggy cuts in. She turns back to Steve. "The problem here isn't your physical capability. It's just your confidence."

"I'm confident!"

"You need to trust your receivers, Steve."

"It's not a big deal," he mumbles. His cheeks heat up and his eyes flick to Bucky. "Gabe is having a great season, we really just need to find ways to get him the ball more."

"Yes, we're a good running team," Peggy says, folding her hands over the newspaper. "But Gabe will be most effective if you can also create a viable threat to defense. Other teams can't just load the box to stop the run game if they're afraid of you throwing touchdown passes."

Steve smiles. "I know. It's not that I don't trust the receivers."

"You should try rushing more."

"If Steve leaves the pocket, he's just asking to get injured," Bucky says, poking at his sandwich without eating it.

"I'm not a delicate flower, here," Steve grumbles.

"Growing five inches over the summer doesn't make you indestructible."

"A mobile quarterback would keep them on their toes," Peggy points out.

"I'm not arguing that—" Steve says before Bucky interrupts.

"God, can we please not talk about football anymore?"
Silence drops onto the table like a rock. They both stare at Bucky, whose cheeks turn pink under their gaze.

Steve blinks. "What?"

"*Not* talk about football?" Peggy says.


"What's the matter?" Steve nudges Bucky with his shoulder.

"Have you finished the article?" Bucky nods at the paper spread in front of Peggy and for a moment Steve thinks he's trying to change the subject. But Peggy casts him a sheepish look.

"I have," she admits. "I wasn't going to—well."

"Tell him how the media thinks, and I quote, 'Steve Rogers performs admirably for a last-minute replacement?'" He snaps with a vehemence that makes Steve's jaw drop.

"What?"

"He's been playing since week two, that's hardly last-minute," Peggy says.

"What?"

"Oh, yeah," Bucky says, lip curled. "If you ask the local sports editor, we've won the last six games *despite* Steve's so-called 'mediocre' playing."

"What?"

"Which is a joke, because they obviously haven't *actually* seen you play. They're still stuck in pre-season rankings. You started the year a nobody, so they assume there's no story," he spits sarcastically. "And they *still* mention Burnside in every fucking article, 'if only MacArthur still had Burnside,' 'wouldn't Burnside'—"

"Bucky—"

"No, I'm *tired* of it!" he barks. His face is bright red. "It's not *fair*. It shouldn't *matter* how big you are or how old you are—or how much money your daddy donates to the school."

A long silence settles over them, broken only by Bucky's heavy breathing. He runs a hand through his hair.

For some reason, the moment embeds itself in Steve's mind. A little kernel in his memory that drifts back into his consciousness once in awhile, triggered by the smell of newspaper or the sound of food trays clattering in the background. Years from now, Steve will still remember the muscles clenching in Bucky's jaw; will remember the sound of Bucky cracking his knuckles; Bucky avoiding eye contact for hours afterward.

"Well," Steve says after the awkward pause. "I haven't exactly been memorable so far this season."

Bucky scoffs.

"You haven't lost a game yet," Peggy says matter-of-factly and folds her newspaper.

When the bell rings, Bucky storms out of the cafeteria. Steve leaps up to follow him, but Peggy grabs
him by the elbow before he can escape.

"Let him cool off."

"I just—"

"He's right, you know," she adds, gathering her things. "No one gives our team any respect. All they want to talk about are traditional powerhouses and rich private schools. And the papers still think you're just a cheap replacement."

"It doesn't matter what they say about me," Steve says. "We just need to execute on the field."

"Bucky's worried about you."

"Worried about me playing like crap?"

"No, Steve," she glares at him. "Give him a little credit. He's worried you'll get hurt."

"Hurt?"

"Everyone is worried you'll get hurt. The coaches and the trainers and the reporters..."

"I'll be fine," he shrugs.

"The problem is, everyone saw Burnside blow out his knee and go out for the season," Peggy says as they follow the crowd toward the cafeteria doors. "It's stuck in their memory, so now it's all they can think about—and they worry the same could happen to you."

"Are you worried about me getting hurt?"

"Of course not," she says, then adds, with an air of affected nonchalance, "not that I don't care about you, of course."

Steve glances up, but her eyes are fixed on the end of the hallway.

"Because I do," she continues, "I just trust you. I know you can take care of yourself."

"Everyone else still looks at me and sees the hundred-and-ten-pound sophomore who kept falling over himself during JV games last year." Steve says it because she won't.

Peggy smiles. "I trusted him, too, you know."

"You might be the only one," Steve says. "You and Bucky."

"You haven't changed that much."

"I'm better at football."

"You think so?" Peggy turns on her heel to study Steve's face, which instantly lights on fire.

"Y—sure," Steve says, suddenly more insecure than he was a split-second ago.

"Then it's about time you make a statement."

The trick play is Bucky's idea.
They are down by four points, which means a field goal wouldn't even get them into overtime. They started the drive deep in their own territory, and they've chipped away to the fifty-yard line. Unfortunately, time is against them. They now have just eight seconds to score a touchdown.

Huddled around their head coach, the offense is mostly silent—a pocket of still water in the churning ocean of the stadium. They all know what this means; to protect their undefeated season, their only option is a Hail Mary.

It is the definitive Act of Desperation. Literally a last-second play, a deep throw by the quarterback and a wild leap of faith by whichever receiver gets closest to the end zone. Without thinking, Steve rolls his shoulder and stretches his arm across his chest while listening to Coach Erskine outline their play.

"—which means Barnes and Morita—"

"Coach." The interruption is clipped, but sharp.

Coach Erskine looks up from his whiteboard.

"Coach, I'm sorry, but it's just ..." Bucky glances around the huddle. "They've been shutting down the long pass all night. Double-teaming me and Jim every other play. There's got to be—"

"I'll find the open man," Steve steps in.

"There won't be an open man," Bucky says desperately.

"What are you saying, Barnes?" their coach asks with an uncharacteristic impatience.

"I'm saying Steve should check in as an eligible receiver."

Everyone stares. For a moment, the stadium seems almost quiet; the roar in Steve's ears becomes muffled, as if someone turned the volume down on hundreds of screaming teenagers and over-enthusiastic football fans.

A minute later, they line up for the play. Some kind of insanity Bucky and Coach Erskine concocted in about twenty seconds. It's madness, and if it works, Steve will probably buy Bucky dinner for a month.

The offensive line crouches in a row in front of Steve. The referee places the ball between the two teams and blows his whistle, and the clock begins to tick. Steve breathes in. Tries to calm his racing heart.

What if this doesn't work.

He glances to the right, and receives a thumbs up from Jim Morita. Glances to the left, toward the MacArthur sideline. From his place at the line of scrimmage, Bucky hops up and down on the balls of his feet. Steve waves, and Bucky goes into motion.

"Wait!" Steve shouts. He stands up from his crouch under center. "Coach, this isn't going to work!" He holds his hands out in a helpless gesture, then abandons his position, striding toward the sideline. "We should call another time out!" Bucky passes him at a jog while Steve tries to flag down their coach.

The Hamilton defense relaxes, glancing around at each other in confusion. The cornerbacks shrug, and the linebackers look to their own sideline for guidance.
That is when MacArthur snaps the ball.

Without hesitation, Steve turns on his heels and tears downfield. He blows past a bewildered Hamilton defender—then two more—and sees the end zone yawn before him. The stadium is muffled again; all he can hear is his heartbeat in his throat and the pounding of his cleats against the ragged turf.

He looks up, squinting into stadium lights. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Jim Morita and Alex Walker, his fellow receivers; and over his shoulder, he sees the football. It cuts through the air, spiraling toward him in a gentle curve. Steve doesn't even have to adjust his trajectory. Bucky's pass is perfect. Steve stretches out his arms, and it's there. Leather trapped between his bare hands. He hauls it in to his chest.

The next thing he knows is deafening noise, Morita pounding his helmet in excitement, half the team flooding into the end zone. They tackle him with almost as much violence as opposing defenders.

Steve can't feel his cheeks. They are numb from smiling.

When he looks up, the scoreboard fills his vision. The "00:00:00" on the clock, the bright "26" under their score and the "24" under Hamilton's. And Bucky's face, swimming into focus through the flare of stadium lights, eyes fierce and crackling and fixed on Steve.

They win their next game by twenty points. The week after that, they win by thirty.

Afterwards, Steve finds himself trapped by a throng of reporters. There are only half a dozen of them, but they are rabid, and they can sense weakness in their prey, so it seems like thirty.

They ask the usual questions, and Steve gives the usual answers, generic cliches like "Well, it was a team effort tonight," and "I owe it all to the offensive line, they really pulled through for me," and "we have the defense to thank, of course, for giving us some breathing room!" He pulls all the stops—the kind of eloquence politicians dream of, all charm, and he even flashes a smile, bargaining for an escape route, but no luck. More cameras cut him off at every turn. They're exponential. It's like a video game glitch.

Not that he doesn't like talking to the media, and the attention is more or less a good thing for the team's sake; but Steve almost faints with relief when he sees Gabe Jones fighting through the crowd to extract him.

"Steve!" he shouts, grinning. "T'as besoin d'aide?"¹

Steve throws his head back and laughs. "S'te plaît! Mon dieu, s'te plaît!"²

Together, Gabe and Tim Dugan part the waters so Steve can begin to fight through.

"So why did we win this time?" Gabe asks over the dull roar. "Hasard? Merveille?"

"Stop it." Steve says, rolling his eyes fondly.

"Que disent-ils? Nous gagnera douze jeux?"³

Steve grins. "En va voir."

"Excuse me! Excuse me! Steve, just one more question—one more question please!"
An arm appears from the crowd and grips Steve's elbow. He almost loses his balance whirling around to face a squat man with silver hair and square glasses.

"What?" Steve says breathlessly.

"One more question for you—" the man leans in close with a voice recorder, "—you and James Barnes seem to have incredible chemistry. Should we expect to see more of that late in the season?"

"We—that's—yeah, I mean—um. Yeah, we're … good friends. Me and Bucky just—we click really well, you know?" So much for eloquence and charm.

"Are the two of you going to lead the team to state?"

"Sorry, you only said one more question!" Steve shrugs and turns his back on the flashing cameras.

Cackling, Gabe herds him off toward the locker room before anyone else can interject. "You shut them down, my friend."

"I can't predict the future."

"You could make something up."

"No," Steve says firmly. "I'm not going to lie to people."

Over his shoulder, Steve can hear a loud voice ringing over the crowd. "I heard someone say something about our awesome defense? I'm Tim Dugan, but you can call me Dum Dum Dugan, middle linebacker. I can't remember—someone tell me, how many tackles did I have tonight?"

The rest of the team has already evacuated the stadium and climbed the hill leading to the locker room entrance. Steve can see them trickling through the door, their uniforms in various states of grime and distress.

Steve glances over his shoulder. "That was more reporters than usual."

"The two good teams in our conference had the week off," Gabe points out.

"What do you mean?"

The catch up to the rest of the team and join the crowd funneling into the locker room.

"I mean they only care because they don't have anywhere better to be."

"They care because we're 6-and-0," Steve says firmly, but softly, so that the rest of the team doesn't hear.

"I didn't say it was a bad thing," Gabe shrugs and smiles as he holds the door for Steve. "I'm gonna keep scoring touchdowns, whether those assholes care or not."

They turn around a corner of lockers and run into Bucky, who has already stripped down to an undershirt and started untying his cleats. "Who's an asshole?" he asks.

"Just the overly-aggressive zoo animals down there passing for sports journalists," Steve says.

Bucky reaches to take Steve's helmet so Steve can wrestle out of his shoulder pads.

"They asked about you, too, you know," Gabe says.
"Me?" Bucky grimaces. "Are they still bitching about me playing both ways?"

Gabe snorts.

"They—no, they just think you're an awesome receiver," Steve says. He shoots Gabe a funny look. "I told them we've always worked well together."

"If you two were there," Bucky nods at them, "I don't know what anyone would want to know about me."

Gabe leans over to whisper something in Bucky's ear and, instantly, as if someone flicked a light switch, Bucky's face goes scarlet. "Shut up, Gabe, I swear to God—"

Laughing, Gabe claps him on the back. Then he turns to Steve and says something in rapid French before heading for the showers.

"Oh, fuck you guys, it's not my fault I only took one year of French!" Bucky's eyes are wide with panic. "What did he say?!"

Steve smiles. "He said next time they ask about our on-field chemistry, I should tell them how you have the best hands on the team."

If anything, Bucky's blush deepens. Steve feels a little lost, but he's still riding the high of a big win, so he can't really be bothered to worry about the weird nonsense Gabe Jones spews in the locker room.

Chapter End Notes

1 Do you need help?
2 Yes, please, God.
3 What are they saying? Will we win all 12 games?

(sorry about the googled french, but man, i just thought the idea of Gabe and Steve speaking french so the reporters wouldn't understand them sounded like the CUTEST thing. also i could torture Bucky a lil bit that way.)
"So, the homecoming dance is this weekend," Peggy says.

Steve flips through his AP Psychology textbook, mostly so he doesn't have to look her in the eye. Is blushing a somatic or autonomic response?

"Yeah," he says, pretending he isn't completely out of breath. "It is. This weekend."

"Are you planning on going?"

Steve goes still, and then glances up at Peggy. Her neutral smile doesn't give anything away. Of course. "I'm—well, I don't really dance."

Peggy looks at him for a long time. At least, it feels like a long time. He flips to the back of the textbook. Maybe "blushing" is in the glossary, or "sweaty palms," or "shallow breathing."

_She's going to ask me, _he thinks, _she's going to ask me before I asked her and it's Wednesday and what kind of a person am I if I let this incredible woman ask me out to a dance before—_

"You should go," she says, finally. "I have to be out of town, and if you go, you can tell me all about it."

"I—you're—you have to be out of town?" Steve manages.

"College visit." She rolls her eyes. "I have to at least pretend to look at a few schools in the U.S., or my family will think this whole exchange thing was a waste of time."

"Right."

"But you should go."

"Go where?"

Her smile cracks a little wider. "The homecoming dance, Steve."

"Right."

"And one more thing."

"What?" Panic makes his heart pump a little faster.

"You'd better win the homecoming game, too."

When Friday rolls around, Peggy Carter isn't in the stands or on the sideline with the other trainers, and it makes Steve feel out of alignment. It's like missing a coach, or Bucky, or his own left arm. If anything, it makes him want to win even more. He can't imagine the repercussions if he had to explain to Peggy how he gave up their first loss of the season while she was in Philadelphia—_at homecoming_, no less.

They are hosting Adams High School this week, an above-average opponent with more money and less diversity than MacArthur. They're also both undefeated. Steve expects the referees to give Adams special treatment, and he isn't disappointed.
"They keep finding new, fancy ways to call holding on me," Bucky says in the third quarter. He looks exhausted, but his grin is still a mile wide.

It's sick, the work Bucky puts in for every game, playing both offense and defense. He wears himself into the ground so people like Steve can get all the credit for the success.

It never seems to faze Bucky, but Steve? He might be starting to hate it.

"I don't care how many flags they throw," Jim Morita says, "as long as you don't let them score, I'm happy."

Even though he's wheezing, Bucky manages to laugh and roll his eyes.

Steve rests a hand on Bucky's elbow. "You good?"

"I'm good!"

"Don't kill yourself." Steve says softly, so only Bucky can hear. "Take it easy. I'll find you when you're open."

Bucky just gives him a noncommittal shrug.

The first two plays, Steve hands the ball off to Gabe, who moves them almost twenty yards down field. On the third play, the coach calls for a pass. Steve finds Monty Falsworth in the middle of the field for a short gain. After another short run by Gabe Jones, they find themselves looking at third down.

Steve desperately needs to keep this drive alive. They're up by two touchdowns, but Adams keeps threatening a comeback, and now the MacArthur defense is running on fumes. The longer they have to rest on the bench, the better.

Before breaking the huddle, Bucky smacks his shoulder. "You said you'd find me."

They line up for another passing play. Steve glances to his left, and Bucky flashes him an okay sign; their hand-signal for when he knows he's being covered man-to-man.

Steve grinds his teeth, takes a deep breath, and hikes the ball. When Bucky's flawless footwork sheds a defensive back and the slant in the middle of the field gapes open before him, Steve doesn't think before throwing.

The pass drifts high. Bucky doesn't hesitate to leap for it. All six feet of him, all single-minded recklessness.

(Some might call him crazy. Hell, Steve has called him crazy. He's thinking it now, watching Bucky drift between the hashmarks, the corners of his vision blurring.)

Bucky never had a chance. The football barely grazes his fingertips when an enemy safety lowers his head and levels him. His feet go end-over-end, his limbs flail, and he hits the ground headfirst. The safety gets up; Bucky stays down.

He doesn't move, and for several seconds, Steve can't, either. Then his heart thunders into overdrive.

There is a storm. A whirl of uniforms. The colors blend together so he can't tell who is who, where is where, not until he's squeezing past Monty and Gabe and skidding in the grass, dirt flying from his cleats, and then Steve is on his knees at Bucky's side.
"Oh god, Bucky—" he says in a rush of air, fumbling for his friend's hand. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry, oh God—are you okay?"

Bucky is flat on his back, one leg bent, eyes round and ringed in red. They flicker in and out of focus before finding Steve's and latching there.

"Talk to me, please."

Bucky's lips open, and nothing comes out. His chest heaves.

This isn't happening, this is the thing Steve should be able to control, the one thing he could single-handedly prevent and he fucked it all up. He fucked up one throw, and now Bucky is crumpled and broken in the middle of the field.

Steve goes numb, a cold fog settling into his nerves. He grips Bucky's hand harder, so hard it hurts, holding it against his heartbeat. Steve's other hand hovers over Bucky, afraid to touch him, afraid to hurt him more.

Bucky gasps again and a hoarse cough rattles in his chest.

"Buck, I'm so sorry."

"Fine," he rasps, struggling for air, and Steve feels every wretched breath in his own lungs; every ragged, broken gasp catches in Steve's throat and there they both are in the middle of the field, just the two of them not breathing, not breathing, not breathing.

Bucky's eyes glisten with tears. He looks at Steve and grins.

The sight is so incongruous, so utterly humorless and unfounded that it hammers Steve's heart into the ground. There is ice frosting over his veins, his mind, and thoughts skid in and out over the slick surface—thoughts of Bucky and head injuries and memory loss and drugs and never playing football again—Steve hears a faint whimpering sound and almost breaks down before he realizes it's him. It's Steve making that pathetic noise.

"Steve," Bucky manages. He takes a deep, labored breath, and keeps smiling. "Just the air—"

"Take it easy, Buck," he whispers.

"Winded—wind—" Another harsh breath. His eyes and his face are brick red; not the flattering crimson of embarrassment, but unnatural. Burning under the stadium lights.

"Take it easy."

"I'm fine."

Bucky coughs again, a full-throated sound. There's air behind it. He's still smiling. And panting, the hard shallow breaths of a sprinter hissing through his teeth.

An athletic trainer has appeared at their side, but Steve doesn't remember him arriving, nor does he understand a word coming out of his mouth.

Bucky lifts his free hand and waves it stiffly. "Fine—I'm—"

The trainer pulls Bucky's helmet off, one inch at a time.

"Does that hurt?" the trainer asks. He asks a lot of things. "Does that hurt?" and "can you move?"
and "can you feel this?" and each new question strikes Steve's skull like hail, driving fear into him and burying it there, bitter and cold.

Bucky squirms under the attention. A good sign, right? His knees bend, then splay apart. The color in his face subsides to something more human, and he looks at Steve, takes three breaths—haggard, but no coughing—and says weakly, "I'm okay." Inhale. "I promise."

He smiles again.

With help from Steve and two athletic trainers, he sits up, then stands. "I'm fine," is the mantra. He walks to the sideline under his own power—though Steve and the trainer hover over opposite shoulders.

It takes a long time for Bucky's breathing to even out. After several minutes of probing questions and prodding fingers, the training staff grudgingly accept that Bucky hasn't suffered a serious injury. Of course, it wouldn't be so grudging if he would just let them do their job.

Steve says so, and Bucky rolls his eyes.

"I landed on the football, that's all," he says, voice still harsh enough that Steve has to bite his tongue. "You know? Right in the ribs. Knocked the wind out of me."

"And scared the shit out of me," Steve says softly, so only Bucky can hear.

"That's attractive."

"Don't be a jerk."

Bucky snorts. "You're all overreacting, geez."

"I thought you were really hurt, Buck." Steve says again. He almost chokes on the words, and the image of Bucky lying on his back, lungs rattling, floats across Steve's mind. He blinks it away.

Bucky's chest hitches and his smile falls. His hand darts out, finding Steve's and twisting around three of his fingers.

The bleachers rise behind them, hundreds of fans in red and white, a blurred backdrop of low-hanging cirrus clouds. The whole world is on mute. Everything but Bucky is just fog and washed out watercolor.

"Thank you." It is quiet. He might not have made a noise at all, but Steve can see the way his lips form the words.

"What, for almost getting you killed?" Steve says breathlessly.

"For being there."

"You'd do the same for me."

Steve thinks, maybe, he might see a hint of a smile on Bucky's face.

"Now, everyone stop looking so damn serious," Bucky says, raising his voice again.

The fog dissipates. The roar of the crowd and the pinprick details and the numbers on jerseys and the smell of burnt popcorn come howling back all at once. The sensation overwhelms Steve, flood waters rushing up to his knees, to his stomach, to his lungs.
Bucky is still talking, that shit-eating grin plastered on his face. "And now me and Steve missed like four plays and we have to punt."

"For crying out loud, Buck, no one cares," Steve rolls his eyes. "We're up by two touchdowns anyway."

They end up winning. And they end up celebrating.

It's well-deserved. Adams was the strongest opponent they'd faced all year, and after the stress of a hard game and almost losing their best receiver—anyway. It's well-deserved.

Jim Morita is probably the happiest drunk Steve has ever met. He talks less than usual, and laughs more. And he likes to give hugs. Likes to hug everyone. As much as possible.

With one half-empty drink in hand, he emerges from the teeming crowd to wrap his arms bodily around Steve for the fifth time in the last hour. He shouts to no one in particular, "This guy, y'all. This guy. He's a stud. He does what needs to be done."

"Steve Rogers!" Gabe Jones says loudly from the couch, raising his glass in a toast.

Steve smiles, his face heating up. The red cheeks could be from the alcohol—though he's not anywhere near Jim's intake. He replies, though no one is listening, "You won the game. Not me."

Which is true. Gabe Jones ran for over a hundred yards and scored three touchdowns, whereas Steve Rogers just got their star receiver blind-sided by a two-hundred-pound high school senior. Without Gabe, they'd all be drunk for an entirely different reason.

"This kid is brilliant!" Jim prattles on. "If only you could play both ways!"

"Oh, that's just—a terrible idea. Steve looks over his shoulder, but Bucky is nowhere in sight.

Luckily, Jim doesn't notice Steve's brief lapse in attention. Instead, he pulls back and peers into Steve's face as though seeing it for the first time. "Oh my God. No, I got one better. We need to get you a headset."

"They don't use headsets in high school."

"Maybe not in Brooklyn," Gabe allows.

"What's the matter?" Jim says with a grin. "You nervous? You'd be a good coach!"

Steve looks at him very seriously. "I'd be too good. I don't know if you guys could keep up with me."

For several seconds Jim stares at him, mouth hanging open. A fleeting suspicion crosses Steve's mind, first that Jim might, inexplicably, hit him square in the jaw; then, more realistically, that Jim might fall over and lose consciousness.

Before Steve can say anything, Morita erupts into laughter, doubles over, and stumbling around the room until he reaches a surface upon which he can sit. Granted, he lands half-way in Gabe's lap, but neither of them seem to mind. Or maybe neither of them notice. They all laugh, look at each other, and then laugh some more.

Steve turns around, still giggling, and comes face-to-face with Tim Dugan. He's with a girl Steve has never met, and Tim is laughing, too, maybe at Jim; maybe at nothing. He pokes Steve in the chest
and asks, "Your cup is almost empty. Can I get you a drink?"

"What?"

"Want another drink?"

"Another drink?"

"... Awesome." Dum Dum beams at him. "Yes please. I'll take another drink."

Steve chuckles. "What do you want?"

"Surprise me!"

"… Dude, it's your house."

"I said surprise me!"

He cackles, and Steve weaves back through the crowd toward the kitchen.

Where he finds Bucky Barnes.

Bucky is stationed on the countertop, and seems to have knocked several stacks of red Solo cups into the sink at his side. His legs swing against the cabinetry, and he sways back and forth, a subtle motion without a melody, and he fidgets, and he laughs, and he spins his drink between his hands, and he must have taken a sip recently because his lips are shining with a dopey grin. The line of him, the fine-toothed, clumsy grace of him, slopes to the roots of Steve's nervous system.

The kitchen seems very warm. Steve can feel his breath grow shallow.

At Bucky's side, Bernie Rosenthal leans against the counter, talking animatedly with her hands. Bucky nods and takes a long swig from his red cup. Then he looks up, blinks hard, and locks eyes with Steve. It makes Bucky giggle, as though Steve's face reminds him of some particularly entertaining inside joke.

Steve saunters over, smiling and shaking his head. "What are you laughing at, Barnes?"

"You look surprised. Your eyes went all huge."

Steve rests his hip against the counter next to Bucky, not touching him, not touching him, but feeling that solid emptiness between them, the warmth of all those atoms whirring and coming to life. "I didn't think you would come. What happened to going home and passing out?"

"Yeah. Passing out." Bucky smiles at the ceiling, remembering. "Well, my mom and stepdad were fighting, so. If I'm gonna pass out, I might as well do it in good company."

"You can't find better company than these maniacs?" Bernie asks, winking at Steve.

"Oh, I see how it is," he shoots back with a knowing smile.

"Steve's not a maniac," Bucky says. "Steve never comes to parties. You never come to parties because, quote-unquote, 'you don't fit in'."

Steve glances at his drink, which is still half-full.

"And you were right. You don't fit in at all!" At this he cackles drunkenly, rocking forward until his
head rests on Steve's shoulder. Steve presses his lips together, but can't suppress a smile. Bucky grips Steve's arm to push himself back up, still snickering.

"Thanks for that," Steve says.

"Excuse you!" Bernie scolds, smacking Bucky's thigh. "There's nothing wrong with Steve choosing not to embarrass himself … like some people."

Bucky looks highly affronted. He opens his mouth to speak, lifts his hands innocently and, in doing so, splashes a little of his drink onto the floor. He freezes. Bursts into laughter.

"You deserved that," Bernie says.

"Yeah, that'll teach you to make fun of me, jerk," Steve agrees.

"Punk."

"So, Bernie!" Steve says, making an exaggerated point to ignore Bucky. "Glad you could come tonight."

"Me, too!"

"Glad you didn't get stampeded by over-excited freshmen who were freaking out about winning their first homecoming."

"It was a close thing, let me tell you," she says drily.

"Steve! Steve, Steve!" Bucky clumsily dismounts from the countertop, tugging Steve's shirt as if he has ground-breaking news to give. "Steve! We just won our first homecoming!"

"What?"

"Like the freshmen!" Bucky insists. He grabs Steve's shoulder and shakes him gently. "We've never won a homecoming before."

Steve plants his feet just in case Bucky loses balance. Then he realizes what Bucky's saying, and wracks his brain to the last two years—years he spent on junior varsity teams, unmemorable years he watched from the sidelines, and— "Oh, my god, you're right."

"We won our first homecoming!" Bucky's teeth shine with whatever liquor is mixed into his drink. "You won, Steve!"

He teeters for a moment, a sluggish, unwound moment, before Steve catches him around the waist. They stumble under Bucky's momentum and Bucky's drink splashes over both of them.

They freeze, staring at the drops clinging to Steve's sweater and the lopsided stain flowering over Bucky's shirt and pants.

Steve bursts into laughter just as Bucky breaks into a horrified apology. Then, in perfect tandem, Steve replies very seriously that "it's not a big deal!" while Bucky dissolves into a fit of laughter.

"Stop, stop, okay," Steve says, pulling away from Bucky. "I'm—crap—" he giggles, "I'm gonna go to the bathroom and try to get this off. Don't worry about it, really. I'll just … I bet there's soap in the bathroom. I'll be right back."

Bucky stumbles after him, the contents of his cup sloshing dangerously. "No, I'm coming with you. I
got stuff on me. I need to fix it."

Steve, though pleasantly tipsy, wouldn't have trouble composing himself if necessary. But he's noticing now that Bucky crossed the "tipsy" line about two drinks ago ago. Steve bites his lip.

*So that's what near-death-experiences will do to a guy.*

It's a miracle Steve even makes it to the bathroom. Bucky hanging off one arm, his drink still threatening to spill over, a sea of bodies and the pervading scent of Axe Body Spray, not enough light around the edges, a bass line shaking the soles of his shoes. It all feels so exposed, when he's not wearing a helmet or pads. When he's the one protecting Bucky, not the other way around.

They worm their way into the dining room, which is dark, then down a deserted hallway, also dark. Steve has visited the Dugans' home maybe twice in his life, but it's one of these doors. Something on the left. One of these. He slips through a doorway and runs a hand along the wall, brushing the corner of a hand towel before finding a switch.

Bucky curses softly at the surge of light, his breath hissing against Steve's neck.

"Sorry," Steve whispers, darting farther into the room to allow Bucky some space.

Bucky squints. Rolls his head back and forth, as though searching for something. "I need sunglasses," he mumbles.

"Yeah, you need something."

Bucky makes a face, blinking harder than necessary. He fumbles with the doorknob, closes the door behind him, and collapses against it. For the first time—maybe ever—he actually looks like he played four full quarters of a football game. He looks like he spent the evening getting scraped across the field. Maybe scraped across a strip of asphalt. It only lasts a second. Like *Fight Club*, with the splicing and the subliminal messages, a shutter shot of reality, a fleeting glimpse of a sixteen-year-old who spent an entire evening in oncoming traffic.

Looking down, Bucky seems to notice his soggy shirt and sweatpants for the first time. He laughs.

"I'm covered in ..." he trails off, snickering. "What am I covered in?"

"Bucky, I don't know what you've been drinking, but it must be good," Steve replies, shaking his head.

There's a dispenser for hand soap next to the counter. Clearly not going to cut it. He scans the room for washcloths, opening a couple drawers and cupboards and finding various toiletries, a spare toothbrush, and three fresh toilet paper rolls. It's guest bathroom. Of course there's nothing useful here.

With a sigh, Steve yanks the hand towel off of its ring and tells himself the Dugans won't mind. They raised Dum Dum, so. Honestly.

Steve grabs the hem of his T-shirt, stretches it under the tap, and turns on the water. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Bucky slide a few inches down the wall.

"Did you see fucking Morita?" he asks.

Steve takes a deep breath. "He's a little drunk."
"Is that how he ended up in Gabe's lap?"

"Gabe, and that girl he asked to the dance."

Everything Steve says tonight, Bucky seems to find hysterical.

Steve turns his attention to the stains in his clothing, dissolving under the running sink. The water has soaked through his cotton T-shirt. There's a scientific principle at work, here—Steve wonders if the water would keep spreading, saturating the cotton fibers, or if it would stop at some point. If gravity could keep it at bay.

Bucky looks down at himself again. "I got stuff on me."

"Yeah, me too," Steve replies, thumbing the little drops of red on his shirt. It's no use, really. "Maybe you should just find something else to wear."

"… I don't live here."

Steve sighs. His shirt is about as good as it's going to get, so he turns to Bucky, who—well, he got the brunt of the mess. A bright scarlet splotch stamped across his torso and a streak of red down one pant leg to match.

Carefully, Steve removes the cup from Bucky's grasp and sets it aside where no one will be able to upend it again. He looks back at the stain over Bucky's shirt and his eyes travel up to Bucky's face.

"You could … run it under the water." Steve says, gesturing vaguely toward the sink and toward his own half-clean shirt.

Bucky licks his lips. "I don't know," he says. "I'm a mess."

He makes a half-hearted effort to move, stumbles, laughs, and gives up.

Steve wonders if it's Bucky or him or the room itself tilting. Just slightly. Not in an inebriated way. In an airlock way, all the oxygen concentrating in the corners of the room, where it does him no good at all.

"I can try …" he says weakly, and holds up the towel. Bucky blinks again. Hard.

Without waiting for more of an answer, Steve holds the hand towel under the tap until it's soaked. He rings it out. Turns to Bucky.

"I'll do my best," he says.

Bucky watches him closely, but doesn't speak.

Steadying his lungs, Steve presses the wet towel to Bucky's stomach. He can feel Bucky's abs tense underneath, and he can tell this isn't going to help, and he moves to pull back but when he tries to escape, Bucky sucks in a breath. He slips a little, sliding down the door, just a few inches. He grabs Steve's side with one hand for balance, holding tight, eyes widening—then, without warning, he bursts into giggles.

They are at eye level.

Steve swallows nervously, feeling very sober and warm and close. His hand goes still. He stares deliberately at the little Nike swoosh on Bucky's chest and not his face. "Uh...you need help? You okay?"
Bucky's laughter dies down. "I'm definitely okay. I'm ... good. I'm really good."

Steve's knees go out of focus. He can feel Bucky's hand against his side. It's been there, apparently, for a few minutes, but he can really feel it now, each individual fingerprint branding his ribs. And he can feel it shift, ever so slightly, down to rest on his hip. His breath hitches.

Bucky's eyes, slightly glassy, roam up and down Steve's face. He clutches Steve's hip, as if to pull him closer, but Steve stands his ground; presses his fingers against Bucky's stomach to keep them from trembling.

Bucky winces, and Steve pulls back as if he's been burned.

"Sorry!

"It's fine." Bucky grips Steve tighter.

Steve can feel his own hipbone through the waist of his jeans. He's never felt that before. The individual seams where they imprint against his skin.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

They're both whispering. Not that it's a secret, not that they need to keep their voices down; it just doesn't take more than that. For now, for an uncountable moment, Steve feels like they could do all this without speaking at all.

"I'm fine," Bucky murmurs again. "I just," he lets out a huff of laughter, "I think I'm starting to bruise."

Steve blinks slowly and his gaze drifts down Bucky's chest. "From the game."

"Look," Bucky says, and before Steve can stop him, he hooks his thumb under the hem of his shirt and pulls it up, exposing smooth skin and muscle. Steve exhales.

He's right. There is a bruise. A lopsided oval glows under Bucky's ribcage, almost the size of a football, still pink and tender, but with purple starting to burn the edges.

"God, Bucky," Steve breathes. His fingers flutter over the injury. The skin is red and overwarm and slightly swollen, just enough to mask the definition of his bottom ribs.

"What?"

"Dammit." Steve curls his hand around Bucky's side and brushes his thumb under one edge of the bruise. He should apologize, he would apologize, if it wasn't too late.

"Steve?" Bucky's voice breaks a little, snapping Steve out of his stunned silence.

His eyes dart up. Bucky looks confused, eyebrows drawn together, tongue moving between his teeth.

Instantly, Steve pulls his hand back. "What's wrong?"

"Are you mad at me?"

For a split second, Steve thinks he knows just how badly that bruise might hurt.
"No, God no. Why would I be mad at you?"

With a short breath, Bucky releases the hem of his shirt, and it falls back into place, draping over one of his hipbones and leaving a small strip of skin bare. Steve notices, and thinks, maybe, that is the moment that his nerve endings reach dew point.

"You look mad."

"I'm not mad at you," Steve says firmly.

Bucky bites his lip, and the air shudders from Steve's lungs.

"What's the matter?" Bucky asks.

Steve realizes Bucky's lips are still shiny, and he realizes he's staring at Bucky's lips, and he realizes he can't stop. He realizes a lot of things and can't get his brain to focus on any of them. Hurricane winds batter his ears. His head roars with an overwhelming urge, real and gritty and unmistakable.

"You're drunk," Steve whispers. He needs, desperately, to be far away from Bucky, but he won't let go of Steve's hip, and Steve doesn't want him to. He needs him to, but he doesn't want him to.

"You're drunk too."

No, Steve thinks. No, because that would make this much simpler.

Distantly, he remembers he's still holding a wet towel, and grips it tight between both hands. He gestures vaguely toward Bucky's shirt.

"That's never going to come out," Steve says with a weak smile.

"I know."

"Sorry I couldn't help more."

Bucky's mouth opens, just a fraction, and his tongue flicks out. "... You're really close."

Steve figures it out a second too late. "Sorry," he gasps. He takes a step back, and finally, finally, Bucky's hand falls from his waist. He stumbles a little without Steve to hold him up. "Sorry, Buck, I'm—I'm just sorry."

Even though he can't stop shaking, Steve manages to guide Bucky into a seated position on the closed toilet seat. Bucky groans and screws his eyes shut.

"I'll just—I dunno. Try to find you a dry shirt, or something." Pulling his mind out of a daze, and hating himself a little, he escapes the bathroom alone.

It takes a few minutes and a great deal of slow, deliberate explanation, but eventually Dum Dum Dugan figures out what Steve is asking, and he promises to take care of Bucky. Actually, Dugan's sister overhears the conversation and assures Steve that everything will be alright, and Steve believes her—especially after she plucks Dum Dum's drink from his hands and exclaims that he's officially been cut off for the night.

Steve decides not to go back to the guest bathroom, because he is a horrible person.

And he walks home, because the cold air feels like a really, really good idea, just now.
Steve goes to the homecoming dance alone. He wouldn't have gone at all, except half of his team insisted on making an appearance. He rents a plain tux with a blue vest, takes a group photo with his offensive line, requests an old Bing Crosby ballad as a joke, asks Bernie Rosenthal to dance to it when the DJ digs it out of a black hole, and starts to text Bucky three times before deleting everything and putting his phone on silent.
Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky shower together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On the Sunday after the homecoming dance, the New York Giants don't play. It's so predictable that the one time Steve could use the distraction, or the excuse, or the opportunity, however you look at it—the one week he would love to watch his team play football, they have a bye week.

So his eight A.M. alarm practically burns a hole through his mattress.

He should go for a run. He'd meant to go for a run when he set the alarm, just as he always goes for a run on Sunday mornings. A light jog to keep his muscles loose before a week of practice. He should go for a run. He should eat a well-rounded breakfast. He should do a lot of things, but instead, he unplugs his alarm clock, powers down his cell phone, and rolls over so the morning sun isn't in his eyes.

Steve doesn't wake up again until eleven-thirty. Even then, he fights consciousness. Out of necessity he trudges to the bathroom across the hall, struggling to stay upright when his socks slip on the sleek wood floors, but after finishing his business he skates straight back into his room and rolls into the bed. He leaves the door open, this time, so Ebbets can join him.

When his dog pads into the room and hops onto the foot of the bed, Steve mumbles a creaky hey, buddy into the pillow.

His mother would scold them both, but despite her rules, the old golden retriever has probably spent more time on the furniture than off of it, considering how often she's out of the apartment.

Steve's father died while serving in the army. They have the medal and the flag displayed in the den. He left the kind of inheritance that's supposed to be worth it, but still Sarah Rogers' shifts at the hospital remain a nightmare.

"What's up, pup?" Steve croaks without opening his eyes.

Ebbets heaves a sigh of soap-opera-proportions.

"Me too, bud."

Steve considers taking Ebbets out for a morning pee. He considers getting out of bed and eating breakfast and turning up the furnace and putting on pants and performing a lot of other productive activities. But he stays in bed.

"I fucked up, Tidbits."

His dog snorts, but otherwise doesn't respond to the old nickname. Of course he doesn't respond, Steve thinks, because he's a dog.
Doesn't stop Steve from continuing the conversation. "I think Bucky hates me," he admits.

He can hear, distantly, the low rumble of the furnace kicking on, which means the temperature in the apartment must have finally fallen below sixty.

"I was trying to help him, is all," Steve says. His voice is low. Contemplative. It feels swallowed up, like it probably wouldn't reach beyond the borders of his double bed. "I'd never thought of—him. Before. But he was standing so close, and it all kind of clicked, and …"

Steve sits up on one elbow so he can reach Ebbets, and he scratches behind his ear.

"I almost…I don't even know what I wanted to do." His voice is barely a whisper. "And he was plastered, and he never asked for that. He could barely stand up and I had him pinned against the door like—like…"

His breath falters. That's all he can manage, now, as his throat closes off and his fingers curl a little too tight into Ebbets' fur.

With a grunt, Steve gropes at the bookshelf beside his bed, pushing aside a nest of Xbox wires, and retrieves his phone. He flips it open, turns it on, and checks the time (eleven forty-eight), and sees one missed message. His heart somersaults as he clicks it open.

Gabe Jones:

That's as far as Steve gets, at first. When he sees Gabe's name on the screen, he barks a bitter laugh and buries his face between Ebbets' shoulders.

Maybe Bucky is just out of minutes. It wouldn't be the first time they had to forego texting—really any form of communication—because they couldn't get the technology in sync. Also not for the first time, Steve wishes desperately that he could destroy Bucky's cheap pre-paid cell phone in a sacrificial pyre.

Whatever the reason, there has been radio silence between them all weekend. It's tying Steve's muscles up in knots.

He takes several deep breaths, then lifts his head to check his phone again.

Gabe Jones: check out the steelers score bro

Steve stares at his phone screen, then tosses it aside into the folds of the comforter.

"Bucky must hate me."

He drags a pillow over his face and thinks about how if he screamed the sound would be muffled and anyway even if they could hear his neighbors probably wouldn't care a great deal.

He doesn't scream.

Instead, he rolls out of bed and tosses the pillow to the floor. Ebbets bounds to his feet and wriggles in circles around Steve's ankles, wagging his tail madly. Steve takes a moment to find his balance, then kneels down. He wraps his arms around his dog.

"Bucky hates me, doesn't he?"

Ebbets squirms and licks Steve's ear.
During math class on Monday, Bucky is conspicuously sullen.

It's the only class he and Steve have together. As per the assigned seating chart, their desks are just about as far apart as possible, because Mrs. O'Connell learned early on that allowing Steve and Bucky in close proximity in a classroom is kind of like releasing a pair of labrador puppies into a small pen and asking them to sit quietly and respectfully for fifty straight minutes.

Despite their separation, or maybe because of it, Bucky spends most days disrupting the class as often as possible. Not in a rude way, of course. In fact, he is so undeniably charming that the teacher usually can't bring herself to reprimand him with more than an eye roll. Though Bucky's contributions are rarely useful and almost never pertain to math, he usually brightens everyone's day with jokes about current news, opinions on the latest sporting events, or off-topic questions about algebra that everyone else is too conscientious to ask. He never hesitates to engage Steve in loud conversation, even from a distance.

But on Monday, he doesn't speak without being called upon. Even then, he provides the answer without any frills.

Steve spends the entire period wound up in a ball of tension, staring at the chalkboard without actually seeing any of the numbers.

When lunch hour rolls around, Bucky doesn't sit with him.

Peggy is there, but Steve doesn't know how to broach the subject with her. *Sorry we couldn't go to the homecoming dance together,* he thinks bitterly. *While you were gone I almost fucked up our undefeated season and made up for it by trying to kiss my best friend. No big deal. How was the college visit?*

She's understanding, but Steve thinks that kind of news could probably overwhelm anyone.

Instead, he spends the 48-minute lunch period wolfing down two slices of pizza and recounting to Peggy the events of the game and how it might affect the season from here on out.

"Bucky's alright though, isn't he?" she says, finally able to get a word in while he takes a bite out of his pepperoni and sausage. Her pupils look big, Steve thinks, and the muscles around her eyes look tense.

"Yeah, he's fine." The image of Bucky's bruising ribcage floats across his mind. "I mean, he'll be fine by Saturday. He'll be able to play."

Peggy rolls her eyes. "I didn't ask if he could play. I still don't want him to get hurt, Steve."

Immediately, his chest swells with affection for her. Most people would only worry about the football schedule, but of course Peggy isn't that shallow. Of course she actually cares about Bucky's well-being.

"Why isn't he sitting over here, anyway?" she asks, and just as fast as his chest swelled before, it deflates now.

He mumbles something about math homework and takes another bite of pizza, avoiding her narrowed eyes. Luckily, he spent enough time telling stories about the homecoming dance already that the bell rings and interrupts her line of questioning.
It's a close call, Steve thinks. He doesn't know how to explain that he hadn't meant to hit on his drunk best friend at a party. It's unsurprising, really, that that friend should want to keep his distance.

No one on the football team uses the locker room showers that often.

For one thing, their aging facilities are a little discolored, a little rusted around the edges, a little bit "don't look at me too long or you might contract something." Not to mention the pervasive smell of body odor, water damage, and a cloying mix of deodorants embedded into the walls. It's not that revolting—it could be worse—but nothing is immune to time, or to several decades of unruly teenage boys.

For another thing, when you're a sixteen-year-old athlete, it is considered the height of Uncool to use school showers, for reasons that are very real even if they don't make much sense. Perhaps high school society has been ingrained with the doctrine that cleanliness is next to caring too much—and caring too much is definitely Uncool.

And finally there is, of course, an unspoken suspicion attached to public showers; a clandestine and deeply internalized homophobia that associates the merest thought of naked men in one's proximity as gay, and by extension, a bad thing.

Whatever the reason, the MacArthur High School showers probably get used once a month, at best. Usually when someone has a date or a meeting or some other event immediately following practice. Once or twice a year, someone rinses off after a game, but even if they plan to attend a house party afterwards, it's much more socially acceptable to just sneak home first and shower in privacy.

So it's not weird, exactly, when Bucky showers after practice on Monday—everyone can hear the faucet squeal when he turns it on, protesting weeks of disuse, and the stream of water takes a moment to sputter to life—but that doesn't prevent the endless teasing comments.

"Got a date, Barnes?"

"Dude, put your shoes back on, it smells even worse than before!"

"You trying to smoke us out?"

"Don't drop the soap."

It's merciless, actually.

It makes Steve's blood boil.

The events of the weekend are wiped from his mind in a white wave of indignant rage. His ears are ringing. He can't even think, actually; he only feels the acute desire to prove a point. Without considering the consequences, he strips down to an undershirt and boxers and follows Bucky into the depths of the locker room.

The second Steve storms off, the laughter and the rude comments die off. He smiles to himself with a very manic satisfaction.

That satisfaction stays with him through the length of the hallway, past several of the showers, each separated by a tile wall almost five feet tall. Just enough of a barrier to provide privacy, but also, presumably, designed to allowed for conversation, if the occupants are inclined.
Bucky is in the third-to-last stall, streaks of white shampoo lathered into his dark hair. His eyes are closed. He doesn't react as Steve approaches, and it takes a minute for Steve to figure out that Bucky can't hear him coming. His socked feet are silent on the tile floor and the rushing water would drown out his footsteps, anyway.

He reaches the stall on Bucky's right. Balancing himself on the wall, he first removes his socks, then peels off his shirt and underwear, then dumps all his clothes into a pile where they'll be safe from the angle of the shower head. He glances at Bucky. His face is scrunched up in the wake of the water, and he is still, evidently, oblivious to his surroundings.

That is, until Steve cranks on his own faucet with a screech.

Bucky whirls, mouth hanging open, tiny dewdrops of water clinging above his top lip, and Steve feels a sharp jolt in his guts, as if they've been ripped straight through the floor. This seemed like a good idea four minutes ago. Now, as his eyes drift to the trickle of soap bubbles pooling over the divot of Bucky's collarbone, he realizes with deep, irreparable clarity that he is a giant idiot.

But now he's turned the shower on and everything. Can't really turn back without making even more of a fool of himself.

If the bewildered horror in his eyes is anything to go by, Bucky also seems to think Steve is an idiot. "Steve?" he says, blinking rapidly.

Steve busies himself with the knobs on the wall, even though his water temperature is fine. "Everyone was making fun of you," he says, going for a light tone even though his chest squeezes around every syllable.

"That's … because they're assholes," Bucky says slowly, still looking dazed and wide-eyed. "That's not exactly new."

An involuntary laugh escapes Steve's lips. It's almost normal. He focuses on the familiarity of Bucky's cynical deadpan, not on the rivulets of water curling around his bare shoulders, and tries to regulate his breathing. "Why are you taking a shower, anyway?" he asks.

"Um."

"Not that it matters—I mean, sorry," Steve stammers, arms hanging clumsily at his side. His limbs tingle. All of them. Weirdly. They feel unattached, and yet they are tingling.

"I—I just," Bucky says noncommittally.

Steve looks at him again, and Bucky's eyes dart away. His cheeks bloom with a deep red from the heat of the water and the gathering steam.

"Don't—never mind. I'm as bad as them," Steve says, then laughs nervously. "I didn't—um. Can I borrow your shampoo?"

Bucky bends out of sight to grab the bottle and passes it to Steve, dripping water on his gym shorts, which are draped over the edge of the wall separating their stalls. Steve blinks at the damp patch, red fabric turned crimson. Almost black. He clears his throat. "Thanks."

Stupid, stupid, stupid, Steve berates himself. He stares fixedly at an uneven tile on the wall—because looking at Bucky makes him feel as if his lungs are filling with water—then pours out a dollop of soap and goes to work on his hair.
To his immense relief, Bucky speaks first.

"Listen, about Friday night."

So much for relief.

"Oh God—"

Then, as if on cue, they both say, "I'm so sorry."

They stare at each other.

"What are you sorry for?" Bucky asks. He's looking at Steve full on, finally, eyebrows drawn together, water trapped in the creases of his face. Steve feels himself squirm under the intensity of his gaze.

"No, no, you go first," Steve says. His temperature starts to drop. At odds with the clinging humidity of the showers, he can feel ice creep into his knees and the tips of his fingers. He hopes he can relax before his lungs freeze over.

Bucky reaches up with both hands to swipe his hair back. It stays in place, as if slicked with gel. "You know," he says. "Sorry I got trashed and made a mess of … everything."

Steve can barely hear Bucky's voice over the twin jets of water and the way they pound against the tile.

"Oh, that!" Steve can't hold back a rush of giddy laughter. "It's fine. It's not a problem."

"I know you didn't want to spend the night babysitting me," Bucky says with a self-deprecating smile. "So … sorry about that."

The frost creeps slowly into Steve's joints. "That's all?"

"Me being a fucking lightweight? Yeah. Sorry."

"Oh, God," Steve breathes. "That's not—it's not a big deal. It's fine, really, I don't mind … I mean, you're not a lightweight."

"I was pathetic."

"You weren't …" Steve can still remember that night, holding Bucky up, the way the vodka shone on Bucky's lips. Or maybe he's mixing things up. Maybe he is distracted, fixated on this tile-bound moment, the way Bucky's lips shine pink through the shower's steam, the way a thin stream of water curls into the dimple in his chin. Steve has to take a deep breath before answering. "You were not pathetic."

"Yeah. Okay." Bucky turns away slightly, though his eyes flick to Steve before adding, "what are you sorry for?"

"Oh."

It's hard to breathe now. A cloud of steam hugs their stalls, rising in waves of heat, clinging to their shoulders, pressing against their rose-bloomed skin.

Steve still isn't even sure what he was feeling on Friday night, let alone what he should do about it. Obviously Bucky didn't notice, or share any of Steve's turmoil. Maybe he's imagining the turmoil,
himself. Maybe that tightly-knotted moment in Dum Dum Dugan's bathroom was all just a fluke, just Bacardi-induced weirdness or the burst of unreal reality that comes after a football-game's-worth of adrenaline.

"Um." Steve's head spins. From the humidity. Definitely from the stifling humidity. "I just … I was sorry about leaving you," he says, quite truthfully. "I should have at least checked on you. Or something."

Eyes fixed on a corner of his own stall, Bucky sighs. He draws his shoulders up and wraps his arms around himself. "You did enough."

"You couldn't even stand up."

That draws a laugh out of Bucky. It echoes against the angles of tile and cement, and Steve can feel the ice inside his veins start to melt. A little bit.

"Wasn't much you could do," Bucky says. "Just had to throw up a couple times. Get it out of my system."

"You were sick?!"

"Well, Steve, sometimes when people drink alcoholic—"

"I didn't know you got sick though!" Steve interrupts, horror burning out his insides. "God, Bucky, if I had known you were that messed up—"

"Messed up? Come on, I was fine." Bucky grins as he twists his faucet off. His shower gurgles and dies. "You helped as much as you could."

"…I think your shirt was kind of a lost cause."

Bucky laughs softly. "Yeah. Thanks for trying, though." He drags his crimson shorts off the partition wall and pulls them on without drying off. Steve doesn't watch, even though it takes a superhuman effort.

"I should have stayed," Steve insists.

"What were you gonna do? Hold my hair back?" Bucky is grinning now, one eyebrow cocked.

Yes, if you need me to, Steve thinks on an inhale. Then he notices the glint in Bucky's eyes and realizes what they're talking about, really—sees the way Bucky's hair is plastered down—it looks too dark, black, even, from the water—and it is shorter than Steve's, to be honest—and his muscles start to unwind.

His body starts to feel normal, again. Like it belongs to him.

The memory of Friday night still coils tightly inside his chest, but it is an intricate knot, one he is afraid to unwind for fear of causing more damage, but one he can live with. It is a small knot in a necklace chain, minuscule and delicate but close enough to the latch that no one will see. He can address it later.

And it seems that he is the only one struggling with it. Though pink around the ears and still avoiding eye contact, Bucky seems otherwise relaxed. Maybe he's just embarrassed about getting drunk. Maybe there was no tension at all between them on Friday. Maybe Steve misread everything. Misread his own feelings, even.
"Seriously," Bucky goes on, "don't feel bad. You didn't miss anything but me changing clothes and passing out."

"I dunno," Steve smirks. He turns off his own shower, pulls on his boxers, and throws his shirt over his shoulder. "Maybe I would have made you clean up after yourself, at least. Spilling punch all over Mrs. Dugan's floors like that …"

"Get me on my hands and knees." Bucky laughs, and the scarlet in his cheeks spreads down his neck. Across his chest. "Cinderella shit."

"I don't remember anyone from Cinderella ever getting wasted."

"That would explain why Prince Charming couldn't recognize her at all."

Steve snorts. "It would not explain why they call him Prince Charming."

"Did someone say Prince Charming? Because I'm here."

They both turn around to find Gabe Jones, wearing nothing but Adidas sandals and a pair of boxers, and they all double over with laughter.

"Prince Charming, huh?" Steve grins. "You think you're some kind of royalty?"

"Uh, have you seen this?" Gabe shoots back, gesturing to himself.

Bucky snorts. "How about we start calling you Prince Charming on the football field? That'll really terrify the other teams."

They laugh again, and Gabe hangs his head dramatically. "Okay, okay. You're hilarious."

"You'll always be our Prince Charming," Steve teases.

Gabe rolls his eyes, and then frowns, apparently confused by something on the floor. He points at Steve's feet. "Damn, Rogers. How'd you get that scar?"

It isn't what Steve was expecting at all, and he has to do a double take. He turns his foot and gets a better look at the scar Gabe was talking about, a thick blade of white skin wrapped around his Achilles tendon.

He can hear Bucky giggle next to him, obviously remembering exactly how Steve got that scar.

"Oh my god," Steve sighs and closes his eyes in a bid for patience.

"What?" Gabe looks baffled, but also incredibly eager for the gossip.

Bucky laughs harder. "Steve Rogers is not a very good swimmer."

"What does that mean?" Gabe's smile is ravenous.

"I can swim just fine."

"Yeah, now you can swim just fine," Bucky says.

"I didn't need you to save me, for crying out loud."

"What happened?!" Game says, frustrated by the way this conversation has left him in the dust.
"Steve fell off a diving board."

"There was a kid trying to get out of the deep end. I wanted to help."

"There were like ninety people at the pool."

"No one else was helping!"

"No one else tripped off the high dive, either."

Gabe might actually pass out from laughter. Bucky, to his credit, tries hard not to laugh, but he keeps shooting sly looks at Steve out of the corner of his eye. Asshole.

"Yes, ninety people at a public swimming pool saw me trip off the end of a diving board."

Gabe cackles.

"And you know what else?" Steve adds. "Bucky Barnes looked like a total idiot jumping after me to make sure I was okay."

Bucky's smirk evaporates. "There was blood in the water, Steve!"

"It was a little cut."

"That ain't no little cut." Gabe raises his eyebrows and nods at the scar tissue on Steve's ankle.

"It was nothing," Steve insists, "but Bucky still thought he needed to be fucking James Bond about it."

"I was twelve. Give me a break."

"I dunno which one of us looked dumber."

"You're the one who needed stitches."

Gabe shakes his head at both of them. "So what you're saying is Bucky is the real Prince Charming, here."

Steve laughs at that, and throws out a hand to brace himself on Bucky's shoulder. They make eye contact, briefly, wildly, enough to blame the hysteria on bad jokes.

"Listen," Bucky says breathlessly, "I gotta go."

"Wait, Buck—"

"I gotta go."

He drops his shoulder, effectively shaking off Steve's hand, and escapes without another word.

Steve doesn't argue. He's still trying to catch his breath, though he has no idea how it got away from him. Laughter, surely.

He bends over to retrieve his socks. Over his shoulder he can hear Gabe start another shower running. Before leaving, he double-checks the stall for anything he forgot and realizes that he never returned Bucky's shampoo.
so the summary might have been a little misleading.
Post-Season

Chapter Summary

Football isn't fair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For Bucky's eleventh birthday, his family made plans to take him to the movie theater, which was a rare treat at the time. They invited Steve along, and Bucky's little sister, Rebecca, suggested they see *Spy Kids*. It was a good plan.

It made opening presents a little dull, but Bucky was never an ungrateful child, so a nerf gun and a real-life college-sized football seemed like terrific gifts to an eleven-year old. The movie night was scheduled a full week after his birthday, though. In those seven days lay the flaw in their plan.

Mrs. Barnes said she would be baking the cake a week late due to a busy work schedule. Rebecca brought up *Spy Kids* in at least one conversation a day in what was, in retrospect, a totally unsubtle way of getting her brother's hopes up. Even Bucky's stepfather got in on the games, allowing Bucky to open presents on March tenth in one breath and telling him to wait patiently for his party in the next.

Steve was the one who let the secret slip.

He lasted about four days. Every time Becca called them in to watch a *Spy Kids* commercial, Steve had to hang back in the doorway and bite down on his finger. He held his breath whenever Mrs. Barnes mentioned cake or vague party plans. He couldn't even walk past movie posters on the sidewalk without blushing furiously.

He spilled the beans in the middle of the week after a school day. He and Bucky were making laps around the block, Bucky on roller blades and Steve on a kick scooter because at the time he was no match for Bucky's balance and coordination.

"We need to take these to a park," Bucky had said, smiling at Steve over his shoulder.

"We could find a hill to race!" Steve had agreed enthusiastically.

"Let's do it on Saturday!"

"Y—we can't on Saturday, though," Steve had said, so naturally, so fatefully. "On Saturday we're going to see *Spy Kids*."

Bucky almost crashed into a post office box in his shocked excitement, and no one had ever asked Steve to keep a secret again, no matter how inconsequential, especially from Bucky Barnes.

To this day, Steve can't keep his mouth shut, no matter how mundane the news. His whole team knew about it when Jim Morita starting dating that girl from AP Chem; and they knew about Bucky's little sister making the varsity volleyball team; and they knew about Peggy Carter getting accepted into some prestigious summer conference on health and fitness. They all probably cared
very little for this gossip, but Steve can't keep things like that to himself. He's kind of stopped trying.

"They're talking about Gabe being the conference player of the year," he says on Thursday evening. They just finished football practice, and Steve is trying to sit still on a bench in the locker room, talking excitedly to whoever will listen, while Bucky tapes a bulky ice pack to Steve's right elbow.

"Who's 'they'?” Jim asks, untying his cleats on the opposite end of the bench.

"The reporters I talked to a couple days ago," Steve explains with a proud grin. "They talked to Coach Erskine too. They won't give out awards for a couple weeks still, but Gabe probably has a good shot."

"Local paper?" Jim clarifies.

"Yeah, just preps sports. But still."

Dum Dum Dugan makes a grand entrance and distracts Jim from the conversation, so Bucky takes the opportunity to contribute for Steve's benefit.

"Not gonna tell them how you're being considered for the same award?" he asks softly, eyes focused on wrapping Steve's arm.

Steve can feel his cheeks grow warm. "It's not a big deal."

"Kind of is."

"Gabe has a better shot than me, though."

Bucky shrugs. "Keep winning, and you've got a good shot, yourself."

"He works a lot harder than me," Steve protests. "And so do you, for that matter."

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Is this good?" he asks, patting the ice pack on Steve's arm and deftly changing the subject.

"Little tighter," Steve says.

Bucky nods and goes back to work without speaking.

It's not a very high-tech system, the quick-fix for Steve's chronically sore arm. Literally just store-bought ice and saran wrap. It's how their athletic trainers deal with the everyday aches and pains of football.

Steve can't finagle the contraption onto his own arm, but when the trainers try to help, they always badger him with obnoxious questions about degrees of pain and scheduling doctors' visits, so for the last six weeks, Bucky has taken up the job. He's not thrilled about Steve's lingering discomfort, either, but he gave up lecturing him about it a long time ago. He's also better at adjusting the ice pack for both maximum effectiveness and maximum mobility, which Steve appreciates.

He makes a couple more passes with the saran wrap, tears it off the roll, and pats down the loose end. It looks like Steve has developed some kind of an amorphous plastic tumor around his right elbow.

"Thanks, Buck."

"Yeah," he replies noncommittally. "It's not getting worse, is it?"
"What, my arm? Nah, I'm fine actually. You're just such a great nurse."

Bucky rolls his eyes. "You'd tell me if it got worse though, right?"

"Aw, you worried about me?" Steve teases.

"Sure, until the state tournament's over." The muscles around Bucky's mouth go tight as he tries not to smile. "You know I only care about you as long as you win us football games."

"I knew it. You only want me for my body."

Steve laughs and pushes himself off the bench with his left hand. "Just let me know if you ever need me to return the favor."

"Oh, I'm fine," Bucky says, grinning outright. "I don't go looking for trouble, like some people."

"… Uh, you absolutely fucking do."

"No, Steve, I cause trouble. There's a difference."

"Hey, Rogers!" Suddenly a voice cuts off their banter, soaring over the locker room din. "Get a move on!"

It's Gabe Jones. He's already headed out for the night, and Steve almost forgot about the plans they'd made earlier in the day. He turns to Bucky, who shoots Steve a quizzical look as he slings his backpack over one shoulder.

"You want to come shopping with me and Gabe tonight?" Steve asks.

"Don't have any money or anything."

"Oh, that's not a big deal." Steve waves a hand dismissively and bends over for his own backpack. "Gabe needs new cleats. Apparently his are falling apart, and his mom said he could get a new pair for the State tournament."

"Well, if it's for a good cause," Bucky smirks.

They join Gabe Jones in the corridor outside the locker room, all of them in matching sweats, all of them lugging backpacks.

"Is it okay if Bucky comes along?" Steve asks as the three of them fall into step.

"Yeah," Gabe shrugs. "When I asked you, I kind of figured it was like asking both of you."

Bucky laughs, but Steve takes a few seconds too long to process that statement.

Half an hour later, the three of them have clogged up an entire aisle of Modell's, which is the closest sporting goods store within walking distance of the high school. Unsurprisingly, Gabe and Bucky can't keep focused.

"I thought we came here for cleats?" Steve says sternly.

"We did," Gabe says. "But check out how awesome these are." He turns to Steve, hands spread before him to display the palms of the gloves and Steve has to admit that they are, in fact, awesome.
They're solid black on the back, but the palms shine with a glossy American flag pattern, one hand blue with stars, one hand red-and-white striped.

"You gotta get some, Gabe," Bucky says. He has put on a matching pair. He raises both hands to high-five Gabe. "Do it."

"I can't afford a new pair of gloves, man."

"You came here for new shoes, man, is another five bucks really gonna break your fucking bank?" Bucky laughs.

"Bucky!" Steve hisses, and his eyes go round. "There are kids in the next aisle!" He smacks Bucky's arm.

"Oh, shit." Bucky says, giggling.

"You're a dumbass," Steve says automatically, and then claps a hand over his mouth.

Gabe snorts. Bucky, however, dissolves into such violent laughter that he has to sit down in the middle of the aisle.

"Shut up!" Steve can barely suppress his own laughter. "Shut up, you a—you absolute jerk."

And because he knows exactly what Steve was about to say, Bucky cackles even harder.

"Anyway," Gabe says, stepping between them and pulling the gloves off one finger at a time. "Like I said, I can't afford these, and I know Barnes can't."

Bucky wipes his eyes with a forearm. "What—what's that supposed to mean?" he says breathlessly, still grinning.

"It means I know you broke as hell," Gabe says, dropping his voice so no one will lecture him for his bad language. He holds out one hand. "Gimme."

"Can't argue with that," Bucky says, and he forfeits the gloves, still chuckling and trying to catch his breath. Gabe takes both pairs of gloves and heads for the end of the aisle to put them where they belong.

"Hey!" Bucky says. "Can't you help a guy up?!" He waves one arm uselessly.

Steve rolls his eyes. "Come on, Barnes," he says, holding out his hand. "Time to get your crazy ass off the floor."

He pulls Bucky to his feet, claps him on the shoulder, and rolls his eyes, all in one fluid, unbroken act. Something totally involuntary.

Bucky's smile triggers something in Steve's parasympathetic nervous system. Neurons light up in a stream of static. If Steve were to take a step back and watch the blaze of nerves, listen to them crackle and take a look at the big picture, to understand where they come from and where they are headed—well, that might be a bad idea. Paying too close of attention might just drive him into a corner with a panic attack. If you think too hard about the reality of a forest fire, even just the little trickling kind you drive by in the Sierra Nevadas at summertime, you'll want to do something big. Steve does want to do something big, or at least he thinks he does. But Bucky might not feel the same way.
"Hey, guys!" Gabe's shout brings Steve back to reality. "Check this out!"

Steve and Bucky follow his voice to the end of the aisle. On the wall overhead, a mounted flatscreen flashes with the ESPN banners.

Five men sit around a sleek wooden desk bearing the NFL logo. They are discussing the events of a game from the previous weekend which only recently ignited a petty controversy.

"I thought the Packers game was supposed to be on?" Bucky says, frowning at the news station footage.

"Not for an hour still," Gabe explains. "But apparently the Cowboys got themselves in trouble on Sunday."

"Quiet," Steve says, not unkindly. He holds up one hand, and they all turn their attention to the TV.

"… current head coach for the Dallas Cowboys, spent the post-game news conference dodging questions from reporters."

The screen cuts to a press conference, the Dallas coach seated in front of a backdrop plastered with his team's logo, drinking from a styrofoam cup and adjusting the microphone set on the table in front of him. He points into the crowd of reporters gathered off-screen.

A reporter's disembodied voice asks the first question. "Wasn't it underhanded, at best, to omit your starting quarterback from the injured reserve all week?"

The coach raises an eyebrow. "You seem to think you already know the answer to that question."

There is a pause, and he nods at another reporter.

"Coach, in Philadelphia's place, would you file any formal grievances if you found yourself faced with a similar situation?"

He takes a long drink from the styrofoam cup. "I'm not in Philadelphia's place."

The third reporter takes a different tactic. "Who within the organization would you say is responsible for this kind of omission?"

"Next question."

The screen cuts back to the table of reporters, who discuss the controversy and joke about Dallas' nonchalant attitude on the matter.

Steve doesn't find it nearly as funny as they do. "But the Cowboys won last week."

"Yeah, slaughtered them," Gabe agrees.

From the television set, Steve can hear one last statement by the halftime-show host: "… Cowboys are unlikely to face serious consequences in regards to last week's win. In the past, similar situations have prompted the league to administer substantial fines …"

"They're getting off with a fine?!" Steve's heart is like a windmill; when the storms kick up, it rattles into overdrive. "But they cheated!"

Whatever oncoming storm Steve is experiencing, Gabe seems to have a shelter built up. "It's not that big a deal."
Steve immediately turns to Bucky for back-up. He is biting his lip, eyes flicking between his two friends.

"Oh, come on, Buck!" Steve crosses his arms. "You don't think this is okay or something, do you?"

"Course not," Bucky says. He shrugs. "But that's how it is, isn't it? The NFL's not exactly known for its high moral ground."

"All they did was leave a name off an injury report," Gabe says. "Someone could have forgotten it for all we know."

"They didn't forget about their quarterback," Steve says, acid in his voice.

"Right, but I mean, it's not their fault if that messes up the Eagles' game plan," Gabe argues. His stance is perfectly logical, too, which is why the winds keep howling in the slats of Steve's ribcage. "Say they expected Romo to play, and spent the entire week preparing for him. Then it turns out his back-up starts the game. Isn't it their own fault they weren't prepared at all for any alternate scenarios?"

"But it's not their own fault that they had false information to work with."

"It's strategic, though," Gabe says. "And all the Cowboys have to deal with is a couple fines."

Steve scoffs. "If you can't beat someone fair, then you don't deserve to beat them."

"Football isn't fair."

They both turn to face Bucky. It's the first time he's spoken up one way or another. His words were soft, but they land with heavy reality in their midst, and it's not just the cynicism but the truth of it that makes Steve want to knock a hole through the nearest wall.

He's not sure how to respond. *It should be fair*, he thinks, but that is childish at best. And he knows Bucky is right. Another thing he doesn't want to think too hard about.

The silence burns, but this isn't a forest fire. This is just the lingering flames waiting to die out.

"Yeah," Steve sighs. "I guess."

Bucky finally looks up and offers him a sympathetic smile. "Anyway, since when did you care so much about the Philadelphia Eagles?" he teases. They are lighthearted words, but the smile is full of understanding.

"True," Steve allows. He can't help but smile sheepishly. "I mean—God, you're right. The Cowboys and the Eagles are both so terrible."

"Too bad they couldn't both lose," Bucky says.

"Too bad they couldn't both lose, cheat, and get fined for millions of dollars," Gabe adds, and with that, he drags them away from the television toward a rack of Nikes.

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MacArthur High School is compact, as any high school must be when it sits in a populous neighborhood surrounded by high rises and expensive condos. On the inside, though, it feels spacious. Built in the seventies, it's new enough to appease the kinds of families who can afford to
live in Brooklyn, but old enough that some rough edges show through. Like the lockers that don't all
shut straight, the faulty air-conditioning in the library, the rusted corners of a sparse trophy case, and
the stall in the second-floor restroom that's been out of order for two years.

It never feels cramped, though. Especially on Friday afternoons, when Steve has to book it from the
fine arts wing all the way across the building to the locker rooms to load the buses and leave for
away games.

"Why are you complaining?" one of the seniors asks when he overhears Steve explaining to Bucky
about the distance. "Don't you get out of class even earlier that way?"

"Well, sure," Steve says. "But honestly, art is the only class I'd rather not miss."

The senior raises an eyebrow. "Fair enough," he says doubtfully. "I'm just happy I get to miss
geometry."

Steve laughs, but his heart isn't all in it. The locker room is tense. Now that MacArthur has
completed their regular season without losing a single game, they've earned a spot in the State
Championship brackets. It's a simple four-team playoff. Two pairs of teams face off in a semi-final,
and then the respective winners battle it out in a championship game. This week, MacArthur faces
Aquinas Institute in Kingston, New York.

So to say that tensions are high would be an understatement.

Everyone deals with game-day anxiety in different ways. Some people put on noise-canceling
headphones and tune out the rest of the world for as long as possible. Some people tell jokes. Some
people get testy. Some people start stretching now, at 1:30, and never really stop until the game
starts.

Jim Morita is dancing at the opposite end of the aisle from Steve, his moves somehow suggesting
equal parts electric slide and dark-corner-of-a-shady-night-club.

"What's he listening to?" Steve asks.

Bucky is totally zoned out. He only has one earbud in, but apparently he still didn't hear Steve's
question. The hood of his zip-up sweatshirt is up, shading the top of his face. He is straddling the old
metal bench and staring at his hands where they rest in his lap, palms facing up. He jiggles one knee,
frantic and out of any rhythm.

"Bucky."

No response. Instead, Bucky slowly cracks the knuckles on his right hand, then his left.

"Earth to James Buchanan Barnes."

"Hm?" He looks up wildly before catching Steve's eye and blushing. "Sorry."

"It's cool."

Bucky blinks, then curls his lip, as if encountering a particularly pungent odor. "Did you just call me
James?"

"Um."

"Asshole," he says without any feeling.
Steve smiles at him. "Well, it got your attention."

"Okay, well, I'm allowed to call you Steven during the game, now."

If he's honest with himself, Steve couldn't care less what Bucky calls him. He's feeling warm and breathless, as if every inhale only fills the top third of his lungs. It makes him giddy and reckless.

"Whatever you want, Buck," he says earnestly. "You can call me whatever you want."

A slow, wicked smile spreads across Bucky's features. "Good, because I've got a few ideas."

"Nickname ideas?"

"Yeah mean, I've been thinking about nicknames for you," he says sarcastically. He is still staring steadily at Steve from under the shadow of his hood.

"That's sweet, you think about me that often?"

"Only when I'm bored."

"Gotta be better ways to spend your free time."

Bucky's eyelashes flutter. "Who says I can't multitask?"

Steve clears his throat. "You know, you can get more done with a little teamwork."

Bucky throws his head back with laughter.

Steve's stomach swoops and then plummets. He feels suddenly, very sober. For the record, Steve Rogers has never, ever been remotely good at flirting—but either he's crazy, or this is flirting. A minute ago they were just teasing, though, and it wouldn't be the first time Steve confused himself in the face of a potential—what. Romance? What.

Over Bucky's shoulder, Steve catches sight of Monty Falsworth and Dum Dum Dugan bent over a playbook, occasionally pointing out strengths and weaknesses, their demeanor unflinching and somber. Maybe it's the setting, or maybe it's the realization that Dum Dum Dugan is actually being serious, but something shakes Steve out of his swift, euphoric spell.

What is he doing? He lets out a shaky breath. How much of his lungs is he using now? Is he using his lungs at all anymore?

"You okay?" Bucky asks. The ghost of a smile still lingers on his face, even through the deep blush.

Steve inhales for several seconds. One lung, then the other.

Now is not the time. There has probably never been, and probably never will be, "a time" for whatever he's doing with Bucky, but this is unquestionably not "the time."

Steve coughs, then jabs a thumb toward Jim Morita's dance moves and says, as evenly as he can manage, "have you seen this fool?"

Bucky blinks. After a brief hesitation, his gaze drifts across the locker room. He snorts. "Oh my God."

"What d'you think he's listening to?" Steve asks, repeating his question from earlier.
"Why don't you ask?"

Steve considers it for a moment, then pulls a face. "Ugh. Does the world really want to know?"

"Huh," Bucky laughs again, weakly, before diverting his attention back to his hands.

Before Steve can add anything else, particularly something he might regret, Gabe turns the corner, dressed in a full, official MacArthur track suit and carrying an open textbook in both hands. He holds it close to his face, as if he's nearsighted. Steve can't hear what he's saying, but he can see Gabe's lips moving as he reads to himself.

When he looks up from the textbook and sees Steve, he immediately brightens.

"Bonjour!" Gabe says. "Comment ça va?"

Apparently, some people psych themselves up for life-altering football games by studying French. The stupidity of the situation relaxes Steve, just a fraction. "Bien, merci. Um … et toi?"

Gabe shrugs. "Pas trop mal." He licks his thumb and first finger, then uses them to flip a page in his textbook. "Dans quel domaine est-ce que vous envisagez de travailler et pourquoi?"

Steve glances at Bucky, whose mouth is hanging open. "Um—what?"

Laughing, Gabe looks back and forth between the two of them. "Nothing." He reaches into one of his pants pockets and procures a small stack of notecards. "Just practicing. Test next week."

"You're crazy," Steve says, his voice weak.

"Oui," Gabe replies. "Pensez-vous que l'autre équipe saura français?"

To say the least, Steve's head is spinning. It's pure luck that Bucky steps in to rescue him.

"You have notecards?" he says, nodding at the stack of cards which, admittedly, make his question unnecessary.

"Yeah."

"I'll help you study."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Bucky shrugs. "Not like I have to understand it. That's your job."

Gabe stares for a moment, then beams. "Merci!" he says. "Merci mille fois."

Bucky smiles, swings a leg over the metal bench, and takes to his feet. Looking slightly bewildered and utterly relieved, Gabe hands over all his study materials. On his way out, Bucky claps Steve on his non-throwing shoulder.

"See you on the bus."

"Yeah," Steve says, feeling dazed. "Yeah, thanks. I mean—see you."

But Bucky has already diverted his attention. He shuffles through the notecards.

"Okay, ready?" Bucky says. "Si vous voulez acheter un aller simple, allez … au quai ou au
It feels as if someone has punctured both of Steve's lungs with a blunt ice pick. Definitely not getting full use out of either one, now.

"Au guichet," he hears Gabe answer as they exit the locker room.

Can Peggy Carter speak French? Steve wonders. She probably can.

"Good!" Bucky says. Steve can tell he's smiling, and he has to sit down for a moment. "Je ne pleure pas! J'ai ..."

Bucky's voice drifts away, taking all of Steve's oxygen with it. His French is slow and a little stilted, but his pronunciation is good.

Steve takes the route of noise-canceling headphones. For some reason, he very desperately needs to get his mind back on track for football-related activities.

Chapter End Notes

my cat walked across the keyboard as i was finishing edits on this chapter and all he typed was:

=]

he knows.
The Semi-Final

Chapter Summary

Dead dove do not eat.

Chapter Notes

i'm picturing Steve & Bucky et al as part of the 2007 high school graduating class.

Aquinas Institute is a perennial State Championship contender, whereas MacArthur has performed a small miracle just by making the post-season tournament. Once the game starts, they hang on largely by the skin of their teeth.

The chemistry that got them here—Steve's stalwart, unwavering leadership; Bucky's fluid versatility; Gabe's slippery running style, not to mention his thirty-three touchdowns—all those unique qualities make them hard to beat, but they don't add up to experience. Aquinas presents a challenge, not only in talent and preparation, but also in confidence. Steve believes in himself, and he believes in his team. But the Aquinas players don't just believe things. They expect things.

The earth itself seems to be at odds with the MacArthur underdogs. All day the sky churned overhead like melted steel, casting a cold, empty gleam over the afternoon. According to the laws of the universe, it's fair to assume the sun rose and traveled across the sky at some point, but no one would know it, judging from the black clouds and ringing chill. The temperature has been dipping, and the sky growing darker, since eleven that morning.

Finally, when MacArthur unloads the buses in Kingston, the storm breaks. Not a thunderstorm. That would be too easy. Lightning would call for a cancelation, or at least for a postponement. Instead, the seams in the clouds come loose and release a constant, icy, spitting rain.

"We have our work cut out for us," Coach Erskine announces, though not discouragingly.

(Perhaps Bucky puts it best when he steps off the bus, squints, and turns his face to the sky. "Dead dove, do not eat." Gabe and Steve both laugh, and Dum Dum Dugan has to explain the joke to Jim Morita.)

For Steve, the game becomes an exercise in frustration.

First of all, there's the miserable weather, the incessant drizzle that neither dissipates nor picks up into a full-blown rain. It only takes twenty minutes outside for their uniforms to be soaked through, layers of pads and spandex and Underarmour saturated and cold and creaking and chafing. With every step he takes, Steve can feel his water-logged insoles squelch underfoot.

In the second quarter, Aquinas scores. When Steve sloshes onto the field with the offense, he almost loses his cool.
"This game is bullshit," Steve exclaims.

"Every game we play is bullshit," Gabe says with a shrug.

"Dammit, this game is really bullshit!" Steve cries, unable to keep his voice down. "Everyone's fingers are numb, Dugan can't rush the quarterback without getting held, Bucky can't cover a receiver without getting called for pass interference, and every time I try to pass, the other team interferes with us. If the fucking refs would open their fucking eyes—"

"Steve, come on," Bucky says placatingly. "Keep your voice down or they'll find a reason to penalize you, too."

"I'd love to give them a reason," Steve spits, looking over both shoulders. He raises his voice conspicuously and adds, "but this fucking ref wouldn't be able to recognize his wife's tits if she danced naked on the fifty-yard-line, so there isn't much I can do to help him."

"Steve!" Bucky hisses.

The rest of the team is howling with laughter.

It's probably a good thing that the referees don't hear Steve's outburst, at least not well enough to understand it. But it was still satisfying to say it out loud.

Bucky looks amused, but the way a parent is amused by their child's ridiculous temper tantrum.

And they score a touchdown on the next drive, so Steve feels justified.

Soon enough, though, the rain and wind drive away their good mood. The game slogs on, the field becomes more and more like a coastal bog, and the MacArthur players begin, one by one, to lose feeling in their limbs from the cold.

There's no way to get a strong grip on the football. Between the water, the temperature, and the stalwart Aquinas defense, Steve as had to throw away more passes than he cares to count, and he's tired of handing the ball off and watching Gabe get tackled only four yards later.

At halftime, Bucky kicks over a water cooler, and more than one teammate bitches at him for the outburst.

"What the fuck, Barnes?" Morita cries, jumping off the floor to escape the spreading puddle.

"What's the matter, are you worried about getting a little wet?" Bucky spreads his arms to display is soaked uniform.

He makes a good point. Steve can't do anything but sit in a corner and fume for the remainder of their halftime break.

Standing on the sideline and watching the defense, though—that is the most frustrating part of all, and it carries into the third quarter. The first half of the game was a battle of wills. Each team held the other to just one touchdown, and frankly, a 7-7 game isn't exciting to watch.

Hopping on the balls of his feet, Steve watches helplessly while the MacArthur defense throws themselves into their work, barely keeping Aquinas at bay. They practically open up a vein and spill their entire being onto the field just to keep their opponents from scoring on every single play.

Bucky had a ridiculous ten tackles in the first half, and he's already on pace for at least ten more.
Each time he makes impact with another player, Steve flinches. All he can do is hold his breath and watch while Bucky wraps up another Aquinas wide receiver, watch while they roll over each other and then drag themselves out of the mud, watch while Bucky waves Dum Dum Dugan over and asks him to pick a patch of grass out of his face mask.

On the next play, Bucky drops into coverage. The quarterback throws his way. He and the intended receiver grapple for the football, which ends up bouncing between them and rolling innocently away onto the flooded turf. For a split second, it looks like Bucky and the receiver are about to get into a fist fight, and Steve grips his helmet a little tighter.

"Come on, Bucky, chill out," he whispers to no one, his voice drowned out by the rain.

Nothing serious happens—both players maintain their composure—but when they turn around and go their separate ways, everyone notices the bright yellow flag fluttering in a patch of mud.

The referee has to shout over the wind. All Steve can hear is "pass interference."

"Oh, for crying out loud, they were both going for the ball!" Steve roars.

Coach Erskine catches him around the waist. In fact, Steve doesn't realize he has started to stride right onto the field until his coach has to rein him in. "Calm down, Rogers."

"This is bullshit, that wasn't pass interference!" Steve roars.

"Steve—"

"If anything, the receiver pushed off!"

"Steve!" Coach Erskine raises his voice and gives him a little shake to get his attention. "While your righteous anger is undoubtedly well-intentioned, I'd really appreciate if you didn't get yourself ejected."

Steve breathes hard through his nostrils. "If they score on this drive …" He doesn't finish, but the warning tone in his voice says enough.

The penalty yards put Aquinas past the fifty yard line. If Steve were a nail-biter, he would definitely be biting his nails. He drifts down the sideline to remain as close as possible to the line of scrimmage. He needs the best view he can get.

On first down, Dum Dum Dugan stops the running back for no gain.

On second down, they go for a passing play, but the receivers are well covered, and the quarterback is forced to run out of bounds, again for no gain.

On third down, the quarterback drops back to pass once more. He checks downfield, where no one is open. Then a lean tight end slants to the middle of the field, and the quarterback lobs him a gentle pass. He reaches for it, arms outstretched, and Steve watches breathlessly.

Just as the tight end gets his fingers on the football, Bucky appears out of nowhere and levels him. Steve almost jumps out of his skin. The crash of their helmets and pads coming in contact is like a gunshot—you could probably hear it four blocks away from the stadium.

The Aquinas tight end hits the ground with a splash. Bucky stands over him for a moment, silent, clouds of fog spouting through his face mask as he pants in the cold air. Then he turns and walks back to the huddle.
Steve clutches his stomach.

Bucky strides with purpose, utterly and devastatingly calm, as if he'd done nothing more than walk down the aisle of a grocery store. The blurry curtain of rain and the eerie silence in the stadium cast a supernatural quality over the scene. Steve feels as if he's getting lost in a Dali painting. His brain can't reconcile the brutality of that tackle with Bucky's apathetic reaction.

"Holy crap." Morita's awed voice drifts somewhere to Steve's left, and brings Steve out of his stupor.

"Glad he's on our team," Gabe says drily.

Steve swallows hard. "No kidding."

The kid gets up slowly, but doesn't seem to be injured, for which Steve is quietly thankful.

And Aquinas doesn't score again for the rest of the game.

Gabe Jones ends up chewing through the mud for three touchdowns, Bucky Barnes ends up tacking on ten more tackles, and MacArthur ends up winning, incredibly, by more than twenty points.

Kind of makes up for the shitty weather conditions.

In the locker room, they exchange hugs and high fives and peel off rain soaked layers and discuss the pros and cons of giving Coach Erskine a Gatorade bath.

"It would be hilarious, though," Steve insists, keeping his voice down so he doesn't give away their intent.

"No, Steve," Bucky deadpans.

"It's a fucking playoff win, though!"

"You're so lucky you have me around to keep you out of trouble."

Steve is lucky, it's true, because if it were up to him and Dum Dum Dugan, Coach Erskine would probably be wet, cold, and covered in bright blue stains.

After packing up, the team files back onto the dilapidated school buses, hunkers down with their dripping football equipment, and prepares for a two-hour drive home. It is decidedly anticlimactic.

Steve and Bucky reclaim the seats they'd used for the ride upstate, dragging their feet and collapsing across from each other on the aisle. Bucky groans. After a moment of steady breathing, he turns to dig in his duffel bag and pulls out a wrinkled, heather-gray blanket. It is made of the same cotton material as sweatpants, and has a four-foot MacArthur logo emblazoned in scarlet across the center. He wraps it around his shoulders and swings his gaze upon Steve.

"It's freezing," Bucky states, pulling the blanket tight around his chin. He looks miserable.

Before Steve can answer, the athletic trainers swarm onto the bus, passing out ice packs, saran wrap, painkillers, and ace bandages. Steve takes a bag of ice and plastic wrap and dumps them on the seat beside him. He waits for the trainers to leave before shooting Bucky an apologetic smile.

"Do you mind?"

"Course not."
With a grunt, Bucky pushes himself up and to the edge of his seat. Steve mirrors him so that they can face each other across the aisle, and holds out his right arm in order to give Bucky easy access to his elbow. Bucky shifts his blanket a little so it will stay in place around his shoulders, then picks up the ice pack.

Steve's elbow doesn't hurt in an exact sense. It doesn't feel like a true injury. It has never hindered him, never given him sharp pangs, or made him beg for a double dose of Tylenol, or anything else he could fix. It just festers. It is like stagnant water, a lingering ache that throbs somewhere between his forearm and his shoulder. It's not even a localized pain. Sometimes, Steve thinks this is far more frustrating than an actual injury would be. He would almost rather break a bone and have it all over with.

Whenever this crosses his mind, he tries to take a step back; tells himself, for God's sake, at least this isn't tampering with his ability to win football games.

But it would be nice not to have to bother Bucky with his uninjured injury every day.

"Steve?" Bucky's voice sounds hesitant.

"Sorry," Steve shakes himself out of his stupor.

"Higher? Lower?" Bucky asks. He's holding the ice pack to the outside of Steve's arm, curling just above the elbow. His right hand wraps around Steve's forearm, holding it steady. His fingertips feel unusually warm. Probably because the bag of ice is skewing Steve's perceptions.

"That's good," he says, slowly coming to his senses.

Bucky nods. "Hold it there for me."

Steve does so, and watches closely as Bucky opens up the saran wrap and pulls out the roll. He carefully unravels the free end, holding both corners so it doesn't fold back and stick to itself, and sticks them to the plastic bag of ice, patting it down. With a shrill crinkly noise, he starts to wind the saran wrap around Steve's arm.

"Tight enough?" he asks after a few layers.

Steve nods. He watches Bucky work, following his fingers as they handle his arm with gentle, practiced proficiency. Pulling his gaze away from Bucky's hands, he lets it drift to his face. He is preoccupied with fixing Steve's elbow, so Steve takes the opportunity to study his features up close.

Steve has known Bucky for a long time. He could probably draw his face from memory, but he rarely gets a chance to actually see him, to admire Bucky without coming across as creepy or intrusive. His traits are lean, but strong, more classic Hollywood than GQ model. He's handsome, Steve thinks with consideration, but in an understated way. He has blue eyes, but his dark lashes make them look gray, and he has a chiseled jaw that comes to a blunt point at the dimple on his chin.

His lips are naturally dark, and they part slightly as he concentrates, and Steve can just see the tips of his middle two teeth, which are a fraction longer than the rest. He frowns as he struggles with the saran wrap. Two small wrinkles form off-center between his eyebrows.

As he concentrates on the task at hand, the tip of Bucky's tongue slips out and traces his bottom lip. Steve wants to kiss him.

With that thought, his breath hitches. It's new and strange and unreal and totally, totally inappropriate, and he knows that, but he wants to kiss Bucky. He realizes that now, with inescapable
clarity, as Bucky administers simple first aid, his face just inches away from Steve's. He's never thought of Bucky as anything more than a classmate, a teammate, a wide receiver, an athlete, a best friend. But Steve can't pretend the wild soaring feeling in his stomach is confusing anymore. He wants to kiss Bucky. The epiphany takes his breath away.

He won't, of course. It's not worth the inevitable disaster, the fallout of bewilderment and heartache. But he knows he wants to. The acceptance alone makes his mind reel.

What does that say about him, about Steve? He definitely wanted to take Peggy Carter to the homecoming dance, and wasn't confused about that, either, any more than he's confused now about how amazing Bucky's eyelashes look in the faint evening light.

Steve glances toward the back of the bus. He can hear Dum Dum Dugan dramatically reenacting a goal line stand from the third quarter, but he can't see anyone down the aisle. All of his teammates are tucked safely into their seats on the bus. All of them are disembodied voices combining into a dull roar. Somehow, none of them have seemed to notice the way the earth just tipped off its axis—the sudden and weird shift in atmospheric pressure, the alteration of wind patterns.

He turns back to Bucky, who is still focused on the ice pack, his tongue still peeking out of the corner of his mouth. Without warning, Bucky's eyes flick up to Steve's.

Steve almost chokes. "I—oh—how's it going?" he croaks.

Bucky's lips turn up in a soft smile. "You tell me."

Steve feels short of breath. He's been sitting still for, what, fifteen minutes now, but he feels as if he just did ten laps around the football field.

When Steve takes too long to answer, Bucky quirks an eyebrow. "Uh, you good?" he prompts, drumming his fingers on the layers of plastic.

"I'm … great. Good. I'm good." Steve looks down at his arm, registers that Bucky finished wrapping him up—probably a long time ago—and then looks back up at Bucky. Jesus, Steve can't remember if his eyes have always been this intense, or if it's a side-effect of paying attention to detail. "I'm great, I mean."

Bucky chuckles. "Well, make up your mind. Are you good, or great?"

"Um…"

"If it's still just good, let me know what I can do to make it great, you know?" A muscle in his cheek twitches, sort of like an aborted wink. Or maybe that is hopeful thinking on Steve's part.

"It's great," he manages. "I'm great."

He thinks Bucky is kind of great, too, but keeps that to himself.

Bucky pats the ice pack where it rests secure, now, on Steve's right arm, and then leans back. Almost instantly, Steve misses the close proximity, but doesn't say anything; he turns, slightly, to face the front of the bus, and squeezes to fit his legs into the cramped space between his seat and the one in front of him. He looks down at his arm and thinks about muscle fatigue and medical care. Experimentally, he flexes the fingers of his right hand and sighs.

While he's thinking about prescription-strength ibuprofen, someone swats his left shoulder.
"Scoot over."

Bewildered, Steve looks up to find Bucky standing over him, making shooing motions for Steve to slide down the bench seat. He does so automatically, feeling dumb, but not questioning it.

"Now I'm cold because of your stupid ice." Bucky pulls his blanket tight under his chin and flops onto the seat next to Steve. "Aren't you freezing?"

Steve blinks. "Freezing?"

He looks at his arm and at Bucky and thinks about ice crystals forming high in the atmosphere where it is cold; high enough that they might melt again before they hit the ground.

"You're literally wrapped in ice," Bucky states. He shifts restlessly next to Steve, knocking their arms together more than once as he gets comfortable. Finally, he settles with his knees propped against the seat in front of them and his shoulder pressed firmly against Steve's.

Neither of them addresses the close contact. Steve pretends he doesn't notice, but in fact he does notice; in fact it makes his brain freeze solid, speaking of cold; in fact the steady warmth of Bucky pressed against him is suddenly all he can notice.

If Bucky notices, he doesn't say so, but his arm remains solid and warm against Steve's.

Steve feels it to the very core of his being, feels as if half his oxygen is escaping; as if there are some kind of rules at work here, some kind of chemical reaction; as if these will be the last breaths he takes; and he feels as if he definitely, definitely won't regret it.

"… immune to the cold?"

Steve shakes himself and realizes Bucky is still talking. "What?" he says. He must sound stupid, and his legs feel stupid, and without a doubt his arm and its stupid ice-tumor look stupid.

"I said you're like a fucking super hero." Bucky curls in on himself and buries his chin into his blanket. "Are you immune to the cold or something?"

"No!" Steve blurts out with wild laughter. "I'm stupid. I mean, I'm freezing. And stupid."

Bucky snorts.

"They really should install heaters on these things," Steve says, gathering his senses as much as possible. "School buses are the worst."

"I think it has a heater," Bucky says thoughtfully, "but the drivers never use it because it just blasts at nine thousand degrees."

"Makes sense. Would you rather be nine thousand degrees or negative nine degrees?"

"Nine thousand," Bucky says shortly. Doesn't even hesitate.

The ridiculousness of it makes Steve giggle. "No, you wouldn't," he says, not unkindly. "If it was hot in here, you'd be whining and stripping and opening all the windows."

"Would not."

"Shut up," Steve says, gently smacking Bucky's knee. "Or should I ask him to turn on the heat?"
"You just want me to take off my clothes," he grumbles.

Steve erupts with wild laughter, and it's kind of the only thing stopping him from bursting into tears. "Shut up," he says weakly. Again. Apparently, it is the cleverest comeback his brain can come up with on depleted oxygen.

His nerves are firing on repeat, his muscles spasming, his brain short circuiting. The point where their shoulders connect burns. It's like leaning against a hot stove and just smiling and taking it.

"Hey," he says softly, trying to grab the world in his fingers and hold it steady. "Hey, Bucky."

"Hm."

"Good game, man."

"… You too," Bucky says hesitantly, as if he's waiting for some kind of catch.

"Seriously," Steve says. "You were pretty incredible."

"I mean, I'm nothing like you, but—"

"No, stop. You're … I don't think we could have done it without you, tonight."

Bucky scoffs. "Don't lie, man, I'm not—"

"Bucky," Steve says, his voice sober, his eyes trained on his hands where they are folded in his lap. "I couldn't do this without you."

He doesn't respond for a long time. The silence passes in waves, in bumps on the road and rattles in the windows. Steve's vision goes in and out of focus but his shoulder tingles where Bucky presses against him.

He can feel it when Bucky takes a deep breath. When he fills his lungs, and his ribcage expands, and his blood pumps under his skin, despite the cold. He exhales, and Steve feels that too. He leans into it.

Bucky takes in another breath and then, at last, he speaks. "I don't want to do this without you."

It has a finality to it, but somehow also an open-ended, pleading implication. Steve feels prone, in the face of the wind, in the face of reality, in the face of world-altering realizations and newly-lit flames.

He doesn't respond. He doesn't feel like he has to. The words hang between them, pinned before their eyes, a little too close, so they start to blur and look like nonsense. If they were to back away, they might be able to read the words more clearly; but if they back away, they might step backwards off of a cliff and lose everything.

The silence bleeds across minutes, across an hour. Bucky's head drapes onto Steve's shoulder. It is both sudden and soft, and Steve's lungs shudder at the contact.

Steve closes his eyes and counts his inhales. When Bucky doesn't move, he takes it as a good sign. He doesn't know if Bucky is awake, even; if he curled against Steve for the warmth, or for the comfort, or if he simply drifted to sleep and couldn't hold his head up anymore. Steve doesn't care, he just doesn't want it to stop.

He monitors his breathing to keep from disturbing Bucky, and he squeezes his hands into fists, digging his fingernails into his palms to keep himself awake. Awake, and propped up against Bucky
Barnes.

The minutes roll over, one breath at a time. For once, Steve just wants the ride home to last a little longer.

He winces as their bus rumbles over the curb into the high school parking lot. Bucky stirs next to him.

The rest of his teammates grumble in the rows behind him, zip their coats and their duffel bags. A chorus of car keys jingles from the depths of their pockets.

Bucky sucks in a deep breath through his nose, planting soft, sleepy noises against the fabric of Steve's sweatshirt. When he finally lifts his head, it leaves a gaping hole straight through Steve's bones.

Bucky blinks hard and looks up at Steve, eyes red and swollen from sleep.

"Hey," he says with a bleary smile.

"Hey," Steve smiles back. "You awake?"

Bucky responds with a yawn so huge it makes him squeak.

Steve can't help but laugh. "I guess that's a yes."

"Sorry I fell asleep on you," Bucky says, looking quite satisfied and not sorry at all. "Literally."

"Not a problem," Steve replies brightly. "Happy I could be of service."

Bucky smirks and pushes himself off of Steve's shoulder. The loss of pressure makes Steve shiver. For the first time, he realizes just how cold it is on the bus, and realizes he still has a bag of ice strapped to one arm. Actually, it's mostly cold water at this point. He shifts a little and the plastic rustles, pulling Bucky's attention.

"You know, it's not really good to leave that stuff on for two hours," Bucky scolds him.

Steve shrugs. "I didn't want to wake you up."

Bucky blinks at him once, then twice. His lips part as if he means to speak, but nothing comes out. To save him the trouble, Steve holds out his arm. "You wanna help me get it off?"

Bucky shifts in the seat for better access to Steve's elbow, and attacks the layers of saran wrap with just his fingernails. Their bus slowly crosses the parking lot, and Bucky dumps the dripping bag into his own abandoned seat.

The bus lumbers toward the gymnasium doors, hisses, and shudders to a halt.

It's almost midnight. As enthusiastic as everyone is about the win, exhaustion overrides most of their emotions. There are exceptions; Dum Dum Dugan, for example, has already invited everyone over to his house for a party, including, inexplicably, most of the coaching staff. A handful of people will probably take him up on it. If his continual yawning is any indication, Bucky won't be one of those people.

Steve, for his part, is already dreaming of his bed, his dog, and a generous hoard of pillows.
Bucky heaves himself to his feet with a groan, stretches, cracks his back, and retrieves his duffel bag from across the aisle. He fumbles with his hood and pulls it over his ears.

Steve grabs the back of the seat to haul himself up. Grimacing, he twirls his ankles experimentally and waits a few seconds to regain feeling in his knees.

Bucky shuffles down the aisle, then turns to make sure Steve is following him.

"Right behind you," Steve smiles, shouldering his duffel bag.

They file out of the bus one after the other, Bucky still cocooned in his blanket, Steve pausing briefly to shake the bus driver's hand.

The team unloads the buses with practiced efficiency before peeling off their separate ways. Jim Morita agrees to go home and drink with Dum Dum Dugan; Monty Falsworth gives everyone a hug before pulling out the keys to his dented 1995 Toyota Camry; Gabe disappears into the parking lot to find his older brother, who stopped by the school to drive him home.

"You walking home?" Bucky asks.

"Yeah, what about you?"

"My mom has the car," he replies, dodging a definitive answer.

By foot, it takes Steve less than ten minutes to get home; Bucky, however, lives a good half-hour's walking distance from the school. He looks pretty miserable and tired, bundled up in layers of cotton and fleece, eyes still glassy from sleep, puffs of fog escaping every time he exhales.

"Want to come to my place?" Steve murmurs. He's afraid to raise his voice. He might not be able to keep it steady.

Bucky's shoulders visibly sag with relief.

Before leaving, Steve digs in his bag and pulls out a beanie to keep his head warm. Luckily, the rain has deteriorated into a cold mist. It feels like walking through a low-hanging cloud more than walking through any actual precipitation.

They cut through the alley behind the school and walk the first three blocks in silence. As they turn the corner onto Steve's street and wait for the signal to cross, Bucky clears his throat.

"Um. Steve?" he says hesitantly. "There's … can I tell you something?"

Steve does his best to take deep, even breaths in order to hide his rocketing heart rate. He can physically feel it, actually, the way his pulse pounds in his throat. God, it could almost crack his jaw.

"Of course," he whispers.

Bucky doesn't answer.

The pedestrian signal changes to a "walk" sign, and they step off the curb into the street, and Steve feels exposed, like all the headlights in the intersection are trained directly on his face, and do they all have their high-beams on? They're like laser sights.

Every worst-case scenario barrels through his mind, a hailstorm of bad news. What if he's still worried about Steve's arm? God, what if Bucky is injured, what if he hurt himself and he's been hiding it ever since the game ended? Steve tries to steal a surreptitious glance at him from the corner
of his eye, just to check if Bucky is limping or favoring any limbs. What if Bucky is uncomfortable with the on-again-off-again flirting? What if he thinks Steve went too far, practically cuddling up together on the bus? What if he could tell Steve was about to kiss him—or was Steve about to kiss him?

What if he wants to kiss Steve, too?

They reach the opposite side of the street and Steve trips on the curb, and still Bucky doesn't speak. He slows down though, holding out a hand to make sure Steve is alright, then clears his throat as they resume their pace.

"So," he starts. He coughs again. "God. Um. This isn't easy to say, or anything."

"Sorry," Steve says, because he doesn't know what else he could possibly say. "Is something wrong?"

"We're moving," Bucky blurts out.

His pace doesn't falter, and he keeps his eyes fixed on the sidewalk in front of them.

Steve damn well falters, though. He comes to a complete halt as he repeats the phrase over and over in his mind. And he still doesn't understand it. "We're what?"

"Me and my mom and Becca," Bucky clarifies. He stops a few steps in front of Steve, turning slightly, toeing a crack in the pavement. His eyes are hidden, lurking under the hood of his sweatshirt. "We're moving," he repeats.

Steve frowns. "Like … getting a new apartment?" he says slowly, and he can already feel his voice beginning to disintegrate. He already knows what Bucky means, and it squeezes the air out of him, but he plays dumb for as long as he can, to protect the little lantern of hope in the back of his mind.

Bucky exhales, and for a moment a cloud of fog obscures his face. "Like, leaving Brooklyn."

A cyclone whirls to life in Steve's chest. It drives the air out of him, coats his throat in dust, makes his head spin.

"Texas," he repeats. His tongue is numb. The word sounds foreign and meaningless in his mouth. "Texas."

Bucky ducks his chin into the folds of his blanket. When he speaks, the words are muffled. "Me and Becca are finishing the semester."

"The semester."

"We're leaving before Christmas."

"Christmas," Steve parrots. He can't seem to process words of his own. Every nerve in his body
lights up one by one, as if someone just walked by and flipped all the breakers to his central nervous
system. He wants to scream. He wants to punch a hole through the glass storefront looming over
them. It's only two feet away. He could punch through a window right now and it would probably
leave him with lacerations up to the elbow and it would also probably feel better than this. This storm
tearing trenches into his guts.

"Steve?"

"You're moving?"

"Yeah."

A lot of responses whip through his head. When do you leave? Do you need help packing? Where
will you live in Texas? Why are you moving? Why?

"How long have you known?" is what finally spills from his lips. Which is harsher than he intended.
But all he can think about is Bucky's head on his shoulder, Bucky curled against him and dozing off.

"Like a week," Bucky whispers.

"God," Steve says. A huff of laughter escapes his throat.

In his psychology class, Steve once read that laughter is actually the body's way of responding to
surprise. It makes sense, because jokes rely on the element of surprise for their effectiveness. And he
thinks maybe that's why he has a terrible, wild urge to laugh, right now. He also feels the irony deep
in his bone marrow. It's funny. It's acid.

"My mom is, um." Bucky coughs again and hunkers into his layers of clothes. "My mom and Bill
are going through with the divorce."

"Yeah."

"And. And you know how my aunt lives in Texas."

"Yeah."

Bucky makes a little choking noise, barely audible over the sounds of traffic. "Are you okay?"

That is what knocks Steve back to his senses. He realizes that in his haze of shock and fear and grief,
he forgot this isn't about him. At all. And he takes a moment to look at Bucky.

He looks very sad, and very unlike the cold-blooded creature that had an inhuman twenty tackles in
tonight's football game. The Bucky standing before him now doesn't look at all capable of
concussing enemy receivers. It's incredible that one person can have that much inside. Steve's mind
drifts to surrealist paintings again, and meteor showers. He thinks of plasma domes, the electricity
inside that looks like a living spider web, and when you touch them, the way all the lightning inside
zeroes in on your lifeline.

Steve doesn't know what to say, and his skeleton is still rattling, trying to contain the storm in his
ribcage. He can only imagine how Bucky must feel.

So he closes the distance between them and wraps Bucky in his arms.

"I'm sorry," Steve says.

He can feel Bucky's fingers flex against his chest through several layers of fabric.
Bucky tucks his face into Steve's shoulder. "I'm sorry too," he says, though the syllables are muted against Steve's shirt.

"Hey," Steve says, going for optimism. "Hey, that's what computers are for, right? That's … we can text. And we can instant message, or something."

Bucky doesn't answer. Steve holds him and rubs his back and breathes in and out and cowers from the storm raging in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

now that you all hate me ... i do have a tumblr and i'd love to see you there. look me up at queenmabscherzo.tumblr.com :)
The State Championship

Chapter Summary

Things begin coming to a close.

Steve Rogers
did u see the papers

Bucky Barnes
no?

Steve Rogers
new rochelle won we play them for state champ

Bucky Barnes
told you

It's true. Bucky was the only one who thought New Rochelle would fight through the brackets to the championship game this weekend. Everyone else—Steve, his teammates, his coaches, the reporters, Peggy Carter—everyone else thought it would be Saratoga Springs, not only because they had a bye in the first week of the play-offs, but also because their senior quarterback is a monster. (Rumors say this kid is being courted by Penn State, Michigan, Southeast State, Florida, and USC, just to name a few. Anyone who has his pick of NCAA powerhouses probably won't have an issue with meager New York high school football teams.)

But they were wrong. The Saratoga quarterback just couldn't get past the heavy-hitting New Rochelle defense. Somehow, Bucky was the only one who predicted it. "Always go for the underdog."

There'd be no living with him.

"Who are you texting that got you smiling like that?" Gabe teases.

Steve snaps his eyes up and holds his phone to his chest. He can feel his cheeks flush. There's no reason for him to feel guilty, but the look on Gabe's face and the way he wags his eyebrows has Steve's mind all jumbled.

"Just Bucky," he says hoarsely, and clears his throat.

"Oh." Gabe instantly sober. He doesn't speak for quite some time.

*He knows*, Steve thinks. Steve doesn't even understand it all, doesn't know how to articulate his weird parallel feelings for Peggy Carter and Bucky Barnes, but somehow Gabe knows and Gabe is judging him for it.

Gabe licks his lips and stares very studiously at Steve's shoes. It feels like hours, actually; long enough for Steve to rehash every text he's ever sent in his life; long enough for him to wonder if "gay" is just branded across his forehead; long enough for Steve to conclude with certainty that Gabe
is judging him, that in fact Gabe hates him and he only spends time with Steve for front row tickets to his unseemly drama; long enough for Steve to consider the consequences of punching him right across the jaw. They may be friends, but Steve doesn't need judgmental homophobes in his life.

God, is Steve already bracing himself to fight off homophobes?

"Bucky doing okay?" Gabe asks.

To say the least, it's not what Steve expected to come out of his mouth. "—What?"

"Seemed like he was wound a little tight on Friday," Gabe says casually. He pulls his sleeves up to his elbows, then pushes them down again.

"Oh, that." Oh. That.

"He beasted, though."

Bucky still hasn't told anyone else about moving at the end of the semester. It's not like Steve can just spread gossip about his best friend. That is what this would amount to.

If it was Steve moving, he'd have probably announced it to the whole team, maybe to the whole school, by now. He wouldn't want to keep it to himself, let alone be able to. But this is Bucky, not Steve, and Bucky has never been the type to draw attention to himself. It's a part of him that Steve loves. The way he trucks through everything—school, football, workouts, life—and excels, even, but doesn't ask to be noticed. That's not why he does it.

"Bucky is good," Steve says simply, because if he said all the things on his mind, if he let all his feelings spill forth, he would never be able to stop. Plus, Gabe would think he was insane. Or think that he's got some kind of weird crush on Bucky. Which, anyway.

Gabe raises an eyebrow.

"He's okay," Steve admits. "It's … I mean, it's stressful. The playoffs and the holidays and final exams and everything."

Gabe takes a deep breath and flops onto a weight bench.

It's another miserable day outside, all steel-plated winds and sawtoothed skies. Instead of going outside for P.E. class, the teacher has let them hunker down in the weight room. It's lined with gym mats in red and white. A scarlet Wildcat logo emblazons the north wall.

Steve Rogers, Gabe Jones, Monty Falsworth, and Dum Dum Dugan all have this period together, which means that, about this time every day, the school gymnasium more or less resembles a four-way intersection with a broken stoplight. All that's missing are Bucky Barnes and Jim Morita. Jim complains about it incessantly, while not a day goes by that Bucky doesn't try to sneak into Steve's P.E. class. (He has English this hour. Two or three times a week, he asks for a bathroom pass, then spends fifteen minutes meandering right past the restrooms and on to the gym. In his own words, "I speak English. What am I gonna miss.")

The P.E. teachers, on the other hand, have often quietly thanked heaven for sparing them the complete set. Everyone seems to think Barnes would be a bad influence on Steve. Maybe he would be, depending on your definition of "bad".

"I don't blame him," Gabe says, lying back on the weight bench. Steve pushes himself off the floor to stand as spotter.
"Me neither."

"Just wait till next year," Gabe says. "College applications are a bitch."

"How's the search going?"

Gabe chuckles. He is a senior this year, one of the few key players on their team who will be graduating in the spring, so he's deep in the throes of the higher education money grab. "Doesn't really feel like a search. Feels more like I'm getting on my knees and begging for someone to find me, you know?"

Steve laughs, adjusting the locks at each end of the bar. Gabe doesn't bench press anything ridiculous during the season—he saves the real hefty weight for the summer.

"Is football gonna help?" Steve asks. Considering the monster season Gabe Jones has had, Steve always pictured him going on to play at the next level. But it's an elite system, the NCAA; not to mention one with flaws and blind spots.

"Yeah, especially with money," Gabe says. "I mean, it's not like USC is knocking on my door, or anything. But I got some letters from some FCS schools, and I think I could at least walk on to a couple places."

"You have a top choice?"

"Syracuse, right now." Game grunts and then exhales as he lowers the bar to his chest. "Maybe Pitt."

"For football?"

Gabe gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head, concentrating mostly on the bench press. "Research grants."

Steve's phone buzzes somewhere in the depths of his comforter, but he's almost done with the shading on this football helmet. Helmets always give him fits. He doesn't answer right away.

He forgets about his phone entirely until it buzzes again, almost five minutes later. He sighs and flips it open, selecting the first message,

_Bucky Barnes_

_Im here_

followed closely by,

_Bucky Barnes_

_steeeeeeeeeve_

It's a jolt of electricity to his heart. He leaps to his feet, texting as he fumbles with his pile of charcoal pencils.

_Steve Rogers_

_shit one sec_

_Bucky Barnes_
Steve doesn't text back, just shoves his sketchbook into the pile on the bottom shelf of the bookcase that serves as his bedside table. His socks skid on the hard wood floor as he jogs into the front hall, dodges a wriggling Ebbets, and buzzes Bucky up. Not even a minute later, Bucky lets himself in through Steve's front door. He's bundled up in sweatpants with the elastic cut out of the ankles, old Nike Shox, and a heavy blue peacoat, the collar pulled up around his ears.

The dog goes wild, toes skittering on the floor as he winds in and out of Bucky's legs. Bucky laughs, his voice thick with the cold, and offers both hands for Ebbets to lick.

"Hey buddy! Hey, it's good to see you too," he says. "Warm my hands up for me, will you? It's freezing out there."

"Bucky, geez, I'm so sorry, I—"

"It's fine, man." Bucky laughs. "Really, it's my own fault. It's pretty late."

"Seven-thirty isn't late! I still—"

"Steve. Shut up." Bucky says, grinning ear-to-ear. He pushes Ebbets to one side, toes off his battered Nikes, and kicks them into a corner of the entryway. The dog promptly sticks his nose into one shoe and snorts. Bucky giggles as he unbuttons his coat. "I don't have frostbite or anything."

"Here, let me." Steve takes Bucky's coat by the shoulders and waits while he unthreads his arms from the sleeves.

"What were you so busy with?" Bucky asks; then his face falls. "You weren't eating, were you?" He peers over Steve's shoulder, as if he might be able to see Sarah Rogers sitting impatiently at the dining room table. "Sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No, no!" Steve says instantly. "No, we ate, like, two hours ago."

Steve begins to pull away so he can hang up Bucky's coat, but Bucky grasps at one sleeve. "I don't have to—I mean—I can go, if this is a bad time."

"Bucky, seriously?" Steve shoots him a skeptical look and prys his fingers from the jacket. "It's never a bad time. I promise."

"Okay." He doesn't look convinced, but he lets Steve take his coat away and fold it over the back of a houndstooth armchair. "Then what took you so long?"

Steve stops short, then turns to face Bucky. His eyes are full of mischief.

"It's cold out there, punk," he says slyly.

Steve swallows, mind drifting to his sketchbook. Not that it's embarrassing, exactly. Bucky has seen most of his artwork and liked it, even, or at least said so out loud. But the piece he had been working on fifteen minutes ago makes him blush, a little. A lean football player with a patch of grass stuck to his face mask. Somehow the jersey had ended up with Bucky's number seventeen, and Steve hadn't thought about it until now, but something in the body type, or in the shape of the hands, might also resemble Bucky.

Steve clears his throat. "Sorry," he says lamely. "I'll make it up to you."
"Oh, will you?"

"Hey, do you want leftovers, or do you want me to kick you back out to the curb?"

"Just when I thought things were gonna get interesting."

Steve takes a deep breath to calm the flock of wild birds in his stomach. "Is leftover alfredo not interesting enough for you?"

He can hear Bucky's footsteps following him into the kitchen, and he can hear Bucky open the cupboard over the sink where he knows they keep the plates, and he is sure he can hear Bucky staring at him when he bends over to grab the tupperware of fettucini from the bottom shelf of the fridge.

But when he straightens again, Bucky isn't looking at him. He's rummaging in the silverware drawer with one hand, a cheap plastic plate in the other. He holds it out to Steve without looking up from his search for a fork.

Five minutes later, Steve has prepared a heaping plate of fettucini alfredo and retrieved two cans of Dr. Pepper from the back of the fridge.

He hands the food off to Bucky. "We can eat in my room."

"You got homework?" Bucky asks, his mouth already full of pasta.

"Not really." He's been putting off an English paper for two weeks now; one more night isn't going to ruin him.

Bucky eases himself cross-ways onto the foot of Steve's bed, careful not to tip his plate of food, and props himself against the wall. It's the best angle to see the TV. Steve crawls into the corner at the head of the bed and pulls a pillow into his lap.

Bucky lays almost flat and rests his plate on his stomach. They watch SportsCenter while he eats. Bucky gloats about New Rochelle, and Steve wonders out loud whether New England will run the table this season. They don't speak much. They definitely don't talk about Texas.

It's uncomfortable. Steve can feel the uneasiness in the room, the threads of the fabric between them coming loose from the strain. He wants desperately for things to be normal, he wants the next few weeks to be normal and happy and good, but it's not something you can just force.

When the Top Ten plays of the day come on, they fall silent, and Bucky finishes his dinner.

"You want more?" Steve asks after they see the number one play; a ridiculous one-handed catch by Steve Smith in the Ravens' end zone.

Bucky frowns at his empty plate. "I mean. How much is left?"

"It doesn't matter," Steve assures him. His fingers tighten into the pillowcase. "You should finish it, seriously. My mom never eats leftovers. They'll just go bad."

"You sure?"

"They're all yours."

With a grunt, Bucky drags himself off the bed. On the way to the door, he stumbles, and an ear-piercing shriek cuts through the room. Steve nearly pisses himself. He throws the pillow aside, but
before he can stand up, he sees the flash of golden fur.

"Oh, crap, crap!" Bucky gasps. He practically tosses his plate to one side on the floor and reaches for the dog. "Oh, Tidbits, it's okay! I'm sorry, bud. I'm so sorry, come here."

Ebbets wriggles into Bucky's arms. He seems apologetic, seems deeply regretful in that unique way a dog has when he is hurt and confused. Steve's heart breaks to watch the pair of them.

"Sorry!" Bucky tries again. He looks up at Steve. "I stepped on his foot, but it's—I think he's okay—"

"Oh, Buck, he'll be fine."

"I don't think he's limping—yes, buddy, I'm so sorry, Bits!—he's good, I think."

"I'm sure he is."

"God, don't you hate when you hurt a dog and can't do anything about it?"

"Yeah."

"Like, I can apologize all I want, but they don't really understand it. They don't really get that you're sorry." Bucky pauses to coo at Ebbets and ruffle the fur around his neck. "All they know is that they're hurting, and they think they did something wrong."

"He's fine."

"Sure, but it's still hard," Bucky says. "I'm the one that hurt him, and he's still trying to say sorry."

Bucky seems so earnest, and Steve doesn't know how to handle it. He goes for a light-hearted tone. "He's had worse, Buck."

Avoiding Steve's eyes, and apparently avoiding having to answer, Bucky continues to fluff Ebbets' fur. He even leans in and lets Ebbets plant a slobbery kiss on the corner of his mouth, then gives the dog a hug in return. He sighs into Ebbets' coat. "I'm gonna miss you guys," he says, muffled against the golden mane.

Slowly, Steve pulls the pillow back into his lap and hugs it close.

Steve Rogers
saved u a seat what's taking so long?

He glances across the aisle. He chose a spot in the middle of the bus (the back is usually reserved for Dum Dum Dugan and anyone willing to participate in his very loud pre-game rituals like chanting and singing out-of-tune renditions of "Eye of the Tiger", while the front usually fills up with young players who are afraid of Dum Dum Dugan), then dumped his duffel bag across the aisle so no one would take Bucky's seat. Bucky has been slow out of the locker room, though. And eight minutes go by without him texting back.

The stragglers trickle onto the bus. Steve pushes himself up and cranes his neck to see better out the window, and sees their other team bus slowly filling up. Would Bucky get on a different bus without telling him?

Someone taps him on the shoulder and he almost jumps through the roof.
"Bucky."

"Uh," he grimaces. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"I was … no, I just … " I thought you might be disappearing from my life piece by piece and I feel like every minute I'm not with you is going to turn into the rest of our lives. "You didn't text me back," he finishes lamely.

"Sorry. Never got it." He pulls his phone out of his pocket and holds it up with an apologetic smile. "Out of minutes."

"Oh. Right," Steve sighs.

"I got you something," Bucky says brightly. He turns to his seat, switches his duffel bag with Steve's, and once everything is settled, unzips one of his outside pockets.

"What?"

"Here," Bucky unveils a sketchbook and hands it to Steve without any pretense.

Steve gapes at it for a moment, acutely aware of how it feels in his hands. The sharp edges of the paper on one side, the cold spiral binding on the other. "What?" he repeats dumbly, and stops at one syllable because his throat is feeling thick and wet with emotion.

"You know," Bucky says, reaching up to fiddle with his ear. "We had to leave extra early today, and I know you don't like missing art class."

"…What?"

"Just thought you'd like something to do for the three hour drive."

"Oh," Steve whispers, eyes flicking between Bucky and the sketchbook. He opens it to the first page, and flips through to the middle. "It's empty?"

"Uh, yeah," Bucky says. One side of his mouth lifts in a half-smile. "They usually sell them that way."

Steve snorts. He rakes a hand through his hair, utterly lost for words.

"Anyway," Bucky says pointedly. "I figure it won't stay that way for long." With that, he passes over a handful of pens and pencils. Then he shoves his bag over and flops into his seat.

Steve sits more slowly, bracing himself on the back of the seat in case his knees give out.

"Thanks." He tries to find Bucky's eyes, but Bucky is staring at his lap. "Thank you, Buck."

"No problem," Bucky says without lifting his gaze.

The drive to the State Championship is bumpy, but not uncomfortable. Bucky hunkers down in his usual nest across the aisle from Steve. The distance between them feels farther than usual.

Absent-mindedly, Bucky drags his hood up. Steve can see when he pulls headphones out of his pocket, starts to untangle the knots that always, always get caught there, whether you just stuff them away or try to wind them up all careful and painstaking. Steve watches Bucky's fingers fumble with the cord and he tries to think of something to say, because sooner or later, Bucky will manage to untangle his headphones and then he'll put them in and where will they be.
"I think I'm gonna run the ball more today," Steve blurs as their convoy rumbles into city traffic. The bus bumps over a curb, and Steve can feel the jolt all the way up to his tonsils.

Bucky pauses his ministrations to look up at Steve. He sighs. "Do you have a death wish?" he asks, wearied to the bone.

"I'll be fine."

"I'm just saying, don't get yourself hurt."

"Says the guy who busts his ass on offense and defense every week," Steve points out.

"Come on, Steve."

"Bucky—"

"We can't replace you!"

"Bucky, I'll be fine," Steve insists.

"You won't be fine if you scramble to the middle of the field and some linebacker gives you a concussion, okay?"

"Well, that's why I have you to block for me, right?" Steve says with a grin.

The sheer exasperation on Bucky's face is priceless.

"Just don't do anything stupid, Rogers." He can't hide his smile for long, though.

When Bucky sticks both earbuds in and folds himself up in his sweatshirt, Steve doesn't argue. Oh, but he wants to: he wants to keep Bucky talking and laughing and smiling and making fun of Steve. He wants to draw up new plays and worry about New Rochelle together.

Steve's fingers are shaking.

He checks his phone screen and sees that they've only been on the road for seven minutes. Bucky hasn't said anything for seven minutes and already Steve is going through twelve different stages of withdrawal.

The bus shudders to a stop at a traffic light, and Bucky curls onto his side, wordlessly stretching his feet across the aisle and punching his duffel bag into a serviceable pillow-shape. Steve doesn't argue. Instead, he just scoots farther toward his own window to give enough space for Bucky's feet.

It's Gabe Jones who ends up helping Steve through his anxiety. Game isn't his first choice, of course, but Steve can't fault him for it, even though he feels the disappointment deep in his solar plexus.

"Hey, Steve," Gabe says, reaching over from the seat behind to prod his arm.

"Hm?"

"Quiz me, would you?"

Steve frowns in confusion. Comprehension dawns on him when Gabe holds out a stack of notecards.

"Oh!" Steve breathes. He is hopeless, really. So far gone. "French again?"
"Nah, that test was last week," Gabe says. "And I aced it, by the way, thanks to Daddy Warbucks. So you better be at least as good as him."

Steve blinks. Instinctively, he sneaks a glance at Bucky, and that's when he figures out the nickname. God, but he is slow today. Everything in his head is such a mess.

Run the ball. Find the open man.

"So what class is it this time?" Steve asks, holding the stack up for a better look. The top card says *serous pericardium* in Gabe's distinctive, squashed handwriting.

"Human anatomy," Gabe states.

"Jesus," Steve laughs. He looks at Bucky, who is either asleep or as good as, then at Gabe. "I think I'd be better off reading French."

Gabe chuckles. "You'll be fine. Mix up the stack, first."

"Okay." Steve shuffles the cards. "*Pericardial cavity*."

"The potential space formed between the two layers of the serous pericardium, which encases the heart," Gabe recites.

It's a three hour drive. They go through the stack of notecards five times and it only lasts half the distance. Finally, Gabe admits he can't ingrain the material any better, and anyway Steve is starting to jumble up words in a mixture of confusion and worry.

But when Gabe reclaims his study materials and leaves Steve alone, that's even worse.

The problem is, Steve's not nervous. He is *terrified*. He is sick with dread and he can't even pinpoint why.

It's a state championship, he supposes; it's not just football, but something tangible at stake, something to lose. He sucks in a deep breath, a long breath, and counts to ten. He stares at the notepad in his lap, and he picks up a pencil, then a pen, then the pencil again, and flips absently through the blank pages. He has an intense, inexplicable desire to leave it blank—to keep the pages clean and untarnished and perfectly off-white, its little unblemished pores like untouched snow. At the same time, he wants to take the pencil and drive it right through the sheets of paper. Scribble until a black graphite hole tears all the way to the last layer.

Turns out New Rochelle talks more trash than Steve and Dum Dum Dugan combined.

Which is an impressive feat.

"Stay down."

"That's what you get."

"You don't run down the middle. You don't run down the middle in my house."

"Stay on the ground, bitch, you're safer there."

Steve takes it for two quarters. He brushes it off, at least on the outside; inside his chest, he hoards
every blunt curse, every hissed insult, each and every harsh word as another coal on the fire in his chest. It burns him down the field and leaves scorch marks in his wake.

The other team came prepared, of course. They did their homework. They prepared a strong strategy to defend against MacArthur's running game. It is obvious that they know how good Gabe Jones is, and it is obvious that they refuse to let him beat them single-handedly. Every time Steve hands the ball off, Gabe has to struggle for a meager gain. It hurts to watch. He does his best, but he just can't get them very far down field.

It's up to Steve to generate first downs, either throwing passes or surprising the other team in more creative ways. Like he said, *I'm going to run the ball more.*

MacArthur scores first.

It's in the second quarter, after Gabe gets them several hard-fought yards, play after play; after a short pass to Monty Falsworth; after a helpful offsides penalty, when MacArthur finally battles their way deep into enemy territory.

On first and goal, Steve fakes a hand-off, tucks the ball under one arm, and loops around the linemen, eyes on the end zone. A New Rochelle linebacker crashes into him just before he can score, and has some nasty words to accompany the tackle.

"That's right," he grins, bending over Steve, who struggles to pull himself up. "That's right, how do you like the mud, Rogers?"

Another coal on the fire.

Steve surges to his feet and throws himself into the defender's personal space. They're chest-to-chest, face-mask-to-face-mask. Steve grins a humorless grin. "I love it," he snarls. "Can't wait to get mud all over your jersey."

"You think you can play?" The linebacker puts a hand on Steve's chest, but Steve stands his ground.

"Oh, I think I can play."

Black and white stripes swim into Steve's peripheral vision, but he feels hot—hot, despite the thirty-degree weather—burning winds battering him from the inside.

"You don't know shit."

That's the last thing Steve hears before hands are on him, arms tangling from every side, there's shouting, there's whistles blowing, he takes an elbow to the chest and he looks up to see Bucky with his helmet off, bellowing over the wind, one arm flailing, the other trapped against his side, Gabe struggling to hold him back.

Steve can't hear what Bucky is saying until the end of his speech, which is punctuated by a sharp "fuck you!"

That's when the referee throws the flag.

He calls the penalty on Barnes, of course. Unsportsmanlike conduct, number seventeen. The New Rochelle linebacker looks red-faced, but pleased. The penalty knocks MacArthur's offense back fifteen yards, which should be a terrible hit—and Steve was livid to begin with.

Bucky seems unfazed.
After the ref announces the penalty, Bucky jams his helmet on and strolls back to the huddle, calm as anything, and looks at Steve expectantly for the play call.

Steve shivers. It's not the burst of rage, nor the present colorless, placid temper that he finds unsettling, but the instantaneous shift between the two moods, like a light switch turning off.

"Give us a play," Bucky has to say twice, "give us a play," before Steve snaps back to action.

That is when they score, of course.

He was mad before they even called the penalty. It's not hard to get to the end zone with the leaping flames of rage to fuel him.

Steve runs straight up the middle, behind monster blocks by Gabe and Bucky. He waltzes into the end zone, tosses the football to the referee without a hint of celebration, and makes a point of grinning at the linebacker who had goaded Bucky into a fight. Well, Steve. The linebacker goaded Steve; it was probably Steve that goaded Bucky into the fray.

Turns out the fire came too soon.

It burns to ashes after halftime, and everything starts to fall apart.

Seven points is no easy lead to protect. Bucky plays out of his mind on defense; his jersey is no more than green and brown stains by the end of the night; but it's no use. New Rochelle is a glacier moving downhill.

On top of everything, they never kick extra points, instead going for two-point-conversions after every touchdown, and soon it stretches their lead to nine, ten, thirteen.

The MacArthur sideline is like an army medical unit on the edge of a war zone.

"Get me a splint!" Dum Dum Dugan can be heard roaring from the bench. "I'm fine, get me a splint, wrap it up!"

Gabe is quieter, but after the third quarter comes to a close, he spends most of his time on the sideline propped against Jim Morita, favoring his left ankle.

Steve's elbow starts acting up in the fourth. During a break, he dances impatiently next to their water coolers, trying to keep an eye on the defense, while a trainer winds an ACE bandage around his arm.

The killer is half-way through the fourth quarter, though, when Bucky Barnes takes a monstrous hit and gets up slow. Actually, slow isn't even the word. Steve and Jim Morita have to drag him to his feet. He's half winded: he can stand up, but he can't stand up straight. A trainer comes to collect him while a substitute darts onto the field. When the huddle breaks, just as they line up for the play, Steve can see the MacArthur bench—and he can see Bucky stagger into a trash can and bend over to throw up—and the referee's whistle screeches to signal the start of the play—and Steve misses the pass the Jim Morita by a mile.

Bucky returns on the next offensive possession, but the damage is done.

They hit the last two minutes of the game, down by ten, and they fight for it, and they don't leave the field without lighting every fuse they have; but Morita is slower than usual, Bucky can't hit as hard, Gabe has been splintering since half-time, and Steve. Steve is numb. He's supposed to be drilling passes and nailing targets, but his arm just won't stay steady.
After the game, Coach Erskine gives his speech to a funereal locker room.

"You did not just play football tonight."

Dum Dum Dugan is a statue, stone-faced, hands on his hips, carved out of marble. It's his stillness that belies his sadness.

"You did not just run plays and throw passes and make mindless tackles."

Jim Morita has an arm around Gabe Jones. Gabe, who remains stoic even while silent tears stream down his cheeks.

"You fought for each other. You showed everyone out there what it looks like to be a team."

Steve knows this is all his fault, too. They could be carrying Gabe Jones on their shoulders, hoisting trophies and laughing and screaming the whole way home if it weren't for little, stupid mistakes. Every tiny miscue runs through his mind like a flip-book. His coaches would tell him to relax, it's not all his fault; but Steve knows better. This team has always rested on his shoulders, and he let them down.

"You may not have scored more points, but you proved that you were better men."

Steve looks at Bucky. He is sitting on the floor, slumped against a pillar, arms wrapped around himself in a sad imitation of a hug, his eye sockets sunken and dark. He looks shattered. Like he's been blind-sided by a dump truck.

"I have no regrets. I am lucky to coach men like you. Thank you," Coach Erskine finishes, and his voice breaks. "Thank you."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky says good-bye a little at a time: a slow-escaping tide in the dark.

The sketchbook was a nice touch. But now Steve can't even pull it off his bookshelf without wanting to rip it to pieces.

On the bus ride home from the championship game, Bucky sits next to Steve again. He doesn't sleep this time, and he says very little, but he hunches close enough to share body warmth.

On Monday, he spends the full hour of math class writing notes to Steve in huge print on his notebook and holding it up so Steve can see from across the room. "GIANTS SUNDAY?" one note asks; "NCAA BETS?" says another, followed by "UF - HEARD IT HERE FIRST"; and, when he realizes most of Steve's row is eavesdropping, "DTF?" Steve stifles a snort. An eavesdropper actually cackles out loud, though, in the middle of an explanation on angles of elevation, which earns her a sharp reprimand from Mrs. O'Connell and almost makes Bucky cry from trying to suppress his own laughter.

On Tuesday, Bucky empties out his gym locker.

Thanksgiving is lonely and miserable for both of them—for Steve, because he and his mother have no other family to spend it with; for Bucky, because his stepfather (ex-stepfather?) stirs up some new, twisted drama. Something about trying to get at Mrs. Barnes via Rebecca's social media accounts. That alongside packing up their entire household for a move to Texas dampens their four-day weekend.

In place of a final exam for AP Literature, Steve has to write a paper on Persuasion. He works on it in the library one day while Bucky gets lost in a Wikipedia vortex. He's supposed to be finishing his own English paper, but Steve doesn't harp on it.

"Pride and Prejudice, right?" Bucky asks at one point.

"Um, no, same author but—"

"What's it about?"

Steve begins an explanation, and Bucky declares Captain Wentworth to be an asshole before he hears even half the plot.

In his last two weeks in Brooklyn, Bucky spends the night at Steve's place about ten times. On November 30th, Steve asks, "Do you want to come over?" The second time, Steve asks, "Are you coming over?" After that, Steve doesn't bother posing it as a question. "We're having chili tonight," he says once. Another time, they arrive outside Steve's building without ever having discussed it—
just drifted there together with the current—and after opening the front door, Steve says, "Oh, crap, I gotta grab the mail. Here's my key, would you bring Ebbets down?"

They play a lot of video games. Bucky sprawls on the floor and reclines against the bed, while Steve sits beside him on the edge of the mattress, elbows propped on his knees. Madden Football, Destiny, and Call of Duty provide enough distraction to avoid any awkwardness. And the potential for awkwardness is there, i.e. the time Bucky spins around to show Steve something on his controller and ends up with his face almost in Steve's lap. He keeps his distance for the rest of the night while Steve tries to think about sines and cosines and Jane Austen novels that aren't *Pride and Prejudice*.

The last time they play Madden together, Bucky lets Steve play as the Giants.

So it happens in baby steps: Bucky slipping like coarse sand through Steve's fingers. In theory, it should soften the blow, but every time Bucky performs some randomly final act, Steve's body grows colder. They started with three weeks together, and it didn't seem that short, but each day, ice creeps up his bones like frosted ivy. His joints grow brittle with frost, his blood sluggish in his veins.

It is fitting, then, that the day Bucky leaves for good—December 17th, it sticks in Steve's head for no reason at all—is the coldest of the year. Feels like it, anyway.

Steve goes over to the Barnes' place around eight in the morning that Saturday, even though the night before, Bucky had insisted it wasn't necessary. ("You don't have to," he had said from his seat on Steve's bedroom floor, knees pulled up to his chest; "We're leaving really early." And Steve had replied, "Then I'll see you really early.")

Bucky, his mother, and his sister have loaded the last of their belongings into a twenty-two-foot Penske truck over the course of a few days, and their family sedan is strapped to a trailer around back. All that's left is for them to load themselves in the cab. It's advertised to fit three people, but Steve suspects it will be on the infuriating side of cozy, especially after a whole day's worth of driving.

So it's early, the Barnes family is already exhausted, and the cold is biting. It is a bone-deep cold, the kind of cold that defies snow itself. It doesn't bother Steve a great deal; he likes feeling something solid in his lungs, even ice itself; but Bucky looks miserable. He is characteristically bundled up, hands buried in the pockets of his blue peacoat and chin tucked into a red scarf.

"Won't miss the cold," Bucky says, smiling absently.

Bucky's eyes are red, and he keeps blinking hard, probably against the sharp wind. Instinctively, Steve takes a step to the right, facing Bucky and acting as a windblock. From this angle he can see one earbud dangling from Bucky's left ear.

"Hey Bucks," Becca calls as she bounces out the front door, "don't forget your backpack!"

Bucky glances at Steve, then tosses over his shoulder, "can you grab it for me?"

"Yeah *right*." 

"God," Bucky rolls his eyes. "She's such a …" He trails off there with a heavy sigh.

"Such a little sister?"

"Yeah," he chuckles. "Yeah, something like that."

Steve clears his throat. Bucky tries to scrape a mud-stain off his shoe with his other toe.
hums low around their collars.

Steve is afraid to speak—every word could be the last—but after a minute or so, it becomes clear that Bucky won't be the one to approach the cliff.

Taking a deep breath, Steve says, "I brought your Christmas present."

Bucky's eyes flick up. For a split second, a frown pulls at his features, but then he laughs and shakes his head. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Steve says, chuckling, himself.

"It's not Christmas, yet," Bucky points out.

"Well, you know, I had to put a lot of thought into it," Steve says, "since you're leaving early, and all."

It's an inside joke. For many years, they've been exchanging what they call "Christmas presents". It started when they were twelve and Bucky's little sister accused them of being horrible friends since they never gave each other gifts. Bucky argued that boys "don't do that kind of thing", but Rebecca was relentless. To get her off their backs, Steve dug into his pocket and pulled out a pack of gum and gave it to Bucky.

"Merry Christmas," Steve said with an innocent smile.

Bucky had stared at him, blinked, and then broken into a brilliant smile. He pulled sixty-three cents out of his own pocket and gave it to Steve in return.

Every year since, they've made a Christmas tradition of exchanging, quite literally, whatever is in their pockets—short of their entire wallet.

One year, Steve got a discarded fortune from a fortune cookie ("You will one day live on the moon"), but another time, Bucky had passed over an unused GameStop gift card. Steve offered not to take it, but stopped arguing after seeing the look on Bucky's face.

In return, Steve has given Bucky cough drops, a pair of gloves, and, last year, six crumpled dollar bills he'd genuinely forgotten about, and which Bucky had promptly spent on coffee for the both of them, despite Steve's protests.

When Bucky looks at him now, his expression is slightly dazed, as if he just got to his feet after a particularly violent tackle. "You didn't have to—"

"Shut up, Bucky. Of course I brought you something," Steve says, with a great deal more bravado than he actually feels. It's too cold to tell whether he's blushing or not. Probably.

He digs into the back pocket of his jeans and pulls out the folded paper. Bucky tracks Steve's movements carefully, biting his lip in a totally failed attempt to hide a smile. He takes the paper and raises an eyebrow. An unasked question.

Steve shrugs, a vague sense of embarrassment welling in his throat. "Just look at it."

Bucky smirks, but doesn't say anything as he unfolds the newsprint. Steve watches his expression change. First it's mild amusement at Steve's antics; then interest; then confusion; then his eyes go round, his jaw drops, and he covers his mouth with one hand.
"We'd never won homecoming before," he whispers. Steve almost misses the words in a cloud of foggy breath, swept away by the wind.

"It was a good game," Steve says, rubbing the back of his neck.

Bucky's eyes flick up, shining bright, and then skitter back to the article Steve had cut out of the newspaper the next morning. MACARTHUR WINS HOMECOMING. It was the first time in five or six years. There's a big color photograph of Steve making a hideous face while in the process of throwing a football downfield.

"It was a good day," Bucky croaks. He stares at the paper for a long time, clutching it in his hands while it flutters, crinkling, in the breeze. He looks up at the sky for a moment, takes a deep breath, and looks at Steve. "I don't suppose you just happened to have this folded up in your pocket. Today. Of all days."

Steve chuckles. "Not exactly."

Bucky nods. The motion is jerky, and he can't seem to stop. He looks at Steve, then the paper, then at a nondescript point somewhere over Steve's shoulder. "Well," he laughs weakly, "you're making me look bad, you know?"

"Yeah, right!" Steve says, clutching the hair at the back of his own head and wincing. "I mean, sorry the picture is, like … me. Awkwardly throwing a bad pass. That's terrible form. And, God, it's probably super obnoxious of me to give you a picture of myself. Literally. You could give me pocket lint and it would be less weird."

Bucky smiles as he carefully refolds the article and slides it into the pocket of his peacoat. "No, trust me; you showed me up."

"Can't wait."

Bucky procures a small package wrapped in clear hard plastic and holds it between them. Frowning, Steve gives it a closer look, then bursts into laughter. "You calling me a gimp?"

"Well, I'm not gonna be here to wrap your arm up anymore," Bucky says. "Figured you'd need a way to take care of yourself while I'm gone."

"It's perfect," Steve says, quite sincerely.

"Hope it's the right size. I got a large since you never fucking stop lifting weights."

Steve laughs again, attacking the seams in the plastic with his fingernails. "It's perfect."

He pulls out the compression sleeve, unraveling it from the tight folds of the packaging. The directions on the back say that it is for support, pain relief, power, and precision. Takes the place of an ace bandage.

"It's perfect." Steve repeats.

"You'll still have to get someone else to wrap you in ice," Bucky says.

"Ah, Peggy can do that."

"Yeah."

Steve looks up in time to catch Bucky's eyes before they dance away. He smiles. "So I don't suppose
you just happened to have this in your pocket, either."

Bucky rolls his eyes. He takes a step closer, and for a second Steve's breath escapes on the cold wind—but then Bucky throws an arm over his shoulders, pulling him into a hug, one-arm-over, one-arm-under, and claps him on the back.

Steve breathes in and returns the hug. When he starts to let go, Bucky holds tighter. "You're a punk, you know."

"Jerk," Steve shoots back.

"Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

"Who, me?"

Bucky pulls away and smacks Steve's shoulder. "I mean it. No starting fights in locker rooms, no starting fights with opposing linebackers, no starting fights with referees …"

"Am I not allowed to have any fun?"

"Steve."

"I'm kidding. No fights, I promise." He grins. "That goes for you, too, though."

"No fights?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "And for that matter, quit playing both ways."

Bucky's eyes widen.

"For real, Buck. Stick to wide receiver. You're too good at it to waste all your energy on defense."

A beat of silence, then Bucky lets out a bark of laughter. "Right. No defense." He shakes his head and toes a crack in the sidewalk. "We'll see."

Today, 11:57 AM

Steve Rogers
how's the drive?

Steve Rogers
how's it going?

Today, 2:11 PM

Steve Rogers
what's up

Today, 4:38 PM

Bucky Barnes
there's zero service in all of maryland

It's a Wednesday night in February, and still uninhabitably cold. Not ideal date weather, especially
for a guy with no car, and therefore no way to guarantee his date's safety when traveling to and from a restaurant through slush and 9-degrees-Fahrenheit.

Peggy doesn't complain, though.

And, unsurprisingly, she looks fantastic. Pin-straight hair, red lipstick, khakis, and a scarlet polo emblazoned with the MacArthur High logo, because she came straight from some kind of official event with the athletic training department. Steve is in sweats and probably smells like the boys' locker room.

So Steve is feeling self-conscious, to say the least, but Peggy—Peggy looks fantastic.

Steve tries to tell her so, but what comes out is, "I can't wait for some grease."

A beat of silence. Exhaling, Steve wills his face not to—but it does. It ignites like a box of matches.

Peggy, to her credit, tries not to laugh. "Come on, then. Let's get you a burger."

The diner had been her idea. "Nothing fancy," she'd specified, and Steve had reluctantly suggested barbecue, but for crying out loud, there's no good barbecue in New York City. If there is, it ain't open on a Wednesday night. So Peggy found a cozy 24-hour diner near the school.

A sharp elbow to the ribs jolts Steve back to the present. His head snaps up, and Peggy nods toward the half-full dining room.

Crumbs are scattered over the table at the only empty booth, but the other side of the room is full of screaming children. Steve opts for crumbs.

"You look nice," he says numbly, wiping the table off with a napkin.

Peggy raises one eyebrow. "At least I smell better than you."

He laughs. This, he can do; he can joke around and pretend his stomach isn't churning. Pretend this isn't literally the second date of his life. And he barely counts the first "date," when the nice blonde girl from his chemistry class dragged him around Dum Dum Dugan's basement at a crowded party, gave him a stiff kiss in a dark bathroom without even closing the door, and never spoke to him again.

Somehow, he's wound up in a booth across from Peggy Carter, the kind of beautiful, driven exchange student that Steve couldn't even dream up. She scares the hell out of him.

"Earth to Steve Rogers."

"Right!" he says instantly. Her eyes twinkle with something—amusement and probably, undoubtedly, a hint of fond exasperation.

"You said you've been here before?"

"Yeah, it's—I've had—I've been here." He fumbles with a menu. "The burgers are good."

"I gathered."

"I like the one with cheese."

The menu stops shaking all of a sudden and it takes Steve a moment to realize it's because Peggy grabbed the other end to hold it still. It's not so much her stellar eyelashes or deep red lips that make his throat close off—although that doesn't help—but mostly he just can't breath because of the half-
smile tugging one side of her mouth. The secret one, the one she doesn't want to give away, but Steve sees it. A lot, actually.

Does that mean something?

"Cheeseburgers it is?" Peggy prompts him.

All vocabulary is sucked out of him. His voice sounds a bit like a chair being scraped across the floor when he says, "Sounds great."

After a bored waitress takes their order, Steve is somehow, somehow, able to ease into a conversation. They don't even notice when the waitress brings their food, two plates piled so high with french fries that they can barely see the burgers underneath.

"How has the college search been going?" Steve asks, then winces internally. He remembers Gabe saying something about how much they suck, and hopes he didn't just drive this conversation—this whole date—off the edge of a cliff.

"Great, actually," Peggy says.

Steve breathes again.

"I'm giving serious thought to Temple and Brown," she adds.

"So not too far away?"

Peggy doesn't answer right away. Steve thinks of cars crashing. A fiery inferno mushrooming on the side of a mountain. He has to set a french fry back on the plate, his hands are shaking so hard.

"The thing is," Peggy begins.

And Steve wants to stop her there, because he feels like he knows what's coming, the burgeoning dimple in the clouds gradually taking the shape of a funnel.

"The thing is," she says, "I think it's more realistic to go back home."

Steve nods. "Um."

"The undergraduate law programs at Cambridge are extremely versatile."

"I bet." Steve doesn't know anything about studying law, least of all overseas.

"I'm sorry," she says, quite genuinely.

On its own accord, Steve's hand darts across the table to grasp Peggy's. "Oh, please! Don't be sorry! You're—that's amazing, you know? Getting a law degree is amazing to begin with, but Cambridge? … That's a good school," he finishes lamely.

She squeezes his hand. "Thank you."

"It's not—not like you'd leave for college and just disappear off the face of the earth, or anything."

"Of course not," she says, waving a fry dismissively and spattering the table with ketchup. "Oops."

They laugh.
"Let me get it," Steve says with a grin, and swipes up the mess with a spare napkin.

"My hero," Peggy jokes.

Steve rolls his eyes. "Definitely not a hero."

"You don't think so?"

"Don't think so," Steve confirms. "I was too afraid to ask a girl out to be a real hero. Too intimidated by the, uh, sort of gorgeous British exchange student who's a year ahead of me."

"Yeah? Intimidated?" she laughs. "Good to know."

Steve eyes the French fries again. Not that he's hungry—his stomach is kind of tied up in knots, actually—but he needs to catch his breath.

"What do you mean, 'sort of' gorgeous?"

"Oh my god, not—I didn't mean—"

Peggy bursts into laughter. "I'm kidding!" She squeezes his hand again. "I'm absolutely kidding."

"Right!" His skin feels hot, every inch of it, as if he's been standing out in the sun so long even the shade doesn't feel cool. "Right." He laughs nervously. Dive in, Rogers. The only thing that can cool you down now is to dive right in. "I know it's a ways off still, but … I don't have a date to prom, yet."

Peggy looks at him. Blinks. "You don't?"

"Of course not. Too scared!," he barks. When he laughs, it sounds strange and too loud for the situation. "And if you'd like to … I was kind of hoping you might go with me?" The words tumble out and he's still burning up and Peggy is still staring at him.

"I'd love to," she says softly.

"Good!"

"I wish I could," she says, even softer.

Steve's heart furls up; it feels like a newspaper in a bonfire, instantly curling up into nothing. "But …?"

"But I'll be leaving before then."

"Right." It's like dumping a bucket of water over the kindling. He's cold, just like that, with a splash and a puff of smoke. "Of course."

"The exchange is up at the beginning of May."

It's like when the nose of the plane takes a dive and the cabin pressure suddenly drops and everything floats in the air for a split second—

"Sorry," Steve says. "I shouldn't have—well."

"No, I'm sorry." Peggy fidgets with the napkin in her lap. "I just have to go home to graduate. Otherwise … Well, I'm sorry, anyway."
"Don't be!" Steve says instantly. "You should, obviously, there are more important things."

"I wouldn't say that."

Steve can't help but laugh. It sounds wet and untrue, but he can't stop it. "I would. You're going places, Peggy."

"I wish I could … with you," she says earnestly. "You'll have to save me a dance." She looks at him with her big, round eyes and a knowing half-smile.

Steve's stomach twists up all over again. "Of course I'll save you a dance."

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**Steve Rogers**

offseason workouts! Dum Dum trying to whip the defense into shape. he hasn't found someone to fill ur place

**Bucky Barnes**

im irreplaceable

**Steve Rogers**

i'm thinking about playing offense and defense

**Bucky Barnes**

DON'T YOU DARE

**Bucky Barnes**

promise you won't

**Steve Rogers**

jk jk

Chapter End Notes

the wait for chapter 9 will not be so long, i promise. there was a death in the family on top of end-of-semester-drama and holiday season stuff. i love this story, though, and i love you wonderful people.
Chapter Summary

Steve finishes out his high school career.

Chapter Notes

here's a fast update for you. it's a christmas miracle :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today, 10:24 AM

Steve Rogers
won our first game

Steve Rogers
closer than it should have been but we'll get there

Bucky Barnes
cool

Steve Rogers
has ur season started yet?

Today, 12:46 PM

Bucky Barnes
yeah

Steve Rogers
how's it going?

"Did you read the article the other day?" Steve asks. "That writer, Johnston, he said we won't win state. He said I'm not the same without James Barnes."

Jim Morita looks up at Steve from a bench in the locker room, halfway through untying one cleat. He scoffs. "Johnston better hope that news doesn't get too far."

"Why?"

"If Bucky hears that BS, he'll probably show up in Johnston's house in the middle of the night and assassinate him."

Jim raises one eyebrow skeptically, but doesn't press the issue.

"Plus," Steve adds, "Johnston is an idiot, so don't bother taking him seriously."

"Have you talked to him about college teams yet?"

Steve blinks. The truth is, his correspondence with Bucky is always sparse, and Bucky's answers always brief—even blunt. Steve hasn't had the guts to ask him about future plans, yet. Hasn't managed to crack that safe. They usually stick to play-by-play details, weather, and New York Giants off-season drama.

"Well … I mean, that's a long way off, still," Steve answers carefully. "Bucky will probably want to go somewhere in Texas, now that he's there. We haven't talked much about it, though."

Jim stares at him. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, then says plainly, "I meant Johnston."

"What?"

"Wasn't he the reporter asking you about the NCAA and signing day and everything?"

It's Steve's turn to stare. "Oh—right." Of course Morita meant something else entirely; and here Steve was, thinking about Bucky's possible college teams. UT Austin. Baylor. Texas A&M. He's good enough.

Apparently Jim had already changed the subject, though. Steve's mind stalls, as if he let up the clutch too soon.

"Right," he says slowly. "Johnston." Not Bucky. "Yeah, he—yes. He was the one asking me about signing with a division one team."

"Have you thought about it since?" Jim says, throwing one cleat into the bottom of his locker and bending over to untie the opposite foot. "Got anywhere in mind?"

"God, Jim! It's too early, still!" Steve can feel his ears heating up. "I—I mean, I've gotten a few letters. I'm visiting Rutgers next week, just to sort of test the waters."

"Okay, but Steve Rogers, come on, man," Jim scolds. "You gotta check out better places than Rutgers. You're, like, USC material."

"USC is overrated."

"But still."

"Well—okay, sure," Steve allows. Seriously, is it hotter in the locker room than usual? "I'm visiting Ohio State next month. Then South Carolina, going to a game and everything, and I have American State scheduled in November. LSU and Florida offered to fly me out, but I dunno … those coaches are pretty crazy, right?"

"Les Miles?" Jim says. "Crazy doesn't even begin."

Steve laughs. While he and Bucky spent their young lives poring over New York Football Giants lore and other NFL propaganda, Jim Morita has always been an expert on college football. If you want to waste an hour or two, just get Morita talking about the BCS, claimed versus unclaimed national titles, SEC favoritism, the Red River Rivalry, Bear Bryant, Tom Osborne, Bobby Bowden. Steve is still only conversational.
"So, anyway," Steve says, slinging his bag over one shoulder. "I have a good feeling about Ohio State and American State."

"ASU is in Chicago, right?" Jim frowns, tossing his other cleat alongside the first. It clangs at the bottom of his locker.

"Um, not exactly," Steve says, closing his eyes, recalling the letter he got in the mail weeks ago, the one stamped with an official American State University seal and an eagle logo. "It's in a suburb, or about an hour out."

"Not quite the city life."

"Yeah." Steve shakes his head. "There are no good programs close to home, but at least I can find somewhere near a big city."

"Sure, bro," Jim says, slipping his socked feet into a pair of Adidas sandals. Then, abruptly, he asks, "You ever think about Wisconsin?"

"Uh … I guess I could?" Steve wracks his brain for any trivia he can dig up about Wisconsin. They're the Badgers, they never win the Big Ten, they … no, that's about it. "Why Wisconsin?"

Jim stands up, grabs Steve's shoulder, and gives it a squeeze. "Their mascot is cute," he says with a toothy grin. "I think you would like him."

10/16/06, 1:51 PM

Steve Rogers
we're 9-0

Bucky Barnes
ur not playing defense are you?

Steve Rogers
lol no buck

Steve Rogers
you still playing both?

10/16/06, 4:37 PM

Bucky Barnes
just LB

Steve Rogers
well ur awesome at it

Steve Rogers
try not to hurt anyone ;)

10/16/06, 6:01 PM

Steve Rogers
 kinda crazy ur the best WR we ever had
The first time he meets Nick Fury, Steve wears a red button-down and dark blue dress pants, freshly pressed. He feels completely foolish, gouged out of a skyscraper and dumped into the cornrows of central Illinois.

Steve meets Coach Fury in his office, a sharp, dustless room decked in antique cherry woods, plush navy fabrics, and herringbone accents—pillows, curtains, the trim on the area rug. This is the definition of class. Steve is afraid to touch anything, because frankly, it looks like no one has left so much as a fingerprint on a single surface of the room. Ever.

Nick Fury, on the other hand, is wearing a black track suit with the simple, serifed ASU logo over the left breast. Steve feels at once both over- and under-dressed for the situation.

He'd also prepared himself for the eye patch, but in person, he has to force himself not to stare.

"It's nice to meet you, Steve," Fury says, holding out one hand over his dark cherry desk. "I'm Nick Fury. We've heard a lot about you here at American State. Glad to have you."

Steve takes his hand, careful not to knock over a gold desk lamp or polished-wood clock. Either one could be antique, or expensive, or both.

"Glad to be here," he says, mostly honest.

Nick Fury has been the head coach at American State University for five years and has already won a BCS National Championship. He sends more players to the NFL than any other coach in college football, and for some reason, he wants to meet Steve. "Glad to be here" is about all Steve's brain can comprehend, right now.

Steve's mother is here in a starched black dress-suit, looking far more peaceful and at-home than Steve feels in the midst of tasteful extravagance. Coach Fury shakes her hand as well, and he asks them both to sit.

"This is Bruce Banner, our offensive coordinator." Fury gestures towards an unassuming man wearing khakis and thick glasses. He also shakes their hands and greets them softly. Fury invites everyone to sit, and Steve and his mother perch gingerly on matching wooden armchairs with heavy blue cushions. Banner remains standing over Fury's shoulder.

Fury launches into his pitch without pretense. "At American State University, we believe in the success of the team," he begins. "And success is a process. It is a process that requires focus, dedication, and preparation."

Steve nods in agreement.

"We believe you can be a part not only of our process, but also a part of our success."

Steve nods again. He's under no delusions that success doesn't take hard work. In fact, the only downside to this arrangement comes up near the end of their meeting. Nick Fury gives him the whole spiel before circling around to playing time, and that's when Steve balks.

"You are exactly the quarterback we're looking for to build a program around," Fury says. "Ideally,
we're looking for you to redshirt a year and then back up one season before competing for the starting job."

That means playing time would be three years away.

"Sir," Steve's mother says diplomatically, "with all due respect, we're looking for ways to help the team out as soon as possible."

It's Bruce Banner who speaks up in response. "The thing is, Mrs. Rogers—Steve. The thing is, you have a lot of raw talent, and believe me, we recognize your talent." He steps forward and leans one hip on Fury's desk. "And the thing is, we want to hone that talent, to develop that talent; we want you to reach your fullest potential."

"I'm hoping for a starting position," Steve says, because he is; he wants to be useful. He wants to contribute. He can't imagine spending weeks, months, an entire season on the sideline, while other players do all the work.

"We understand that," Banner says calmly. He's so warm and thoughtful, as if he's actually considering Steve's point of view. "There's always a chance you'll be able to compete for that starting position after a redshirt season."

"Are you set on me redshirting my first year?"

"We are, Steve, and let me tell you why." Banner takes off his glasses. "I'll be completely honest with you. We've watched your film, we've watched you throw, we've studied the statistics, and our scouts have seen you in person. It's all there. You have every tool you need to be a starting quarterback."

He pauses, and Steve hesitates before filling the silence. "But … you don't want me to start, yet?"

"We want to see you start in the NFL," Bruce Banner says candidly. "And we believe that our program will put you there."

Steve gapes at him, and only realizes after several seconds that his mouth is literally hanging open. He glances at Nick Fury, who is reclined in his high-backed desk chair, his expression serene, even smug. He looks regal, and poised, and a bit like a James Bond villain who is getting his way. Fleetingly, Steve thinks that Bruce Banner is the real secret weapon behind American State University's recruiting system.

(Months later, Steve will meet Tony Stark, the defensive coordinator, for the first time, and he will fully understand why Stark isn't at that initial meeting in Nick Fury's sharp-edged office.)

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11/05/06, 8:45 AM

Steve Rogers

11-1 headed to the playoffs

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11/13/06, 11:12 PM

Steve Rogers

going back to state. rematch w/ New Rochelle. media can't stop talking about it
Bucky stops texting Steve back sometime before Thanksgiving.

It doesn't register to him, at first, amidst the winds of the State Tournament storm. The game itself doesn't stick in Steve's memory. That's the way it's supposed to be, too; when a performer is in the zone, he or she loses their train of conscious thought, and looking back, it's all supposed to be a blur of passion and heat and success. In Steve's case, all he can remember is four quarters of unrelenting rage. It's like the coals in his heart, laid dormant for the past year, are reignited and pressurized into diamonds, bright red diamonds. How do you make rubies? You stand in Steve Rogers' way and let the offense fester for twelve straight months; you take away his best receiver, his best running back, and give him time to plan revenge.

If his senior season was a hurricane—dogged and inexorable and vast—the championship game is a tornado. It is a swift onslaught, unpredictable, a deadly strike in the dark. He makes short work of New Rochelle and earns the hardware for MacArthur's trophy case with grim satisfaction.

The morning after their win, he reads the article in the sports section of the newspaper: a front-page full-color splash of celebration for his team. When he picks up the scissors to cut the article out and keep it, that's when he thinks of Bucky Barnes.

He stands in his kitchen, scissors in one hand, newspaper in the other, not moving, for several minutes. Eventually, though his hands shake, he manages to clip out the article. He sticks it to the front of the refrigerator with an old magnet and, for the next week, tries not to look at it when he sits at the kitchen table with his bowl of Cheerios.

That's about the time Dum Dum Dugan accuses Steve of acting "reclusive," an indictment which catches Steve completely off-guard. ("'Reclusive'? That's a pretty big word, Dum Dum, you sure you're using it right?")

He is, of course. He is using it right. Steve hadn't noticed, but when he thinks about it, he realizes he hasn't been out to a party since August, hasn't gone on a date in even longer, and he's churned through an entire sketchbook since their championship win. That must count as "reclusive."

Steve does the only thing that makes sense, then: he Skypes Peggy Carter.

"Steve!" she cries, elongating the syllable of his name and beaming through the grainy computer screen. "You look good! How are you?"

"I'm—good, Peggy, I'm pretty good."

"What's up?"

"We won state."

Peggy doesn't move for several seconds, and Steve feels a brief stab of fear that their connection might be glitching. Then she throws her head back, laughing. "Steve! The state championship! That's not 'pretty good,' that's fantastic!"

He chuckles. This is part of why he called her. She'll react with the enthusiasm he needs, and maybe pass some enthusiasm along to his stalling heart, as well.
They spend fifteen-or-so minutes catching up. Cambridge is cold, as is Brooklyn, and legal studies are going well, although her history elective is a bitch. For as long as possible, Steve avoids talking about himself, unless it involves the football team as a whole. He can't keep it up forever, though. She has a way of gently peeling back his awkward layers.

"Isn't it like, midnight, there?" Steve asks for probably the seventh time. "Are you sure it's not too late?"

"Steve, darling, it's not even eleven."

"Right."

"I have all night if you need."

Those are the words he wants to hear; the words he wants so desperately not to have to hear.

He doesn't know what he needs. He looks at Peggy, her perfectly-straightened hair where it catches on both sides of her shirt collar, her faded red lipstick. She's not wearing any jewelry. Probably nearly time for her to shower, or change into pajamas, or whatever it is she does to get comfortable at night. Steve kind of wants to ask. He's curious about her routine.

He takes a deep breath, and when he speaks, he surprises himself. "Bucky hasn't texted me in a month," is what comes out.

Peggy's shoulders sag. "Oh." That's all, just "oh," and through the computer speakers it's a brief dead tone and static. "Oh."

Steve looks at his hands. "Maybe his phone is out of minutes," he says, voice wavering.

Peggy hums noncommittally. This is why—part of why—Steve got in touch with her. She won't lie to him.

"Did something happen?" she says bluntly. "Did you have a disagreement?"

"What?"

"You and Bucky. How were things before?"

"Well—we didn't fight, or anything, if that's what you mean." Steve pauses for a moment, thinking. "After he moved … he never seemed talkative, that's all. But he always texted me back. Always: until, like, three weeks ago."

"I can't see him just ignoring you," Peggy says.

Steve runs a fingernail along the seam of his sweatpants. "I dunno. I had a lot of friends, and so did he. It's not like we …"

He trails off. There is a thread coming loose on his inseam, about halfway down his thigh. He tugs it a little, and it grows by an inch.

"You should call him."

Steve looks up, gaping. Peggy lights up his screen, smiling. She blinks, and Steve remembers how pretty her eyes are; he can't tell, through the fuzzy Skype screen, whether or not she is still wearing a subtle eyeliner or if her eyelashes are naturally thick and dark. He realizes he has never seen her without mascara.
"I should what?"

"Call Bucky."

"… That's weird, isn't it?" Steve sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Guys don't really … I mean, he hasn't texted me in weeks. Won't that seem a little desperate?"

"Do you really think Bucky would make fun of you for something like that?"

Bucky, who was always the best nurse after football games; who used to put himself between Steve and enemy linebackers without a second thought; God, put himself between Steve and everything—linebackers, safeties, high school bullies, referees, everything. Bucky, who went out and bought Steve a Christmas present after years—a decade—of not buying Christmas presents for one another. And his present is really just a way to keep looking after Steve, even when he's thousands of miles away.

As always, Peggy is right. They speak for six more minutes. Steve watches them go by on the corner of his computer screen. After repeating herself four times in a row, she shoos Steve off the computer with a stern reminder to call Bucky. (The "or else" is implied.)

It takes six more minutes to muster the courage to dial. What if the number is disconnected? What if Bucky ignores him? What if it goes straight to voicemail? What if he does pick up? What is Steve supposed to say, then? "You haven't been texting me, but I can't stop thinking about the hug you gave me almost a year ago and I don't have anything to say, I just wanted to hear your voice again"? His panic is still gathering like clouds on the horizon when he taps out Bucky's phone number and hits "send."

On the third ring, someone picks up.

"Hello?"

Steve's heart sinks. He can tell, without a doubt, that the voice is too high-pitched.

"Hi—um, is Bucky there?"

There is a brief pause, filled to the brim with dread and distant resignation.

"Who the hell is Bucky?"

Steve cringes. "It's—um, I thought this was his number. I mean, it used to be his number. I just … I'm sorry."

"Are you the one who's been texting me?"

"Ye—um—probably, yeah."

"I don't know anyone named Bucky."

"Okay," Steve says. He takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry. The number must have changed, or—something. I'll just …"

Another long pause ticks by. Steve wonders if he's supposed to hang up. Or say good-bye first.

"I'll stop calling you," he offers.

"… Thank you."
Steve breathes in for four counts, then out again. "Sorry."

"It's okay." After another awkward silence, the stranger adds, "Um—good luck. I hope you get ahold of him."

Steve tries to swallow around the lump in his throat. "Thank you," he whispers.

Steve never took a human anatomy class, but he remembers quizzing Gabe Jones on vocabulary a year ago. He didn't understand most of it. Words like "pericardial" and "mediastinum" and "vena cava". But a few things, he remembers. They call the chest a cavity, and the heart is full of cavities, too, separated by walls of dense fibrous tissue.

After the stranger hangs up, Steve pulls out a sketchbook from the bottom shelf. Not the one Bucky gave him—that one is still thick and blank as a slab of marble. He pulls out another sketchbook, one he's already worked half-way through, and outlines a human heart. He doesn't know all the details, so he makes up the angles and proportions; imagines the placement of each ventricle and each atrium, and fills them in with brick walls and bubbling rainwater.

Steve ends up signing with American State University and, as much as possible, he tries to avoid too much pomp and circumstance. He's not Bo Jackson, for God's sake. He doesn't pull the stunt with the camera crew, doesn't sit at a table behind three different ball caps with three different logos and pick up his choice and don it proudly, doesn't sign the paperwork and send the footage in for ESPN to show on replay. He's not the type for theatrics.

He definitely doesn't pull the crap where you verbally commit to one school and then renege on them. (He read about a 5-star linebacker once who got an Auburn University tattoo, verbally committed, then ended up dumping them for the Alabama Crimson Tide, which, Christ, that's like a mid-century American gymnast defecting to the USSR. With a bald eagle tattoo to top it off.)

Anyway. Steve doesn't even play around with verbal commitments. He's too superstitious for that.

When national signing day rolls around in February, he makes the official phone call, talks to the official American State University representatives, and signs the official paperwork.

The program is legendary. Seven national championships, two Heisman trophy winners, a fat endowment, and an annual contender for the Northern Athletic Conference title. It's far away from home, but the scholarship is nothing to scoff at. They offered Steve half the world, it seems like, and if he does well, they'll probably fork over the other half. Full ride, room and board, university-funded computer, and a hefty stipend which is meant to cover "textbooks" but could probably equal the down payment on a decent new car.

Steve suspects this is what the nation considers "special treatment" for college athletes. And, sure, he knows he's a lucky guy, here, but he also knows how many hours he's about to put in at the American State football facilities, and he doesn't feel guilty. Not too guilty, anyway.

The sprawling suburban campus tumbles over a flat prairie landscape like a box of Lego spilled across the Kankakee River. Simon, Illinois, is a college town, through-and-through. Its population swells with every school year; and in the summers, it rests, rural and peaceful, on the Midwestern plains.

The wealthy bankers, politicians, lawyers, and myriad of university employees live on the south side of town. North of the river, the campus melts into more of an urban area, blue-collar workers displaced from Chicago, a high-density African American population, two public high schools, and apartment buildings dating back to the 1950s which mainly serve as off-campus housing for
upperclassmen and grad students.

Steve falls in love with it. When he is on campus, he understands why they call their school *American State*.

He falls in love with the high-rise residence halls, the seven square blocks of athletic training facilities, the local bars that cling to the edges of campus, and the quad: a basin of scruffy grass and sweet gum and sumac and slippery elm yawning in between the brick school buildings.

It's slow, so much slower than New York City. But the town lives and breathes for the school and, more importantly, for the football team; and Steve is counting on Chicago to breathe life into him when he gets homesick.

Brooklyn is starting to swallow him up, anyway. Everyone needs a rebuilding year.

"Would you be open to the possibility of surgery?"

"Will it help?" Steve asks.

"It will reverse a lot of the damage to your elbow," the doctor explains. "Take away the fatigue and the chronic pain. Give you greater mobility."

Steve considers this. "Sure sounds good."

"It's a straightforward procedure," the doctor says, nodding, "but there are minor risks involved, like the chance of permanent nerve damage. And there's a very long recovery period."

Steve glances to the corner, where Bruce Banner is leaning against a table with his arms crossed. Steve raises both eyebrows and holds his hands up, silently asking for an opinion. Banner gives a sort of affirmative shrug.

He's more than halfway through his redshirt season. That's-good-enough-for-me is probably not an adequate reason to agree to serious medical procedures, but Steve has never been one to play it safe. He turns to the orthopedic surgeon and grins. "Let's do this." Rebuilding, he thinks.

Chapter End Notes

this is what you might call the end of "part one." the boys are growing up :'}
Three years pass, and Steve makes a home for himself and a name for himself at American State University.

Three years later.

Sam Wilson can fly.

Seriously, blink of an eye, and he's fifty yards down the field.

Steve has been fortunate to work with a lot of highly skilled wide receivers over the years: some who were six-and-a-half feet tall, some who could literally jump over cars, and even one who shocked the world when he ran a 4.32-second 40-yard-dash at the NFL combine. But, damn, Sam Wilson could probably give that kid a run for his money.

And his feet aren't the only thing that's fast.

"Get ready, get fired up, get your game on, boys, today is the day and tonight is the night, they ain't ready for us, they don't know what's coming, Northwestern who-the-hell-cares about to go down, you seen demolition but you ain't never seen this…"

Sam has half the offense barking mad in minutes.

"Are you ready?"

"We're ready!"

"Are you ready?"

"We're ready!"

As a true freshman, Wilson's influence still hasn't quite stretched to the whole team, but he has a decent crowd gathered.

The first week he did his hype routine, only a few teammates joined in—just his fellow wideouts shouting in each other's faces. But now it's week five, and actually? He's hard to ignore, and more importantly, the team is learning that they don't want to ignore him. His enthusiasm has this deeply earnest quality that finds its way into your chest, whether you asked for it or not. It's not just hype for the sake of hype.

"I want to hit something!" Wilson shouts, gesturing so wildly it looks like he's going to deck someone with his the helmet in his hands. "I'm gonna eat them alive! Northwestern is not ready for
Two dozen young skills-players roar back at him in unison.

Steve, from his spot on the grass just within hearing distance, finds himself smiling, despite himself.

He's not against the display, or anything, but as a redshirt senior, starting quarterback, and returning Northern Athletic Conference Champion, he's afraid to mess with his own routine. He's not the only one; the offensive line are like a stone wall of silent meditation, and the entire defense—well, Tony Stark and the American State defense are a little like a mad-scientist cult. They have their own hellhound pre-game rituals to perform. Steve tries not to get too involved in case they accidentally reanimate a legion of the undead, or get accused of hoarding weapons-of-mass-destruction, or something.

Steve sticks to his own world: playing catch with the back-up quarterback, headphones blasting classic rock, and a lot of partner-stretching. Visualization of success, and all that. It's supposed to be very zen.

"I already got a posse up in the student section, now."

Steve opens his eyes and blinks into the sunlight. "Oh, yeah?"

Isaiah Bradley is standing over him, leaning into Steve's left leg to gently stretch his hamstring. His dreadlocks dance around his face and a line furrows over his right eyebrow when he concentrates. "Still haven't seen that one fraternity, though," Isaiah says. "The one that worships the ground you walk on."

"Thank God. Last week they brought a giant cutout of my face."

"I know!" Isaiah chuckles. "It was amazing!"

"It was horrifying actually," Steve groans and signals for Isaiah to switch legs. "I haven't been so embarrassed since I posed for NAC Championship promos last year."

"I remember that," Isaiah says. "They didn't appreciate my pink hair."

"Are you kidding?" Steve asks incredulously.

Isaiah shrugs. "Kind of clashes with the red-white-and-blue color scheme."

"I'm pretty sure breast-cancer awareness doesn't clash with anything," Steve says firmly. He happens to love Isaiah's hair, long dark dreadlocks with the ends dyed fluorescent pink, and he can't wait for someone to say something stupid to him about it, just so he can set them straight.

"Nah, it does clash," Isaiah admits, a hint of a crease forming at the corner of his mouth. "But I look good though."

"And you're humble, too."

Isaiah's eyes sparkle, but he still manages not to grin. Isaiah Bradley never smiles on gameday. "Fans love me," he says, nodding toward the stands. Steve cranes his neck and catches a glimpse of almost a dozen students in the front row—the men shirtless, the women in sports bras—their bodies painted solid pink with white letters to spell out Isaiah's name and number.

"Badass," Steve says. "I wish my fans were that cool."
"What d'you mean?" Isaiah teases. "Giant blown-up versions of your face aren't cool?"

Steve shoots him a stern look. "Watch it."

With a snort, Isaiah sticks out his hand to pull Steve up, and they switch places.

The calm before a home game is one of Steve's favorite parts of playing for an NCAA powerhouse. Being here at ground zero in an almost empty stadium. Streamer-clouds traipsing overhead, the sky whitewashed by late-autumn chill. Even when the sun shines bright, all its heat seems to evaporate while still high out of reach, all its warmth trapped in the stratosphere so only a hard white light cuts through.

He likes to go through lazy stretches with Isaiah Bradley while fans trickle into their seats. Steve feels like an insect in the middle of a sacred tower.

Memorial Stadium is the real eighth wonder of the world. It rises around them, a cathedral of ruins on the grassy plain, its brick columns and steel buttresses and glass parapets with standards of light-banks soaring overhead. Soaring arches. White light slicing through imagined stained glass. The press box, a pulpit; the goal post, a holy relic. It starts out empty, but as the hours pass, the gleaming silver pews fill up with pious pilgrims decked in navy and red.

The first time he steps onto the field, a tepid cheer bubbles from the student section, which is first-come-first-served and thus the first to populate. Every time a recognizable player appears, he can hear the fans again; a dull rumble for Nick Fury when he makes his first inspection of the field, banks a wide U-turn, and heads back to the locker room; a wave of applause for Sam Wilson; a deep roar for Luke Cage which sounds, at first, like booing, but is actually several thousand people calling "Luuuunnnke!"; and, even when the stadium is only half-full, it rocks with excitement for Isaiah Bradley, their star running back, and Steve's oldest friend on campus. He likes that cheer the best. He often joins in.

By the time they finish stretching and Sam Wilson has finished stoking his fire, the student section is full, and the ticketed seats are half there. They run through team drills. The receivers jog through routes, Steve tosses mechanical passes, and the linemen practice exploding off the snap. It becomes muscle memory for the brain as well as the body. It's like going down the hall and flipping the breakers, one at a time, surging everything with football.

Or maybe the best moment is when they fill up the tunnel, ready to rush onto the field, the steel and concrete around them thundering on every side, the tinny strains of the marching band filtered through brick, filtered through the howls of a hundred thousand fans. It vibrates down to Steve's bones. Separates his blood from the air in his lungs.

Or maybe the best moment is when they take the field. When they burst out into the open air and the crowd isn't muffled anymore, it screams right in their ears like wildfire.

Or maybe the best moment is the coin toss. The team captains shake hands at the center of the field. Steve Rogers stands at the head of the row, Isaiah Bradley on his right, unswerving, and beyond Isaiah tower the defensive captains—Luke Cage, Danny Rand, and Bill Foster.

Or maybe the best moment is kickoff.

Or maybe the best moment is when Steve first gets his hands wrapped around the football and everything goes quiet and the defense spills across his vision and he still manages to complete a deep pass.
Yeah, that's probably the best feeling; like today, the first quarter, when Sam Wilson shakes a
defender and Steve hits him for an early touchdown. That's pretty great.

Right off the bat, it puts them ahead of the Northwestern Wildcats—not only an undefeated Big Ten
team, but also an in-state power-conference rival. Those turn out to be valuable points, to which
Northwestern responds by scoring on a punt return. They nurse that 7-7 tie score all through the first
quarter and most of the second.

Halftime looms upon them when Luke Cage finally gets a sack, forcing Northwestern to punt. ASU
takes the field for the next offensive possession and on first down, Steve hands the ball off for a short
gain. They regroup in a brief huddle.

"Eyes downfield, gentlemen," he says, before giving his team the play. They break huddle, Wilson
goes into motion, and the Wildcat defense swarms. Steve is forced to throw the ball away.

He storms back into the huddle, cursing under his breath. "Go somewhere!" he shouts. "Go
somewhere!"

Coach Banner calls in another passing play.

It's hard to tell if Isaiah is scowling because he won't get the ball, because it's third-and-eight, or
because he's always scowling one way or another. Either way, he throws a wicked block that opens
up a lane for Sam Wilson to get another first down.

Sam sprints back to the huddle, popping like a firecracker. "That was sick, man! That was insane,
you are the shit, bro, that was like …" he mimes his head exploding and almost, almost manages to
make Isaiah Bradley smile.

"Eyes on the ball, kid," Isaiah says curtly.

"No problem," Sam says with faint reverence, "especially if ya'll keep bustin' down linebackers for
me."

He does. Keep busting down linebackers, that is. In fact, before the night is done, Isaiah not only
lays down a block for Sam Wilson's second touchdown, but also rocks the Northwestern defense for
over a hundred yards and two touchdowns of his own. They end up winning 41-14.

"I'm here with American State captains Steve Rogers and Isaiah Bradley," a thin blonde woman tells
the nearest camera—while Steve tries to flatten his helmet-hair. "Steve, you were responsible for
three touchdowns in the game," she says. "You seemed very comfortable out there. Did you do
anything special to prepare for this game?"

"It wasn't just me, of course." Steve runs his knuckles along his jawline. "It was my teammates, too.
It was a team effort, today."

"Of course," she agrees. "How did the team approach this game, considering the higher caliber of
your opponent than the first few weeks?"

Steve shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He glances at Isaiah, who is stone-faced as ever.

Steve sighs. "The thing is, preparation is key, no matter who you're playing. We don't view any
week as special, or harder, or more important. We take Northwestern seriously, just like we took
Western Illinois seriously, just like we're going to take Notre Dame and Southeast State seriously."

"The passing game had an extra spark, today. You seemed to open things up, more, take some looks
downfield. Do you know what might have contributed to that change?"

"Just, you know," Steve says. Over his shoulder, Steve can see Sam Wilson with a reporter for another news agency, talking animatedly with his hands. "It all starts with our offensive line. They're rock solid. I couldn't do anything without them there. And second of all, we have a lot of guys running good routes—I mean, there's someone open on every play, seems like. Johnny and Sam are both stepping up big."

"How do you bring all that together to beat a good team like Northwestern?"

"Uh—well—the key is balance," Steve says, weariness settling between his shoulder blades. "We work hard on our routes, and we're also lucky to have one of the best running backs in the country." He smiles and gives Isaiah's shoulder pad a shake.

"That's right," the reporter agrees, managing, as all reporters do, to show all her teeth and ask questions at the same time. "Not one of the most talkative running backs, though."

The microphone drifts between them, catching nothing but uncomfortable silence. Isaiah eyes Steve, curling his lip, then turns back to the reporter.

Steve steps up. "Is there a question, there?"

She's unflappable; her expression never even wavers. Steve blinks at the CBS logo on her microphone. Of course.

Training her broad, symmetrical smile on Isaiah Bradley, she asks him directly, "How do you feel about your performance today?"

He tilts toward the microphone. "Felt good."

"What do you think attributed to your success?"

"Team played well," he says. "I'm proud we pulled out another win."

Isaiah speaks like a car engine groaning to a stop; clunky and final. For just a moment, silence ripples between the three of them, as if the reporter expects Isaiah to continue. She and Steve shift awkwardly, while Isaiah runs his tongue across his teeth.

"Thank you so much, gentlemen," she swoops in with a smooth smile. Turning back to the camera, she adds, "Back to you, Chris."

Steve nods politely. In a calculated move, he pivots his shoulders and steers Isaiah back out of the throng of media, all pushing and shoving with microphones and voice recorders and video cameras and flashbulbs.

He leans close to speak in Isaiah's ear. "You don't have to give them all the cold shoulder," he teases.

"Nah," Isaiah smirks. Not exactly a smile. "But that means I win the bet this week."

Steve gives him a playful shove. "I can't just ignore them, Ice."

"I put on a clinic, back there."

"Yeah, on being rude."

"On the art of efficient conversation."
"You were cold-hearted."

"Why d'you think they call me Ice?"

Steve can't hold it in anymore; he bursts into laughter, grabbing his own ribs for support. They break free of the crowd and meander toward the tunnel, side-by-side, just as Sam Wilson emerges from the media swarm.

"Dude! That was sick," he says as he and Isaiah high-five and thump each other on the back. He gives Steve the same hug, just as if they've been doing it their whole lives, and not for the first time in front of a hundred thousand people. "Good game, man, good game."

"Me?" Steve asks, a little incredulous. His mind drifts to the second quarter, when he blew several passes in a row and forced the team to punt the ball on back-to-back possessions. "I wouldn't be able to do it without you, man." The three of them fall into step.

"Nah, I'm just tryin' to keep up with you, Captain," Sam says with a smile.

Steve can feel heat rise in his cheeks, and he hopes, fleetingly, that it passes for sunburn. Never mind he was wearing a helmet most of the day.

"Hey, he's a captain, too," Steve insists, waving at Isaiah. "I mean, he's probably the top captain, and everything. He's the one I voted for."

Sam starts giggling.

"Plus he calls the coin-tosses!" Steve plows on. "If you're gonna call someone Captain, it ought to be this guy."

That's no use, though; Sam can't stop laughing and, to Steve's horror, Isaiah has joined in.

"You don't get to choose which nicknames you get," Isaiah says.

"Yeah, Captain," Sam agrees.

Steve runs a hand across his face. It doesn't help the blush at all. "I'm nothing special."

They finally reach the shadows of the home team's tunnel, hidden from view; they leave the game behind them, officially, and Isaiah breaks into a smile that takes up half his face. "The man spoke," he says, beaming. "You're the Captain, that's all there is too it."

"Not if I call you Captain, first."

"Nice place," Sam says, nodding, as he takes in the façade of the old two-story house. Steve splits it with three roommates, all football players: Isaiah Bradley; his brother, Eli, the back-up quarterback; and Clint Barton, the place kicker.

They first rented the thing two years ago because the landlord advertised it as a "four-bedroom Victorian-era mansion" and practically charged pocket change for each tenant. The description didn't turn out to be an outright lie: There are four bedrooms, although the two on the first floor are really just repurposed living areas, and the two on the second floor don't have air-conditioning. And it is Victorian era, which means the original tile fireplace makes for a nice decoration, though it's unusable, considering the decrepit chimney. The hardwood floors were, at one point, polished, but now they're mostly chipped. The window frames are warped, the downstairs shower—slapped
together in a desperate '60s renovation—has lurking mold, the square footage is a beast to heat in winter, and their kitchen gets ants in summer.

Steve loves it. From the outside, it may look austere and a little dilapidated, but inside it is cozy and secure. It's also riddled with personal touches, like the framed New York Giants poster in the living room hung right next to Isaiah's Terrible Towel and Clint's dartboard. It's almost like a family home, not a cheap property rented out to a group of college boys.

But as much as Steve loves his house, he also knows that, to outsiders, its charm might get lost somewhere in the warped linoleum and peeling paint.

So when Sam gazes fondly at the house before he even steps inside? Well, that definitely puts Steve at ease.

He leads the way up the uneven wood steps to their front porch and just as he opens the screen door, a squealing little girl almost knocks them on their butts.

"Monica, slow down—"

A tall black man, all legs and arms, shoulders past Steve in pursuit of the errant child.

"Sorry, Steve." A young woman appears in the doorway, another little girl propped on her hip. The toddler is tugging on a fistful of her mother's long black hair, to which the mother seems oblivious in a world-weary way. "Don't mean to run out on you. They begged daddy to take them out for hot dogs."

Steve waves off her apology. "Yeah, I bet that took so much begging," he says with a wink. He knows his roommate, and he knows those little girls are Eli's kryptonite.

"Well, sorry we're running out on you, anyway," she rolls her eyes knowingly and follows her family.

Once the whirlwind has passed, Steve holds the door open for Sam. He doesn't move at first. Steve gives a little nod toward the foyer, and Sam blinks at him. He seems flabbergasted.

"Was that …?"

"Eli."

"Right." He spins slowly, eyes tracking Eli Bradley as he loads his daughters into the back seat of a black Escalade. "I didn't know he had … kids."

"He's been with Kate since high school," Steve shrugs.

With a short nod, Sam seems to snap out of his brief shock. He turns to Steve and grins. "Do they all live here?"

Steve winces. "Not exactly. I mean—no, no, if you asked Kate, she would say no."

"So that's a no," Sam laughs. Then he turns an appraising eye to Steve's front hall and steps over the threshold. "Alright! Do I get a full tour, or what?"

Steve laughs. "There's nothing interesting on the second floor, but yeah, yeah, I'll show you around downstairs. So …" He looks around and scratches his head. "This is the foyer."

Sam nods in approval. "It works."
The front hall is long and thin, and mostly bare of decoration aside from a herringbone rug thrown over the dirty wood floor. Most of the space is occupied by the staircase, with blocky carved wood bannisters and a little door leading to the cupboard underneath.

Steve points to the door facing them, which is closed. "That's Eli's room. It's the biggest, and we figured he'd like being downstairs, when the kids visit, and all."

"Makes sense."

"Clint's room is behind that, but trust me, you don't want to go in there. We're pretty sure it's a biohazard."

"The fuck you talking about me behind my back!"

Steve snorts and rolls his eyes. "And that would be Clint himself. Also a biohazard."

"Come say it to my face!"

Steve rounds a corner into the large living room at the front of the house. It features a massive single-paned window looking out over the porch; the fireplace; a 48-inch Samsung; and Clint Barton, who is more or less a permanent fixture taking up one end of their big, squishy gray sectional.

"Welcome home!" Clint's voice sounds from a small mountain of blankets. Madden Football flashes on the TV, although it seems impossible for Clint to see the screen from his fortress of fleece and yarn.

If a stranger wandered into their house and found Clint Barton melted into his usual indentation on the couch, they would almost certainly not believe that he's a Division I athlete. He's been kicking for a nationally-contending football team for three years, now, but at home, he likes to relax. To put it mildly.

The first thing Steve notices, other than Clint's pillow-fort, is the row of pop cans marching across the coffee table.

"Oh my God," Steve sighs, "How did you manage to beat me home and turn the apartment into a dump in ten minutes?"

"I'm clearly faster than you."

"In what universe?"

"Steve, my friend, we've been over this," Clint says. "I'm the tall, good-looking hero with super speed and X-ray vision, and you're my bumbling sidekick."

"So how do you explain the Coke cans?"

"Superhuman strength is a bitch, man. Gotta carb-load."

Sam lets out a long, indecent snort. From the depths of the blanket mountain, an arm yanks at the pile, and Clint's eyes appear.

"Oh hey, Sam's here."

"Don't change the subject," Steve says, crossing his arms. He's not actually upset, but messing with Clint Barton is one of his favorite pastimes. Mostly because Clint gives it right back. "I'm not gonna have to clean up after you, am I?" he asks sternly.
"Depends how fast you want it cleaned up." Clint shrugs and turns back to his game.

Sam interrupts their banter—which would last indefinitely, otherwise—and flops onto the couch next to Clint. "Got another controller?"

"Yeah, dude, is that a joke?"

"Careful, Sam," Steve warns. He perches one hip on the arm of the couch. "You might not want to sit next to him. He probably didn't even shower after the game."

"Still smell better than you," Clint counters.

"Did you at least get some ice for your knee?"

"I can take care of myself, Mom."

"I'm not your—"

"You're kind of a mom."

Sam smiles, even though most of his attention is on the video game. "Don't take it personal, Steve. We need someone like you looking out for us."

"'Us?' Steve sighs. "Are you guys an 'us' now?"

Sam whips around to face Clint. "Can I come over and play Xbox again?"

"Yeah, dude."

He turns back to Steve with wide eyes and a childish grin. "Yeah, we're an 'us'."

"Oh, my God," Steve says, pinching the bridge of his nose. Then he adds, a little dazedly, "Is Ice home yet?"

"Nah, why?"

"I need the company of another adult."

He's not serious, of course. Well, Clint is kind of a child—but Steve loves that about him. It's what makes the teasing so much fun. Especially since Clint can take care of himself just fine. He's a fantastic kicker—perfect on field goals so far—and he's almost done with some kind of obscure criminal justice degree which he plans on taking into military officer training. He's not a dead-end NCAA athlete, that's for sure.

And then there's Clint's girlfriend, who is somehow even smarter and more talented than Clint. Originally from Russia, Natasha Romanov plays for the university's gymnastics team—also a national title contender—but she and Clint actually met in an academic setting. Some kind of guest lecture on international finance. At first, Steve didn't understand what she was doing with Clint; but it turns out that behind the cool exteriors, they are both dog lovers, closet nerds, and coffee addicts. They also each speak about four languages, and spend half their time together making fun of people to their faces in Russian or Spanish or—Steve’s favorite—sign language.

Steve pulls himself to his feet. "I think we have Bud Light, you want one, Sam?"

"Yeah, man, whatever's good."
"One for me too!" Clint says.

"You can get your own beer, Barton," Steve says. As he shuffles toward the kitchen, he can hear Sam's voice rise over the volume on the TV.

"Why are like all the cans half-crushed?"

"So I can tell which ones are empty," Clint answers, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Chapter End Notes

i waffled for a long time on how to introduce Steve's new team, new campus, new everything. i decided to go with teammates, first. i've been dying to write sam and clint and isaiah for AGES. :'}
American State University makes a run for the national championship, thanks to a few key players.

"I think I'm going to ask that guy out," Sharon says.

Steve only hums in response, doing a full body stretch under his bed sheet, which is still warm and still tangled around one leg.

"The one from my statistics class," she clarifies as she fastens her jeans. Then she props her hands on her hips and scans Steve's bedroom, naked from the waist up. "Where's my shirt?"

"Dunno," Steve says, burying one half of his face into a pillow. "You don't need it."

"You're not keeping it hostage, are you?" She casts a suspicious glance toward the bed sheet.

"Not hiding anything over here."

"That's the truth," she mutters, and continues the search for her missing shirt.

Steve snorts. His alarm clock reads 6:14 in bright green numbers. Normally, he thinks of himself as a morning person, diving into exercise, stretches, and one of three breakfasts all before 9 AM. Morning workouts are some of the most efficient, because there's no mental noise in the way. Just the barely-conscious thrum of the treadmill; the click of the weights going in time with his heartbeat.

But it's Sunday, the closest he really gets to a "day off", and they won their sixth game yesterday, and it's not every night Steve gets to spend with Sharon Carter. He'd done his best to appreciate every minute of it. Which means he really doesn't feel like dragging his ass out from under the warm covers. Especially before the sun is up.

"What's the guy's name again?"

"Why, are you jealous?" Sharon smiles.

"Just chatting."

"Have I ever mentioned that you suck at pillow-talk?"

Steve grins. "Once or twice."

It's an old joke between the two of them: as long as they have their clothes off, they're a match made in heaven; try to have a conversation, and they completely fall apart.

More specifically, Steve falls apart. On their first date, Sharon had spent the entire evening grasping at straws—business class drama, gossip about their classmates, football stats, even that despicable
econ GTA who flirted with every girl who walked through his office door—while Steve had stuttered and sat stiffly for over an hour through dinner. He'd managed to pay, though, and managed to go in for a kiss before getting in the car. Which led to a kiss before getting out of the car, and a kiss on her front porch, and more kissing on the stairway, trying not to wake up Sharon's roommates on the way to her bedroom.

That was a year ago, now. More than a year. It had been sometime in September, which Steve remembers well because they'd just played their first home game of the season when he mustered the courage to ask Sharon out. They went on two more painfully awkward dates before throwing in the towel, but they fell into a comfortable friends-with-benefits system. They've hooked up once every couple months, or so, relieving anxiety around bowl season and midterms and final exams.

They are sort of friends, but it's more of a symbiotic relationship. A good way to burn off stress. Sharon Carter is warm and earnest and disarming—and irredeemably dull. Steve wants to like her, but all she does is talk shop.

"I'm not telling you his name, but he actually shares an office with Creepy Kevin," she says. "You know, the GTA with no sense of—"


Sharon lets out a soft, triumphant exclamation and darts forward to pluck her sweater from the top of Steve's mini-fridge. "I heard his brother is gay," she says, giving Steve a pointed look before pulling the shirt over her head.

Steve sucks in a deep breath through his nose. "Is he hot?"

"Short, but great forearms," she grins. "Curly blond hair. You'd like him."

"Does he like football?"

"He's in the marching band, so … probably?" she shrugs. "I'd be happy to hook you up."

Steve slept with a music major, once. He had a voice like an angel. Steve spent the night with his hands on the headboard trying to make the guy sing. Good times. He smiles wryly at the memory. "Thanks, Sharon," he says, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "I don't know if I'm up for a blind date, though."

"Because it's a guy?" she asks bluntly.

"No," he says without hesitation. "I'm not in the closet, or anything. My roommates all—come on, we've talked about this."

"Well, either way, you could afford to show a little affection for someone."

"You saying I'm a robot or something?" he teases.

Immediately, Sharon backs down. "No, not at all! You just deserve to be happy, you know?"

"I am happy," he insists, mostly for lack of anything else to say. "I'm … not against a relationship."

She laughs at that, looking up from her socks for a split second. "No offense, but you're not really the commitment type."

He doesn't even know how to respond to that. His knee-jerk response is to protest—adamantly—
because he's not a hit-it-and-quit-it kind of guy. The fact that he can't sever ties with Sharon Carter after a year of little more than small talk should prove just how much he does, in fact, get attached too easily, not the other way around. Right?

"I don't have a problem with commitment," he says, still working out how she came to that conclusion.

"Please." She rolls her eyes and plucks down on the floor to tie her shoes. "If you kept your sex life any quieter, I'd have to climb out the window afterwards."

With another deep, early morning breath, the kind that burns up sleepy lungs, Steve finally forces himself out of bed. He digs into his top drawer for a pair of sweatpants. The least he can do is show Sharon out. None of this climbing-out-windows business, not even close.

That speaks for itself, doesn't it? The last year of irregular hook-ups with Sharon Carter is the closest thing Steve has had to an actual relationship in his life, and easily the longest, despite the fact that they're far from exclusive. He's not in a rut, precisely, which is why he can't put a finger on any real, fixable problem. Instead, he vacillates between the high-octane one-night-stand lifestyle of a college frat boy, and settling down with someone he genuinely likes—the kind of thing he sees with Kate and Eli, or Clint and Natasha.

While Sharon finishes tying her shoes, Steve picks a pair of socks and an old ASU T-shirt from the top of his overflowing laundry basket. "I'm not afraid of commitment," he says again. "There's just a lot to this, you know?" He plucks at the big Generals logo on the front of his shirt. "I don't want to drag anyone into the whole … circus."

"I can think of plenty of people who would love that circus."

"Yeah, maybe," he says. That's the problem, he doesn't say.

He unplugs his phone from the wall charger and trails after her down the stairs, where they hug and say their good-byes.

"Good luck," she says. "With everything."

"Should be a good season."

Sharon smiles at him, lips closed. She looks like she's about to respond, but then, blinking, she just says see you later. Steve smiles, and she opens the door—cautiously, so it doesn't creak too much—and slips outside.

And that's how Steve ends up wide awake at 6:45 a.m. the day after a conference game, and even though he would dearly love to sprawl out on his bed and snore himself straight through to Monday morning workouts, there's no way he's getting back to sleep, now. For one thing, he has to pee, and for another, his stomach is already growling at him. He yawns and does a little twist, and firecrackers pop up and down his spine.

After a detour to the bathroom, Steve turns on a light in the kitchen and winces. It takes a good minute for his eyes adjust to the light. And for his feet to adjust to the floor—the linoleum is chilly, even through socked feet.

Their kitchen is overflowing with breakfast options, a side effect of living with three other college athletes in peak physical condition. This is a good thing, of course. But at the moment, Steve's brain is like a watermill slogging through peanut butter. Or Nutella. Or cream cheese. Or a very thick batch of Bisquick. All of which sound tasty.
While processing what he wants to eat and how to make it, Steve grabs a new carton of milk with "ICE" sharpied onto all four sides, tears it open, and takes a swig.

"Pretty sure that's not yours, Rogers."

The voice jolts like a livewire against Steve's spine. He whirls around to face the intruder, effectively splattering the floor with milk and rattling the contents of the refrigerator door.

Seated calmly on his kitchen counter, wearing a matching ASU sweatpants-sweatshirt combo and a smug smile, is Natasha Romanov. A faint dizziness sets in behind Steve's eyes as he tries to relax.

"How long have you been there?" he pants, still holding the carton of 2-percent like a very pathetic and slightly soggy shield.

Natasha tilts her head to one side. "Just long enough to watch you steal Isaiah Bradley's milk."

Steve glances at Isaiah's nickname where it's scrawled all over the carton, all caps, underlined three times. "That's mostly for Eli's sake."

"Sure it is."

It's true, he thinks; the Bradley brothers fight over food in this household just about every four hours. But he isn't brave enough to argue with Natasha, especially with a brain still sloshing around before seven a.m. While Isaiah has never given Steve express permission to steal his groceries, he's also never explicitly asked him not to.

Anyway, his best tactic is probably to change the subject. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I know," she says. She hands over a roll of paper towels.

"Should I be scared?" Steve asks, kneeling to wipe up the small splatter of milk on the floor.

One corner of her mouth quirks. "You were like a zombie. I think it would've been harder to sneak up on Clint."

"I literally just woke up." Steve turns back to the fridge, replacing Isaiah's milk carton and pulling out bagels and cream cheese, instead.

"Trust me, your bedhead speaks for itself."

"Not all of us can wake up runway-ready."

Shooting him another half-smile, Natasha slides the toaster out from behind her hips. "One for me, too?" she asks.

"You got it."

Steve begins preparing two bagels, tearing them in half and slotting all four slices into the toaster before digging in the silverware drawer for a butter knife. While waiting for the toaster, they catch up on mundane small talk.

It's not unusual to encounter Natasha in their house, no matter the time of day. Her visits are frequent enough that she is closer to full-time residency even than Kate, but unpredictable enough that she can still surprise Steve by materializing on his kitchen counter before dawn.

She has her own place somewhere on campus. It's an actual dorm room, which is unusual for
upperclassmen, but technically she's an international student, which makes off-campus housing less practical. And it's brand-spanking-new, a four-bedroom suite with two bathrooms and generous shared living space. She lives there with three other gymnasts, Maria, Ana, and Laynia. They've made it very clear that Clint and his roommates aren't allowed to spend the night there. Steve still doesn't know why.

At any rate, Natasha is good company. Especially when Clint and Eli are being particularly childish, or alternatively, when Ice is being particularly overbearing. She tempers the rest of the household in a way that Steve desperately needs, some days.

The toaster pops, disrupting their conversation.

"Do you have butter?" Natasha asks, watching Steve carefully pluck the bagels out of the toaster without burning himself.

"Sure," Steve says. He jabs a thumb at the fridge. "Top of the door, I think."

Natasha hops off the counter, landing soft and cat-like, and busies herself spreading cream cheese on one half of her bagel and butter on the other half. After returning the food to the refrigerator, Steve follows Natasha out of the kitchen, each with a bagel wrapped in a paper towel.

"They've been going on and on about you guys on SportsCenter," Natasha says as she leads the way through to the small dining room, which isn't so much a "room for dining" as a space for storing all the uncomfortable furniture.

"Jeez. How long have you been awake?" Steve asks.

"We migrated to the living room around 2 o'clock."

"Okay … but why?"

"Not to freak you out or anything, but turns out your bed frame is situated directly over Clint's."

"What … oh." Steve can feel his cheeks burning. "Oh my God."

Natasha snorts. "How's Sharon?"

"Oh my God. How did you—I mean, she's fine."

"Okay," Natasha says, her voice light. "She sounded better than 'fine,' but okay …"

"Oh. My. God."

She's laughing outright, at this point. Which is probably within her rights. "Relax, I'm messing with you. We were watching movies until two, but then we decided to play Xbox."

"Could you really hear me?"

"Only a little."

"Sorry."

Natasha smirks. She flits into the living room, asking innocently, "Is your middle name really Grant?"

"Oh my God."
Steve follows her, flopping onto the empty end of their giant sectional. Clint looks up from his burrow of blankets when they enter the room. He gives Steve a distracted wave and adjusts his hearing aid before sitting up to offer Natasha a place underneath his fluffy purple afghan. Daintily, she folds herself at his side. She hands over the half of her bagel with cream cheese, keeping the buttered half for herself.

"So, Steve!" Clint says, turning to face him, rather than the television. "I didn't expect to see you up so early!" He raises his eyebrows pointedly.

"Okay, I'm officially never having anyone spend the night again."

"You can have guests over," Natasha says lightly, and wipes a crumb from the corner of her mouth.

"How's Sharon?" Clint adds.

Steve throws his head back against the couch cushions. "Why does everyone assume … never mind. I don't want to know."

Clint raises an eyebrow.

"Sharon is perfectly fine," Steve says in what he hopes is a clear and final tone.

"This is fun," Clint declares. "Steve should get laid more often. He's fun to mess with."

Natasha doesn't answer, but her lips twitch.

"You're really peppy for seven o'clock in the morning," Steve grumbles, and takes a bite from his own breakfast.

"I can't sleep after a game, you know that," Clint says. He waves vaguely at the TV screen. "They've been talking about us since like 4 AM. Did you hear Ohio State lost?"

Steve almost chokes on his bagel. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, they're saying we could jump them in the rankings."

"We'd be in the top ten!"

Clint nods vigorously, scattering crumbs all over his blanket.

"Ohio State really lost?" Steve can't quite believe his ears. Ohio State went into the weekend ranked number one in the country. American State had been eighteen. Moving into the top ten would be an astronomical leap, even for a traditional powerhouse like ASU—people are probably only entertaining the idea because they'd just beaten an undefeated Xavier team by three touchdowns.

Before Clint could respond, Natasha shushes them both and waves their attention toward the TV. American State highlights from the previous night flash onscreen: Isaiah breaking four tackles for a touchdown, Sam's one-handed catch, Steve dancing just fair of the sideline for a first down. The volume is almost silent, but the closed captions flicker at the top of the screen.

… offense proves that they're one of the most dominant forces in college football …

"Turn it up," Steve says, "turn it up—"

Natasha fumbles for the remote and adjusts the volume in time to hear an early morning reporter say just, precisely, exactly what Steve did not want to hear.
"Well, Sage, there's no doubt anymore that American State is the real deal. I think we all know where this is headed."

"Week twelve," she agrees.

The anchor smiles at the camera. "The Frozen Wasteland."

"No, God." Steve covers his eyes with both arms. "Turn it back down, turn it back down."

"Are you kidding?" Clint argues. "This is the good part!"

Steve groans and does his best to ignore the television.

It's no secret that Clint Barton gets a unique and grotesque pleasure out of media exposure. Maybe because his face isn't the one plastered on every poster, web page, commercial, and highlight reel that even so much as mentions the team. Maybe because he appreciates a good story. Either way, he watches more SportsCenter than anyone in the house. (And the only reason Steve originally signed up for Twitter was to appease Clint Barton. It took him four hours to gain ten times as many followers.)

Clint has his phone out now, actually.

"It's all over ESPN already," he announces.

"Clint, I don't want to hear about Southeast State or Alexander Pierce or the Frozen fucking Wasteland," Steve says. "Can we please just enjoy beating Xavier without all the extra bullshit?"

"Sorry, can't hear you, you'll have to speak up."

"You can hear me just fine—"

"I am disabled, how dare—"

"What's a frozen wasteland?" Natasha interrupts.

"That's what they call the stadium at Southeast State," Steve says, spitting out the last two words with a venom that makes Natasha raise both eyebrows.

"Yeah," Clint agrees, finally looking up from his phone. "What kind of school nicknames their stadium?"

Natasha blinks. "The Southeast game is always a big deal. They're our biggest rivals. What's so different about this year?"

"Everyone in the country thinks the winner of that game will win the national championship."

"I hardly think everyone—" Steve starts to argue just as one of ESPN's reporters speaks up again.

"… roads lead to the American State-Southeast State showdown in week twelve. Frankly, these two teams are in a league of their own."

With a haggard sigh, Steve melts back into the couch cushions. The Southeast State game is stressful enough year in and year out without an added nuclear meltdown triggered by dramatic media outlets.

It's one of the oldest, most savage rivalries in college sports. The Southeast State Tundra vs. the American State Generals. Each has a storied past, a string of national championships, a tradition of
All-Americans, and a titan head coach. American State touts more NFL stars, more household names moving through the ranks. They're flashy. They're fun to watch. The favorite in the eye of the public.

Southeast State, on the other hand, is a glacier, mammoth and immovable. They boast nine national championships—more, even, than ASU—but no Heisman trophy winners, and those statistics alone kind of embody the entire history of the program.

Their campus is an isolated outpost in Winter Station, Wisconsin, near the coast of Lake Michigan. Known for their howling winds and annual ice storms, Winter Station is littered with tunnels and enclosed bridges for pedestrians to travel building-to-building, because it is literally hazardous to a person's health to spend time outdoors there between November and March.

Somehow, the football team evolved as a product of its frigid environment. They are, in a word, defense. They don't dominate other teams because, frankly, they don't have to; they win 7-0, 10-0, 14-3. They give up nothing. No touchdowns, no points, no mercy. Especially in Winter Station. Though their stadium is officially named after a war-era coach, everyone always calls it the Frozen Wasteland. Where opponents go to die.

Steve will be leading American State into Winter Station later this season. It's a fact. It's not something he's been avoiding; rather, he adopts Nick Fury's policy of living in the moment. He focuses on each game one at a time. This means preparing for five other teams before even thinking about Southeast State.

If the media will lay off for two seconds, that is.

"Why are they still talking about us?" Steve groans, trying and failing to ignore the TV.

"They're talking about you, Captain," Clint says with a grin.

"Oh my god, is that nickname really gonna stick?"

Natasha chuckles. "I think it already stuck."

"Nat—look, look—" Clint jogs her elbow to get her attention. "You have to see this replay—"

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**BCS Top 25 – Week 7**

1. Oregon (6-0)
2. Southeast State (6-0)
3. Boise State (6-0)
4. Oklahoma (6-0)
5. TCU (7-0)
6. Lemurian (6-0)
7. Auburn (7-0)
8. LSU (7-0)
9. American State (6-0)
10. Alabama (6-1)
11. Michigan State (7-0)
12. Utah (6-0)
13. Wisconsin (6-1)
14. Ohio State (6-1)
15. Stanford (5-1)
16. Iowa (5-1)
Steve doesn't get hit very often on the football field, and he gets hit hard even less often.

Typically, he comes to set with the offense; calls the snap; drops back two, three, four steps; observes the field as the play unfolds; inhales; glances downfield at deep coverage; flicks through checkdowns; exhales, and fires quick passes into the slots. He finds open men in the middle of the field, tight ends who have juked linebackers and confused them enough for an eight-yard gain. Or he waits for a receiver to cut toward a sideline, where he slips a pass just inches in-bounds, where only his teammates can catch it fairly. Steve Rogers is sharp and accurate and efficient. He doesn't need big gains or trick plays to win. He just plays better football than everyone else.

This is what ESPN's analysts would tell you. This is the reputation he's earned over a year-and-a-half of regular playing time for American State.

Over the past few weeks, that mode of operation has begun to evolve.

The next Saturday, against National State, Sam Wilson sidles up to him while their defense is on the field. He gazes across to the other sideline and says, nonchalantly, "Number five can't keep up with me, Captain."

"Is that so?" Steve responds with the same light tone.

"He keeps getting fooled by the stutter-step."

Steve suppresses a smile. "Well, give me a wave next time he's covering you man-to-man."

"Oh, I will," Sam says. In the shadows of the stadium, Steve can see Sam's toothy grin flash behind his facemask. "I will," he says again, drawing a finger across his throat.

The next time they are on offense, Steve settles under center and glances down the line at Sam Wilson. He makes the same gesture, one finger across his throat. Steve can just make out his teeth shining white.

He hikes the ball, drops back one, two, three steps, and inhales. He dances in the pocket to buy time. Sam was right. Number five can't keep up.

In real-life-time, it all spans less than six seconds. The time it takes for Sam to feint left, trip up his defender, and charge downfield, nothing but wide open grass before him. In football-time, Steve watches it all unfold in what feels like an hour; counting inhales and exhales while Sam pulls away from all the opponent's white uniforms.

Steve rears back and heaves downfield, releasing the ball long before Sam is even close to the mark; before Sam even turns around to look. But it is perfect. When Sam turns his head, the ball is there, and he reaches forward and cradles it gently in both arms, just as if Steve had handed it to him from a
step away.

Touchdown. The National State fans fall silent. One more nail in their coffin.

So the season drives on, and American State leaves a trail of vanquished foes in their wake. They climb the rankings steadily, at first. Since last week's win on the road, they have hovered in the top 20; then they rout National State at home and jump to ten, over Ohio State, as predicted; and then comes week nine, when they host Lemurian, an undefeated conference opponent. Both top-ten teams with conference championship hopes on the line.

It's a heavyweight matchup, no doubt.

The game rides the edge of a knife through halftime. Tony Stark's defense keeps them in the game, despite the fact that they only score two touchdowns in the whole first half.

Finally, late in the third quarter, enough is enough.

"You can't keep checking down, Rogers," Sam says, before lining up for a passing play.

Silently, he draws a finger across his throat. Steve gets the picture.

It's a daredevil stunt, a deep pass to the sideline, well-defended—but somehow, Sam Wilson hauls in a spectacular catch in the heart of enemy territory. Memorial Stadium comes undone.

On the next play, Steve looks to Sam again, this time a quick pass to the strong side, and Sam takes matters into his own hands. Literally. He stiff-arms a linebacker straight into the turf, practically tackles him into the ground. If their fans were wild before, they descend into mayhem now. Sam finally gets pushed out-of-bounds around the three-yard-line.

Before rejoining the huddle, Steve and Sam get in each others' faces and shout nonsense—

"That was badass!"

"You're a freak!"

"You're a freak!"

and their teammates have to corral them back to the huddle so they can call in a play. Isaiah promptly trots into the end zone for an easy touchdown. After that, ASU never looks back.

They topple Lemurian by almost twenty points.

After the game, Steve can barely focus, adrenaline pumping hard in the arteries in his throat. A reporter tries to draw something coherent out of him. She begins her first question, something like, "What changed at halftime—?"

And that's all Steve hears before he releases a wordless shout. "That was amazing. Did you see him? Sam Wilson, man, he's the boss, he's the one you want to talk to."

The reporter smiles. Steve probably didn't answer whatever question she asked. She tries again: "Folks are saying with a win like this against Lemurian, you could be ranked number one in the country. Where do you think the polls should put you?"

"What? Should we be number one? … Hey, why not?!" Steve takes a deep breath. He's just conscious enough to pull his head out of his butt and laugh it off. "I mean—it's up to the voters, of course. But after that game? We just destroyed Lemurian. I think that speaks for itself."
"It does indeed."

That's the last reasonable statement they can scratch out of Steve Rogers; his brain is blown to bits. As the training staff steer him toward the locker room, he can see the same reporter interviewing Sam Wilson, who is practically on fire. His feet are barely touching the ground. Steve can't hear what Sam is saying, but he feels it, he can still feel it, the rush of blood in his ears, the untamed joy of winning a game. A stupid win, a win they earned with their fingernails and the last breath in their lungs.

So week nine is the week Sam Wilson breaks out as a star receiver—not just as a talent, but as an honest-to-god threat.

Week nine is also the week Sam Wilson catches Steve drunkenly making out with a frat boy in a half-bath at a party after the game.

It hadn't been hard to isolate the guy from the pack; he'd been eyeing Steve for over an hour, nursing the same drink, and he was cute, in a generic way. Dark hair, strong jaw, heavy eyebrows. Not as tall as Steve, but that's not saying much. H had seemed like the right type—a rich kid who looked experimental but obviously not willing to out himself in case daddy’s tuition checks stopped clearing. So Steve had made the first move.

“Thought you could use another drink.” He crowds the other boy a bit, not enough to be threatening, but enough to make his intent clear.

“You bring one for me?”

“Why don’t we go find something?”

Totally smooth, Rogers.

But it gets the job done. In a half-assed attempt to find the kitchen, they instead wind up in a bathroom, Steve crowding the stranger into the wall next to a rack with mismatched towels. He’s not a bad kisser, but certainly not shy with his tongue. Steve is considering his options—would it be easier for just one, or both of them to get their pants off in this tiny bathroom?—when something bangs on the other side of the door.

Steve tears himself away from the frat boy just in time for the door to slam into his shoulder.

“Ow!” he says, grabbing the door and holding it half-shut. “Anyone ever teach you to knock?”

“Steve?”

“Sam?”

“Oh shit—”

“I’m out of here.” That would be the frat boy. He mumbles something neither of them really catches, and squeezes past Sam and Steve, and scurries away without a good bye.

Sam blinks, open-mouthed. His first reaction is an apology. “I’m so sorry,” he says, his voice hushed, so genuine and full-hearted that Steve almost smiles.

Sam’s second reaction is to throw his arms around Steve’s neck and say, “Holy Fuck, I just cockblocked you, bro."

“Yeah—I mean, well.” Steve pats him on the back awkwardly. “It’s fine.”
Isaiah appears in the hallway with two beers and a bewildered expression. “Is Wilson okay?”

“No!” Sam wails. “I cockblocked the Captain!”

Steve shushes him and tries not to laugh. “It’s really fine.” He looks over Sam’s shoulder at Isaiah and nods at the drinks. “Is one of those for him?”

“Well … it was,” Isaiah admits. He looks hesitant, though, because the sight of Sam draped across his quarterback and practically crying is probably an indicator that he’s had enough to drink.

“Hey, Sam?” Steve stutters a little, trying to pull himself away.

Sam gets the message after a few sluggish seconds. Stumbling a little, still sporting a forlorn look, as if he committed a gruesome crime, he finds his way to the opposite wall and props himself there. “What’s up?”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“What’s up?”

“Drink a glass of water?”

Isaiah snorts.

“Anything for you, Captain,” Sam slurs.

“Also, can you stop calling me Captain?” Normally Steve wouldn’t take advantage of a drunk person, but this can’t be asking much.

Sam considers him very seriously. “How about—what if—okay, listen. I’ll stop calling you Captain if you start calling me … The Falcon.”

Beat.

Isaiah dissolves into laughter. Literally dissolves. Slides down the wall until his ass hits the floor.

“I’m not doing that, Sam.” Steve says. “I’m never doing that.”

“Sorry I cockblocked you, Cap.”

Steve rubs both temples with his fingertips. “It’s okay.”

“I can find you another cute boy if you want.”

“Oh my god.” Steve wonders where the kitchen is, after all. That glass of water seems vital right now. “Don’t worry about it, Sam.”

“Falcon,” he corrects with a crooked smile. “I’m the *Falcon*.”

Chapter End Notes

so the AP rankings include a few fictional universities, but otherwise they are the actual real-life AP rankings for week 6 of the 2010 college football season.
Targeting

Chapter Summary

The NCAA rulebook defines "targeting" as "contact to the head or neck area of a defenseless opponent with the helmet, forearm, fist, elbow or shoulder."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the morning, Steve crams himself into a seat at their kitchen table and props his feet up on an adjacent chair. He makes their spindly, second-hand dining set look like a Fisher Price playhouse, but it was free furniture, so he can't complain. Plus it gives Clint a place to pile all his junk mail.

For the first time, Steve appreciates that pile of junk mail; he can use it to carefully cover up the local paper's boisterous headline, which reads, in big embarrassing block letters, \textit{STEVE ROGERS—HEISMAN FRONT RUNNER}. Steve would like to relax, thank you very much, not deal with media sensationalism and wild claims about post-season awards. So he covers it up with a stack of bills, works through his second glass of milk, and watches Sam—who spent the night on their couch—cook some kind of breakfast feast. He claims it can cure a hangover any day of the week.

"And I mean \textit{any} hangover," he emphasizes. "Even a real-life \textit{Southern} hangover."

"What does that even mean?" Steve asks, grinning.

"I mean you northerners don't know how to drink," Sam says. "So this little headache doesn't stand a chance."

"So you're admitting you're hungover."

Sam scowls and returns to his work. A half-empty carton of eggs rests to one side, while he stirs something in a small pot. After inspecting it with a creased brow, he opens the fridge, retrieves a stick of butter, slices off at least two tablespoons, and adds it to the mix.

Steve frowns. "Are those the grits?"

"Yup."

"I thought you got the butter-flavored ones."

"Yup."

"So why are you adding more butter?"

Sam goes still, then sighs dramatically. "Does everybody from New York hate flavor, or is that just a Steve Rogers thing?"

"I don't hate flavor," Steve protests.

"Okay, that's fair," Sam says innocently, scraping the sides of the pot with a wooden spoon. "I guess
you can't hate something you never tried."

"Whoa, whoa," Steve says, laughing. "You're killing me, here."

"I'm calling it like I see it."

It's become one of Sam's favorite games; making fun of Steve and his roommates for cooking without spices, jogging indoors, drinking unsweetened iced tea, and always, always leaving the house with hat-hair. Sam is a proud Atlanta boy, and he won't let anyone forget it. In return, it's very easy to tease him for his inadequate winter wardrobe and collection of Atlanta Falcons ball-caps, all of which still have the stickers attached.

One thing can be said in his defense; his accent is a hell of a lot easier to understand than Isaiah's or Eli's. The Bradleys grew up in the depths of New-Orleans-suburb swamps. After Hurricane Katrina, their family was forced to relocate near the Quad Cities in Illinois, but their drawl still sounds like sweet-gum seedpods and half a bottle of bourbon. Steve used to have to ask Isaiah to repeat himself about four times just to get a point across. (According to Clint, it's "harder to read Isaiah's lips in English than it is to read Natasha's in Russian"—but he's known for hyperbole.)

"Fine," Steve grumbles, trying not to smile. It would give Sam too much satisfaction. "Just don't burn my house down."

"Quit worrying so much, Mom."

Twenty minutes later, when Steve takes his first bite of Sam's breakfast extravaganza, he closes his eyes in a moment of ecstasy before announcing, in no uncertain terms, "This is the best thing I've ever tasted."

"Told you."

"My life will never be the same," Steve adds earnestly.

"It's got one drawback, now," Sam says. Steve opens his eyes and frowns, unable to think of even a small downside to this delicious food experience. "What?"

"We're gonna have to work it off later," Sam admits. "There's a few calories in there, y'know? I mean, sausage and butter ain't that bad, but—it's gotta go somewhere."

Steve laughs.

And that's how they end up on campus an hour later, decked out in matching ASU workout gear, discussing whether to do cardio or weight-training first.

The American State football facilities are like a small nation tucked onto the edge of campus; a state-of-the-art complex of brick and glass, formidable in both size and splendor. After scanning their access-cards, they enter the front room, which is pristine white marble on all sides and features a massive navy blue rug with their trademarked five-star logo. The rug is roped off; no one is allowed to step foot on it. It is the first, but not the last, reminder that once you enter American State Football territory, you are on hallowed ground.

Two hallways shoot off from the marble entryway, one toward training facilities, the other toward offices and meeting rooms. Sam and Steve take the first. Giant murals depicting famous plays and motivational quotes cover the walls. They pass rec rooms, cafeterias, smoothie bars, pool halls, and
study rooms, everything in pristine white and navy blue—the upholstery, the carpeting, even the felt on the pool tables. Here and there are splashes of red trim or scarlet accents.

At first it was intimidating, but after four years, Steve is used to the cinematic grandeur of the American State amenities. He feels right, in the midst of it all, like he is a part of the infrastructure, another marble pillar in a living, breathing tradition. We bleed blue, indeed.

Their weight room is a cavern of high-tech machinery and rows upon rows of cutting-edge equipment. The ceiling soars overhead, and natural light spills through gigantic windows lining three walls.

Sam takes a deep breath and asks, simply, "Arms?"

"Yeah," Steve affirms, "but I'm not benching much, between games."

"No problem."

They are not alone in the workout room. There are a few other football players scattered, mostly in pairs, through the rows of machinery. Most of them are defensive players, especially linemen—big, mean sons of bitches who spend most of their time trying to get bigger and meaner—but Steve can see one stocky backup running back among them. Steve admires those kinds of players. That kid doesn't get much playing time now, but one day, he will take Isaiah Bradley's place, and that's nothing to scoff at.

Also strewn throughout the room are a bunch of photos printed out on eight-by-ten sheets of computer paper. Each one depicts a different player for the team they'll be facing this week, Wilder University.

This is also an ASU tradition; every week, no matter how big or small the enemy, they hang up photos of opposing players in the weight room. It's not fancy. They're just fastened to the tops of weight machines with scotch tape. They're meant to motivate, to inspire you to work harder than the people you have to beat. As they pass a squat machine, Sam's gaze drifts toward the photo hanging overhead.

"That the Wilder quarterback?"

Steve nods.

"He's little."

Steve shrugs.

"This machine got some kind of significance?" Sam asks, glancing around.


Sam chuckles. Luke Cage certainly values his routine. He also takes personal responsibility for every opponent's star player—usually with astounding success.

They settle at a bench press at the end of a row, right near a window with a view over the practice field. The slanting midmorning sun overexposes everything, casts bright highlights across leafless branches and chain-link fences. Despite the light, it looks cold outside. It looks like November. It looks like the threat of a Midwest winter.

They take turns spotting, which means occasionally balancing the bar for their partner, and mostly
admiring the view. As promised, Steve doesn't overload the bar when his turn comes around. It does more harm than good for a quarterback to bulk up too much. A proper throwing motion requires balance of both strength and flexibility. Plus, he has to be thoughtful of his old elbow injury. It hasn't bothered him since the surgery, but under a great deal of strain, the tissue could still break down fast, especially with a history of weakness.

When they trade again and Sam settles down for a second set, Steve glances up at the photo taped across the aisle. It's a wide receiver in Wilder University purple. Steve wonders where they got a nickname like "Runaways." There's stupider shit out there (like Gamecocks or Cardinal or Orange or, honestly, who calls a football team the Golden Gophers?) but Runaways is certainly unique.

Sam finishes his rep and follows Steve's line of sight. "Do you think other teams do the same thing?"

"Hm?" Steve shakes himself out of a daydream.

"You know," Sam clarifies, "Do you think the other teams have pictures of us floating around? Like pictures of you and me over a bench press to help motivate them."

Steve thinks about it. About treating every opponent with the same respect. "I hope so."

He's so lost in thought that, at first, he doesn't notice a shadow pass over them.

"—sake, Wilson, y'all can't just go running your mouth like that."

Steve turns to face the voice and—"Isaiah."

Isaiah Bradley is looming over them, arms folded, and damn, it's something else to have that solemn scowl boring into you, and not an enemy linebacker.

"Seriously, Sam, what were you thinking?" Isaiah says, ignoring Steve entirely.

If he could, Sam would lower his ears and tuck his tail between his legs. "I was just excited about winning, man."

"'Excited about winning,'" Isaiah parrots. "That's great, but you gotta be careful what they get on camera, you hear me?"

"Hang on," Sam says, his nose wrinkling. "I didn't say anything that bad!"

"SportsCenter think otherwise."

Steve stands up, level with Isaiah, and raises his voice. "Hey, hey, just a minute." Sam and Isaiah both look at him. "What's going on?"

"You haven't heard?" Isaiah asks.

That's how they all end up in a lounge, Isaiah and Sam standing with their arms crossed, Steve propped on one arm of a blue leather armchair, shaking their heads at the drama unfolding on the television.

Red block letters at the bottom of the screen sum up their current topic: SAM WILSON: "WE'RE NO. 1"

"Come on," Sam says, turning to Isaiah with an imploring look. "They're blowing it all out of proportion."
On the TV screen, a pair of analysts sits across from each other at a broad walnut desk, engaged in a heated debate.

"He's young," one of them says placatingly. "This is a true freshman we're talking about, a young man with a lot of energy who just won a big game. Of course he's confident in his team."

"There's a difference between confidence and cockiness."

The screen flicks to footage of Sam's post-game interview from last night. He was riled up. He was at ten thousand volts and the reporter plainly looked intimidated by the sheer magnitude of his enthusiasm. Just watching the footage makes Steve's lungs burst with joy all over again—and a hint of apprehension.

The reporter asks him the same question she had asked Steve; "Should American State be number one in the country?"

And the Sam onscreen claps his hands. "Why not? Why not?" His voice rises and his gestures become erratic; the reporter takes a step back. "You saw the game, didn't you? Who do you think we are? You know who we are. So why not?"

"Wilson!" a voice barks from the doorway, and all three of them whirl around. It's Bruce Banner, looking stern and impatient. He fixes a toxic stare on Sam and says, simply, "A word."

Steve's stomach turns to ice. They see Coach Banner angry maybe once a year, at most, and never directed at them or their teammates. It's not like he's shouting, or out of control, or anything, but—something in his voice rattles red and ugly, so menacing that Steve almost wants to step between him and Sam.

He doesn't, though, and in the thunderous silence, Sam follows Coach Banner out into the hallway. Their footsteps fade away, probably headed for Banner's office. Steve and Isaiah stare at the empty doorway, then turn to look at one another. The same shock and concern Steve feels is written all over Isaiah's features.

"I didn't think he did anything wrong," Steve says weakly.

Isaiah looks like he's about to answer, but the TV catches their attention again, flashing a graphic of the rankings that have caused all this controversy. The top ten teams are listed on screen:

1. Oregon (8-0)
2. Southeast State (9-0)
3. Boise State (7-0) 4. Auburn (9-0)
5. American State (9-0)
6. TCU (9-0)
7. Alabama (7-1)
8. Utah (8-0)
9. Wisconsin (7-1)
10. Lemurian (7-1)

So American State barely made the top five.

This all seems like nothing; Sam did nothing but show a little confidence in his own team. Steve's mind reels. He remembers talking to the same reporter last night, and he remembers saying their actions spoke for themselves, and he remembers her agreeing. Should they be number one? Steve hasn't changed his mind. Why not?
But there they are, sitting at five.

That explains why at least one of ESPN's analysts is still spitting mad about Sam's outburst.

"The rankings released just this morning reveal that American State is not, in fact, the best team in the nation. It's inappropriate for a player, especially one like Sam Wilson, to make wild claims like he did last night."

"We're not talking about an ongoing problem, here. We're talking about one outburst."

"We're talking about a thug. Plain and simple."

Steve bristles. "A thug?! That's bullshit."

"You surprised?" Isaiah raises an eyebrow.

"No, you don't get it! I said the exact same thing!" Steve stands up and holds his hands out desperately. "I literally said the same words. She asked if we should be number one, and I said 'why not'."

Isaiah takes a deep breath. He seems lost for words. Steve, on the other hand, wants to scream. He wants to pick up the flatscreen and chuck it through a window, preferably from at least six stories up.

"I said the same thing, Ice." Steve has to ball his hands into fists to keep them from shaking. "So that makes me, what, a Heisman finalist, and it makes Sam Wilson a thug?"

"I mean …"

"It's not fair."

Isaiah tugs on his ponytail. "Football isn't fair."

Steve's mind goes instantly, breathlessly blank.

"Life isn't fair," Isaiah adds.

"What?" Steve asks, his lips numb, his mind sluggish.

"I said shit like this ain't fair."

Steve is thrown back in time, to high school, the Philadelphia Eagles, or was it the Dallas Cowboys? The smell of new cleats and leather, rows of unused footballs, still in their packages. Head coaches with that devious half-smile twisting their features.

Isaiah is still speaking, coming to Steve through a thick fog. "Please don't tell me you never figured that out before?"

"No, I—I have, actually," Steve says, feeling dazed. "I know it's not fair, it's just …" he stares at Isaiah and clenches his jaw. Wild winds pick up at the bottom of his throat. They give names to storms like this. "It should be."

"It'll blow over," Isaiah says softly.

"It's bullshit."

"It ain't the first time a black kid got called a thug for no good reason, Steve."
That draws him back to the present; yanks him, actually, ripping his mind back to bitter reality. "There must be something we can do."

"Keep winning football games," Isaiah murmurs.

Keep winning football games, he says, and the look on his face is hard to read. It is sad, but not dejected. It's like watching the replays after your favorite team loses. Steve glances at the TV, but his vision is blurred. After a moment, Isaiah touches his elbow. "You okay?"

Steve brushes past him. "I'm fine," he says. His teeth feel cold. "I'm going for a run."

On Saturday, they blow past the Wilder Runaways. Wilder has never exactly been a conference powerhouse, but American State flat-out embarrasses them. It looks like an NFL team beating up on some redneck high school's junior varsity. When they are done dragging the Runaways up and down the turf, Steve Rogers blows off every single post-game interview, storming to the locker room and never looking back.

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**BCS Top 25 – Week 10**

1. Southeast State (10-0)
2. Oregon (9-0)
3. American State (10-0)
4. Auburn (10-0)
5. TCU (10-0)
6. Boise State (8-0)
7. LSU (8-1)
8. Wisconsin (8-1)
9. Lemurian (8-1)
10. Stanford (8-1)
11. Ohio State (8-1)
12. Nebraska (8-1)
13. Leviathan (8-1)
14. Michigan State (9-1)
15. Alabama (7-2)
16. Oklahoma State (8-1)
17. Iowa (7-2)
18. Arkansas (7-2)
19. Utah (8-1)
20. Virginia Tech (7-2)
21. Trask (7-2)
22. Mississippi State (7-2)
23. Arizona (7-2)
24. Oklahoma (7-2)
25. Missouri (7-2)

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After ten weeks of a grueling, 24/7 football schedule, November 13th is an open date for the American State Generals. And bye weeks are a breath of fresh air.

Everyone playing college football now fell in love with the game twenty years ago. Spent Saturdays and Sundays sitting on the living room floor in front of the TV screen with a football in their lap, listening to Chris Berman and Trent Dilfer, asking what "first down" meant. Somewhere along the way, football became 90-hour weeks. Running, weightlifting, drills, practices, film study, doctors'
offices, ice baths, locker rooms, weekly games that last anywhere from two to six hours. When you're playing football, there's very little time to enjoy football.

They get Sundays off, of course. Isaiah tries to catch the Pittsburgh game every week, but if they play too early or too late, he's likely to be asleep for half of it. When you only get one day off a week, the level of exhaustion is just about insurmountable, no matter how badly you want to root for the Steelers. Not to mention that half the time, Sundays turn into travel days. They could hook up iPads and laptops to watch NFL games on the bus, but it's not the same.

Steve never really allows himself a day off. They may not practice on Sundays, but that doesn't mean he doesn't work out. Three miles in the morning usually keeps the legs loose, and free weights in the afternoon stave off soreness without bulking up too much to throw. It's also the best day to do recon. Whether he's at home, on a bus, or folded into the window seat of an airplane, Steve likes to spend Sunday reading up on the new week's opponent. Likes to get a head start before watching film with the coaches on Monday.

(Not to mention, somewhere in there, they have to squeeze in homework. 

*Student-athlete* is such a misleading term. Makes it sound like the two are in pleasant, perfect balance. It's laughable.)

Anyway, bye weeks are a blessing. They let you truly connect to the kid who fell in love with football all those years ago. To the kid who watched Jerome Bettis and Jerry Rice, the kid who pretended to catch passes from Troy Aikman in the backyard. Steve doesn't like days off, but bye weeks are different. He and his roommates relax, for once, drink beer and cook burgers and let the day's college football games play in the background. It's practically research.

It's also the only opportunity to rest throughout the entire season. Which explains why Clint is taking up even more of the couch than usual, completely horizontal and nested in blankets, nursing the same beer he started an hour ago. Steve suspects he might be asleep. It also explains why, when Steve tries to sneak away and do homework, Isaiah groans, confiscates his laptop, and forces him to sit down for a foot massage.

"You really don't have to," Steve says, rolling his eyes.

Isaiah gives him an unimpressed look and gathers Steve's right foot in his lap. "You won the bet, fair and square."

"Well, I won't argue, then."

"You want to take off your socks?"

"Socks stay on," Steve smiles. "My feet are always freezing."

Isaiah shrugs and starts rubbing circles around the bones of Steve's ankle.

Steve is just starting to relax when a loud knock sounds from the front door. A minute later, Eli appears with Sam and a cheap six-pack. They both stare unabashedly at the state of the living room: Clint Barton, snoring lightly and somehow balancing a bottle of beer in the crook of his elbow; Isaiah Bradley, sprawled in an armchair; and Steve Rogers, one foot stretched across Isaiah's lap. Highlights from this week's college games flash on the big screen, but the volume is almost inaudible.

"So … what's up?" Sam says slowly.
"Getting a foot rub," Steve says. He folds his hands behind his head.

"Can I ask why?" Sam asks. "Or would you two like some privacy?"

Steve laughs. "Ice is a big sap."

"… I'm not sure what question you just answered."

Eli rolls his eyes and flops on the floor next to the coffee table. "It's their stupid bet."

"You have a bet?"

Steve smiles. "This is the first time I've won."

"We do it every week," Isaiah explains. "At the end of every game, we get hounded by reporters asking dumb shit, you hear me? So we started betting, whoever gives the first interview loses."

"I always lose," Steve provides unnecessarily.

"Ri-ight," Sam says, glancing between them. He's still standing up, as if he doesn't feel comfortable sitting in the same room as a pair of crazy people.

"Whoever loses the bet has to give the other one a massage," Steve says. His cheeks hurt from smiling.

"This is the first one Steve's gotten," Isaiah says drily. "That's why he look so smug for no reason."

"What do you mean 'no reason'?" Steve asks indignantly.

"No kidding," Sam mumbles. "I want a foot rub."

"Everyone shut up."

They all turn to face Clint, who has apparently risen from the dead to stare, deeply shocked, at something on his phone screen.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Sam jokes.

Isaiah looks up from Steve's foot. "What's got you so stressed out, Barton?"

"Yeah," Steve agrees, "this is a stress-free zone."

Clint ignores them all. Heaving himself into a sitting position, he starts digging frantically in his pile of blankets. His beer bottle—which turns out, thankfully, to be empty—clatters to the floor. "I'm serious," he says, his voice a little too loud and strained; a sign that he probably did fall asleep, and hasn't adjusted his hearing aid. "Where's the remote?"

"Okay, no need to yell," Sam grumbles.

"He can't hear you," Steve says kindly, and lays a hand on Clint's shoulder to get his attention. When Clint turns, Steve hands him the remote and gestures toward his own ear with a pointed look.

Clint adjusts his hearing aid with practiced ease and then says, his speech at a normal decibel, "Oregon's losing."

Somehow that blunt statement echoes more than any of his shouting from before. It's like the first,
distant boom of thunder before the storm. For a fraction of a second, silence falls over the room; then it erupts with a chorus of hope and anxiety and disbelief. They all turn to the television where, sure enough, the Oregon Ducks are in profound trouble.

"Is this real?" Sam asks dumbly, and everyone shushes him.

The score at the bottom of the screen reads Oregon 17, Stanford 16, but that's not the punchline. What gets Steve's attention are the 2 seconds left on the clock, and the calm, collected Stanford team lined up to kick an easy field goal.

A field goal which would put them ahead by two with no time left.

The Stanford kicker takes a deep breath, sets his feet, and indicates that he is ready. He looks at the holder just as a referee blows his whistle.

"Motherfucker!" Eli exclaims.

Steve rolls his eyes in agreement. "This never works, why don't they just let him kick?"

It's a common tactic among football coaches, known colloquially as "icing the kicker." Right before he kicks an important field goal, the opposing team will often call a time-out in a rather helpless attempt to distract him, or to ramp up the anxiety of the situation. Sometimes it works. Sometimes the kicker will go in after the brief time out and blow it. But a good kicker usually takes it in stride and makes the field goal, regardless.

"Anyone ever do that to you, Clint?" Sam asks, while they wait for the teams to reset after the time-out.

"Oh, it's the dumbest thing ever," Clint says with an emphatic nod. "As if anything could make me more nervous about a game-winning kick."

"Somebody did it to us last year, didn't they?" Isaiah says.

Clint nods. "I was more confused than anything." He kicks Eli gently in the side. "Remember? I was all set, but then you stood up? I had no idea what was going on."

As the back-up quarterback, it's Eli Bradley's job to take the snap and hold kicks for extra points and field goals. Eli laughs, now, at the memory. "I tried to tell you 'they called time-out!' but you kept shaking your head 'no'. I was as confused as you."

"You did the time-out sign!" Clint says, making a T with his hands now to demonstrate.

Eli cackles. "And the first thing you said was 'why the hell did you call time-out?''"

Steve remembers, too. They'd spent the whole time-out explaining to Clint that it had, in fact, been the other team and not Eli Bradley who had called it to begin with. When Clint finally lined up to make the kick, he had still been laughing.

"Could you not hear the whistle or something?" Sam asks.

"Oh, nope." Clint taps the side of his head. "I turn these off while I'm kicking."

"Shut up, shut up, it's happening," Isaiah hisses urgently.

Everyone turns to face the TV. The room is an airlock; the stagnant dead weight before stormwinds set in. Steve doesn't even breath. It's nuts, actually, how nervous he is for a game he's not even
The Stanford kicker lines up and raises one arm. The referees nod, static gathers in the air, and they snap the ball. It's smooth and simple, the calculated motion of muscle memory. He kicks, and the ball slices the center of the goalpost. Exhale; the referees raise both arms; and pandemonium strikes. On TV, the stadium explodes.

Steve and Clint leap to their feet, grab each other's shoulders, and shout nonsense. Eli lets out a long, triumphant yell, while Isaiah slumps back into his chair in relief.

Sam is clapping and bellowing wildly: "Southeast State, baby! Southeast State! They better watch out, I got my eyes on 'em, I got my eyes on the top. We control our own destiny, folks, that's it, Oregon goes down and now ain't nothing standing between us and number one but Southeast fucking State!"

Steve crosses the room, wraps Sam into a hug, and claps him on the back. "Time to go to work."

With that, Steve pulls away and begins to leave the room—and triggers an unholy outburst from Isaiah. "Whoa, whoa!" he cries, sitting up straight. "No way! You sit your ass down! I will not let you work on our day off, not if it's the last thing I do!"

"Take it easy, dad," Steve says, grinning. "Can't a guy get up for another beer? Or are you monitoring my alcohol intake, too?"

Isaiah narrows his eyes. "Just a beer."

"Wait," Eli cuts in, "If you're mom—" he points at Steve, "—and you're calling him dad—" he points at Isaiah, "does that make you grandpa?"

"What?" Isaiah deadpans.

"You're mom's dad," Eli says, full-on laughing, now. "That makes you grandpa."

"I ain't nobody's grandpa, Elijah," he says firmly.

Steve tries to sneak out while they bicker, but Isaiah is like a bloodhound.

"I swear to God, Rogers, you better not come back in here with anything but a beer."

"What about food?"

"If I see you with a laptop I will literally unplug the wi-fi."

(At that, Clint makes a sharp noise of protest.)

Steve holds up his hands in a show of innocence. "Nothing but beer, I promise."

Though he looks totally unconvinced, Isaiah doesn't argue further.

As Steve retreats to the kitchen, he can still hear his roommates bellowing about Oregon and Stanford and Southeast State.

He feels elated. He feels giddy, like his heart is full of helium fit to burst. The week had started with Southeast State, Oregon, and American State as the top three; and though he's afraid to say it out loud, Steve agrees with Sam. There's no doubt about it. After the Oregon loss, Southeast and ASU will be number one and number two, one way or another.
He opens the refrigerator and thinks, fleetingly, about just taking a whole six-pack back to the living room. It's early in the day, though.

He pushes past cottage cheese, lunchmeat, two cartons of eggs, and a whole shelf of various kinds of lettuce to inspect the beverages. Gatorade, orange juice, three gallons of milk, bottled water, a case of Dr. Pepper, Coors Light, Sam Adams, and some kind of ale Clint wanted to try and ended up hating.

Steve pulls out two bottles of Sam Adams and goes hunting for a bottle opener. (If he tried, he could get the tops off without it, but the last time he did that, they ended up picking broken glass out of the sink for three days—plus, if Isaiah caught him, he would probably cover Steve in bubble wrap and tie him to the La-Z-Boy.)

Another commotion erupts in the living room. Steve smiles and thinks of next week's match-up. Southeast State and American State, bitter rivals, number one and number two in the country, a clash of titans in the Frozen Wasteland. It's a shame they play in the same division of the same conference; it means they probably won't ever face each other for a national championship, even though they're clearly the two best teams in the country.

The shouting in the living room drags on, then trickles into heated, but solemn conversation. Steve can't pick out the words, but they sound distraught, which seems odd. He grabs his drink and crosses back to the front room to see what's got them all serious.

"… the sickest thing I've ever seen," Sam is saying. "Sick. I mean, I actually feel sick from watching it."

"That wasn't just sick, it was scary," Isaiah says, quite seriously.

Eli is still sprawled on the floor, while Sam and Clint share the couch—Sam sitting forward with his elbows on his knees, Clint clutching his hair and wincing. Isaiah is on the edge of the old armchair, and every last one of them is riveted to the TV. There's no football game. Instead, ESPN is showing recaps and highlights from the afternoon games.

"I mean … he must be okay, right?" Clint asks. No one responds. "If he wasn't okay they would have said something by now … right?"

"Is who okay?" Steve asks.

"I'm not even okay, and all I did was watch it on SportsCenter," Sam says.

A clip from one of today's games appears onscreen. Southeast, the infamous Southeast State University, pitted against another in-conference opponent. Steve is about to ask what's going on when the highlight plays again in all its 48-inch high-definition glory.

It's the sound, more than anything, that makes it so shocking.

Steve has witnessed a lot of wicked tackles, both in person and on TV, but it's not often that you can hear them so well. It is a sickening crunch, unmistakable helmet-to-helmet contact, the defender lowering his head to maximize the violence of the hit, and it makes Steve flinch. After impact, the defenseless receiver folds in half, lands awkwardly on the turf, and doesn't move.

"Jesus," Isaiah murmurs.

The screen cuts to a pair of ESPN analysts discussing the vicious tackle.

"… wasn't just unnecessary. It was inappropriate. It was vicious, and it was deliberate."
"I agree, Tom." The announcer turns to address the camera. "Barnes was ejected for the remainder of the game, and will be suspended through the first half of next week's Game of the Century against American State. This is in conjunction with the defenseless player rule, which lengthened the ..."

"Well, on the bright side, that jackass will miss the whole first half of the game next week," Sam says.

"They never said if the receiver was alright or not," Steve says.

Everyone looks up at him, then back at the TV. No one speaks.

The screen cuts to a post-game interview with Alexander Pierce, the Southeast State head coach.

"Is he really gonna defend the guy?" Eli says indignantly. "What is there to defend?"

"... always known he was an intense player. That doesn't mean we condone violence on the football field. He will be disciplined according the NCAA rulebook, just like anyone."

"In other words, he won't be disciplined at all," Eli grumbles.

"Shh," Steve says.

The ESPN anchors are back on screen. "The NCAA rulebook defines 'targeting' as 'contact to the head or neck area of a defenseless opponent with the helmet, forearm, fist, elbow or shoulder.' This is the fifth time this season that James Barnes has been called for unnecessary roughness, but only the first time he has been whistled for targeting ..."

A photo labeled "James Barnes" appears on screen, and Steve drops his beer.

The bottle hits the hard wood with a crash, Eli hops off the floor in distress, newscasters drone in the background, and Steve stares at the TV screen.

"That's Bucky."

"Steve?"

"What the hell?"

"That was our good beer!"

"What's wrong?"

Steve doesn't process anything that's going on. He doesn't hear whatever they're saying on TV, doesn't register why Eli stood up so suddenly. He blinks and tries to find his bearings.

Bucky's picture is still on screen.

"What ... the fuck is going on?" Sam asks warily.

"That's Bucky."

Clint and Sam glance at one another nervously.

"Sorry ... who?" Clint says.

"Bucky." Steve nods at the TV screen. Something occurs to him, then, and with a swift wave of
nausea he asks, "was he the receiver that got tackled?!"

Everyone else follows Steve's gaze to the television where Bucky, in a Southeast State uniform, glares back at them from hooded eyes.


Steve doesn't speak. Cold beer seeps into the toes of his socks, and Eli holds his hands out, as a zookeeper might with an unruly caged animal.

Isaiah speaks up softly and deliberately. "Is everything okay, Steve?"

"I know him."

His friends pause for a beat and glance at the TV screen.


"Right." Steve turns his gaze to the puddle of beer and sparkling glass between his feet. His mind reels. "I know him."

Sam laughs humorlessly. "Everyone in the country knows him, now."

"No, I mean, I know him." Steve inches his feet backwards as he fully processes the pile of shattered glass on the floor. "I went to high school with him. We … grew up together."

"He ain't gonna be any kind of friend next weekend," Eli says.

Steve looks up at Isaiah, whose eyebrows are drawn in deep concern. Then he looks at the TV, where SportsCenter is replaying the tackle again, this time in slow motion.

"Yeah," Steve whispers. He blinks, hard, and snaps himself out of his stupor. "Wow, sorry. I gotta clean this mess up. Let me go grab some paper towels."

"Careful!" Isaiah hisses, eyes widening as Steve navigates the maze of glass shards.

Safe and alone in the kitchen, Steve bends over the sink and takes several deep breaths. Over the years he has often daydreamed about the day he would finally reunite with Bucky Barnes. Something football-related always seemed most likely, maybe an email out of the blue reading "hey, I guess we're playing each other this weekend, LOL!" Steve's wildest dreams involved a championship game and confetti, or a grinning Bucky standing on his front porch come to whisk Steve away to catch up over a couple beers. In the end, though, he would have been happy just to find the guy on Facebook.

He searched for him once in awhile. He used to do it more often—probably once a week the summer after high school graduation—but even now, every couple months Steve will type "Bucky Barnes" into the search bar, and when nothing comes up, "James Barnes." Sometimes, embarrassingly, he tries other variations like "Jim" or "Jimmy", and if he's feeling particularly lonely, he would throw in a "Buchanan" before or after.

Nothing ever comes up. Not the right James Barnes, anyway, not even close enough to get his hopes
up. There was an independent musician with the same name whose Facebook page had several thousand likes, but not enough to make him famous. There was also a James Barnes working at a PetSmart in California with whom Steve shared a mutual friend, but that mutual friend was a lab partner who had recently graduated from American State and gone out west to enroll as a Teaching Assistant at UCLA. Very unlikely it was the same James Barnes. (He'd clicked the link, of course, just to double check, and found several pictures of a skinny redhead.)

"Steve?" Sam's voice makes him jump.

"Geez, you scared me."

"Sorry," Sam says. He inches closer, still treating Steve as if he might splinter at any moment. "You okay? You seem a little … off."

"I'm fine." Steve pants a little. "Just never thought I'd see Buck—my old, um, friend on SportsCenter, you know? Well, actually, it's not surprising, he's an amazing football player. Not that anyone would know it, now, they're busy trying to slap him with suspensions, but—"

"Slow down, man." Sam reaches around Steve to grab the paper towel roll. "I'm not here to judge."

"… I haven't seen him in a long time."

"But you guys were close?"

Steve curls one hand around his stomach, thinking back to good old MacArthur High School and Jacobs Field. "Yeah. We were … he was my best friend. We won a conference championship together. He was the best receiver I ever had, I could toss the ball just about anywhere and he would find it. And probably score."

"I'll try not to take that as an insult, since you're being all nostalgic," Sam says with a smirk.

Steve can feel his face heat up. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Shut up, I told you it's fine." Sam leans one hip on the kitchen counter and adds, more soberly, "you guys don't talk anymore?"

"What was your first clue?" Steve asks drily.

"That'd be the Sam Adams soaking into the living room floor."

Steve laughs. It hurts his stomach, a little.

Sam adds, more quietly, "So how do you think he ended up a damn headhunter for Southeast State?"

"He's not a headhunter." Steve says instantly. He tries not to think about whether or not this is true.

"Linebacker," Sam concedes. "Why don't y'all talk anymore?"

"It's not that dramatic, actually." That would be so much easier, wouldn't it? Steve crosses his arms and hunkers against the kitchen cabinets. "He moved away the summer before our senior year. The fans were devastated." He chuckles at the memory. "Anyway, his mom got a divorce and he moved to Texas. And then he … fell off the map."

"Couldn't you text, or Instant Message or—I dunno—Myspace or something?"

"Myspace?" Steve snorts. "How old do you think I am?"
"I don't know what y'all did back in high school."

"You and I are only three years apart."

"Technology evolves in the blink of an eye, Steve."

"Right," Steve laughs. "Well, neither of us had a Myspace, I can tell you that. We talked for awhile, but when senior year started, he stopped texting back."

"Weird."

Steve folds his arms tighter. "I tried to stay in touch, like, all of football season. Every week I would send him something to let him know—you know, who we were playing, how we did."

"He didn't reply at all?"

"Nothing. He never did social media or anything, and when I called, the number had changed. He just … disappeared," Steve sighs. He stares at the kitchen tile until his eyes glaze over. "This is the first I've heard of him in … God. Four years."

"Well," Sam ambles toward the living room, gesturing vaguely with the paper towel roll. "You'll get to see him next week."

"Yeah," Steve breathes. Oh, my God. "Next … how did I not know he played for Southeast?"

"Dunno, man."

"God … this will be our fourth year. In the same conference. How have I not heard of him?"

"I can tell you one thing, Captain Heisman," Sam says, unrolling a handful of paper towels and looking into Steve's eyes. "He's heard of you."

Chapter End Notes

for more angst and suffering and steve/bucky feelings, tune in to my tumblr, queenmabscherzo.
The basement of Steve's house is technically unfinished, but not uninhabitable. It has concrete floors, a few fluorescent light fixtures, cheap drywall, and shoddy insulation, so even though it floods in heavy rainfall, at least it doesn't have patches of mud or nests of small rodents. The boys converted it into a weight room when they moved in. Nothing fancy: free weights, bench press, a second-hand treadmill, space-heater, a mini-fridge with several gallons of water and a half-empty Gatorade.

It's usually a great place to hide.

After seeing Bucky's face on his TV, and after Sam's accidental profound wisdom, Steve feels like his head is tumbling down a hill without the rest of his body. He can hear his roommates in the living room. Their conversation rests at a dull murmur for awhile, but sooner or later, there is laughter. Steve really can't bear that, right now. So he holes himself up in the basement.

He doesn't turn on the space heater. Enough heat swirls inside him, boiling over around his eyes and his throat. He takes it out on the bench press, stacking on more pounds after every set and lifting in time with the thud-thud-thud in his ears. He loses track of sets and loses track of time.

He and Bucky used to work out together all the time, back to the days when Steve was too weak but wouldn't admit it. Those were the days when he embarrassed himself with the dumbbells, the days when Bucky could finish two miles for each of Steve's one. When Bucky seemed so big. When he stacked weights onto his barbell for a few sets, and then kindly took them all off for Steve while rambling about the Mets shutout or the cute girl in social studies. They staked their claim in a corner of the school gym before and after school and laughed through loosely-structured routines. Steve would always add just a little too much weight, enough that Bucky would give him that flat, unimpressed look.

"I've gotta get bigger if I'm ever gonna make varsity," Steve would say.

Bucky would never stop him, but spent less time telling bad jokes when he was the one spotting. Steve knew why, of course. He used to resent Bucky for babying him like that.

"What are you staring at?" he would ask on a sharp exhale.

Now, in his basement in a small wintry prairie town, Steve can still remember what it felt like to struggle with each lift. Every single one. The way his arms would tremble and the way he could tell his time was up when a distant pain pricked the inside of his elbow. He can remember the way Bucky hardly blinked, the way his eyes fixed on Steve and made his temperature rise, the way the muscles in his face twitched when he clenched his jaw.

The déjà vu is a sharp stab between his ribs. Bucky chews the inside of his lip and stands over Steve, helping him return the barbell to its uprights because Steve always tries for one rep too many.

The image from ESPN is already wiped from Steve's mind. He doesn't see the James Barnes with a curtain of black hair and a frigid stare. He sees Bucky, leaning over the bench and looking upside-down at him, and he sees shadows. Shadows in Bucky's crooked teeth, shadows in the wrinkle of his brow, shadows where his eyelashes flutter across his cheeks.

The world shrinks until it is just gray eyes and shadows and pounding in Steve's veins, ragged
breathing, the inhale and exhale of every cell until they are all tattered. Everything flattened in hurricane winds.

"You shouldn't be down here without a spotter, you know."

Shocked, Steve fumbles the barbell. The left side tilts just a little too far, and the lock comes loose, and thirty pounds of weights slide off and thunder onto the cement floor.

"Shit, Steve—"

"You scared me!"

Clint is at his side in an instant, balancing the side of the bar that still has weights attached, and together they return it to the steel uprights. Once the equipment is in place and Steve is safe from any immediate harm, Clint reaches out to squeeze his shoulder. "You okay?"

Steve swats his hand away. "I'm fine," he says, pulling himself up with a grunt, then slouching. He rests his forehead in one hand.

"Sorry," Clint says. From the corner of his eye, Steve can see him carefully removing the weights from the bar to balance it out.

"I'm fine."

"We didn't know where you went."

"... I'm fine." What else.

"Still can't believe you went to high school with that guy," Clint says in a deliberately light tone.

Steve presses the heels of his hands into his eyes until his forehead aches and sunspots sputter in his vision. He can sense Clint as he walks around the bench to pick up the fallen weights.

"James Barnes," Clint says carefully. Just dipping his toes in.

He expects Steve to say something, but Steve bites his tongue. Literally. Flattens it between his front teeth until heat spreads in his mouth.

Clint Barton is the last person he wants to have this conversation with.

If it was Eli, he would avoid Steve's eyes and ask him about his friend from high school. Isaiah would fix Steve with a sorry stare and ask him about the Southeast State game. Sam stuck to the facts, which was fine. And Clint isn't worse than all that—having a conversation with Clint is just so intense. He devotes his undivided attention to you, to your lips and your eyes and all the nonverbal cues that help him understand what he doesn't fully hear.

Normally, Steve loves this about Clint. You never realize how perpetually distracted people are until you have someone's full attentiveness. Other people, they're always glancing at a clock or a cell phone or their feet, or waving their arms unnecessarily, or absently covering their mouths while they try to think and talk at the same time. A hard-of-hearing person can't and doesn't do any of that, which Steve loves and admires. It is beautiful. It is a genuine form of communication, just two people with nothing between them.

And right now, Steve really, desperately doesn't want to have that conversation. He wants something between them. Anything, really, even the safety of burying his face in both hands. He's not ready for
scrutiny. He feels battered. His skeleton has withstood one too many thunderstorms. All it will take is a slight wind for his bones to rattle apart.

Clint is going to spotlight him with all that openness and decency, and Steve can't stop it, even though he just wants to lock himself in a gym and punch something until his knuckles bleed.

Something brushes his shoulder, and Steve flinches. This is another habit of Clint's; he is careful to get someone's attention before addressing them.

Steve isn't usually so jumpy, that's all.

"Want a drink?" Clint asks.

He hands Steve an unopened bottle of water before he can answer.

"Thanks." Steve cracks it open and buys time by taking a long drink.

When he opens his eyes, he sees Clint settled in one of the mismatched lawn chairs clustered by the fridge. They blink at each other. Steve takes another drink, and Clint waits for him before speaking again. "I thought you went to school in New York?"

"Brooklyn," Steve confirms.

"James Barnes is from Texas."

Steve watches Clint carefully, but there's no sign that he is judging or angry or suspicious. Steve looks down at the water bottle and twists the cap on. Then he loosens it and tightens it again. "He is," Steve says, looking up at Clint again. "He moved to Texas our senior year."

Clint's eyes flicker to Steve's hands, and his shoulders, and back to his face. "Crazy."

They look at each other's knees and ponder through the silence. It is uncomfortable.

"Clint," Steve says, finally. "You said … when we were up in the living room. You know, when we were watching that—the tackle?"

Clint nods slowly.

"You seemed to think I should know who James Barnes was. Is."

"I didn't know you went to high school with him."

"No, not like that," Steve agrees. He looks down at the water bottle again and fiddles with the lid. "Is he famous or something?"

"What?"

Steve looks up again. "Is … James Barnes a pretty well-known player?"

Clint reaches under his collar to scratch his neck. "Well, sort of. He's leading the country in tackles."

Steve can feel the air rush from his lungs, like a punch to the gut.

"He has a bunch of sacks and interceptions, too," Clint goes on. "He's one of the best players on the best team in the country, but he's not a skill player, you know? So, sort of well-known."
"Of course, of course. A flare goes off behind Steve's eyes. "How did you know he was from Texas?"

"It was in an article last week. Maybe two weeks ago." Clint shrugs.

In high school, Steve used to read the papers and clip out articles. He remembers fastening the good ones to his mother's refrigerator with magnets shaped like flowers. He remembers discussing statistics with Peggy Carter—God, he hasn't thought about her in months, at least—and he remembers Bucky begging them to talk about something other than football. ("Doesn't matter how good the other team's defense is, Steve. Just throw the ball where I can catch it.")

Then Steve came to American State, and he integrated into Nick Fury's system of tunnel vision. All that matters is the process and the work you do during the week. One opponent at a time, every opponent equal. The outside world can't affect you if you are prepared for that opponent, and, more importantly, the outside world isn't going to help you on game day.

Steve bought into it almost on the spot. It's a beautiful mentality. Brutal and efficient.

Plus, avoiding outside influences means Steve never has to read his own name in all those garbage headlines. So now, he keeps his nose out of the papers, like Fury instructed—like Bucky begged him to all those years ago. Figures that's where Bucky's been hiding all this time.

"The article was before they suspended him, obviously," Clint adds. "It was mostly about Alexander Pierce, but it mentioned James Barnes and some of the team, too."

"Anything interesting?" Steve asks, trying to keep his voice level.

"Said he was from Texas." Clint settles with his elbows on his knees. "He went to community college for two years before transferring to Southeast State. He, um." Clint pauses and scrubs his hair, making it stick up. "I guess he had some trouble with the police. It didn't say anything specific, just something about legal problems? But then Pierce recruited him. Straightened him out."

"Pierce always recruits assholes, he's worse than Urban Meyer," Steve says.

Clint laughs, and Steve realizes with a jolt what he just implied. "Was Barnes an asshole back in high school?"

"No," Steve says instantly. "God. Not at all."

"Wonder what he got into."

"… Everyone in the country thinks he's some kind of criminal now, don't they?"

"You know how the media is," Clint says gently. "They simplify everything. Everyone's either a sinner or a saint. It's all for drama. It's a great story, you know? America's Golden Boy leads his team into the villain's lair to fight for the throne."

Steve snorts. "You watch Lord of the Rings lately?" he asks, deflecting.

"I'm just saying," Clint says with a smile, "if you're the good guy, someone's got to be the bad guy." He jabs a thumb toward the ceiling. "You saw the replay on TV. I think all of America could pick that bad guy out of a line-up."

"One tackle, and everyone thinks he's bad. That's all it takes to make him a bad guy?"
"Isn't that usually how it goes?"

"He'd hate that," Steve says under his breath. Clint doesn't respond. Maybe he doesn't hear. "He'd hate that more than anything." A sharp, prickly sound echoes in the basement as Steve crumples the plastic bottle in his grip. "He was the best player on our team, back in the day."

Clint looks skeptical. His eyes flick to Steve's feet and back up. "Maybe second best."

"No," Steve says. He can see fleeting images: muddy fingernails and breath fogging the air and easy left-handed catches. "No, he was the best. I wouldn't have been any good without Bucky."

Steve can feel Clint's eyes boring into him. He wonders if Clint can see all the things Steve isn't saying out loud.

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**BCS Top 25 – Week 11**

1. Southeast State (10-0)
2. American State (10-0)
3. Auburn (11-0)
4. Boise State (9-0)
5. TCU (11-0)
6. LSU (9-1)
7. Wisconsin (9-1)
8. Stanford (9-1)
9. Lemurian (8-1)
10. Oregon (9-1)
11. Ohio State (9-1)
12. Nebraska (9-1)
13. Alabama (8-2)
14. Michigan State (9-1)
15. Arkansas (8-2)
16. Virginia Tech (8-2)
17. Leviathan (8-2)
18. Missouri (8-2)
19. Oklahoma (8-2)
20. South Carolina (7-3)
21. Texas A&M (7-3)
22. Nevada (9-1)
23. USC (7-3)
24. Trask (7-3)
25. Iowa (7-3)

Monday's practice starts out intensely, but unravels into a minor disaster before the sun sets. After several grueling drills and cardio exercises, they end the day by running through plays at half-speed.

The first time he drops back to pass, Steve is sacked. ("Sacked" in a practice-sense; the defensive linemen descend on him and then squeal on the brakes before actually tackling him.) Fury blows his whistle and yells and tells them to run it again. This time, a linebacker darts across Steve's vision, distracting him, so he doesn't bother looking downfield. He takes the safe option, dumping a short pass to a tight end near the sideline.

Fury makes a note of it on his clipboard and calls another play.
The next time Steve has to pass, he can't find a receiver. The defense is everywhere. He's forced to throw the ball away.

A minute later, Steve fumbles. He fumbles in the most embarrassing way, too. No outside force. Just as he's trying to hand the ball off, he loses his grip. Everything slipping through his fingers.

Shoulders slumped in resignation, he watches dejectedly while Luke runs past him for a defensive touchdown. In fact, he is so distracted by his teammate and by his own irritation, it takes him a few minutes to notice a small commotion near the middle of the practice field.

Several players huddle around a handful of trainers, who are crouched in a tight circle. They're gathered around an injured player, Steve realizes with a swift jolt.

Fear pounds in his gut as he jogs toward them. He pushes past several defensive linemen, but still can't see which player is lying on the ground. God, they can't lose anyone now, not with Southeast this weekend, not when they're all supposed to be indestructible. He imagines playing a football game without Danny Rand, without Johnny Storm or—shit—without Isaiah. Steve scans the crowd for their running back and doesn't see him.

His throat tightens. He starts to lose feeling in his collarbone. Growing desperate, he angles for a better look through the wall of bodies and almost trips over one.

"Sorry, I'm—who—I'm just—"

Isaiah grabs his elbow and holds it steady.

Gaping, Steve can't speak for a second. Eventually he manages, "You're okay."

"It's Sam," Isaiah says in reply.

Steve stops breathing. After several tense minutes, word spreads through the crowd. Back spasms. Apparently Sam suffers from them on a regular basis. Apparently they shouldn't be concerned. Apparently this isn't serious.

None of that comforts Steve while he watches three trainers carry his friend off the field toward the medical facilities.

ESPN produces specials on what must be half the team: a fifteen-minute segment on Clint Barton, the only active deaf player on an FBS roster; a tour of the football facilities with Luke Cage and Danny Rand; footage of Isaiah Bradley with a live microphone in practice; piles of interviews with the legendary Nick Fury; and, of course, a mini-documentary on Heisman Hopeful Steve Rogers.

It's humiliating, not just because it's like condensing his life into a bad Hollywood knock-off of Remember the Titans, but also because on their first day, the film crew catches Steve doodling in a team meeting. Just like that, they have a hook.

"Turns out quarterback Steve Rogers isn't just an artist on the football field."

It makes Steve want to burn up everything he's ever drawn in his life. Won't even be that hard; he's blushing so furiously, anything within a foot of his face is likely to spontaneously combust.

Luckily, the film crew doesn't spend too much time on Steve's sketching; just a few shots of him bent over a notebook in Monday's team meeting, a few close-ups of his absent-minded five-star general logos and a cartoonish eagle with a robe and a gavel. His art provides a framework for the
filmmakers. It's supposed to make Steve more personable and accessible, and endear him to viewers at home, especially those who think he's just some dumb jock. Like his doodles in the margins make him more human. Mass media always seems to confuse relatability with humanity.

At the end of the day, Steve sits down with an interviewer in a brightly-lit alcove and answers one-on-one questions (which are not actually one-on-one, once the camera crew are taken into account), microphone clipped to his shirt collar, trying not to say "um" too much.

"Do you have time to draw much in your spare time?" she asks.

"What spare time?" Steve asks with a friendly wink. They both laugh. "No, but really—I used to take art classes, back in high school, but I haven't done anything serious since."

"What are you studying now at American State?"

"Business."

"Smart man."

He leans in conspiratorially. "I draw all over those textbooks, too. Whoever buys them used after I've had them is gonna hate me."

They laugh again, mechanically. Then they spend almost an hour talking about football and Southeast State, compiling enough footage to pare down into a half-hour TV spot. At one point, the nice woman from ESPN asks him how he plans to break through the Southeast defense, and Steve lapses into a coughing fit.

"Sorry—could you repeat the question?"

She doesn't. She does him one better. "You seem to have lucked out, with James Barnes landing that suspension for the first half. How do you plan on taking advantage of that?"

Steve inhales deeply. His vision blurs on images of James Barnes trucking through a defenseless receiver. "That's not … well, not lucky. We're not lucky." He clears his throat and starts over. "Southeast State has a strong defense. I'm sure they have plenty of good players in their depth chart. We're going to approach this the same way we always do—study the defense, prepare ourselves, and go out there with confidence in our own abilities."

"Southeast State has the best defense you'll face all year."

"Sure," Steve agrees. "And we have a healthy respect for them. That all goes into our preparation. We control our own destiny."

So in the end, he handled things as smoothly as possible, even though he almost barfs in the restroom after escaping the interview.

Two days later, the half-hour segment on Steve Rogers airs on SportsCenter, and he makes a point of getting up and making himself a sandwich while his roommates laugh at him from the living room. He comes back to the room on a commercial break with his mouth full of barbecue Lay's.

"'We control our destiny'," Clint says dramatically, then dissolves into undignified giggles. Natasha smacks him out of propriety. Her smirk speaks volumes.

Eli is a little nicer about it, but his shoulders are shaking and Steve can tell he's forcing himself not to laugh. Jesus, even Isaiah smiles.
"I was just trying to play it safe," Steve protests. He eases onto the end of the couch.

"They're doing a Southeast segment after commercials," Isaiah warns him.

Steve's heart does a clumsy cartwheel. "Of course they are," he says with a weak laugh. He can feel his face heat up, and tries to hide it by rolling his eyes. Sure enough, four minutes later, SportsCenter returns, this time plastered with the Southeast State Tundra logo. Steve's mind starts to wash out. Half of the clips on screen include Bucky. If Steve's heart was doing cartwheels before, then at this point, it's tumbling wildly down a steep hill.

"… suspended for the first half of Saturday's game. Barnes, who is notoriously reclusive, hasn't made a public statement regarding last week's penalty."

Steve notices, belatedly, that he is gripping the arm of the couch so hard his hand aches. Isaiah glances down at Steve's white knuckles.

"I don't know about y'all," Isaiah announces, "but if I have to hear about their Russian running back one more time, I'm probably gonna jump out the window."

"We're on the first floor," Eli points out lazily.

Ignoring him, Isaiah leans over Steve to grab the remote and promptly mutes the television.

"You don't have to stop watching," Steve mumbles, "not just for my sake."

"Who said I wanted to watch?" Isaiah says. "Got my fill of Southeast State already this week. Ain't even played 'em yet."

"I'm with you. There's literally nothing else on good old ESPN-dot-com," Clint says, absently waving his smart phone. He sighs. "Everyone's calling it the Game of the Century,"

"First time the number one and number two teams ever faced each other in the regular season," Eli says, as if he's reciting from the million articles published over the course of the week.

"Here," Clint says, looking at his phone screen. "Here's a good one. It literally says, 'this week, the Captain leads his troops into the Frozen Wasteland …'"

Natasha rolls her eyes, but reaches out to angle the phone so she can see the screen better.

Steve pauses awkwardly, then asks, "Aren't you going to read it out loud?"

Clint, Natasha, and Eli all look at him at once. Silence. Then, "Um. Do you want me to?" Clint asks.

"Yeah," Steve says. Then, "I mean, is there anything good?" He stares Clint down, willing him to remember; channeling their conversation from the basement just days before.

Confused, Clint starts to skim through the article and stammer. "Um, something about Pierce running a tight ship. Maximoff says he's never felt healthier. Oh, it's, um, Winter Station got slammed last night. Ice storm. Blackouts all over town. Half the team is bunking up until their power comes back on."

Steve fidgets, and Natasha notices. She leans over Clint's shoulder. "Here," she says, her finger on the phone screen. "Barnes is suspended … yeah, we know that." She scrolls slowly. "Declined comment, we knew that too. Oh, hey." A half-smile touches one corner of her mouth and she catches Steve's eye. "They're calling him the Winter Soldier."
Steve blinks.

"Like Winter Station?" Eli says slowly.

"Better than Captain," Isaiah teases.

Steve sputters indignantly. "You're a captain too!"

"You don't see Captain Bradley plastered across the Tribune, though."

In the days leading up to the Game of the Century, Steve can't turn on the television without seeing a replay of The Hit.

The receiver, he finally learns, was Peter Parker, a smiley sophomore for Penn Central. American State hadn't played them this year, but they'd heard about Parker. He was supposed to set records. At least until the Winter Soldier traveled through like a low-pressure storm and knocked him out for the remainder of the season.

The one place Steve doesn't spend all his time doodling in the margins of notebooks? The film room. When he's watching film, he focuses. Maybe this week more than ever before. He spends an extra hour there on Thursday, hunched over at the far end of the front row. His teammates filter in and out of the seats behind him, but his focus remains fixed on the Southeast State defense. They favor a zone pattern. Bucky favors his left side.

"He's like a machine."

Steve glances up. Though the room is dark, Eli's eyes glint from two rows back, shining with the reflection of the film footage.

"Barnes, I mean," Eli explains. "He's a machine. Look. You can't get away from him."

It's true. James Barnes doesn't miss tackles; nothing, nothing, nothing gets by him.

"He's not a machine," Sam Wilson says softly. "He's a ghost."

Steve stares at the big screen. Watches Bucky drive a running back out of bounds for a six-yard loss. He's everywhere at once, on every play. It's superhuman.

Sam's voice slides through the dark. "You think he's on the other side of the field, and the next minute he's on top of you. He comes out of nowhere."

"Yeah," Steve whispers.

He should be focusing on defensive formations and play counts and offensive line schematics, but he can't concentrate. Always, every down, every second the Southeast defense is onscreen, Steve's eyes zero in on Bucky, like some magnetic force is at work. The rest of the film footage is a hurricane, flood waters, and it all swirls around Bucky, the eye, the sharp clarity of something Steve thought he would never see again.

In the end, he doesn't learn much about the Southeast State defense.

He learns other things. He learns that Bucky wears a black visor across his face mask, the kind that looks opaque and menacing and a little bit Sith Lord. His jersey number is 45. He plays every game with a gray sleeve and a massive black brace on his left arm, the kind that's supposed to provide
support for the elbow, or maybe protection. His hair is long; it peeks out from the bottom of his helmet.

He never takes his helmet off.

Steve finds himself loving and hating that black visor. He can never see Bucky's face, not once. It's horrible, knowing he's there and having no proof.

Steve tries to pretend it's not Bucky; he lets his eyes go a little out of focus and gets in the zone, tries to forget what he knows, tries to see any old linebacker prone to unbridled violence. He tries to imagine it impassively. Some kind of robot that produces beautiful, brutal tackles on the football field. But he can't.

Sure, the Winter Soldier is broader than the Bucky he remembers. He's thicker around the chest and he has settled into a low center of gravity. But the confidence, the surety of his gait, the scientific precision of his decisions. The way he rolls his shoulders one at a time after making a tackle. That's all Bucky, the Bucky he grew up with who smiled and joked and preferred playing wide receiver anyway. Steve can't un-see it.

In the end, Steve does learn one thing about the Southeast State defense. He learns that James Barnes is a force of nature. He is a savage, sacrificial storm and when they play him on Saturday, Steve will have his work cut out for him.

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Two hours. Winter Station is an easy two-hour drive from Simon, Illinois, depending on the route. Depending on traffic. Steve spends a lot of late nights wondering how bad the traffic would be. He wakes up with headaches.

Chapter End Notes

fun game: imagine this week from bucky's pov.
Ohio State and Michigan play The Game; Alabama and Auburn play the Iron Bowl; Texas and Oklahoma play the Red River Showdown. The Army-Navy game is legendary. The yearly matchup between Oregon and Oregon State has grown so vicious that they call it the Civil War.

The rivalry between American State and Southeast State has no name, but it burns as bright as any. It's become a source of pride, actually. Gimmick-free football, just two elite teams hitting each other until one falls down.

In a characteristic paradox, the media likes to refer them as the No-Name Rivals.

The 116 miles separating their campuses is among the shortest distances between Division I rivals. They've been playing each other every season for over a century—in fact, have not only playing each other, but have also been evenly matched. Southeast State leads the all-time series, with 53 wins to American State's 46.

It is not a friendly rivalry. Like the Iron Bowl and the Civil War, it is an annual fight to the death.

Steve has been to the Frozen Wasteland once before, two seasons ago. That was the year Johnny Storm dislocated and broke his ankle on a rough punt return. When training staff carted him off the field, the Winter Station crowd cheered. Steve likes to think the American State fans have more class than that, but he might be biased—there was, after all, that time ASU beat Southeast and photos of the Tundra quarterback crying went viral.

So it's fair to say the hatred is mutual.

The mere sight of black-and-scarlet uniforms makes bile rise in Steve's throat. Even now, when he sees Bucky in that uniform, anger sweeps through his muscles, there and gone like wind ripping tiles off a roof, urgent and vicious, leaving gaping holes behind.

After practice on Friday, the team travels to Winter Station. Steve wants to talk and not talk all at once. His mind is overflowing and he wants to unload it somehow but these aren't things you say. It's more melting clocks and no good reason for it. Not something you can define between goal posts.

As they load the bus, he looks up at the steel-gray sky and feels inexplicably trapped. It wouldn't be fair to unload his fears on his teammates, and anyway, they are all settling into a comfortable pre-game zone. The offensive linemen are hunched over a stack of playbooks, Clint is doing homework, and Isaiah is already snoring on his brother's shoulder. Steve takes an empty window seat and puts on noise-canceling headphones and smiles when Sam sits wordlessly at his side.

"How's your back?" he asks, pushing his headphones around his neck.

Sam makes a dismissive noise. "Hundred percent, Cap."

"You sure?" Steve wants to lay a hand on Sam's spine and feel for himself. But that would be weird.
"Definitely."

"You better be."

The corners of Sam's mouth twist. "You look like you could use a hug." Then he adds, more sincerely, "I'm good. I promise."

"Just don't hurt yourself," Steve says, trying to school his features into a neutral smile. "It's not worth it."

Sam leans over to peek at Steve's phone. "The Winter Soldier, huh?"

Steve huffs and locks his screen, as if he got caught looking at something inappropriate. "It's so weird."

"What is?"

"The nickname. He hates the cold," Steve says, shifting to cross his ankle over one knee. "Hated the cold," he amends.

"We got that in common," Sam says drily. He leans back and makes himself as comfortable as possible for the trip.

The bus drivers take a route around Chicago to avoid city traffic, which doesn't really shorten the drive, but does make it considerably more boring. They rumble into a small, modern hotel on the outskirts of Winter Station. They are careful not to travel into the heart of the city, in case any hometown fans discover them and vandalize the buses or worse.

Steve steps off the bus and shoves his hands in his pockets. A breeze slices under his collar, cold on top of cold. The winds off the lake show no mercy. Steve glances at the sky, the same gray they left in Illinois, and feels an acute sense of just how far the clouds go.

Steve binges on headlines the night before the game. Each one hits harder than the last, straight to the veins, makes him sick, and he can't stop.

**UNSTOPPABLE FORCE MEETS IMMOVABLE OBJECT**

**FURY IN THE FROZEN WASTELAND**

**CAN THE SOLDIER STOP THE GENERALS?**

**WINTER STATION BLACKS OUT ASU**

He skims the articles for signs of James Barnes or the Winter Soldier, but it's a fruitless effort. It's the same story over and over. Barnes penalized for targeting; Barnes forced to sit out the first half against American State; Barnes, the community college transfer turned Heisman hopeful. (Steve's eyes snag on that word, "Heisman," and his heart beats faster, and he pretends he never saw it.)

His cell phone screen glows in the hotel room well past midnight, but he doesn't feel too bad. Eli isn't sleeping, either, or else he'd be snoring by now.

Steve Rogers and Eli Bradley have been away-game roommates since their freshman season. At the time, they had little in common and were technically competing with one another for the starting quarterback job. They eventually bonded over long discussions about Steve's Tommy John surgery. As an athletic training student, Eli found the process fascinating, especially the physical therapy.
Tonight, though, they sit silently in their hotel room, ignoring the pale blue flash of the TV screen, and ignoring the fact that they are both awake.

Steve considers texting Isaiah. It wouldn't be the first time they kept each other up the night before a game. Typically, Isaiah sleeps even worse than Steve. But, again, what would he say?

It's like high school all over again, when Steve felt the gameday anxiety through to the pores of his bones, saturated with it until he could drown, and would keep Bucky up until sunrise just so he wouldn't run out of oxygen.

Steve has played in Winter Station before.

It presents itself as any other Midwestern town, tans and browns and fogs bled together in a bland watercolor. It is very Eliot, with its handfuls of dust, its heaps of broken images—although April is probably no crueler than any other month, here. Steve remembers the ice storm that hit just days earlier, and he sees its remnants, how it slicked the city in gray and half-melted snow. The campus buildings squat in boxy red brick across the prairie, rooted to the hills or vice versa. Other than the student union's bell tower, there is little to catch the eye.

Except for the football stadium.

The Frozen Wasteland is a gothic fortress risen from the frost-molded tundra. It looms over the city in pale concrete blocks and red-brick inlay. A gilded stone lancet archway soars over the south entrance, overlooking a vast brick walkway, along which stand nine bronze statues of players with no faces. No eyes to watch you, but it still pulls all your veins right to the skin.

Each statue represents a Southeast State national championship—the entire team, not an individual—featureless, numberless, no signifying marks except a plain placard denoting the year of the championship victory.

One player is every player, past and present, nothing more than a gear in the machine.

It's a morbid philosophy, but it gets the job done.

In the morning, the buses drop them off under the archway, abandon the American State Generals to that garden of bronze sentinels, both faceless and many-faced. Honestly, playing Southeast is twelve labors in one. Hydra has many heads; Geryon has many bodies.

As he passes the statue labeled "1957", Steve slows down and gazes at the blank face behind its carefully sculpted facemask. It makes him think of James Barnes and the blank black visor he wears during games. The air catches in Steve's lungs, and he tears his eyes away to look forward. He crosses the threshold of the fifty-foot archway beside Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley.

The Southeast State visitors' facility is little more than a series of cinderblock rooms with threadbare black carpet, worn down to muted gray and tattered at the seams. The locker room has pegs on the walls for each player's equipment and metal folding chairs that have probably been around since that '57 championship. The bathroom stalls have no doors, and some public high schools could probably boast cleaner showers.

Steve also suspects that it has no central heat. Deep within the bowels of the stadium, they are protected from the outside elements and, most importantly, the icy lake winds, but the walls and floors maintain a residual cold that seems infused in the structure.

It's not unusual for visitors' facilities to be unwelcoming. Part of the game. Steve has been in a locker
room with no benches, before, and distinctly remembers one that was painted pastel pink from floor to ceiling. He wonders what the visitors' wing is like at American State. He's never thought about it before. He wonders if Bucky has been there. Was he with Southeast last year? If so, did he travel with the team?

He's so lost in thought that he catches himself sticking his arm through the wrong sleeve of his wool-lined Under armour. His head is crackling with electricity or noise or something brighter.

A soft radio tinkling from the medical facilities down the hall; the murmur of indefinably angry voices; the clatter of equipment. A fluorescent light flickers and buzzes in the corner of Steve's vision. To his right, Bill Foster squeezes into his shoulder pads, which make him even more giant than usual. To his left, a trainer is checking the knee braces on an offensive lineman for stability. All of the linemen wear splints on their knees, some as preventative support, some because they have already experienced serious injuries. The kind no brace can really fix, but here we are.

While he waits, Steve adjusts his pads and sprays Right-Guard on his feet. It's a trick he learned when he came to college, and honestly wished he'd known about it in high school, for those late-season cold-weather games in upstate New York. Anti-persperant doesn't just prevent odor—it prevents your body from losing moisture, and therefore losing body heat. Dry feet are warm feet.

The trainer turns to Steve. "Your turn."

Steve settles into a metal folding chair and props one foot in the trainer's lap. He tapes both ankles on gamedays, just for the extra stability. It has become a comfortable pre-game ritual, allowing a trainer to wrap his ankles in gauze and athletic tape while his mind zeroes in on strategy and offensive play-call.

He takes a deep, centering breath. His eyes flick over the trainer's shoulder and land on a photograph—an eight-by-ten printout of a Southeast player. Number 45. The déjà vu is like a stab-wound. He can't see Bucky's face. Or he can, he can see Bucky's face; he could see Bucky's face blindfolded and brainwashed; but technically, Bucky's face isn't in the photo.

Steve can see him clearly, now, though, the blade driven clean through. Bucky's tongue darting out to lick his lips while he winds a bandage around Steve's arm. Blue eyes peeking through long dark lashes. Not just blue, something unique, the gray-blue of water under thick layers of ice.

"You okay?"

Steve sucks in a frantic breath, as if he had just broken through the ocean surface for air.

"You look a little pale. You need to visit Hank or anything?"

"No," Steve whispers. He doesn't need to see the team doctor. The opposite. He needs someone to bash his head into the wall so he won't have to think anymore. He'd be much better at football, then. "I'm fine," is all he says out loud.

Crowds of trainers, noisy conversations, faint music and the rip of athletic tape cloud the locker room. Suddenly it all feels stifling, like smoke, a humidity you could choke on. As soon as the trainer finishes with his ankles, Steve surges to his feet, looking for escape.

"We're taking the field in ten—" the trainer says urgently, but Steve is across the room in three strides. He ducks into the restroom. It is nearly empty. Right—ten minutes until the tunnel.

Steve steps up to a mirror. He's fully dressed, except for his helmet, and his cleats echo on the tile floor, brrrat, brrrat.
Less than ten minutes, and they'll be out on the field.

Steve splashes water on his face. When he turns the faucet off, he can hear someone puking in one of the back stalls. A toilet flushes and Isaiah appears in the mirror. Steve watches his reflection as he approaches the sink, rinses out his mouth, and unties his hair. His dreadlocks spill across his shoulder pads.

"Ready?" Steve asks.

Isaiah stretches his jaw until it cracks. "Never am."

The Frozen Wasteland isn't much of a wasteland when they line up to take the field. It is overflowing with Southeast fans, all decked out in black, seething with noise and energy. Twelfth man intimidation tactic. The very foundation of the stadium shudders under the weight and the volume—the god-awful volume—of the crowd. They are like a nation's entire armed forces, all gathered in one place, all raising their voices in a unified weapon of mass destruction.

The thunder says, go home. The thunder says, go back to your real city and your sunsoaked sycamore.

Nick Fury stands under the tunnel entrance, at the head of the American State Generals, a lonely tree in a storm. Their white helmets gush behind him, rolling and frothing like river rapids all the way down the hall.

Steve stands just behind Fury's right hand, flanked by Sam Wilson.

Sam cranes his neck to get a better look outside, and Steve remembers with a jolt that Sam has never been to Winter Station before. It's hard to get a look at the field from here, facing straight into the bright, cold light of late afternoon. "Why they got a net over the tunnel?" Sam shouts into Steve's ear.

"The fans used to throw garbage at us when we took the field."

Sam gapes at him, eyes round. "Like … trash?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "Leftover food, wrappers, stuff like that. Technically they're not supposed to have alcohol, but sometimes there used to be beer bottles."

If anything, Sam's eyes get bigger.

They put up the nets in a half-hearted effort to protect visiting teams, but in all honesty, this is probably worse. Now, the fans dump water and other drinks over their heads. It trickles under their collars and freezes on the backs of their necks and causes more problems than half a hot dog ever could.

While their team lies in wait underground, the rioting fans harmonize into one unified cadence. The words aren't clearly discernible, but the band is probably leading the crowd in organized cheers. Maybe the fight song. At one point, half the stadium takes up one word, while the other half completes the phrase, an unintelligible roar splitting Steve's ears, splitting the earth itself in half.

After a final fanfare from the marching band, the loudspeaker announces their name and Coach Fury leads them through the tunnel. He starts at a walk before accelerating to a comfortable jog.

The crowd boos, and the stadium shakes with their hostility. The sound rings in Steve's ears as they announce the starting line-up over the loudspeaker. More booing. A deep, nasty roar for Steve
Rogers, in particular. He grits his teeth.

After brief announcements, both teams prepare for the coin-toss. Steve lines up with his fellow team captains. In his head, an image flashes of high school football players holding hands. His vision blurs in blacks and grays, and his arm feels stiff. The cold is tangible, out here, as if the wind were a solid object. It wraps around Steve's wrists, his waist, his throat. Tries to throw him to the ground.

The walk to the center of the field lasts years, maybe decades. Like he has to wade through two feet of snow for every step. The world shrinks down to the fifty yard line, where Steve Rogers, Isaiah Bradley, Luke Cage, and Danny Rand come to a halt and face the Southeast State captains. Steve's eyes travel from the turf to the number 45, and finally come to focus on Bucky Barnes' face.

His face.

He is wearing a helmet, but no visor.

Steve can see Bucky's face.

For real, now, and talk about stab-wounds.

The wind and the stinging white noise of the stadium swirl in his ears. The air leaves his chest, a hammerstroke against his ribcage, real physical pain, and a puff of fog obscures his vision before disappearing on the arctic breeze. Numbness takes root in his fingers, like a thin-leafed vine, creeping up into his wrists.

It's the face he remembers, of course. He could never forget Bucky's face, not entirely, though the face bearing down on him now doesn't precisely match Steve's memory. It's older, with sharper corners, different in its shading but drawn by the same artist. The same, the Bucky he knows like the back of his hand.

Knew like the back of his hand.

It's like waking to a douse of ice water.

Bucky's eyes are just as Steve remembered, the pale strip of sky that hangs over the horizon; the frame of unreal eyelashes. Steve thought he had romanticized the blue, had imagined the blue, but here they are, diamonds and smoke. Looking right out at him from the shadows.

A sharp elbow jabs Steve in the ribs, and he looks around wildly. Isaiah is glaring at him.

"You gonna call the damn toss?" he hisses.

Fuck.

The referee watches them expectantly. Steve's eyes flick back to Bucky, whose expression remains still, dark. Crunched steel. He blinks heavily. Steve swallows and looks back at the referee.

"This side is heads," the referee says, showing both teams the respective logo; "and tails," he adds, flipping the coin over so they can see. So they can see. That's funny. Steve can't see anything. A storm thunders behind his eyes.

The referee nods at Steve. "Call it in the air."

He tosses the coin and it tumbles, end over end, reaches the top of its arc and starts to descend.

"—Heads," Steve croaks, just before it hits the ground.
"Southeast State wins the toss," the referee announces. He looks at James Barnes, who doesn't speak, doesn't even move, just glowers at him from hooded eyes. "Would you like to kick or receive?" the ref prompts.

Barnes blinks at him, stone faced. The player beside him speaks up in a sharp voice. "We defer."

That's normal. They would rather kick off the ball now, let American State have the first possession, and then receive the kick-off after halftime. It's a common strategy. In case anything tragic befalls the team in the first half, they can guarantee themselves a fresh start by deferring their kick-off to the third quarter.

The referee turns to Steve and asks which direction they would like to kick. Silently, he points to the north end zone. The wind will be at their backs in the fourth quarter. A small victory.

"Good luck to both teams," the referee says, just like the booklet he learned it all from. "Let's have a good, clean game, boys."

The Southeast State captains do an about-face and march back to their sideline without shaking hands.
The Game of the Century

The official temperature at kick-off is 16 degrees Fahrenheit. Accounting for wind chill, it feels like single digits. There's no escaping the cold—it is relentless, and it burns and burns until there's nothing left to feel.

The American State players layer up with fleece turtlenecks, wool-lined Underarmour, and thermal socks. In a non-traditional move, Sam Wilson wears a hooded sweatshirt under his uniform. The hood drapes over his pads and covers up the name on the back of his jersey but his teeth still won't stop chattering. Clint and Eli and the other players who spend a lot of time on the sideline hunker down in full-length, thermal-regulating wind-breakers, huddled around space heaters running full-blast. Astoundingly, Luke Cage is in his shirtsleeves—just looking at him, you'd think it was mid-July—but then again, Luke is practically indestructible.

Steve sticks both hands in the muff around his waist and clutches the pair of hand-warmers stashed there. He hates playing with gloves, especially on his throwing hand, but going without means his fingers go numb every thirty seconds or so.

How horrible it must be to come to games like this as a spectator. It's the only respectable thing about Southeast State fans, Steve thinks. At least they're dedicated. And, apparently, immune to frostbite.

The turf is frozen under their feet. Their cleats have nothing to sink into, just crunch over the frost-coated grass. Steve can already imagine how it will feel when he gets tackled for the first time. In his mind, he pictures wrecking balls and concrete walls.

"It's like gettin' thrown in front of a bus," says Miles, after returning the kick-off for a paltry six yards.

"It's like falling on the asphalt in a game of two-on-two," says Isaiah, after getting tackled for a short gain the first time they run a play.

"It's like getting caught in a dark alley in the hood," says Sam Wilson, after a Southeast linebacker hurls him out-of-bounds.

On third down, Steve learns for himself just how hard the ground is. They still need six yards for a first down, which calls for a passing play. As soon as he hikes the ball, though, he's under pressure; the linemen move stiffly in the cold and Southeast crumples the pocket in seconds. A linebacker finds an opening, and Steve barely has time to wrap both hands around the ball before crashing to the earth. No; earth would be more forgiving; this is solid ice. He can feel a dangerous crunch in his left shoulder when he slams into the ground, and says a silent thanks that it wasn't his throwing arm.

Three plays, and American State only traveled four yards. A starving artist could find better profit.

And that's about how the football game goes, instantly spiraling into a defensive showdown. They trade punts for the first six possessions, stumbling through passing routes, dropping passes between numb fingers, turning sluggishly and getting up slow from the concrete-cold turf. Waiting for the ice to crack.

Steve can practically hear the color-commentators in his head. What they must be saying about this poor excuse for a football game. "Fury and Rogers totally fail to take advantage of Barnes' absence …"

Steve glances at the Southeast sideline, and of course he can't see Bucky there, if he is even there. It's
all one seething shadow of black uniforms. But he can imagine James Barnes and his arctic stare and the fog rising from his facemask. Maybe he remains still, a statue, lying in wait; or maybe he paces the sideline like a caged animal.

Isaiah catches him staring and gives him a shove—friendly, but not without some force. "Eyes forward, Cap," he says. "Don't let him mess with your head, man."

On the next play, Johnny Storm peels away from a defender, the crowd gives an anxious roar, and Steve misses the pass by a mile.

The worst part is that none of his teammates blame him. *It's the cold*, they say; *I can't feel my fingers either*. Steve knows better. The only person brave enough to call Steve out simply won't: Isaiah keeps a watchful eye on him, but says nothing.

"This is f-fucking bullshit," Sam hisses, teeth chattering. The end of the first quarter is rushing to meet them, and neither team has scored, or indeed, even passed the fifty-yard-line. "Sitting around hoping the other team fucks up first."

"I know," Steve says. "It's time to do something about it."

Luke and Danny get their job done, Southeast State punts the ball, and then it's Steve's turn again. One minute left in the quarter.

He inhales slowly, forcing his lungs to expand and shed their layer of frost. He taps into the hurricane, the wind in his veins, the churning in his ears, and tries to pinpoint the space of calm in the center.

On the first play, he finds Sam Wilson near the sideline for five yards.

On the second play, he dumps a pass to Isaiah, who is promptly tackled before he can get a first down.

On the third play, Steve drops back to pass, takes one look at the swarming Tundra defense, tucks the ball into the crook of his elbow, and plunges forward all on his own. He weaves between linemen and sidesteps a big linebacker. He can see the first down marker out of the corner of his eye and he will not be denied. A defensive back charges forward, filling Steve's line of vision, so he does the only thing he can do: he lowers his shoulder and drives into the defender with all his strength. They go down together, a tangle of numb limbs and curse-words.

Isaiah's hand appears and he hauls Steve to his feet. They both look at the referee. He waves one arm emphatically.

First down.

It injects them with the fire they so desperately needed, and they hold onto that flame, shelter it from the wind with hugging and shouting and more completed passes. They drive downfield in short bursts, an inexorable charge.

They cross the fifty yard line, and the Southeast crowd unleashes a new hail of boos.

The Southeast defense gets dirty. Their nasty defensive end, Creed, starts poking fingers through facemasks to gouge their eyes. Striklan lays a nasty hit on Johnny Storm, late and out-of-bounds, and earns himself a fifteen-yard penalty. Those fifteen yards turn into American State's greatest blessing. It pushes them into easy field goal range. With danger so close at hand, the Southeast defense kicks into overdrive, and Steve is forced to throw the ball out of bounds three times in a row—but now,
they don't have to punt.

The field goal unit takes the field. Clint Barton doesn't look very imposing in his mismatched shoes, fleece-lined turtleneck, and a fat ski-mask under his helmet. But he nails the kick, and the crowd goes dead silent, and the first quarter comes to a close with American State in the lead, 3-0.

The second quarter shows even more promise. Steve wears his fingers to the bone, but he can't feel them through the cold, so what's the difference, anyway? Though he is hoarse and breathless and his elbows and knees creak with every step, he steers the team downfield again and again, battling against the current, finding the tiniest dents to chip away at the Southeast defense. It's not so bad, he figures, easy as dodging cyclones, easy as swerving between brick-sized hailstones.

Halftime looms, and the score hasn't changed. Clint grows restless on the sideline, swearing at anything that moves and taking practice kicks into a net until he gets too cold and has to hunch over a space heater once again.

Between Steve and Sam Wilson, they find a way across the fifty with some time to spare. He glances up at the pocket of fans closest to them. Black shirts, black scarves, black parkas, waving black towels and black flags with the Tundra logo—the skull of an elk with wicked, curved antlers. A banner stretches across the front row and reads, "THE BONEYARD." This must be the student section. The middle fingers and the bad costumes are also a clue.

Steve pushes for another first down, and hell, if only he could catch their faces on camera. God but he loves breaking the other teams' hearts.

Doesn't get the touchdown, though. They settle for a field goal again and for a blissful moment, they're happy about it, about everything.

Then Southeast drives for a field goal of their own. The momentum swings their way just as the clock hits zero, and the crowd goes nuts, the roller coaster hits that pinnacle of stillness at the top of the hill, and all they can do is wait for halftime to end, and for the downhill battle to begin.

American State could be happy. They have the lead, after all—not a big lead, but it counts. Three points is something. They could be comfortable.

But after halftime, Southeast State will get the first possession. And after halftime, American State might not get another chance to score. After halftime, James Barnes will be back.

The stadium is full of hand-made signs. Some of them are clever, relatively speaking. They say things like "STEVE ROGERS PUNTS IN MADDEN," or "NICK FURY'S PAYROLL IS HIGHER THAN THE CUBS," or "FURY FAILED ANGER MANAGEMENT," or the wordy, "WHY DOESN'T ASU HAVE ITS OWN WEBSITE? THEY CAN'T STRING TOGETHER 3 W'S," a sarcastic reference to Southeast's current 2-game win streak against American State.

Some don't try as hard. One sign bears an acronym for CBS, the station airing the game: "CAN'T BEAT SOUTHEAST." A less tactful fan proclaims that "ASU FANS WOULD HATE THIS SIGN BUT THEY CAN'T READ IT."

A small pocket of visiting ASU fans tries its best not to get swallowed by the home team crowd. (One of their signs declares that "COLD DOESN'T BOTHER ICE," with Isaiah's number bolded in the corner.)

Normally, Steve would not allow the crowd to distract him, but he finds their oppressive hostility to be a welcome and familiar presence. It keeps his mind occupied, and keeps his eyes from drifting to
the Southeast sideline. As they warm up for the second half, he vehemently ignores the black jerseys, and it works for awhile; his heart beats steadily, if only for a few minutes. Then he sees a tight-knit group in the stands who are clearly Barnes fans, all dressed in 45 jerseys and black camo and waving signs that read "WINTER'S CHILDREN" and "EVEN THE GENERALS CAN'T BEAT OUR SOLDIER."

Steve bends over to catch his breath. He just wants to play football, for crying out loud.

It becomes more bearable by the time the game resumes. The crowd bleeds into the background and the world zooms in on the frostbitten turf, the fog in the trenches, the hoarse shouting over winter winds, the numbers and cleat marks and stitches and bruises.

The Maximoff kid is no joke.

When ASU kicks off the third quarter, he almost slips through their special teams. If it weren't for a well-timed grab at his shoelaces by Danny Rand, Southeast would probably be up a touchdown in the first ten seconds of play.

Their heavy reliance on the running game proves helpful to Southeast in the long run. It's hard to keep up any passing threat, what with the numb hands and howling winds. On the other hand, a fast running back like Maximoff can chip away, yard by yard, first down by first down. At one point, Tony Stark has to call a time out and knock some sense into his defensive linemen. It works. On the next three downs, they chew up Maximoff for a fifteen-yard loss total, and American finally gets the ball back on offense.

For whatever good it does them.

Steve calls in the play as always, breaks the huddle as always, settles behind the line of scrimmage as always, and looks up to evaluate the defense as always. Only today, his vision zeroes in on James Barnes.

When Barnes takes the field, Southeast is like a whole new team.

*Without* Barnes, the Southeast defense works like well-trained battalion, a fleet of fighter jets, cold and steely and sleek, with devastating efficiency. They cover every possible opening and swarm to the ball in mere seconds.

*With* Barnes, they are weaponized. Facing Southeast is like facing an army; facing James Barnes is like facing the barrel of a loaded gun.

He takes up all of Steve's attention, immediately and unswervingly. He prowls the secondary, huge and menacing. God, they're twice as big with him on the field. You can hear it, the bright thrill of his presence, the loud silence of midnight sliced by cicadas and an overheated street lamp.

Steve promptly fumbles his first snap of the second half. And if that doesn't set the tone.

The next time he drops back to pass, all he sees is Bucky. Or James Barnes. Anyway the point is his receivers are all covered and his mind is all jumbled and he has to throw the ball away, and by this point even Isaiah Bradley can't dig them out of Steve's deep, dark hole.

 Appropriately, Isaiah is the one who calls him out—finally—when they return to the sideline.

"He's messing with your head, man!" he hisses, crowding into Steve until he almost trips backward over a space heater.
"No he's not!"

"Then pull it out of your ass, because we got a game to win!"

Steve tries; God, he tries. But the game has devolved into a showdown between defenses, in particular their ability to crush running backs. It's a challenge that both Bradley and Maximoff are more than willing to take. They do their best, but it's as if the cold saps the life out of the offense. For both teams. They both struggle to move the ball downfield—past their own twenty, let alone past the fifty-yard line into enemy territory.

For example, on their next possession, American State begins on their own two-yard line. Their own end zone is like a cement wall behind them. On first down, Isaiah rumbles forward for three yards; on second down, another yard and a half. They are trapped.

That's when Coach Banner calls in a passing play. Steve's heart pumps in his throat. He can hardly swallow, all too aware of the end zone looming at his back.

They line up for the play, and Steve assesses the defense, which means he stares at James Barnes for a split-second too long, eyes watering in the sub-zero winds. All of the Southeast defense looks angry, but Bucky looks like nothing at all. He settles into his stance with fluid ease. Compact. Vicious.

Don Juan was killed by a statue. Steve remembers that from an advanced literature course. But Don Juan wasn't much of a hero, to begin with.

He hikes the ball before he can completely lose his mind, and the black jerseys are everywhere all at once. Without a second thought, Steve dumps an inelegant screen pass to Sam Wilson near the line of scrimmage.

As soon as he launches the pass, he wants to grab it back. It's not a bad throw—a little wobbly, but that's to be expected with numb hands—but a screen pass on your own five is lunacy. The Southeast defense sees it coming a mile away.

Sam catches it cleanly, but it's no use, James Barnes is there, a careening steam engine with no brakes and nothing to lose. He flattens Sam, who goes down hard and motionless and flat on his back in their own end zone.

Briefly, chaos. The referees give the hand signal for a safety, awarding Southeast two points. The Frozen Wasteland erupts, a volcano, deafening and bright.

Steve only has eyes for Sam. He skids to his side, panting, as if he was the one who just got the wind knocked out of him by a two-hundred-pound linebacker.

"I'm so sorry," Steve says, breathless. "Are you okay?"

Sam is already pushing himself into a seated position. He wraps one arm around his torso, and reaches out with the other toward Steve. He groans as Steve pulls him to his feet.

"I'm good," he says with a wince. "They hit hard, damn." He blinks a few times and glances around at the grass, painted black with red lettering; then he looks up as American State’s special teams take the field, and his face falls. "Sorry about the safety, Cap."

"Shut up," Steve says, leading Sam toward the sideline. "It was my fault, that was a stupid throw to begin with."
"Next time."

As they reach the sideline, athletic trainers swarm like flies. They form a cloud around Sam Wilson, guide him toward their equipment, and get him situated on a table for inspection.

With easy, practiced motions, the trainers push Sam's jersey up around his armpits to get a better look at his chest. He's already shivering, eyes red and lips trembling in the cold.

"Will someone get a heater over here?" Steve demands, and three separate people scurry off to do his bidding.

He wishes he could help. His hands feel so empty, his brain feels so empty, useless, roots torn up out of the earth. All he can do is watch as the trainers and doctors inspect his best receiver, his friend. They check his ribs, where he took the hit, of course; but they also check his back, and as they probe the lower regions of his spine, Sam stiffens and grunts.

_Dammit._ Steve wonders if he's imagining the sudden ache in his surgically-repaired elbow.

"Rogers!" Coaches and teammates are bellowing at him from the sideline. _"Rogers, will you get over here and do your job?"

Their offense is already set to take the field again. How long has it been? How long has Steve been standing here like a waste of space? Obviously the American State defense is doing their job, why can't Steve get his act together? It's a joke.

Without Sam Wilson, they're even less effective than before. Steve can't get the ball to anyone. Isaiah does his best, he is a dog in a fight, but as the third quarter drags on, his strength begins to wane.

American punts, and then Southeast punts, and then American punts, and on and on, and the crowd seethes, the Southeast defense fights, and the American defense answers, until they are all one roiling ocean, black waves and white foam battering the coastline as thunder booms in the background.

They enter the fourth quarter with the score unchanged. American State 6, Southeast State 5. It's ridiculous. Some teams score ten times that many points in the same span. Once a mountain range has formed, there is very little that can make it move.

Steve trades out for new, fresh hand-warmers. The chemicals break down after a couple hours, and he's already gone through a dozen today. Likewise, his heated insoles are also losing potency, if the numbness in his toes is any indication. He and Sam and Isaiah stand shoulder-to-shoulder on the sideline, rubbing warmth into each others' hands one at a time.

"You sure you're good to go back in?" Steve asks, side-eyeing Sam Wilson and wary of the answer.

"F-fuck, you couldn't k-keep me off the field, man."

That's what Steve was afraid of.

"You don't need to kill yourself, you know."

"Listen, Cap," Sam says solemnly, "My back's been tore up s-since I was twelve years old. Doc gave me a sh-shot for the pain. Trust me. I'm good to g-go."

"But—"

"Shut up, Steve." Isaiah finally speaks up, his voice craggy. Weather-worn granite. He doesn't look
up from Steve's hand, where it is pressed between his own, but somehow, there is no way to argue with him. "Just shut up."

Steve looks up at the sky while Isaiah coaxes the blood back into his fingers. The clouds have melted from steel into tarnished silver. The sun must be setting, somewhere beyond the bloated gray hung heavy overhead. It's against the rules in the Northern Athletic Conference to play night games after September, a precaution against the frigid Great Lakes temperatures where most of its schools live. Kick-off was at 3:30 in the afternoon, but the sun sets early these days, and this game has slogged on, slow and bitter.

The fourth quarter is no different. No one scores for the first ten minutes. American State nurses a tenuous one-point lead as long as they possibly can. It doesn't feel like a lead, though; it feels as if they are hanging on by their fingertips in a hurricane.

The team is finally suffering the effects of the cold, too. Steve can feel his blood pumping slow; he can feel his muscles seizing up from top to bottom. Sam Wilson and Johnny Storm drop more passes than before. Isaiah trips up short of a first down over and over and over and Southeast eats them up. They are unaffected. Across the line of scrimmage, Barnes is iron ore, shrill and piercing, metal gleaming as bright as it did at kick-off. He's like an assault rifle. His offense takes the field, and he leaves to reload; and every time, he returns as bloodthirsty as before.

The fourth quarter is a battle of wills. Southeast takes two steps forward for each of ASU's. Isaiah coughs up bile, and Sam gets a new brace to wrap around his waist.

They're falling apart. Supposedly this is winning.

It isn't often that Steve takes a truly hard hit from a defender. He works with one of the biggest, most rigid offensive lines in the country. They are a barricade. They keep him from the worst of everything. Besides that, he's decent at avoiding tackles, or at least the brunt of them; even when he gets taken down, it tends to be a glancing blow.

But James Barnes is good.

Steve remembers the film room, and he remembers watching Barnes at work, and he remembers, amidst the vicious fury, seeing telltale signs of the Bucky he once knew.

Not only is Barnes vicious; he is also silent. His hits come out of nowhere.

Steve tries, throughout the game, to avoid him. Barnes takes the strong side, so Steve throws left; Barnes covers Sam, so Steve targets Johnny Storm; Barnes dives in for a blitz, so Steve rolls out of the pocket and throws it away.

He does this all afternoon. By the fourth quarter, Sam Wilson has lost patience.

"Where the fuck you throwin' the ball?!!" he roars, advancing on Steve in between passing plays. "I can get open. They're movin' slow, man. But you gotta find me out there, don't leave me hanging no more."

Steve doesn't want to put Sam in danger again, not for no reason; they're winning for fuck's sake, if they just play it safe they can walk away with this. "You're hurt!" he argues, desperately.

"I'm fuckin' mad is what I am, Rogers! Throw me the fuckin' football!!"

They look into each others' eyes for a long moment, a silent war playing out between them.
"I'll be open," Sam insists, his voice dark.

"... I'll find you," Steve replies.

When Steve hikes the ball, nothing seems amiss. He fakes the handoff to Isaiah before settling into the pocket. His deep option, Johnny Storm, is well covered by a defensive back. The safeties lie in wait downfield. Sam Wilson cuts across the middle, but his route leads him straight into a throng of linebackers. Steve exhales, forcing his heart rate down.

None of his receivers are open.

Sam said he would get open, just give him time.

Time, time, the one thing Steve doesn't have. The offensive line is cracking.

Steve ducks to his right to avoid a massive defensive end; stutter-steps; hopes for some kind of decent option to present itself. It doesn't, of course. His receivers are good, but so is Southeast State. And suddenly a linebacker fills his vision.

Steve skids to a halt, staring down his opponent, the sharp gaze, the looming shoulders, the jersey number. Forty-five.

His only thought is to run.

He turns his back to the defender—45, Barnes, because of course it is, it's Barnes bearing down on him like a bird of prey.

So much for touchdown passes, so much for finding Sam Wilson, at this point.

He can't get away from Bucky.

He feels the impact and knows he's about to be sacked and hates himself for it. All he can do is hold onto the football. He does; he hugs it close as James Barnes knocks him to the turf, a speeding Peterbilt thundering in, steamrolling him, and that's all Steve remembers before a blinding pain flashes behind his eyes.

For a second, he can't see. Either the world is spinning from the tackle, or Steve has blacked out in pain.

He loses track of his body parts, all at once, like a power surge in his spine throwing everything into darkness. He remembers little for several minutes. Or maybe seconds, or maybe hours. Time spins meaninglessly, and he comes back to himself by atoms and nerves. His hands, still loosely gripping the football. His heart, pounding somewhere between his sternum and his tonsils. His eyelids, aching as they flutter open. Everything aches. Everything is painful; of that, Steve is sure.

He is flat on his back. He would have no way of knowing it, except the bright fuzz of stadium lights frames his vision, and everything else looks like slate. So he must be flat on his back. And he feels as if his body is imprinted in the grass. Hands drum over him, patting him down, scrabbling around the football, and he protests, though he isn't sure what he is saying, or if he speaks out loud at all. I didn't fumble, is all he can think. Stop trying to steal it.

Several pairs of feet swirl in and out of his vision, and he hears yelling. They probably think he has a head injury.

Does he have a head injury?
He takes a breath to talk to someone, to tell them something, anything—and that is when his world caves in.

When Steve inhales, he can’t inhale; he feels a stabbing pain in his side, as though someone twisted a serrated knife between his ribs. It’s like that shortness of breath you feel when lowering your body into an ice-bath, hyperventilating, as though there are no lungs there to fill, and every breath hitches in your chest.

A knot tightens around his lungs every time he tries to use them. He panics and struggles even more to breathe.

Voices shout overhead. Someone grasps his hand tightly, comforting, clutching his fingers together in an attempt to keep him calm.

He can’t breathe. He can barely see.

He slowly grows more aware of his surroundings, and more desperate to communicate all the things he can’t communicate. He is near the Southeast State sideline, his vision saturated with the opponent’s black and red, and he wishes a little sadly that he could see a friend or teammate.

When he tries to move, the knife between his ribs sinks deeper, so he resigns to lying still, stamped into the ground. With a final squeeze the hand holding him steady vanishes, and Steve whimpers at the loss, flapping his open hand in the cold wind. More hands come to replace it. More hands across parts of his body, asking him where it hurts. Steve takes several rapid, short breaths around contracted lungs, but can’t formulate words. He gasps.

He is surrounded by trainers—khaki pants kneeling beside him, cleats pounding the grass in the background. They prod him for signs of injury, focusing around his chest and neck and shoulders.

Finally, Steve stammers, "I—can’t—breathe."

Someone pries the football from his hands, and Steve objects. Everyone assures him that it's alright. It's not alright.

He can’t see.

He didn’t fumble.

He’s not going to fumble now, give it back, he can’t breathe, they are winning. They are winning.

"Just relax."

"Stay calm for us, son."

"Can't find any spinal damage."

"We're moving you real slow, now, Steve."

"Relax."

"Relax."

"Relax."

With his right arm, the one flailing uselessly in the air, Steve clings to his side. Maybe he can hold
himself together long enough to win a football game.

A high, piteous whine escapes the back of his throat without his permission. He fights for every short, halting breath. His head throbs.

"Does this hurt?"

"Can you see this?"

"Can you hear me?"

"Steve?"

He realizes, belatedly, that the trainers are asking him questions. He can't focus on the questions. He doesn't know how to answer the questions. He opts for the direct, "I can't breathe."

"Yes, you can, son. You have to relax. Keep relaxed and take slow, easy breaths, now."

Steve shakes his head again. Why don't they understand? The air feels thin, as if they are at an unreasonably high altitude. This is the Frozen Wasteland, after all. Have they already used up all the oxygen?

"No—I—can't—"

"Shhh, calm down. Nice and slow, just focus on breathing nice and slow."

The voice is syrupy and peaceful and completely unhelpful. Steve focuses; he tries so hard. When he tries to inhale slowly, as instructed, it rattles in his sinuses. It stretches his temples and makes his eyes burn. "Can't—please—"

"Breathe with me, Steve."

He fumbles with the chinstraps on his helmet. The mask is stifling him. He can't see anyone's face. Maybe he could breathe better without it.

"Relax!"

"It's okay, it's okay, we're here, buddy!"

"Help me get his helmet off."

"Relax!"

"Stay calm and keep breathing."

The voices sound noticeably more concerned, and Steve tries not to panic. They keep reassuring him and urging him to rest, or he thinks that's what they're doing. Things are getting fuzzy.

His helmet is gone. Or the strange frame of his facemask is gone—maybe it just blurred into nothing. Everything is blurry. Steve focuses on breathing.

Hands grope his neck and torso, searching for a diagnosis. Steve can hear voices, muffled, as if they are traveling underwater, words out of context, things like ribs, shortness of breath, tackle, stretcher, and shock.

A trainer's face swims into focus. Maybe a teammate. Steve can't tell. His attention is flagging. Stars
dance in the sky overhead. But that's stupid—there are clouds. The face floating above him frowns
and begins to speak.

"Steve … look at me … okay, that's right. Just keep … taking care of you … Steve. … to be fine,
you're going to be … look at me … breathe. I know it's hard … hurts, okay? I know … you can do
this. You're strong. *Good* … stay with me … breathe, Steve."

Steve nods absently as he listens, or he thinks he's nodding. He's thinking about nodding. He's
nodding in his head.

He sucks in a breath, a full breath, a tangible intake of air in both of his lungs. Then he does it again.
He keeps breathing. It doesn't clear his vision, though; in fact, he feels overoxygenated. The air
whistles behind his eyes, pressurized, bursting in his ears.

So it is a head injury, after all. This is his last thought as darkness creeps on the edges of his vision.
He knows it is a head injury because he's seeing things in triple, and because someone's voice—it
sounds like Eli, or Isaiah, or maybe Gabe Jones—someone's voice howls in one ear, reassuring him,
"Take it easy, man. You can do this. Bucky's here for you, we're all here for you."

That doesn't make any sense.

Blood pounds in his temples.

That doesn't make sense, he hasn't seen Bucky in years. Decades.

The world spins around him, blacks, grays, whites, blues. Steve thinks, maybe, he hears the stadium
roar, but that might be blood rushing in his ears.
Chapter Summary

American State vs. Southeast State. Only one of them can win the game, only one of them can win the division, only one of them can win the conference. Only one of them can win the National Championship.

Chapter Notes

In the last couple chapters, I kept finding myself writing about the "howling" winds. So in this chapter, I've gone full-on Ginsberg.

Steve is standing upright. It takes him several minutes to figure it out, but he's definitely standing, definitely on his own two feet, definitely fully conscious. Trainers flank him on both sides to prop him up and hold him steady. He's on the sideline, and they are guiding him toward the locker room.

Wait.

"No," he protests. He stops moving his feet, and the trainers all whirl on him with round eyes.

"Steve, please, you need to see—"

"No," he repeats. "No, I'm fine. I'm standing up. You can't—I can't leave."

"Rogers—"

"No!" he barks. He pushes the trainers away, lists to one side, catches himself, and stands under his own power. So it's wobbly. It gets the point across. "I'm fine, I just need—just let me sit down. Let me sit down for a second."

His eyes begin to clear. There are the trainers, the details of their faces and the little ASU logo on their breasts; there is the team doctor, there are his thick glasses, there is his disgruntled expression; there are his teammates; there is the scoreboard. Still winning.

Someone steers Steve toward a bench, where he eases to a seat under the hands of half a dozen athletic trainers. The doctor kneels in front of him.

"Steve," he says, enunciating clearly, "listen to me, bud. You could have a concussion. We've got to get you somewhere quiet, somewhere—"

"I don't, no, I can see fine," Steve says, waving the hands away. So many hands everywhere.

"Okay, I understand that, but listen—"

Suddenly, thunder claps overhead, interrupting their conversation.
No, not thunder. The Southeast State fans.

The crowd has exploded with madness, everything howls, Steve can feel his brain bared to Heaven, seared by the winds and sealed in by the cold.

He shoves a trainer out of his line of sight and cranes his neck—wincses, god, the pain—there's pain in his head—there's pain everywhere, and that might not be the head injury; that might be the heartbreak as he finally gets a look at the scoreboard. Southeast State 8, American State 6.

They scored a field goal.

One good hit from the Winter Soldier and Steve is gone and they are losing, just like that.

The ground spins wildly and Steve has to pause and find his balance—and he realizes, abruptly, that he's standing again. When did he stand up? The world is tilting, but fine, that's fine, Steve uses the momentum to carry him over to the sideline, to his coach.

"I'm ready," he says, gripping Nick Fury's arm, holding maybe a little too tight.

Fury glares at him, and Steve can't read his expression, but it looks like leaping flames and curse words and wheels spinning in mid-air.

"I'm ready," Steve says again.

"Sit down, Rogers, you're not—"

"Doc said I was good," he interrupts. "I'm good, I'm ready. I'm ready to win this."

He can't let them down now. This is all his fault; Sam getting hurt and James Barnes digging into weak spots—if anyone should be able to read James Barnes, it should be Steve, but he keeps messing up.

Fire still burns across Nick Fury's features. Several seconds pass, enough for Southeast to kick off.

"Eli is ready to go," Fury says, and maybe there's hesitance there. Maybe Steve is imagining it, but maybe not.

"I'm ready to go," he says. "I can fix this."

Silence. It's like watching the second hand on a clock, or watching the timer on a bomb, or watching the steady pulse throbbing in your veins. Steve gazes back at his coach, careful to keep his eyes steady. He is certain, more certain than he has ever been, that he has to fix this.

"Go," Fury says.

This is the part Steve won't remember. He runs a few plays, hands the ball off to Isaiah Bradley. They end up drifting in and out of field goal range until Steve gets sacked and Clint Barton leads his men onto the field.

Fleetingly, Steve sees an image in his head; Stanford versus Oregon, a field goal as time expires. A field goal to win the game.

Steve crouches on the sideline, staring avidly at his teammates on the field: Eli Bradley, ready to catch the snap, and Clint Barton, lined up to kick, unable to hear the roar of the crowd but hell, he can probably feel the way the stadium rocks with the noise. The way it reverberates underfoot.
If Clint makes this kick, American State will win, cut and dry.

Steve stares, waiting, and the referee blows his whistle.

Time-out, Southeast State.

Icing the kicker is stupid, Steve thinks. He remembers Clint saying the same thing, once. *As if anything could make me more nervous about a game-winning kick.*

Wait for it, Steve thinks, for the wind to win it, the wings whirling at their backs, a wire wound tight around their fingers until the tips turn blue. Wait for the sun to come back out, *and the moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn*, water in the clouds and in his eyes, wetness clinging to his eyelashes, freezing them shut. Wait for it, Steve thinks, the river of truth. Passing routes and running routes and red mouths full of swears, saliva dried up in the cold air. Where is Bucky, Steve thinks. There is a linebacker in black, buried behind the lines, there is a boy, a bridge over brackish water, Barrett M107 semi-automatic, there is James Barnes, but where is Bucky.

Steve breathes in, brushes the frozen water from his eyelashes. He breathes out, and Isaiah is there. He crouches on one knee beside Steve and takes his hand and mutters under his breath.

The American State team lines up again, a 49-yard attempt. That's a long kick; it's absurdly long, but if anyone can do it, it's Clint Barton. Desperate times and all that. The noise in the stadium is so relentless, so high-octane fuel, that it becomes nothing. The cold freezes that, too. They can't get any louder, and they just disappear.

The referees start the clock.

Steve closes his eyes and lowers his head. He doesn't want to watch. Wait for it.

Who is angrier: Barton? Barnes? The coaches, the refs? The Southeast State fans? The Frozen Wasteland?

Steve thought it couldn't get any louder. He was wrong.

He is not watching, but he can tell when Clint misses the kick. Thunder booms again, a continuous roar, washes over Steve, into his ears and his throat and the chambers of his heart. He bows his head further until he can feel the frosted grass against his forehead. Four hours of football fought just to watch the fire fizzle into six-degree fog.

The stadium screams with it.

It is Isaiah who finally tugs Steve to his feet, because he has to, of course. He can't escape this. They look at the scoreboard together.

American State 6, Southeast State 8. Final.

Both teams flood the field when the clock hits zero. The coaches stride toward the fifty-yard-line to shake hands, and players do the same.

Steve burns through the crowd like a dream. The volume disappears again. It's there, everywhere, and rips itself into white noise. Black and white jerseys flock from all sides, and referees, and the tan and gray of the camera crews, and cops wearing dark brown state trooper uniforms and looking more serious than the occasion calls for. Or maybe the seriousness hasn't sunken in, for Steve.
Pietro Maximoff finds him first. The kid talks faster than he runs—so fast Steve loses half the words, though that could be because of the headache.

"You played a good game!" Maximoff says, and Steve catches that part. Then something about "crazy," and "ridiculous." He stands so close, one arm around Steve's waist (he wonders if he's tipping over again); they're practically nose-to-nose. Maximoff is still talking, a stream of "football" and "should be proud" and, absurdly, "I am glad we don't play on the same team. I would never get to run the ball."

Steve doesn't know how to respond to that. He says something, though, it is definitely out loud, because Maximoff slaps him on the back and releases him back to the swirling waters. Over his shoulder, Steve catches a glimpse of black. Of long, dark hair.

He moves as quickly as possible, shoving people aside with as much courtesy as anyone can muster when he's wearing football pads and stands a foot taller than half the crowd.

"Bucky!"

It's hopeless, really. Bucky is twenty feet away and moving fast. "Bucky!" Steve cries again, more desperate.

He reaches one of the end zones—he can tell, because the crowd is thinning and the grass underfoot is painted solid black, spells out TUNDRA in thick bloody swathes of crimson.

"Bucky!" he says. "Barnes!"

Incredibly, Bucky turns to face him. Steve was almost expecting him to dissolve into the air right before his eyes. His head swims and a fog creeps into the corners of his vision, but this is worth it, he thinks, this is worth the lectures he knows he's going to get from a post-traumatic amnesia specialist, especially when he tries to explain oh, yeah, haven't seen the guy for years, but we're best friends, I swear.

"Bucky?"

"… No one's called me that in years."

For some reason, Steve feels breathless again, the same constriction in his lungs as before, when he was lying in the grass, stricken and panicked and suffocating. "Sorry," he says, because he has no idea what else to say.

"What do you want."

For a moment, Steve is too stunned to speak. Bucky is motionless, an ice sculpture muddled by the cold. Steve could be seeing things. His breath comes in bursts of fog, whirling before him and making his vision dance.

Steve clears his throat. Unsure of what would be the best answer, he simply gives Bucky an honest one. "I wanted to see you."

"Why." Bucky's voice grates in his chest.

"I missed you." The truth, again. What else could come to mind, here, now, with Bucky Barnes standing right in front of him? "I thought—I miss you."

The seconds click by in Steve's head. Get rid of the ball. Get rid of the ball.
Bucky's gaze is glassy: the unwavering slope of a loaded assault rifle. "Leave me alone." The bell tolls.

"Come on, Buck, I'm … It's been years."

"Yeah," Bucky scoffs. "Years."

"We could … meet up. Something," Steve says, feeling light-headed. He's definitely about to fall apart, but not now—just a few more minutes, he needs these minutes—

Steve tries to take everything in at once. Bucky's greasy hair, his pale lips, the massive brace protecting his left arm, the jersey hugging his torso, the skintight black pants, and the stare between the stars.

And he doesn't speak. It's unsettling.

"Okay," Steve says again. "Can we catch up or something? Like old times."

"It's not." Bucky shifts from one foot to the other, his eyeline fixed somewhere around Steve's collarbone. "We're not friends, Steve."

Steve feels that as hard as the head trauma.

It is four o'clock in the morning in his veins. They begin to frost. In his head, he can hear the color commentators on ESPN arguing about gruesome tackles and unnecessary roughness.

"Sure we are," Steve says hoarsely. "We just haven't seen each other in awhile."

"Let it go."

Steve holds his breath. He's afraid to look away. Aren't you supposed to maintain eye contact with certain predators so they don't recognize your inferiority? If you break eye contact, they pounce. You're probably not supposed to move, either—in case the predator's attack instinct is visually-based—but Steve isn't an expert, after all. He takes a step forward.

Bucky doesn't attack. He backs away instead, an immediate, heartbreaking reflex, crystallizing proof that Steve isn't dealing with a predator. It's inhuman, the raw metal of his eyes and his expression, his hollow features, the way he blinks slowly and deliberately. He just won a football game, for crying out loud, not just any football game, the Game of the Century, he beat the number two team in the country and he can't even crack a smile. There is James Barnes, but where is Bucky. Bucky used to smile through broken bones and blood in his teeth, where is that Bucky.

Come back, what happened, come back to me. Heart thudding, Steve surges forward, thinking about 49-yard field goals. "At least take my phone number."

For a long time, he doesn't think Bucky will respond, and when he does, it's on an exhale, an inaudible brushstroke on dry canvas: "Fine."

"You—do you want to write it down or something?"

"I'll remember."

The noise of the crowd rises and falls.

"Okay," Steve says, and he glances at the score on the scoreboard, and the defeat, and recites his phone number.
"Now can I go," Bucky says lowly.

"You—you'll remember."

"I'll remember," he states, zero inflection in his voice.

"You can—get in touch, okay?" Steve pleads. "Text me sometime, Bucky. Any time."

"Maybe." Bucky's eyes are glazed over, and they track Steve's movements slowly. "Are you happy
now."

No, Steve thinks. He has maybe never been less happy. He doesn't get a chance to answer before
Bucky makes a harsh noise low in his throat and starts to back away.

Steve thrusts out a hand, but he can't reach; there is already a river of Southeast State uniforms
overtaking them both, forcing them apart. He can see Bucky, still. He hasn't turned around. His gaze
remains fixed on Steve, dark, grim with resolve.

"Leave me alone," Bucky says again.

Steve has never been able to deny Bucky anything. So now, faced with a request dropped heavy
from his lips—not a request, a command—Steve can't argue. He doesn't fight it, and Bucky
disappears in the tide of black uniforms, and the gap between them deepens. Steve has never been
able to deny Bucky anything, but as for himself—Steve is used to denying himself.

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Days from now, Steve won't remember what happens after the game. He won't remember the locker
room, or undressing, or whatever losing speech Nick Fury throws together for their sake.

He will remember a crashing noise, though. Metal on cinderblocks, the twisted heap of a folding
chair, and rage in Isaiah Bradley's eyes. He will remember Tony Stark speechless, for maybe the first
time in his life. He will remember Clint Barton sobbing in a corner.

He won't remember why, or how they got there. Eli will have to tell him the ending all over again,
because the only thing that sticks in Steve's memory is crashing and tears and shooting pain in his
head.

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That evening, in their hotel room, Eli goes into full-on parent-mode. Every two hours throughout the
night he wakes Steve up, like clockwork, to check for concussion symptoms.

At eleven-thirty, he asks Steve basic questions; what's your name, what's my name, where are you,
what year is it.

At one-thirty in the morning, he asks for Steve's name again, and offers him an ice pack for the back
of his neck.

At three a.m., Steve is more resistant, but it's mostly due to exhaustion, not serious head trauma. Eli
drags answers out of him, hounds Steve about where he's from and where he goes to school and
who's his favorite NFL team.

At five a.m., he doesn't ask any questions. He wakes Steve up with a firm but gentle hand, pressing
lightly around Steve's knee-cap.

"I'm fine, Eli," Steve says, before he can ask any dumb questions.
"I'm not cut out to be a starting quarterback." Eli's voice barely cuts through the darkness.

Steve doesn't speak for a moment, dumbfounded. He can make out Eli's silhouette, slumped on the edge of Steve's bed, lit from behind by the shimmering television screen. Is this a test, or is he finally feeling the effects of a concussion? He considers Eli's words and all he can say is, "Yes you are."

"Nah." The furnace under the window rattles. "I've always kind of known. They didn't recruit me to carry the team, or nothing."

"What do you mean?" Steve whispers. Anything louder would make his head spin.

"They recruited me to get Isaiah."

Steve doesn't say anything, and Eli doesn't elaborate for a long time. The fan in their heater must be out of alignment. Its rhythmic wobble seems to get louder and louder in the little room, out of tune with the persistent whine of the television.

Eli speaks again several minutes later, hauling the words up a rock-strewn hill. "You know we're the same age?"

"You and Isaiah."


"… I know." Steve found that out the first time he got drunk with Isaiah and they both accidentally spilled their life stories. He's not sure why Eli is bringing it up right now, but his head isn't pounding, so he rolls with it.

"We're supposed to be made of the same stuff, down to the bone marrow, down to the last touchdown. You'd think we'd both be child prodigies, you hear me?" Eli breathes through his teeth. "But Isaiah was something special. Next to him, I looked like a fraud. Still do."

"You're not a fraud."

"He got held back our freshman year."

Steve swallows, but doesn't say anything. He knew Isaiah had to have been held back at some point, since he entered college a year later than his twin brother. The details never seemed important.

"He's not stupid," Eli says defensively, in a tone that sounds clear and practiced. "He just—he was too cool for all that. He didn't care about nothing but football. Plus he was good enough to get away with it."

"He figured things out," Steve allows.

"Sure did." Eli shifts in the edge of the bed; Steve can hear the sheets rustle, out of sync with the shuddering furnace. "Nick Fury came to visit campus my senior year. We always had a few coaches and recruiters turn up, you know, it was a pretty big school."

"Yeah."

"So Fury watches us practice, right? Writes stuff down, doesn't say much. You know Fury—he never really does the recruiting, himself. Then he watches us play a game, though, and—Steve."

"What?"
"I'll never forget that game, Steve." Eli pauses. He sounds breathless, as if he only just ran up the stairs and collapsed into bed. "Isaiah scored eight touchdowns, that game. I threw one to him, but the other seven—the other seven—he rushed all on his own."

"Holy shit."

"He lit the fucking field on fire," Eli whispers, then clears his throat. "After the game, Fury walked right up to me and introduced himself and fucking shook my hand. He was—he was just gushing. How bad they want me at American State, how much good I could do, tried to sell me on the program and shit." His voice melts into the hum of the furnace and the television. "I thought I'd piss myself. Nick Fury."

"Eli—"

"Figured out what he was really doing the next morning."

"He wasn't—"

"Pretty obvious. I don't blame him or nothing. It's smart." Eli sighs, sharp and cold. "And it worked."

"They wanted you at American State, Eli," Steve says, enunciating with care.

"They wanted Isaiah," Eli says. There's not an ounce of bitterness in his voice. "Got me on board, hinted stuff about GPAs, ain't make me pay a cent for any of it."

Steve doesn't say anything. He wants to tell Eli it's not true, and to assure him that he's valuable in his own right, which is true; Eli has a better arm even than Steve, and he's hard to tackle, and he's great at reading a defense before the snap, and he knows when Isaiah needs a break just by the way he adjusts his weight from one foot to the other.

But Steve also knows Nick Fury. He isn't the most nurturing person on the face of the earth, but he is, quite possibly, the best recruiter. Nick Fury gets his way.

Eli breathes in and out, so light it barely makes a sound over the electric buzz of the television. "They wanted Isaiah, and they wanted you."

Two hours later, after sunrise, the American State players stumble out of bed and load their buses for the trip home. No one says much. They are like a horde of zombies without the appetite.

Eli doesn't bring up their conversation from the middle of the night. Steve isn't sure he was meant to remember it, so he doesn't bring it up, either.

It is week 12. American State is 10-1. They won't play for a National Championship. There are too many good teams across the country, too many undefeated teams. For that matter, they won't even play for a conference championship. The Southeast State Tundra just clinched their division and probably the title, because hell if Steve can't think of a damn thing that's gonna stand in their way, now.

Chapter End Notes

they say at the end of Act II, your protagonist should reach his lowest point. so .... well. [gestures vaguely]
(PS: unfortunately, it's not unrealistic for Steve to play under really unhealthy conditions like this. there are documented situations where players, even quarterbacks, have experienced a head injury, returned to the game, and later, found they couldn't remember any of it happening at all.)
Steve wakes up Sunday afternoon with a blow to the heart.

Literally. He is napping on the couch when Natasha Romanoff chucks his cell phone from across the room and strikes him between the ribs. The jolt yanks him back to delirious consciousness.

"Ah—I'm—what the—"

"Answer your phone, Rogers," Natasha says with a scowl. "It's been buzzing off the hook for fifteen minutes."

"Natasha," someone scolds her.

With a groan, Steve cranes his neck to find Isaiah at the other end of the couch, burrowed in a blue ASU sweatshirt. Eli is leaning in the doorway. In fact, there's only one person missing.

"Where's Clint?" Steve asks, rubbing his eyes.

"Just went to campus." Natasha folds her arms. "Weight room. I think he's trying to lift himself into a coma."

"Tell that to the people sending him death threats over social media," Natasha says, her voice sickly-sweet.

The end of the game swirls in Steve's mind. The images and facts are like dough in a blender, but he definitely remembers Clint missing that field goal at the end of regulation. To be honest, Steve never gave it much thought; he still hasn't been able to get over his own shitty playing, which lasted a great deal longer than Clint's single, minute mistake. If you can even call it a mistake. It would have been a miracle shot.

"Is he okay?" Steve asks.

"Not really," Natasha says matter-of-factly.

That hurts worse than the phone to the ribcage. In the background, Eli lowers his head and hunches his shoulders.

"He gotta know it's not all his fault," Isaiah says, not looking up from his phone screen.

"Yeah!" Steve drags himself into a seated position and gestures between himself and Isaiah. "Seriously, we couldn't score a single touchdown! The only reason we were even in the game was thanks to Clint."

"Tell that to the people sending him death threats over social media," Natasha says, her voice sickly-sweet.
Silence surges through the room like a vacuum. Cold. Airtight.

Eli raises his head slowly, his expression horrified and faintly queasy. "The what?!"

"Death. Threats." Natasha looks like she wants to send a few death threats of her own. "He had to delete his Twitter and deactivate his Facebook. He's still getting gross text messages, too."

"Oh my god," Steve whispers.

"I tried to take his phone away," Natasha continues, "but he was texting his brother, too. So hopefully the insults have died down."

"Who the hell is sending him death threats?" Isaiah demands.

"Mostly American State fans," Natasha says with a feral grin. "Aren't they fantastic?"

No one answers her.

"Yeah. Fantastic," she says again, pulling her car keys out of her pocket. "It was nice seeing you guys." She heads for the doorway.

Steve, Eli, and Isaiah look at each other.

"Oh," Natasha adds, spinning to face them. The grin falls from her face, and her mouth goes flat. "Sorry about the loss."

And then she is gone, her absence heavy and black.

Isaiah sucks in a deep breath. "Fuck," he sighs. He reaches out a hand, which Eli promptly takes, pulling his brother to his feet. "I'm getting a drink," Isaiah says. "You want anything?"

Eli shakes his head.

"Water would be great," Steve says.

An awkward silence hangs in the room when Isaiah leaves it. After an uncomfortable minute, Eli nods toward Steve's lap. "Who was calling you?"

Steve jumps. He'd forgotten all about his own cell phone. He pulls it up and flicks at the lock screen. Thirty-two unread messages. He stares at the little red bubble for a few seconds, wishing it would disappear without him having to read any of them.

Being a college athlete is such an unearthly experience. They hang just on the edge of celebrity, part-time household name, part-time anonymous face. A very specific fanbase could recognize Steve on sight, in or out of uniform; but at the same time, he can also go an entire day without getting so much as a second look from students on his own campus. He has a massive Twitter following, but almost never gets stopped in the street for photos. Just last week he starred in a segment for ESPN, but by law, he is not permitted to sign autographs for any reason.

College athletes exist in limbo. Through endorsements, the schools and athletic conferences and television networks make millions off of their success. But technically—technically—no one is allowed to profit off of the students themselves.

A fine line, if there ever was one.

At any rate, this means that Steve Rogers, a twenty-one-year-old business student living in rural
central Illinois, somehow has over eighty-thousand Twitter followers and maxed out on Facebook friends his junior year of college. He also gets dozens of text messages after games, either congratulatory or sympathetic, and over half of them come from numbers he has never seen in his life.

He's never gotten death threats. At least not yet. He deserves them more than Clint Barton does, though. That's for sure.

He shifts a little on the couch, leaning back against the cushions and propping his feet on the coffee table. With a deep breath, as if preparing to dive underwater, Steve opens his message app.

+1 (708) 292-1155
you need a new kicker

+1 (205) 348-0021
its ok Rogers we'll beat them in the natl champ for u

Sharon Carter
Sorry kiddo :( got a six pack with your name on it

+1 (262) 107-1945
why the hell did you come back in the game

Gabe Jones
I'm so conflicted! How's Bucky?

+1 (217) 534-7844
Good game. Next time!

+1 (708) 792-3491
you suck

Clever.

How do these people get his phone number, anyway?

Steve takes a second glance at Gabe's text, cringes, and closes his messages.

He opens up his Twitter app and almost immediately closes it again when he finds a string of Clint Barton hate messages. His throat burns.

Briefly, and not without some sincerity, he considers chucking his phone through a window. He takes a deep breath. He's not quite that blind with rage, but he opts instead to chuck it into the cushions of the nearest armchair. It bounces harmlessly onto the seat. Almost mocking him. Steve stares, a little indignant, until his lock screen winks off.

He heaves a sigh and collapses deeper into the couch cushions. In an effort to forget every horrible thing he's seen on Twitter, he digs the heels of his hands into his eyes. Spots start to flicker behind his eyelids.

"Everything okay, Captain?" Eli asks.

Steve laughs bitterly at the nickname. "Everything is just peachy."

"Maybe this will help."

Steve's eyes fly open. He blinks a few times, and then a bottle of Miller Light swims into focus in the center of his vision. "Fuck," he gasps. His gaze drifts up to Isaiah Bradley, standing over him with a bottle in each hand. "Oh Captain, my Captain," Steve says, and accepts his beer with a weak smile.

"How you feel, buddy?"

Steve groans.

"That good, huh?"

"I want to sit in an ice bath for, like, 70 years."

Isaiah flops onto the couch between Steve and his brother.

"Want a foot massage?"

Steve peers at him from the corner of his eye. "Did I win the bet?"

"Fuck no."

Eli snorts.

"If a reporter tried to talk to me, I would've probably punched 'em," Isaiah adds. "But you didn't do no interviews either. Plus you look like you could use a little R&R."

"This is all my fault," Steve says, shaking his head. "They can't take it out on Clint, for crying out loud. It's not fair."

"Football isn't fair," Eli says.

Isaiah takes a swig from his beer and chuckles, no doubt remembering when he had the exact same conversation with Steve not long ago.

"No …" Steve whispers, staring somewhere in the middle distance. "No, it's not."

---

That evening, Steve has an appointment with the medical staff to examine his injuries, specifically the possible concussion. When he arrives, several trainers usher him into a sterile white room and smother him with tests. After almost twenty minutes, the crowd thins down to one person, who points a flashlight in his face, examines his paperwork, and asks him annoying questions.

"Any nausea?"

"No."

"Dizziness?"

"No."

"Sensitivity to light?"

"Only when you shine it directly into my eyes," he says drily.

"Come on, Rogers," the trainer says, pinching the bridge of her nose. "This is serious."

"Serious waste of time."
"Do you think head trauma is a joke?"

"An egg on the back of my head does not equal trauma," Steve says.

The trainer looks up at him in alarm. "There's a contusion?!" She reaches as if to touch the back of his head, and Steve instantly leans away, blocking her progress.

"I didn't say that! I was kidding!" he insists. "You know, hypothetically speaking."

"You're a piece of work, you know that?" she says, wagging a finger at him.

He thinks of Heisman voters and All-American headlines. Steve Rogers, the NCAA Golden Child. If only they knew.

Luckily, he really doesn't show any symptoms of serious brain injury. The training staff agrees that his brief memory loss proves a mild concussion, and Hank McCoy lectures him enthusiastically about running off and lying to Fury and going back in the game, and they all agree that he should be limited in practice on Monday. In all likelihood, he'll be able to play the last game of the season.

It's a consolation prize, at this point. They won't even play in the NAC championship.

When the trainers shoo him out of the medical wing, Steve can't even bring himself to smile or say a polite good-bye. All that's on his mind is a couch, a stack of pillows, the "silent" button on his phone, and maybe another Miller Lite.

Which is why it shouldn't surprise him when he exits the football facilities and finds himself in the middle of a sea of reporters.

"Rogers, we heard you suffered a concussion. How serious is the injury?"

"Do you think a 49-yard field goal is asking too much?"

"Should James Barnes face further sanctions for head-to-head contact in yesterday's game?"

"What did Clint Barton have to say after the game?"

"Should James Barnes be suspended?"

An angry wind rattles in Steve's veins, kicking up dust and clogging his throat. All the faces, all the wrong questions. He turns to the closest person, a thin woman with a severe widow's peak, and says clearly, so everyone can hear, "I don't blame anyone but myself for losing yesterday. I didn't do a good enough job leading the offense. The only reason it was so close was because of Clint Barton."

Another flurry of questions. It's like talking to a brick wall. An unusually verbose brick wall with two dozen microphones and flashing cameras.

"Will you be able to play on Saturday?"

"Are you upset that Barnes wasn't penalized for that hit?"

"Did James Barnes just steal your chances for a Heisman trophy?"

"The only person who lowered my chances for the Heisman is me." With that, Steve whirls around and hurls himself through the doors, back into the vast, imposing serenity of the American State
football complex.

He feels a fleeting stab of shame for hiding, too. Steve is the face of this football team, and he's got no right to back down from that responsibility because as soon as he does so, the media will just turn their predatory gaze on someone like anti-social Isaiah Bradley; or Clint Barton, who doesn't deserve the criticism; or, God forbid, Sam Wilson, who will say exactly what the world needs to hear when no one wants to hear it.

Steve considers all the different ways he can say "my head feels fine," "it's my own responsibility," and "I don't blame James Barnes."

Fuck it.

He hunches his shoulders and ducks into the nearest doorway. He tells himself this isn't cowardly; he just needs to brace himself for a minute. Maybe thirty minutes.

After a few calming breaths, Steve begins to absorb his surroundings. He finds himself in near-darkness, and realizes he's made sanctuary in the film room. It's like a very small movie theater, maybe the kind an exorbitantly rich person would build in his or her basement and use once a month, with a big projection screen on one wall and six rows of comfortable chairs facing it. The projector is on, but the footage is paused, casting a dull, wavering glow over the room.

After catching his bearings, Steve notices another person in the room.

"Hey, Falcon."

Sam Wilson turns around and offers a wry smile. "Hey, Cap," he says. The look on his face screams, I feel you, bro. I am right there with you.

"You hiding, too?" Steve asks.

"Of course not!" Sam's smile is slow and mischievous. "I got work to do, here!" He gestures vaguely at the film screen, which is still paused on some kind of special teams play from three weeks ago—a strong indicator that Sam hasn't touched the footage since he came in.

Steve smiles knowingly. "Mind if I join you?"

"Nope," Sam pats the seat next to him. "Coffee?"

"What?"

"You want some coffee?" he repeats, holding up a steaming paper cup with a generic logo on the sleeve.

"Wow. Yes, I would love some coffee," Steve says a little awed by the gesture. "How did you know?"

Sam shrugs. "I got four cups," he says, waving at the cardboard travel carrier near his feet. "I passed the cafe on my way out of the hot tubs. Kinda figured I wouldn't be the only one who needed it."

"Thanks." Steve takes a sip and savor the bitter sting on his tongue. "That's worth the lecture we're gonna get from the nutritionists."

Sam snorts. They spend a few minutes drinking together in companionable silence.

"I guess we could really watch some film, or something," Steve finally says, a little guiltily.
Sam lifts one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "You really want to watch film the day after?"

Steve gazes at the projector screen, eyes unfocused, and mindlessly picks at the sleeve on his coffee cup. "I feel like I should be doing something," he says. "I'm still a little … shell-shocked, I think."

"Could be the head injury," Sam says lightly.

Steve shoots him a withering glare.

"I'm kidding, man," Sam says. He takes a moment to remove the lid from his coffee and blow the steam off the surface. Steve doesn't think he's going to continue, but finally, after taking a sip and making a face, he adds, "how do you feel, anyway?"

This isn't like the reporters. The garbage writers from the local paper or the desperate graduate assistants trying to find quality material for the campus publication or the sleazy guy from the nightly news or, God, the color reporters from ESPN who only give a shit because Steve plays for a national-championship-contender.

Played for a national-championship-contender.

Steve is beyond tired of talking about his head, but Sam isn't like that. Time spent with Sam Wilson is Real. Steve never feels like he has to prove anything, or fake anything. If Sam asks about your well-being, it's because he cares, not because of his own agenda. Not because of BCS implications or beating the spread.

It's weird, because Steve can actually answer honestly. He can tell Sam Wilson how his body actually feels without considering the consequences his words will carry for a week's worth of national news media. "I'm not bad," he finally concludes. "I think."

"You think?"

"Mm." Steve takes a drink and blinks experimentally. "Yeah. If I move my head too fast, things get a little jostled."

"Does it hurt?"

"… Only when I move my head too fast."

After a long, scrutinizing look, Sam seems satisfied. As satisfied as he's going to get, anyway. He turns back to his coffee. "Tell Eli to ice it again tonight."

Steve sighs, but he doesn't have the energy to argue. "Can we talk about something else?" he asks. "Like … anything else."

"I mean, I guess," Sam allows. "I don't want to bug you. I just care about your head, man. Hope it stays in one piece."

Steve chuckles. "Yeah. Thank you. Really."

"Were the coaches on your back about it, or something?"

After several deep breaths and several swigs of strong black coffee, Steve feels better equipped to start this conversation. "And the reporters," he says, keeping his voice neutral.

"Oh," Sam says knowingly. "Right."
"They all seem convinced I'm gonna be out for weeks, or something."

"Sorry, man."

"And they keep asking about B—if I think Barnes did it on purpose, or something."

Sam hums and sips his coffee.

"They keep poking and prodding," Steve adds, eyes fixed, unseeing, on a dark corner of the theater. "'Should Barnes have been flagged' … 'was it an illegal hit' … 'are you angry he knocked you out of the game' … It's like they want me to make this into a big controversy."

"Media loves controversy."

"No kidding," Steve sighs. "They want me to do their dirty work, call B—you know, blame Barnes for everything. Stir up shit."

"So what do you say back?"

"That it's all my fault, anyway," Steve says. "They just want to turn Bucky into a villain."

Sam turns to face him full-on. His eyes flick up and down Steve's body, but he doesn't say anything; after what seems like a very long, uncomfortable minute, he turns back to his drink and takes a sip.

"My head is fine," Steve says, feeling the need to justify himself. And to justify Bucky's actions. "It was about as mild a concussion as you can possibly have."

"Yeah," Sam says noncommittally.

"I mean, come on, Sam, I just don't get it." Steve sets down his cup because his hands won't stop shaking and he's kind of afraid he might spill. "I'm fine, but everyone's obsessing over this one tackle and how Buck—you know, how Barnes is some kind of violent monster, or something."

Sam doesn't answer for a few minutes. He finishes one coffee and removes the lid from a second. They both watch the steam rise in pearly tendrils without speaking.

Steve begins to think the conversation might be over. He thought Sam Wilson would understand, or have something valuable to share, or at least a joke, something, but—

"Have you seen footage of the hit yet?"

"Have—um—" Steve sputters, taken aback by the question.

"Have you seen footage of it? You know, of when Barnes tackled you and you hurt your head."

Steve stares. His eyes flick to the projector screen, then back to Sam. "… No. No, I haven't."

Sam pulls his bottom lip between his teeth. Without speaking, he gets up, takes the stairs two at a time, and bends over the computer hooked up to the projector. Steve can hear a mouse clicking. Then a blurry image appears on the giant screen, what is obviously a paused moment in the middle of a football game. Steve recognizes the American State and Southeast State uniforms.

"Is this yesterday's game?" he asks unnecessarily.

Sam doesn't answer. After a few more mouse clicks, the opening of the fourth quarter begins to play. Almost immediately, the little progress bar winks at the bottom of the screen and the footage begins
to play double-speed. Apparently, Sam is fast-forwarding.

Steve takes a long sip of coffee and grimaces.

"Sorry," Sam murmurs. "It was basically the end, right?"

"Yeah," Steve whispers, probably not even loud enough for Sam to hear.

Sam boosts the fast-forward speed. Finally, he reaches the end of the fourth quarter: that fateful possession on which Steve was injured.

After returning the film speed to real-time, Sam hops back to his seat. The on-screen Isaiah Bradley runs for a four-yard gain on first down.

"Was this it?" Sam asks.

Steve shakes his head. He watches himself hike the ball and drop back to pass. It's a garbage play. Well-planned, but also well-defended by Southeast. Johnny Storm runs right out of bounds after Steve's errant pass.

As the American state players on-screen line up again, Steve braces himself.

He knows what's about to happen. He doesn't really want to watch because he doesn't want any reason to believe, as the rest of the country seems to believe, that James Barnes is some kind of loose cannon. But Sam is showing this to him for a reason, so Steve swallows and keeps his eyes focused on the footage. Only a day old, already rocking the sports world with its future implications.

On screen, Steve Rogers drops back to pass. He dances around for a second, two seconds, three seconds. Steve remembers every check down and he remembers how tight the coverage was. His breathing accelerates just thinking about it.

The offensive line, usually a stalwart fortress, starts to disintegrate. The Steve on screen abandons the pocket to avoid a sack from a lineman threatening his blind side. He gazes downfield, desperate for some option, praying for Sam to get open; and then Barnes is there, looming before Steve, his pathway clear.

Just watching the film gets Steve's heart pounding. He watches as Bucky chases him, only delaying the inevitable. The video-Steve tucks the ball against his chest just as Barnes crashes into him, a tidal wave against a rocky shore.

Even though he's caught up in the moment, Steve can feel a little tug at the back of his brain. He scoots to the edge of his seat and watches carefully. The tackle itself isn't particularly violent. Bucky wraps him up cleanly and together they go to the turf and—Steve gasps. As he and Bucky fall to the ground, his head collides with an American State lineman's knee and snaps sharply to one side.

Steve shoots Sam a quick glance. "That wasn't his fault."

Sam shakes his head and points to the screen, so Steve keeps watching.

On the video, Steve and Bucky hit the ground together. Bucky untangles himself and stares at Steve, lying prone underneath him, for a split-second too long. Then, as if shot through with an electric current, Bucky springs from the turf and waves frantically at the American State sideline. Steve's teammates take a moment to catch on. Sam and Isaiah hover around Steve's motionless body, trying to get Steve's attention.
American State athletic trainers stampede onto the field. One of the Southeast players tries to pull Bucky away, but he shakes him off.

It's surreal. The video is playing in real time, but Steve feels like he's watching it in slow motion. On screen, Bucky pushes through a few American State trainers, squeezes past Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley. Bucky bends over Steve, reaches out, and takes his hand.

It must only last a few seconds. In reality, Bucky is there and gone as soon as the American State trainers clear the area. But Steve stares at the image for what seems like years. He can feel every hairline fracture in his heart.

He is struck by an overwhelming, relentless déjà vu. He remembers the feeling of airlessness, dizzy banks of stadium lights, Bucky lying on the grass, Bucky panting, Bucky crying, but smiling, always smiling. What happened, come back to me, what happened.

Heat stings behind his eyes.

Tearing his gaze from the projector screen, he turns to Sam, who is watching him closely.

Steve clears his throat. Smooths an imaginary wrinkle in his shirt. "Oh my god."

Sam offers a sympathetic smile. He's very good at those.

Something occurs to Steve, and his blood pumps harder. "Didn't everyone in the country see this?"

"I dunno when they cut to commercial." Sam says it like an apology.

"Why the hell aren't they replaying this on SportsCenter?"

"Steve—"

"This is bullshit!" He leaps to his feet and waves an arm in the general vicinity of the reporters outside. "They're all trying to make Bucky look like some kind of monster when—when this—when he just—he didn't do anything wrong!"

"I know."

"He tried to help me, Sam!"

"I saw."

It's too much. Adrenaline thunders in Steve's veins. He bounds up the stairs and pauses the video, unable to wrap his tired head around the game.

"They want him suspended for this?! This proves he's not the psycho they all think he is!"

"Nobody seriously thinks he's gonna get suspended," Sam says placatingly. "That's just loudmouth ASU fans and people like Skip Bayless tryna stir up controversy."

"Fine, but they're still destroying Bucky's reputation in the process."

"Did you talk to him after the game?" Sam asks.

The abrupt change in conversation is like water in Steve's lungs.

Sometimes the most damaging part of a storm is the flooding that comes after.
He stops pacing and almost throws himself off-balance in the process.

"Yeah," Steve croaks. "I talked to him."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing," Steve says tightly. "It's been a long time. I guess we're just not … um." Steve clears his throat. "This is bullshit."

"Sorry."

"He didn't want anything to do with me."

"He doesn't want anything to do with anyone," Sam points out. "He never talks to the press. No one knows anything about him."

"It's like Pierce keeps him locked up in a zoo somewhere with the rest of his defense freaks."

"Look," Sam says, voice neutral. "It has been a long time. Maybe he's not the guy you remember. Maybe he's not a good guy, and maybe he's too violent on the football field. But this?" He points at the big screen. "This is a clean tackle, man. This is a linebacker doing his job, and if it weren't for a little bad luck, we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

Steve sucks in a cold breath through his teeth. "Why doesn't anyone else see it that way?" he says, a little ashamed of how small his voice sounds.

"They don't know him like you do." Sam smiles. "You don't even know him anymore. Not really."

"Yes I do," Steve says, instantly and emphatically.

This is too much. Losing to Southeast State was like lightning, bright and sharp and painful. It whipped through the sky in a nano-second and then it was gone, a gash of empty nothing, nothing, nothing, not even air. This, though: reporters like feral hounds, death threats, concussion testing, Bucky Barnes struck down as a wanted man. This is the thunder. All the air clapping back into place after the lightning has passed.

Steve can't take it anymore, and he doesn't want to unleash it all on Sam Wilson. So, with a soft apology and a softer good-bye, he heads for the exit.

"Hey, Steve."

"Yeah?" He turns back to the theater. Sam has his arms folded over the back of the chair, his hair glowing in the light of the projector.

"How come you call him Bucky?"

"That's his name," Steve says automatically.

Sam cocks his head. "James Barnes?" he clarifies.

Steve fills his lungs up, then turns to the suspended video footage so he doesn't have to look Sam in the eyes. "He used to go by Bucky, back in high school."

"That's a weird nickname," Sam says, not unkindly.

"Yeah." Steve can't argue. Bucky always hated being called James enough that his old grade-school
nickname stuck, for years and years, and anyone who made fun of him had Steve to answer to.

"I mean, not that I can talk," Sam concedes. When Steve doesn't answer, Sam adds, "He sure was mean, though."

"Bucky?"

"Yeah, man. He hits hard." Sam grins and crosses one ankle over his knee. "I wish I could've hit him back, you know? Just once."

That must be the real perk to playing both offense and defense, Steve thinks. He imagines Bucky back in high school, taking down wide receivers with a little something extra, just out of spite. That's something Bucky would have done. Something he would have joked about afterwards.

"Um, not that I want to break his neck or anything," Sam says, mistaking Steve's thoughtfulness for annoyance.

"Oh, I know what you mean," Steve says, smiling for real, now. "He'd probably deserve it."

"I didn't say that," Sam says warily.

Steve stuffs his hands in his pockets. "I bet you two would get along."

Sam glances at the big screen. "We didn't exactly get along yesterday."

Which is a good point. Steve doesn't know why he said it, and when he thinks about it, he wonders if it's even true. Sam and Bucky.

But he feels a weird tug in his gut, and he thinks of something a famous football coach once said. *Battles are primarily won in the hearts of men.*

---

While sneaking out a side door, Steve runs into one of his teammates, also looking stealthy with his hood pulled up and chin tucked to his chest. They *literally* run into one another, and Steve starts to apologize before he recognizes—

"Clint!" he gasps.

"Hey."

Steve throws his arms around Clint's neck and hugs him tight. "I'm so sorry, God, I just want to light every newspaper in the world on fire, what are people thinking, I can't believe—your Facebook—"

"Oh. No big deal," Clint says, patting Steve on the back.

Steve pulls back and looks Clint in the face. "It is *too*, it's fucked up, and I'm going to give everyone a piece of my *fucking* mind—"

"Hey, Mom, it's really cool. I promise."

Steve pauses to catch his breath, and takes in Clint's haggard state—the hair poking from under his hood and his sunken eyes and the bright red line on his bottom lip where he bit down and drew blood. "You really okay?"

"I'm really okay, Mama Bear." Clint even manages a smile, though the shadows around his eyes remain dark. "On the bright side, the Southeast State fans have been very sweet to me."
Steve blinks. "Um. What?"

"I got a bunch of nice thank-you messages from them," Clint clarifies, waving his phone and smiling cynically. "Well, I assume it was them," he adds, frowning at his phone, then shrugging. "They had Wisconsin area codes."

"… Those assholes."

"Oh, I'm telling you the truth—they were downright kind."

After a moment of consideration, fireworks go off in Steve's head. "Wait—you—they had … do you know any Wisconsin area codes?"

"... I mean, I'd have to look at them again."

Suddenly frantic, Steve digs his own phone out of his jacket, almost dropping it in the process.

"Here we go," Clint says, peering at his iPhone screen. "Area code 715. 'We owe you one, Barton'."

Steve scans his own messages for comparison.

"Or this one: 'We'll be sure to include you in the thank you speeches when we win the BCS.'" Clint recites.

Distantly, Steve hears what Clint is saying, and it makes him so angry, he has to force himself to breath right. "I kind of want to burn down all of Winter Station, you know."

"Oh, here's a good one!" Clint says, ignoring Steve's righteous fury. "'It's so nice to have two kickers on our payroll.' Genius. Are they admitting Southeast pays their players off, you think, or—"

"Is that the same area code?"

"—just kidding about—oh, what?" Clint looks back at his phone. "No, this one is 262."

Steve took a class on atmospheric geography his freshman year. Had no idea what it was when he registered, just needed the science credit. It turned out, essentially, to be Meteorology 101. They learned about weather and wind and precipitation and air pressure. He remembers dew points being very important on the final exam. Dew point is technically defined as the "temperature to which air must be cooled in order to reach saturation." That's what the textbooks say. Steve never really understood it. Something to do with whether or not the grass would be frosty in the morning.

Now, looking at his messages, and the text he received this morning from a 262 area code, Steve thinks he understands exactly what a dew point is. He understands it with striking clarity, if the cold in his bones means anything.

"Steve?" Clint's voice sounds deep and distorted, as if he is underwater. "Steeeeeve. Earth to Mr. Rogers. Are you in the neighborhood."

Slowly, agonizingly, Steve tears his gaze away from the text message on his phone screen. "Um."

"You okay, Steve?"

"I'm good, I just—262, you said?"

"Yeah. Listen, no offense, but I kind of want to bounce before those reporters find their way around the corner."
"Yeah," Steve says, dazed. He shakes his head to clear it (instantly regretting the sharp motion, which sends a shooting pain through his temples), and looks Clint in the eye. "Hey, man, I really am sorry. The game, the kick. It wasn't your fault, okay? I don't blame you. No one does. We wouldn't dream of it."

Clint gives him a weary but genuine smile. "Thanks, Steve. Still feels like shit, though."

"I know." Steve gives his shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Don't beat yourself up, though?"

"Yeah, yeah," Clint says. He runs a hand through his hair. "Call of Duty tonight?"

"You got it."

Clint is gone, and Steve's attention is already back on his phone.

This is what it feels like to freeze overnight. He can see his fingers shaking, even if he can't feel them at all. His whole body is numb.

+1 (262) 107-1945
why the hell did you come back in the game

Steve takes a deep breath.

It might not even be him.

It could be anyone from Wisconsin. It could be a fan of either team. It could be one of Steve's own teammates—one of the younger kids, or the redshirts, or a defensive player from the bottom of the depth chart, the kind of player to whom he doesn't often speak.

So it might not be him. But Steve isn't about to take that chance.

He responds with the neutral,

I felt fine. Didn't want to let my team down

and proceeds to wait for five minutes, gazing at his cell even after the screen auto-locks. Five minutes become ten, which become fifteen. When the phone buzzes in his hand, he almost drops it.

+1 (262) 107-1945
do you have a deathwish you fucking punk

Steve sits down hard on the concrete steps. He thinks of old football coaches again, and high school and lightning and quotes about sports. It is essential to understand that battles are primarily won in the hearts of men. Men respond to leadership in a most remarkable way and once you have won his heart, he will follow you anywhere.

Steve can't actually see the screen through his tears; when he types in a response, his fingers are on autopilot.

Bucky?

Chapter End Notes
i've been listening to a lot of Futuristic and A Great Big World, for those curious.

fun fact: in early drafts, Isaiah was the one who showed Steve that clip in the film room. but Isaiah has evolved into something different now, and it fits Sam's character better, i would say.
Senior Day

Chapter Summary

The last game of the regular season.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several events occur on Monday morning.

The first event is this: the BCS releases rankings for the final week of the regular season. Southeast State remains locked at number one. However, somewhat shockingly, American State only falls to number three. This causes a small uproar in the college football community.

Clint is the first to hear about it. After his morning run, Steve is searching for a second breakfast when he hears what sounds like a small avalanche from the living room. He dashes in to find Clint Barton wedged between the couch and the coffee table, tangled in at least three different blankets, voice muffled by a pillow.

"You okay?" Steve asks, removing the pillow to find Clint, wide-eyed.

"We're number three," is all he says in response.

It's virtually unheard of; usually, even a single loss results in a sharp drop in the rankings. But they only fell to number three.

Steve gapes, open-mouthed, at the television screen. The rankings displayed on-screen tell an intricate story.

BCS Top Ten—Week 12

1. Southeast State (11-0)
2. Auburn (11-0)
3. American State (10-1)
4. TCU (11-0)
5. Wisconsin (10-1)
6. LSU (10-1)
7. Stanford (10-1)
8. Lemurian (10-1)
9. Oregon (9-1)
10. Ohio State (10-1)

The country is already up in arms on behalf of undefeated TCU.

The BCS system is a series of complex computer programs that accounts not only for wins and losses, but also for strength of schedule, points scored, points allowed, quality of wins, quality of losses, and several other factors when deciding where to place each team. Apparently, ASU’s low-scoring loss to the best team in the country reflected well upon them. And though TCU can boast 11 wins, those all came against relatively weak opponents.
At the end of the season, the top two BCS teams will play for the national title in January. And as of now, only one team stands in between American State and that championship game.

"Does this mean we have to root for Alabama this week?" Clint's voice sounds from somewhere near Steve's toes.

Steve grimaces. "Gross."

Clint is right, though. If Alabama can beat Auburn this week in the Iron Bowl, American State has a distant chance to sneak back to number two. And, historically speaking, Alabama is very good at beating Auburn.

"Roll Tide?" Clint tries.

"I won't say it."

The second event to occur on Monday morning is this: Steve receives an official email from the Heisman Trophy Trust. It informs him that he has been selected as a finalist for this year's award, and invites him to attend the ceremony in New York City two weeks from Saturday.

Steve reads the email through four times, then has to set his computer aside so he can lie down and focus on breathing.

It's not a surprise. There have been rumors involving "Steve Rogers" and "Heisman Trophy" for months. But Steve kept busy ignoring those rumors, denying any comments when dealing with media, and focusing on football.

This is real, now.

He's officially going to New York, and he officially has a chance to win one of the most prestigious awards in American sports history.

The third event is this: Clint Barton gets a new phone. Well, a new number, anyway.

Since their loss Saturday afternoon, the rude text messaging has slowed, but not stopped. And though he bemoans the fifteen-dollar fee, Clint eventually goes through with the process. He doesn't really have a choice once Natasha has her say.

("What if I just start sending insults back?" Clint argues.

"No," Natasha says firmly. "You'll get in more trouble than any of them, and you know it."

"Okay … but you gotta admit it would be fun."

She shrugs. "So give them my number instead."

"I'm not giving them your number!" Clint exclaims. "I don't want them sending you death threats, I care about you!"

And then Natasha fixes him with a very chilly, very pointed glare until he gets the picture.)
This triggers the fourth event to occur on Monday morning: Steve Rogers takes up arms against all of Twitter.

Every time he opens the app, he is greeted by hostile tweets about Clint Barton. When the whole situation forces Clint to change his phone number just to end the abuse, Steve decides to take action.

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
To all the self-proclaimed "ASU fans" out there bashing Clint Barton: you should be ashamed

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
In case you forgot: Barton has made 18 of 19 FG on the season and he has the highest FG pct of any NAC kicker

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
Not to mention he scored ONE HUNDRED % of our points against southeast

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
We wouldn't have even been in a position to ATTEMPT a game winning FG if it wasn't for Barton's efforts in the 1st half

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
Clint Barton is one of the most talented, hard-working, and valuable members of our team

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
If you were a real ASU fan you would never turn your back on one of our players

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
American State has more class than this.

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
We all played our hearts out on Saturday against a tough team, including Clint Barton. Especially Clint Barton

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
Sometimes you just don't catch all the breaks. That's football. But as soon as we start passing off blame we only weaken ourselves

**Steve Rogers SteveRogersQB**
I stand by Clint Barton

When he's satisfied that he's gotten the point across, Steve turns off his notifications.

The fifth event to happen on Monday morning isn't an event so much as a mundane reality: Steve and his teammates go to class.

The town of Simon, Illinois, lives and dies with its football team. When they win, the whole town wins. When they lose, the student body descends into a state of agonized depression. It's not uncommon for most students to skip class the Monday after a loss. Hell, it's not unheard of for teachers to cancel class outright.

The team members themselves, however, do not have the luxury of a mourning period. The academic requirements for student athletes are stringent and unyielding. It is one of the grandest
hypocrisies of college sports.

One thing does not happen on Monday morning: Bucky does not text Steve back.
That happens on Wednesday.

"Remind me never to piss you off, Captain," Isaiah says with a smirk.

Eli glances up at them for a split-second before returning his attention to his daughter's hair, which he's half-way through braiding. "Why, what did he do this time?"

"Declared war on half the fanbase," Isaiah replies.

"I did not declare war," Steve groans. "I just … dispensed a little advice."

"That wasn't advice, that was a fuckin' beatdown."

Monica gasps. "Daddy! Ice said a bad word!"

"Sit still," Eli shoots back. "Let me finish your hair, Granny's gonna be here any minute."

The four of them are gathered on the front porch, enjoying an unseasonably warm and sunny day. Four-year-old Monica is planted on the bottom step. Her father sits behind her with grease and a comb. Isaiah and Steve mirror them on the other end of the stairs, Steve rubbing deep circles into Isaiah's shoulder blades. Kate, Clint, and Natasha are inside giving Tanya, Eli's youngest, a bath before Eli's mother arrives. They make a pretty unconventional family. Steve kind of loves it.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, and Saturday is the last game of the season. Normally, the Bradleys would drive the two-and-a-half hours to their mother's home in the Quad Cities to celebrate the holidays, but this year is a little different.

"Why don't we go to Granny's house like always?" Monica asks.

Eli looks skyward and sighs heavily. Steve suspects this is not the first time Monica has asked this question.

"Saturday is Daddy's last football game, remember?" Steve says gently.

Since it's the last home game of his career, Eli will be a part of Senior Day celebrations. Every year on the last home game of the season, American State celebrates Senior Day, honoring its seniors by introducing them all before the game alongside their parents and family members. Which is why Mrs. Bradley is making the trip to Simon, despite her poor health.

Monica's eyes are round. "His last football game ever?"

"Ever at American State," Steve says.

"Are they kicking you out?" Monica asks with the kind of genuine concern usually only displayed by empathetic parental-figures or extremely docile golden retrievers.

Isaiah laughs.
"No, baby," Eli says. "I'm only allowed to play football at American State for four years, and my four years are over."

"I'm four!" she says brightly, making Isaiah laugh harder.

"You're goofy is what you are," Eli says. "Stop squirming, we got one more braid left."

"Steve is staying for Thanksgiving too, though, right?" she asks plaintively.

"Of course I am!" Steve says. "I can't even picture Thanksgiving without my best girls."

That makes her giggle.

Steve has spent the last three Thanksgivings with the Bradley family. ASU always has a game on Saturday, so it's almost impossible to fly back and forth to Brooklyn for the holiday. Plus, Eli's mother adopted Steve practically on sight their freshman year. When they first met, he had just gone through with the Tommy John surgery—had his arm all wrapped up in a sling—looked like a dog caught in a thunderstorm. Mrs. Bradley shoveled four servings of Thanksgiving dinner into him, plus a handful of home-remedies for pain relief. She has been like a second mother to him ever since.

"Is it Steve's last game at American State, too?" Monica asks.

"Oh—I'm—no, it's not," he stutters. "I can play a whole 'nother year."

Steve, who redshirted his freshman year, technically has another year of eligibility. But he could also enter the NFL draft early. So this could be his last game with American State.

The decision has been causing him a great deal of angst, to say the least.

"We'll see, won't we?" Isaiah murmurs, nudging Steve with his elbow.

The two of them have yet to decide whether or not to stay for their senior season. They'd been hoping to go out on top, with a National Championship win, but those chances are looking pretty slim, these days.

"Yeah we will," Steve says softly.

Which, of course, is when his cell phone buzzes from the pocket of his sweatshirt.

**Bucky**

*congrats Heisman*

It feels, for all the world, as if Steve's stomach is tumbling down the porch steps. "Shit," he whispers.

"What's up?" Isaiah asks, craning his neck.

Instinctively, Steve leans back so Isaiah can't see the phone screen.

"Nothing, just—I got a text."

He can't explain why he feels the need to keep Bucky a secret. He's not ashamed of Bucky, nor is he ashamed of Isaiah, but combining them seems like a bad idea. Vinegar and baking soda. For now, at least. So Steve leans back and keeps his phone screen behind Isaiah's head while he texts a response.

**Steve Rogers**

*Thanks I'm still pretty shocked but yeah thank you*
Bucky
trust me ur the only one surprised

Steve gives Isaiah's shoulder a squeeze. "I'm gonna go inside. You good?"

"Aw, I'm just getting loose," he replies, rolling his neck experimentally.

"Is there anything—?"

Isaiah laughs. "Nah, I'm messing with you. Get out of here."

Steve pulls himself to his feet and waves a vague good-bye to the Bradleys. Inside, the house is dim and the living room is empty. He eases onto their creaky herringbone armchair and stares at his phone for a second before typing. Battles are primarily won …

Steve Rogers
Bucky listen I know it's been a long time but we should get together sometime and talk. You know, football or school or life or whatever, I just want to catch up. You could come down here, you're welcome anytime, or I could drive up to Winter Station if you want, or we could meet half way in the city? What do you think?

He waits for what feels like forever, maybe a day, maybe four minutes. His eyes drift out of focus. When it finally comes, Bucky's response doesn't ease his nerves.

Bucky
i don't know

Steve Rogers
Got any thanksgiving plans? We could do something

He waits fifteen minutes, this time. The afternoon is slipping away, but damned if he'll let Bucky slip away, too.

Steve Rogers
Buck?

Bucky
you know Maximoff is a finalist too

If it means keeping Bucky engaged and talking, Steve will allow him a little deflection.

Steve Rogers
Yeah I saw! I met him after the game. He seemed cool

Bucky
"cool" might be a stretch

It's unclear whether or not Bucky is joking, so Steve aims for a neutral response.

Steve Rogers
Haha well I'll have to talk to him again when we're in NYC

Silence. Bucky doesn't answer for five, then ten minutes. Steve steps off the diving board.

Steve Rogers
How about we meet in Chicago or something? Just to hang out

**Bucky**
we have practice

**Steve Rogers**
Sunday then? We have a day off, what about you guys?

**Bucky**
ya

**Steve Rogers**
Sunday's free day at Shedd Aquarium

**Bucky**
only if ur from illinois

Steve almost smacks himself. He got an Illinois driver's license when he turned twenty-one, but of course Bucky won't have one. Free day at the aquarium. Good going, Rogers. While he's berating himself for the oversight, Bucky texts him again.

**Bucky**
art institute?

Steve buries his face in his hands.

Mrs. Bradley is a handsome woman with a square chin, broad shoulders, and strong hands. She wears her hair slicked into a bun at the back of her head, and her voice naturally hovers between the decibels of a kitchen timer and an excited operatic tenor. She walks with a cane everywhere, except when she's cooking.

It's easy to see where the boys get their athletic ability; Mrs. Bradley is almost as tall as her sons, and she has an uncanny ability to reach from the kitchen sink to the stove on the opposite side of the room almost without trying. She also displays excellent aim when tossing crumpled aluminum into the trash.

Where Eli got his insecurity, or Isaiah his taciturn shyness, is an utter mystery.

Thanksgiving is a whirlwind of small children, sweet potatoes, NFL football, and Mrs. Bradley threatening Isaiah with her cane when he goes back for fifths.

(On the other hand: "Steve, come on now, have another plate," she insists.

"Oh—I couldn't, ma'am. I've had three already."

"Let's make it four, you hear me?")

Mrs. Bradley was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago, but the disease has slowed her down very little, if at all. She spends Wednesday night working on desserts—cherry pie, sweet potato pie, chess pie, and chocolate chip cookies by Kate's request. On Thursday, she and Eli team up to produce a feast that could feed either a 50-man battalion or a handful of college athletes.

As always, Steve offers to help, but gets shot down—while Isaiah doesn't offer to help, and gets called out. "I'm in charge of the cranberry sauce," he claims, which means he can use a can opener.
without harming himself.

Clint and Natasha are also instructed to wait on the sidelines, though the second she learns Sam Wilson is from down South, Mrs. Bradley recruits him to man the timers and to dump giblets into the gravy.

The meal features roast turkey, smoked turkey, deep-fried turkey, glazed ham, dressing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes topped with fat browned marshmallows, macaroni and cheese, green beans, collard greens, potato salad, several stacks of cornbread, butter, gravy, deviled eggs, and of course, the canned cranberry sauce.

"That was delicious, Mrs. Bradley," Steve says after his fourth plate. "I don't think I've ever eaten so much in my life."

"You say that every year, baby."

After eating and napping, Mrs. Bradley wrangles Isaiah into clean-up duties while Steve, Sam, and Kate play catch with a football in the backyard. Steve tumbles melodramatically to the ground every time Monica tries to tackle him; Eli watches and worries about skinned knees.

"Trade me," Steve says, tossing Eli the ball. Then he flops into a plastic lawn chair and watches Eli and Kate play an enthusiastic game of keep-away with their daughters. Steve's cheeks hurt from smiling. He thinks of Ebbets, his old golden retriever back in Brooklyn; he thinks of Carl Sandburg and the Smoke of Autumn; he thinks of David Tyree and the New York Giants; he thinks of his cell phone, which he left upstairs next to his pillow. The temptation to spend the day texting would have been too great.

Steve begins their senior day game by throwing a touchdown pass to Isaiah Bradley.

Isaiah has been fired up since their loss a week before. (He planted himself on the sideline for the Senior Day festivities and remained there, rigid and stonelike, except to hug his mother and Eli before the coin toss.)

Notre Dame never stood a chance.

The first half alone is a blowout. Isaiah runs for another touchdown, Sam and Johnny catch one each, and Clint tacks on two more field goals. Luke Cage and Danny Rand, for their part, are bloodhounds; the Irish don't score in the first half, and get a single touchdown in the second.

By the fourth quarter, Steve and Isaiah have accounted for seven touchdowns between them.

Feeling safe with a 50-point lead, Coach Fury takes most of the starters out of the game. To a deep roar of thunderous applause, Steve leaves the field half-way through the fourth quarter, and Eli runs the offense for the remainder of the game.

He ends up throwing a touchdown pass, himself.

Steve's heart aches.

Where was this team last week? Where was this offense with the sixty points and the mammoth yards from scrimmage? Where was their loyal fanbase? Where was Clint Barton's impeccable aim?

As proud as he is to watch Eli Bradley close out his senior season with unfathomable success, Steve can't help but think it's all for nothing.
It is bittersweet. This team deserves to play for a national championship, maybe more than any team in history. Isaiah Bradley, the most underappreciated running back in the country; his brother Eli, forgotten in the cracks; Clint Barton, one of the most consistent kickers in conference history; indestructible Luke Cage, who battled so hard and gave up so little and still suffered a loss to mar the entire season.

Instead, this will be it. A legacy of potential and distant thunder.

These thoughts haunt Steve all the way through post-game interviews, all the way to the locker room afterwards. The team is gathered there, surged with lingering adrenaline and the high of a big win and the distant mixture of joy, terror, and nostalgia that defines the end of a season.

Nick Fury takes his time; he stands before them, arms folded, staring at the floor. Steve expects something deep, inspiring, and emotional. Something to punch you in the gut like only Nick Fury can.

He takes a deep breath, and looks Steve in the eye. "Auburn lost."

Pandemonium.

An Auburn loss doesn't guarantee anything. But it infuses them with hope.

Isaiah almost breaks Steve's ribs, he hugs him so hard.

Chapter End Notes

sorry i just love the bradleys so muchhhh
You know those times you stop through a town where you used to live and make plans to meet an old friend you haven't seen in awhile, and you get together at some restaurant, and you smile and laugh and have a great time, and it's like you were never apart? This is not that kind of reunion.

Chapter Notes

trigger warnings: modern art, bad allegory, gaping subtext

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isaiah is the real test.

Eli is out of the house with Kate and the girls today, and Clint is preoccupied with video games. ("I'll be damned before I do homework on Sunday. Sunday is a day of rest," he declares.

"So when midnight rolls around you'll pull an all-nighter, like always?" Steve says.

"I like to think of it as 'effective time management'."

"You never sleep."

"Exactly. Effective.")

Anyway, that means Isaiah will be the only real obstacle when it comes time for Steve to drive to Chicago.

Through a series of disjunct and terse text messages, Steve and Bucky agreed to meet at the Art Institute around two in the afternoon. It's an hour drive, give or take, depending on traffic and parking.

It's a fine plan. Still, it makes for a sleepless night, an early morning, a skipped breakfast, and a distracted attempt at reading for English class before Steve gives up and retreats to the basement. He hides there most of the morning. He even lifts weights, for awhile. Not too much, since he doesn't have a spotter and all he can think about is Bucky spotting for him, but the sentiment is there, anyway.

He ventures upstairs around noon and stops dead in his tracks at the top of the stairs. He holds his breath. He thinks, fleetingly, of the safety of silence in nature.

Isaiah is lounging in a rickety kitchen chair, feet up on the table. His laptop is open, but the screen is black; his textbook is spread across his lap, but his attention is fixed on his phone screen. Technically, Steve could sneak out the back door. But he's an adult, dammit. And he doesn't need to
be ashamed about driving sixty miles to meet his former best friend-turned high school crush-turned the one that got away-turned violent in-conference opponent who ended up dashing Steve's hopes for a National Championship and a Heisman Trophy and a first-round draft pick in the span of about two seconds.

It's not a weird situation at all. He has no reason to cover his tracks. What tracks? What *tracks*?

"Morning, Captain," Isaiah says, not looking up from his phone.

"Yeah, you, um, it's actually afternoon, technically." Steve laughs. He's not sure why. The little muscles over his eye start to twitch. "But I haven't seen you all morning! So it's cool. Yeah! Good morning. *Captain.*"

Isaiah tilts his head to look at Steve. Raises one eyebrow.

"I'm going out," Steve answers the unasked question.

"Why?" Isaiah asks. He only sounds half-interested, but Steve can feel the judgement. It tingles all the way up the hair on his arms.

He pretends not to hear the question as he strides through the kitchen, the dining room, and the foyer. In fact, Steve is literally walking out the door when he hears Isaiah call after him.

"Rogers!" Isaiah barks from the big oak front doorway.

Steve pauses at the bottom porch-step. Turns to face his roommate. "Yeah?" he says lightly. "What's up?"

"Where you going?" he asks, voice hard and unreadable.

Steve swallows. "Christmas shopping."

"For who?"

"... What?"

"Who are you shopping for?" Isaiah asks.

"... You."

It is bright outside, in a colorless, wintery way; bright outside and dark inside the house, so Steve can't really see Isaiah's face: just his white teeth and the bright pink highlights in his hair.

He would swear that, at some point in the last four years, he's bought Christmas presents for Isaiah Bradley. He can't remember. But he would swear.

It is fortunate, Steve thinks, that Isaiah's face is hidden in shadows. It makes it easier to smile and wave and turn his back.

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And that's how Steve ends up sitting on the front steps of the Art Institute of Chicago at 1:30, watching the crowd pass by, watching all the faces that don't belong to Bucky. At this moment in time, this crowded, lonely moment, Steve understands Einstein's theory of relativity. Something about putting your hand on a hot stove. His very soul is on a hot stove.

*Breathe.*
He wastes time by purchasing tickets. He doesn’t hear the total—he just slides his debit card across the counter and smiles.

That kills fifteen minutes.

He retreats outside again and sits down on a middle step, under a shadow of one of the giant green lions. Propping his elbows on his knees, he takes a look around, catching sight of a couple kissing, a child throwing a temper tantrum, and a teenager trying to approach a pigeon without scaring it off. Three steps down, Steve notices a girl with pink hair and red Converse bent over a sketchbook, and he wishes distantly that he had thought to bring his own. He cranes his neck, unabashedly trying to get a better look at whatever she’s drawing. Though he can't see the whole page, he can see one corner, where she has sketched a series of human eyes with different levels of shading. It makes him smile.

Steve's sketchbooks have pages upon pages of similar, largely irrelevant, details: rows and rows of eyeballs, thumbs, kneecaps, and that crease between the nose and the bow of the lip. Seeing this girl mirror his repetitive habit makes him smile.

Being in downtown Chicago in November is like being indoors. Gray walls, gray ceilings, and gray floors. As always, the city feels smaller than it is, for the intimacy. It energizes Steve. It uplifts him the way the prairie fields and low-slung brick roads can't. Maybe it's the tallness of the buildings, or the closeness of the clouds, or the narrowness of the wind, or the way nothing leaves a shadow because there are lights shining from every angle.

He checks the time on his phone screen. 1:57. Steve is not patient enough for this, and the fluttering in his stomach is not patient enough for this. He scans the crowd with a manic edge. He feels like those computer programs in science fiction movies with facial recognition software, working in rapid streams of binary. He identifies foreign middle-aged couples, high schoolers, women with walkers and silver hair, hipsters, art students, hipster art students.

The girl with the sketchbook pauses, stretching her legs and pointing her toes toward the bottom step. It is 2:02, and he doesn't see a sign of Bucky. He waits for another five eternal minutes. *Hot stove*.

He doesn't know if Bucky will be happy to see him, or if their relationship will be anything like it was before. He remembers Bucky biting down on a smile. He remembers Bucky after a few hard drinks, the way his laugh became more like a giggle and he grew clumsy. He remembers Bucky falling asleep on his shoulder, and tries not to remember.

Steve scans the crowd again: two old men speaking an Asian dialect, a black girl taking a picture with her cell phone, a boy in a Cubs hat. A familiar anxiety stretches in Steve's ribcage, the feeling of a play clock winding down while he's trying to spit out an audible.

It is 2:15.

He hadn't considered the possibility of Bucky not showing. In fact he avoided considering *all kinds* of possibilities, out of a superstitious fear that he might get his hopes up and ruin the whole situation. Because, let's face it, all athletes are superstitious, especially the ones who deny it.

Steve wants to reclaim his old relationship with Bucky, but he’s also not sure what their old relationship was. He has had four years to contemplate that latent attraction he kept hidden for weeks before Bucky left. Yeah, Bucky Barnes was cute, and compassionate, and protective, and he never failed to make Steve laugh. But they were best friends, and Steve had been discovering what would turn out to be a very open-minded sexuality for the first time. He's tried hard not to read into things.
Especially since Bucky disappeared.

Even more especially since Bucky came back.

It is 2:19 and heat sears between Steve's toes and behind his eyes and through the notches in his spine.

The girl with pink hair stands up as another girl approaches; she gives her a peck on the lips and hands over the sketchbook. The new girl laughs. Steve overhears a clipping of the conversation.

"I was wondering where that went!"

"You're lucky I'm here to clean up after you."

"Please. You stole it, don't lie."

They turn away from him and descend the staircase, laughing together, and Steve doesn't hear whether or not the girl with pink hair was telling the truth. The two of them drift across Steve's vision like a curtain and as they leave, Bucky appears.

On the football field, Barnes is monstrous and many-headed. He is a titan. He sets the field on fire.

Here, in a crowd of nobodies, he is the least. He does not take up space or air or light; he refracts it. He slots in the shadows and the little gaps between people. And for all these smoky qualities, Steve still couldn't miss him.

He is there at the bottom of the concrete staircase, one foot a step above the other, on the balls of his feet, barely there. He is wearing faded black Southeast State gear in several layers, none of which are adequate for winter in the Windy City. Under Armour, T-shirt, White Sox hat, and a sweatshirt with the hood half-way up. He has a cup of coffee in each hand.

Steve stands up so fast his head spins.

"Bucky," he croaks. He'd meant to call out but his voice is broken and barely usable. He clears his throat and tries again. "Hey, Buck."

"Hey."

That's it. Steve hesitates, expecting some kind of elaboration: How are you? or Sorry I'm late or Nice weather we're having. But that's all Bucky offers, just Hey, one sharp, throaty syllable that sounds like it hurt on the way out. He doesn't smile, or nod, or wave. A stillness lingers about him, but not a calm stillness. It is a calculated stillness, a stillness pulsing with potential energy. A small core of low pressure in the atmosphere where high-stress wind patterns diverge.

Steve smiles in that weird way where every muscle in your face feels stiff. "How are you?"

Bucky shrugs and holds out one of the coffees for Steve to take.

"Didn't know it was a date," Steve teases.

Without reacting, Bucky takes a sip of his own drink. "I wanted something, so I got you one too."

"You didn't have to."

"I didn't know what you'd like, though," Bucky says, ignoring Steve. "I just got two of the same."
Steve inspects his cup, and moves the sleeve to see if there is an order written on it, but the only writing there is a neatly scrawled "James".

"What is it?" Steve asks.

"Hot chocolate."

Steve's initial reaction is, absurdly, to laugh. The idea that James Barnes brought him hot chocolate blows a circuit in his brain. "Thanks," is all he can say back.

They look at each other, make brief eye contact, and without saying anything, they both know that they won't hug. It's like a conscious thought between them. And it sets the tone for the rest of the afternoon. They're too familiar for a hand-shake or for small-talk, but they've spent too long apart to find common ground.

"So," Steve says, turning one shoulder vaguely toward the museum entrance. "You want to...? I got us tickets."

Bucky blinks at Steve, then at the big arched doorways. "Speaking of things you didn't have to do."

"Oh. Well. I was here, so I figured ... Plus it was my idea and—I mean, you got me coffee!" he stutters through an explanation. "Or—that's, I mean. Hot chocolate."

Bucky says nothing. He blinks again. His expression is blank. A veil carved out of marble.

"So," Steve begins, without knowing what he's going to say.

"Lead the way."

Can't argue with that.

They can avoid awkwardness at first by opening doors, traversing crowds, handing over tickets, going through security, and choosing a gallery to start with. But eventually the uncomfortable silence creeps up on them again. Bucky remains expressionless. He is barely present; wisps of smoke curling from a blown-out candle. It makes Steve ultra-self-conscious of his own presence. His limbs feel gawky and obtrusive.

"So," Steve begins, again without any conversation destination. "You guys won yesterday."

Without looking at him, Bucky nods.

"NSU was kind of weak this year," Steve adds. While they were playing Notre Dame yesterday, Bucky's team faced off against National State. Obliterated them.

"They just need a decent quarterback."

"Yeah!" Steve jumps on the possibility for an exchange. "Yeah, they have some good tools. Roberts just can't get them the ball well."

"They're not cut out for the spread." Bucky speaks as if he doesn't want to be heard. He drags all his words across asphalt, low and rocky, and his lips barely move.

"I mean, your defense makes any offense hard to run," Steve says. He attempts a smile, but Bucky doesn't look at him. "You guys are pretty good."

"It's like we're the number one team in the country or something," Bucky deadpans.
Steve winces, unsure whether or not he is supposed to laugh. What comes out is an aborted huff of air, then he swallows and looks at his feet. "Yeah, well—yeah, you sure put together a season for the record books."

"Ain't over yet."

With that, Bucky drifts away toward the next gallery. Steve realizes, belatedly, that he didn't look at a single piece in the first. He follows Bucky anyway.

The interior of the Art Institute would be beautiful even without the works of art. The architecture is pristine, and the soft lighting casts a warm, soothing glow over everything. Steve steals a glance at Bucky, whose chin is lifted toward a small Monet. His face is still expressionless, but now, tilted up toward the light, it is burnished in gold, a warm contrast to the smooth shadows of his jawline and the stubble dusted there. His eyelashes cast long shadows over his cheekbones. Absently, he pulls his hood down, revealing dark locks of hair where they curl under his hat and around his ears.

Steve stares openly at him for a split-second too long: Bucky's eyes flick to meet his and, instantly, he can feel his stomach plummet off the edge of a cliff.

Over the past four years, Steve had begun to wonder if he ever really had a crush on Bucky, or if he just romanticized their subtle flirting in his memory. Anyway, seeing him here, bathed in the gentle pastels of late-19th-century art? That's not even fair.

"So." Steve clears his throat. He wants to make up for insulting Bucky's team. And maybe, if he distracts him enough, Bucky won't notice the way Steve is staring too long, blushing too much, and gripping his drink too tight. "NAC this week," he offers. Bucky will be playing in the NAC championship on Saturday, representing their division against Lemurian, who gave American State a headache earlier in the year. "Big game."

"Yeah."

"... Lemurian was tough."

Bucky shrugs one shoulder.

*Come on, Buck. Give me something, here, anything,* Steve thinks. Out loud, he says, "Luke said their running back was hard to bring down."

For a moment, Bucky actually turns to look at Steve. His eyes are narrowed, either deep in thought or in annoyance. "He y'all's big linebacker, right?"

"Yeah, Luke Cage."

Bucky takes a drink and squints at the nearest painting. "I'm faster than him."

So much for not insulting the guy.

"So what are you majoring in?" Steve asks. Because that's how this day is going to go.

"Psychology."

The next room is full of more modern works. Bucky lingers in front of Jasper Johns' *Target.*

"So ... got a girlfriend or anything?" Steve asks, feeling distinctly lame, like a distant relative playing catch-up at Christmas dinner.
Bucky makes a harsh noise in the back of his throat that could pass for either laughter or anger. "Not really my thing."

"Dating, or girls?" Steve asks, trying to lighten the mood.

"Both."

Static pops in Steve's brain. It's like when the cable goes out, but the TV stays on, ringing and casting an eerie glow across the living room furniture. He has to consciously close his mouth. "Um, any boyfriends, then?"

Finally, for the first time all day, an emotion cracks Bucky's face. He turns to Steve with a deeply skeptical scowl. "Come on," he says in that unused, granite voice. "I'm from Texas, remember?"

Then he affects a deep, syrupy Southern accent and drawls, "We don't tolerate homosexuals in the South."

Steve's jaw drops again. He can't tell for sure if this is a joke.

Bucky drops the accent and adds, almost inaudible, "So technically I'm still in the closet."

Steve thinks about that pocket of low-pressure atmosphere, again. He can feel the storm converging on the edges.

"Sorry," he offers.

"For what."

"You know," Steve says. "Sorry you can't be what you like."

"Not your fault."

"I just—I'm sorry. I've been out—with the guys anyway, my teammates know I'm bi, and—and it's nice, you know," Steve says. Bucky exhales audibly, but doesn't answer, so Steve goes on: "It's not fair that you can't be with someone you like. That you can't live your life."

"I've lived in Wisconsin for two years, now," Bucky says. "I could probably date a guy if I wanted to."

"... Do you want to?"

For a long time, Bucky doesn't say anything. A very long time. Or it feels like a long time. Hot stove. He doesn't move. He is fading smoke again, hollow stillness. Light and sound pass right through him like nothing. He stares at the Target, his face impassive.

Steve shouldn't have said anything. He wants to take it back, but his throat is in knots and he can't get sounds to work. Finally, Bucky speaks, and Steve almost misses it; one syllable, terse and cold, the kind of sound that doesn't echo.

"No."

Bucky leads the way into the next gallery.

Steve can barely keep up.

He'd never known Bucky was gay. How had he not known? How long has Bucky known? What was that about homophobia in the south? Is that why he doesn't want to date? Or was he joking
They travel through another gallery, and two more after that, room after room of wooden footsteps and clunky conversation. His feet scuff against the floor with each step. Steve feels trapped, a bit. He can't tell if Bucky is enjoying himself or not. If he's dragging his feet and drifting quietly from room to room because he's bored, or unhappy, or if he just doesn't know how to act around Steve.

Either way, Steve is beginning to notice a dull ache in his chest.

Bucky's not moving fast, but he slips through the galleries at a disinterested speed, an unobservant speed, the speed of a glance and a swig of coffee, just like that, onto the next painting. Steve could spend twenty minutes in front of each and every work here, but more importantly, he wants Bucky to have a good time. He wants Bucky to open up and talk. He wants Bucky to smile more. He wants Bucky, plain and simple.

His eyes linger on a Caillebotte as he trails after Bucky—and then walks straight into him, holding his Starbucks at arms-length to keep from spilling. Bucky has stopped short just inside the doorway to the next gallery.

"What's wrong?" Steve gasps, instinctively checking Bucky for injuries or signs of distress.

If anything, he looks mad; alert; ready to fight. It's the difference between the fourth quarter and the first quarter of a football game, an unnamable freshness in the eyes, a steadiness of the shoulders. He is glaring at—Steve follows his line of sight—a huge painting on the nearest wall. Steve recognizes it instantly and feels the air melt in his lungs.

He is in the same room as *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. It's beautiful, he thinks, and glances back at Bucky; it's beautiful.

"You okay?" Steve asks again, more tentative.

"Fine."

Steve exhales, the air shuddering in his lungs.

Without warning, Bucky strides forward to read the placard. Steve hops a little to catch up, leans just close enough to hear Bucky read aloud.

"*Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte,*" he says in flawless French dialect, and Steve's heart stutters. "I don't get it."

"Don't get what?" Steve says, softly, delicately, because this feels very important all of a sudden. After half an hour of stuttering silences, Bucky has finally spoken up about something, about a work of art, even, and Steve doesn't want to scare him off. Not now.

"It's a mess."

Steve glances at the painting, and at the placard with its title and "Georges Seurat" underneath, and it clicks. "Here," he says, reaching toward Bucky with one hand, telegraphing his movement and his intent. He doesn't take Bucky's elbow until getting a nod of permission. Gently, he guides Bucky to the opposite end of the room. He can feel Bucky's eyes following him. Boring into him.

He turns around to face the painting again. Bucky fixes him with a wary gaze. His face is flushed, deep pink blooming high on his cheekbones.
"Look." Steve gestures toward the piece, and Bucky's eyes slowly follow.

Steve doesn't look at the painting, himself. He would rather see Bucky's reaction. It's more fascinating, anyway, more vivid and more hopeful. He lifts his chin and parts his lips, just enough that Steve can see the tips of his middle teeth. He doesn't smile, exactly, but the intake of breath is practically visible. Steve can see Bucky's pupils dilate, even through the fan of his long lashes.

At this point, Steve realizes he has probably spent more time studying Bucky's face than all of the paintings in the Art Institute put together, and he blushes at the thought.

"Oh," Bucky says. It's more of a sigh, a full-bodied exhale.

Steve smiles.

Bucky backtracks, maybe twenty feet away. Experimentally, he leans back and then leans forward, peering closely at the thick dots of paint. It's fascinating to watch. Bucky is so deep in concentration that he seems to have forgotten there are other patrons in the museum at all. When he speaks, his voice cracks.

"Modern."

It takes Steve a second to realize Bucky is asking a question. Bucky's voice drops with such deadly precision that sometimes it's hard to pick up on timbre; sometimes you almost miss him speaking entirely, and at that point his words have sliced through you before you can defend yourself.

"Y—yes," Steve manages. "It's modern." He swallows around the lump forming in his throat.

"It makes sense, though," Bucky says.

Steve isn't sure what to make of that. Bucky's voice lacks any inflection to give Steve a clue, so he doesn't respond right away. He feels, inexplicably, bafflingly, and agonizingly, that he has to tiptoe around Bucky. Like Bucky is a skittish animal on the verge of escaping right from Steve's fingers, or worse, a skittish animal that might bite back.

"It's pointillism," Steve offers neutrally.

"Have you seen it before."

"Not in person," Steve says. "But it's pretty famous."

Bucky doesn't answer.

"A—a little famous, anyway," Steve says, because he doesn't want Bucky to feel stupid. "It's not the Mona Lisa, or anything."

Without speaking, Bucky takes a sip of his drink.

His eyes are restless, Steve notices. They dance over the Seurat, then around Steve's shoes, then over his shoulder, presumably to one of the other paintings. His gaze flicks to Steve's and for one bright blue second, they make eye contact, and Steve's heart throws itself against the bars of his ribcage, but then Bucky's eyes skitter away again. He takes another drink and turns for the door.

So close.

It's been years, but Steve thought he could remember conversations that never seemed to end, a Bucky who never seemed to run dry of teasing remarks and friendly banter. The Bucky Barnes in his
memory shines bright with laughter. Maybe Steve is remembering wrong. Or maybe something has happened in their time apart, maybe something about those years made Bucky bitter. Maybe he never liked Steve that much, to begin with. What is it they say about rose-tinted glasses?

"Steve."

He blinks at the sound of his name, snapping back to reality.

Bucky has stopped short at his side, and at first Steve's hackles rise; at first, he scans the room for potential threats. Then he glances back at Bucky's face, and sees that it is open, breezy, sunlight spilling over a small windowsill. It's not a smile, but it still sings. It makes Bucky's eyes look smaller and his chest look bigger.

It almost knocks Steve off his feet.

Steve follows his gaze and sees, in a far corner of the gallery, a middle-aged woman with a service dog. It's a sheepdog, he thinks, maybe a collie or an Australian shepherd, and it has pale blue eyes—they almost look gray from a distance—and those eyes are fixed on the dog's owner, nose upturned and mouth spread in a uniquely dog-like smile, not exactly a smile, but a look of adoration. A look that makes others smile. And Steve does smile, when he sees the dog, this goofy anomaly in a stale, high-class setting.

He looks back at Bucky and smiles harder. He could do this all day, he thinks, forget Seurat and Monet and Warhol and long bright hardwood floors, forget hot chocolate, even.

When Bucky looks at him, Steve almost gasps out loud. He looks at Steve, and for a moment, he looks happy.

"You still taking art classes."

Steve lets out a cold breath. "Not really. I took an art history last year."

Bucky glances at Steve, then back to his cup.

"Technically I'm a business major," Steve clarifies. "But I needed the fine arts credit. Everyone told me to do general music because it's supposed to be the easy way out, but ..."

"You've never been an easy-way-out kind of guy."

Steve barks with laughter. His face feels like clay, half-shaped and cold and growing stiff under the lights. "No," he agrees. "Never have."

Bucky tucks his chin to his chest. He glances up at the dog again, eyes dancing under long lashes.

The last thing they see before leaving is The Old Guitarist. Steve almost misses it. It is small; it would fit in someone's living room between a pair of tall double-hung windows and it would just melt into the decor.

It is beautiful, Steve thinks, but in an understated way. Silver and smoke and sorrow captured in layers of blue. Beautiful, but without demanding attention. Beautiful the way a stranger on the streets of Chicago is beautiful, even if you only catch a glimpse and an idea.

"What's wrong."

"Nothing," Steve sighs, "Nothing, just, it's—look."
Bucky slides in front of the painting and gazes at it. His expression doesn't change. "It's nice."

"Nice?!!" Steve would prefer if Bucky just tackled him. "It's Picasso!"

Bucky looks back at the painting and raises an eyebrow. "Really?" He blinks. "I thought it would be weirder."

"Oh, right," Steve says, tilting his head and looking at the artwork, himself. "Not all of his stuff was crazy abstract."

Steve watches him carefully, tension threading through his spine like a drawstring, but Bucky doesn't elaborate. He stands in front of the Old Guitarist for a long time, though.

"Why blue." Bucky's voice still sounds dark, but maybe less hollow.

"Well," Steve says, clearing his throat. "Picasso had what people called a 'Blue Period'. For three or four years, he was really depressed. He painted everything in shades of blue."

Slowly, Bucky turns his head to look at Steve. His expression is neutral, shadowed. "Four years."

"Yeah, not too long," Steve said. "After that came his Rose Period. Those paintings are brighter."

Bucky is watching Steve, now, not the painting; he is watching Steve's lips and blinking. Focusing on the words. It's unnerving.

"Um—but the Blue Period is pretty famous," Steve stammers. "The guitar—that painting—it's pretty famous."

Bucky's eyes flick to Steve's for the briefest millisecond, then skitter away. He looks at Steve's shoulder, and at his shoes; back at the painting, and at the little placard, The Old Guitarist, irrelevant and irreverent. Meaningless and monumental. He looks down at his coffee cup and picks at an imperfection on the plastic lid.

Steve doesn't know what to say. Nothing stretches between them, a gaping silence and an itch on the back of the neck. He almost gives up, it lasts so long.

Bucky's eyes drift back to the blue guitar and he scowls at it, dark and reticent, for several seconds. "The bright stuff came later."

"Yeah, Buck." Steve forgets, sometimes, how most people associate Picasso with weirdness and color and humor and joy, when that only fits a fraction of his actual output. How interesting, to struggle with depression and mental illness, to produce these grim subjects in mournful colors, to open up your head and release such lonesome and fractured things, and then go down in history as a funny painter. That seems like an accomplishment. Maybe his greatest accomplishment. "He painted some happier stuff later on."

They don't stay long, after that. They've seen the best the museum has to offer—or would have, if Steve had ever been able to take his eyes off of Bucky. But that was worth it.

On the front steps, they are carrying on a deeply awkward, nonverbal discussion about how to say good-bye without hugging or high-fiving or shaking hands or indeed, in Bucky's case, even so much as smiling. They stop by a trash can, and Steve catches another glance at the Sharpie scrawled on the side of his hot chocolate.
"So you're … James, now?" Steve asks, trying not to sound too incredulous.

"I guess."

Steve waits for Bucky to continue, but he doesn't. *I guess.* It's meaningless and open-ended, but his clipped tone of voice doesn't exactly invite conversation.

Steve has no idea how to interact with this dispassionate, taciturn Bucky. It feels like everything he says, no matter how funny or kind or earnest, just rolls off the edge of a cliff into the wind. Four years is a long time. People change. Hell, Steve has changed. But he never imagined a world where he wouldn't be able to carry even the most meager of conversations with Bucky Barnes.

He tries anyway, of course.

"I thought you hated James," he says brightly. He hopes Bucky can hear the smile in his voice, because he still refuses to look at Steve.

"Yeah."

Steve breathes deeply through his nose. "Does everyone call you James?"

"Or Barnes," he shrugs.

"No good new nicknames?" Steve says with another smile that Bucky doesn't see.

"Forty-five."

Steve blinks. He checks the clock on his phone, momentarily disoriented by what seems like a completely unrelated answer.

"Forty-five?" he repeats, frowning. His mind reels back to their game, and the images knock him back to his senses. "Oh! Your jersey number."

"My number," Bucky confirms.

"No one calls you the *Winter Soldier*?" Steve teases lightly.

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Stupid fan bullshit."

Steve laughs, this time. He thinks that might have been a joke. It was funny, anyway. Bucky doesn't laugh though, so it's still difficult to tell.

In the ensuing silence, Steve clears his throat and squares his shoulders, bracing himself for the next part.

"Can … Can I still call you Bucky?"

He turns to fully face Steve. There is a small crease between his eyes, the only marker that betrays any emotion in his otherwise neutral mask.

"Yeah," he says. His lips barely move. "What else would you call me."

Steve feels as if an ocean wave has just crashed into his lungs. The bluntness of the statement—what could otherwise come across as curt and standoffish—is actually what makes Steve so happy.

*What else would you call me.*
Steve shakes his head, opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again, floundering. "I don't know," he admits. He feels like an idiot, but he can't stop grinning. "Yeah. I don't know."

Chapter End Notes

#basicbucky shows up 15 minutes late with starbucks.

note: i've only been to the art institute once, and it's been awhile, so forgive me any inaccuracies. there's also no rhyme or reason to their trip through the galleries. i did enough research on jasper johns as it is.
Texting Bucky remains an exercise in patience. His responses are curt and impassive, and they are never prompt. They are like brittle, twiggy trees scattered across the plains, groping with wooden fingers, resisting the flower and green of spring. Every time Steve comes upon one, he has a hard time deciphering whether or not it is still alive.

Bucky does respond, though; it just takes him anywhere between twenty minutes and two hours. For example, when he gets home from Chicago on Sunday afternoon, Steve sends a text thanking Bucky for spending time with him. Bucky's blunt "np it was fun" arrives after ten p.m.

Good thing it's dead week, because Steve can't even begin to focus on school. No tests, no quizzes, no assignments due; just a week dedicated to studying for finals. In other words, a week dedicated to procrastinating studying for finals.

In Steve's case, it also means daydreaming during lectures. After spacing out through his entire statistics class, he gives in and sends Bucky a simple "what's up?"

It isn't until after lunch that his phone vibrates with the reply.

_Bucky_

*listening to rumlow ramble through another team meeting*

_Bucky_

*livin the dream*

Caught off-guard, Steve laughs, sharp and loud—which wouldn't be an issue, except he's sitting alone in a quiet study room on campus. From the next table over, half a dozen tall women with basketball logos embroidered on their backpacks turn to scowl at him.

"Sorry," Steve whispers. He turns back to his phone, hand over his mouth.

Brock Rumlow, the Southeast State University Defensive Coordinator, has been working under Alexander Pierce for about five years. He and Steve shook hands once after a game. Rumlow's grip was hard, and he didn't smile, or even say anything—just nodded sharply and moved on. For some reason, Steve's first thought was "hyena."

On film, though, Rumlow seems like more of a predator than a scavenger. He is the fire to Pierce's ice; he is a semi-automatic, the serrated edge of the blade. On more than one occasion, he's gotten into disagreements with officials over bad calls—throwing headsets, tearing up play sheets, cursing at everything that moves, keeping his toes just outside the sideline to avoid a penalty. Southeast State fans praise him for his intensity, though some ESPN analysts suggest he might be a bad influence on his players.

Steve can't imagine Rumlow droning on about defensive shifts in front of a table full of jaded college kids. He's still grinning as he texts Bucky back: "Lol Rumlow doesn't seem like a boring guy!"

Bucky doesn't respond at all to that text.

Several hours later, Steve changes the subject and asks how practices are going. American State won't resume normal team functions until around Christmas, depending on which bowl game selects them. It makes Steve feel detached from the world, as if gravity has stopped working, but only enough to keep him floating just out of reach of the ground.
Steve tries to live vicariously through Bucky, but his reply is strange.

**Bucky**  
*not practicing*

**Steve Rogers**  
*What do you mean? Aren't you getting ready for NAC game?*

**Bucky**  
*yeah the team is practicing but im sitting out*

Steve's heart stutters. There's only one reason a starter would sit out of practice this early in the week.

**Steve Rogers**  
*Are you hurt??*

Of course, that's when Bucky stops responding. Two hours later, he tells Steve, *just a precaution.*

That's understandable—maybe—but it doesn't help lower Steve's heart rate. All he can think about is Bucky lying on the grass, unable to breath, all the wind knocked out of him, an angry red welt blossoming on his stomach.

It's just one more reason Steve wishes he were the one playing on Saturday, instead of Bucky. The Northern Athletic Conference Championship is always a big deal, but this year it feels even more fateful than usual.

Steve has been to two NAC games with American State. This year, he won't be playing in the game at all. It's a strange feeling. He's grown accustomed to playing that thirteenth game, being part of the championship race. The very thought of *spectating* makes him restless.

Every year, Chicago hosts the NAC Championship Game at Soldier Field, where the Bears play their home games. The media has been, for lack of any better descriptor, going apeshit. The Winter Soldier playing in Soldier Field? That's a written invitation for every sub-par sports journalist in the country to try their hand at punny headlines.

Clint has made a point of sharing his favorites with Steve all week. Steve becomes more and more tempted to smack him every time. In fact, Clint is about to make another dumb joke on Wednesday night when Steve shoots upright, gaping at the TV screen.

"The game is in Chicago."

"Ye-es." Clint glances between Steve and the ESPN anchors. "What part of Soldier Field did you miss?"

"It's in Chicago," Steve repeats. "That's still only an hour away."

"Well, yeah, it doesn't move or anything," Clint points out, but Steve is already bounding out of the room and upstairs.

Once he's in his bedroom, he dives for the phone on his nightstand, almost ripping the charger out of the wall in his enthusiasm.

**Steve Rogers**  
*I'm gonna drive up to see the nac champ*
Bucky's response is uncharacteristically swift.

_Bucky_

_lol what_

Miraculously, with one short text message, Steve has found out not only how to get Bucky's attention, but also to keep it.

_Bucky_

_sorry bud its our turn this year_

_Bucky_

_wait steve are you serious_

_Bucky_

_don't you dare_

_Bucky_

_that's a stupid idea don't be an idiot the fans will kill you_

_Bucky_

_steve_

_Bucky_

_text me the hell bck you goddamn punkass motherfucker_

The irony of the situation, and that text in particular, is not lost on Steve. A more spiteful person might leave Bucky to a death spiral of neglect and anxiety—for revenge, if nothing else. But Steve thinks it's funny. Revenge is far from his mind.

_Steve Rogers_

_Don't worry, I can't actually afford tickets_

_Bucky_

_YOU SCARED ME_

_Steve Rogers_

_I'll come to Chicago though maybe I can see u after the game_

_Bucky_

_THAT'S NOT BETTER_

Steve doesn't give up. He harps on Bucky all week. He asks what hotel the Southeast State team will be spending the night in, and Bucky pointedly ignores him. So Steve asks when they'll be traveling, and Bucky simply says, "idk". Bucky maintains his cold demeanor all week. Late on Friday night, Steve finally cracks the ice.

_Steve Rogers_

_Just filled up the gas tank. What hotel are you guys in_

_Bucky_

_steve stop_

_Steve Rogers_
Chicago is a miracle. It's no Brooklyn, but as big cities go, it's still a miracle. No matter where you're from, if you're in Chicago, you can find a home. If he wanted to, Steve could probably find an entire bar dedicated to the New York Giants. There is, in fact, an American State-themed bar in Boystown, but that's a bit of a trek from Soldier Field and Southeast's hotel. So Steve wears black—plain black hoodie, black T-shirt, black windbreaker—and sneaks into a Pittsburgh Steelers bar that's showing the NAC Championship on all its big screens. The bartender, a cute girl with a deep tan and bobbed hair, asks him for his order almost immediately, but the bar is so packed that it takes almost ten minutes for him to actually get his drink.

Steve takes the opportunity to scout the crowd in the bar. Several of the patrons seem to be Penn Central fans. As soon as Steve sees them, decked out in red and gold, his stomach furls like burnt newspaper.

Peter Parker plays for Penn Central. Or he did, until Bucky knocked him out for the season.

Great.

That's when the bartender returns with Steve's local IPA. Too late to back out, now.

From that point forward, his experience watching the game is entirely predictable. Southeast pulls ahead early, James Barnes makes a string of earth-shattering tackles, and the Penn Central fans descend into a state of hostile camaraderie. They all share a deep and wrathful hatred for Southeast and for Barnes in particular, and have no reason to hide that hatred among friends.

Steve pulls his baseball cap lower over his eyes and nurses his second beer. He tries to zone in on the game and ignore the angry mob, but it gets harder and harder as the second half drags on.

The man next to him, a sloppy middle-aged blue-collar worker in a Steelers jersey and a Penn Central hat, keeps trying to get Steve's attention. He thinks they're buddies, the way everyone is buddies when rooting for the same team in a big game.

"If Roberts could throw straight, Lemurian would have a chance, wouldn't they?" he booms halfway through the third quarter, giving Steve's shoulder a rough shake.

"Hm," Steve says with a noncommittal smile.

That's when he realizes something that makes his brain stall out.

He's rooting for Southeast State.

Well, "rooting" might be a strong term. He's not crossing his fingers or biting his nails or jumping up
and down when they score. But his heart races when they go for a long pass, and he almost leaps out
of his seat every time Maximoff scores, and, God, now Lemurian is deep in enemy territory and he's
squeezing his glass so hard it might crack.

He takes a deep breath and releases his grip.

His blood pressure rises and falls with Southeast State University, the waves of their success and
their dire stretches of anxiety. As deeply ingrained as he is with disdain for those black uniforms,
Steve still can't extract himself from Bucky. It's tearing him down the middle and he just hopes no
one in this bar notices.

Lemurian makes a big play. The fans in the restaurant go wild. Steve hunches farther into his jacket
and digs his fingernails into his heart line.

Bucky is playing more stiffly than usual. He favors his left side more and gets up slower. He is not
the same cyclone Steve watched on film, or the same storm they played in the Frozen Wasteland. He
remembers Bucky sitting out practice all week. Just a precaution. What kind of precaution, though?

The teams line up near the goal line. Steve's eyes zero in on Bucky first, where he settles in the
middle of the defense, giant brace on his left arm, a looming iceberg. Then Steve scans the offense's
formation. They line up in the shotgun, with just one man in the backfield. Steve starts to tap the side
of his glass frantically. Lining up four receivers is a risk for the offense—exactly the kind of
formation that Barnes will be able to shred like tissue paper. On the goal line, of all things. Steve
can't for the life of him figure out what Lemurian is doing, but it can only be good for Southeast
State.

Lemurian throws to the middle of the end zone. A knot draws tight in Steve's stomach. A broad-
shouldered tight end tips an errant pass, the ball goes skittering out of bounds, and the tight end
doesn't stop. He and Bucky collide in the middle of the field.

It is nuclear fusion. Both players are solid rock, indefinable energy—you can practically see the
explosion.

The tight end gets up slowly, with the help of a teammate.

"It's fucking Barnes again!"

"He should be kicked out of the league, this is ridiculous."

"Why is there no flag?!"

The Penn Central fans, livid, speak their minds loud and clear. Steve tries to block them out while
staring at the screen.

Bucky rolls onto all fours and sways there before another linebacker drags him to his feet. Obviously
dazed, he trudges to the sideline so a substitute can take his place.

Pandemonium. You'd have thought Lemurian scored a touchdown, but no; everyone in the bar is
celebrating the James Barnes injury.

"Serves him right!"

"Finally!"

The big annoying drunk next to Steve is the worst. "It's about time he got a taste of his own
medicine. That kid needs to be locked up before he does any more damage."

"Locked up where?" Steve says coldly. He's on his feet. He has no idea when that happened.

"A goddamn insane asylum, that's where," a young man in a beanie responds.

Big Drunk disagrees. "He needs to be in prison." He pokes Steve, hard, right in the shoulder. "You know that kid is a criminal? You know he's been arrested before? Alexander Pierce is a real piece of work, you know that? He recruits thugs and fuck-ups and says he'll straighten 'em out, but he really just turns 'em into attack dogs."

"They're kids," Steve says. "You said it yourself."

"You on their side or something?"

"I got no love for Southeast State," Steve says honestly, "but that doesn't mean they deserve to get hurt."

"That asshole Barnes deserves to get carted off the field in an ambulance."

"Yeah!" the kid in the beanie chimes in. "After what he did to Parker, he can go to hell for all I care."

Strictly speaking, Steve never throws a punch. But someone may or may not end up bent backwards over the bar, and a bottle may or may not shatter across the floor, and bar stools may or may not go flying, and Steve may or may not be in the middle of things.

And that is how Steve Rogers gets kicked out of a bar full of Pittsburgh fans watching a Wisconsin game in Chicago.

It's just as well; the cold air outside helps him relax. Helps him breathe normally. Another block away on Lake Shore Drive, he finds an Irish Pub with more neutral patronage. By the time Steve settles into his seat, the game is almost over, and Bucky is on the field again, playing with the same vigor he had in the first quarter.

The sight is absurd, for some reason; it seems like the last twenty minutes never even happened. Like Bucky never tackled that tight end or took a possession off or showed signs of injury at all.

In the end, it isn't close. Southeast stacks on another touchdown and ends up winning by twenty. They are a force of nature. They are a storm that doesn't stop. They are sixty-mile-per-hour winds and six feet of snow and there's really no way to fight them. All the country can do is wait for them to pass.

The Congress Plaza is easy to find. In any other city, it would be a gem, but in Chicago—Lake Shore Drive, no less—it is a second-tier upscale establishment. Nice enough for a Division I team, but not so nice that booking over fifty rooms will put you in debt.

Steve can tell he's in the right place when a stream of Southeast players almost knocks him over on their way to the bar in the lobby. Ducking his head, hoping no one recognizes him, Steve darts to a bank of elevators and takes one to the third floor.

He tries not to constantly look over his shoulder. *This isn't weird*, he tells himself. Friends and family
members and significant others visit players in hotels all the time. Sometimes. Well, infrequently. But it happens.

The plush maroon carpet swallows his footsteps. As he traipses down the corridor, faint voices murmur from behind closed doors. They are indistinct and unreadable. They could be Southeast players celebrating or travelers sleeping before an early flight or businessmen cheating on their wives. It's astounding to realize, but to some people, there was no football game tonight. The Northern Athletic Conference has a Champion, now, and most of the universe doesn't even care. It doesn't mean a thing to some people, when for Steve—well. There is a flock of birds in his stomach, beating against his ribs, flapping in his throat, trapping his heart in his chest.

He reaches a T in the hallway. A sign on the wall says that rooms 301-324 are to the left, while rooms 325-351 are to the right. He turns right and almost immediately hears a thump from somewhere down the corridor, followed by shouting. Instinctively, his pace accelerates.

There are two voices, but Steve can't make out the words. He passes room 335, 337, 339.

"… the point of letting you sit out of practice all week if you sit out half the damn game, too?"

Steve's feet slow down, but his heart rate skyrockets. The door of 343 is propped open by the security lock. He hears another thump and a muffled response and hopes fervently that he is mistaken; that those shouts aren't coming from Bucky's room.

"Pardon me for fucking exaggerating," the first voice says. "It wasn't the whole game. It was three possessions. Which is three possessions too many!"

"I could barely breathe."

Steve's heart turns to ice.

"Maybe if you could fucking tackle properly, you wouldn't hurt yourself every goddamn time you come in contact with a running back half your size."

"Aren't you the one supposed to teach me to tackle?"

Steve considers knocking, decides against it, slides his fingers into the space between the door and the doorframe, and then hesitates. There is a war inside him, a war between passion for Bucky and passion for American State football.

"Don't give me your fucking attitude, Barnes."

Bucky mumbles another response, and Steve can't make out the words, but it is, unmistakably, Bucky's voice. It is Bucky's voice.

The other voice is louder, this time. "You want to run that by me again?"

"Back off!" Bucky shouts, the pitch rising almost an octave.

The desperate sound surges down Steve's spine. He bursts into the room without a second thought about privacy or consequences and the sight before him triggers thunder.

"What the hell is going on in here?"

They both look up at Steve, mouths hanging open.

A lean, dark-haired man in official Southeast State gear has Bucky herded into the corner between
the wall and the IKEA entertainment center. There are no obvious signs of violence—neither of them seems to have touched the other—but Bucky has his back flat against the wall, both hands held up in a show of innocence, and instantly, Steve's hackles are raised.

"Who are you?" the stranger says. He doesn't back away from Bucky; in fact he rounds on him and adds, "who the hell is that?!"

Bucky's eyes—his whole face—are still fixed on Steve in abject astonishment.

"Why don't you give him a little space?" Steve says, eyes flicking between Bucky and the stranger.

He doesn't, of course. He still has Bucky crowded into a corner, but he turns to face Steve in full—and Steve realizes who exactly is in the room with them.

For a split second, Steve is speechless, but when he finds his voice, his throat smolders with it. "You're a coach."

"And I don't know who the hell you are," Brock Rumlow says, "but I do know this is none of your business."

"You're his coach. Give him some space."

So he does. Rumlow gives Bucky some space. He whirls around and bears down on Steve, instead.

"Listen, I don't know who you think you are," he says, teeth bared in a wolfish, bony smile, "but I do know you got no business here."

"And you've got no business shouting at students like that." Steve sets his jaw. "Maybe you need to take a walk. Cool down."

Rumlow's eyes glint. "Are you telling me to leave?"

"Might be for the best."

Shaking his head, Rumlow grins and advances on Steve. "Listen here, you—"

He doesn't get to finish his insult, though, because as soon as he moves toward Steve, the room implodes. It begins with Bucky throwing himself between Steve and Rumlow, growling like an animal. In return, Rumlow shoves him bodily to one side, and Bucky bounces against the wall with a hollow thud.

That is when Steve snaps.

He doesn't clearly remember the full sequence of events, but he does remember pushing Brock Rumlow aside; several sets of hands on him; at least one person—maybe Steve—shouting obscenities; and after the abrupt and confusing cyclone of violence, Steve finds himself pinned to the wall.

It is Bucky holding him there. The shock, more than the physical force, is what keeps Steve in place.

Bucky's fingers are buried into the front of Steve's shirt, and his eyes flash with vitriol, with bright, toxic, don't-mess-with-me pink around his irises. His chest heaves. "What the fuck are you doing here, Steve?" he demands, giving Steve a little shove for emphasis.

"I'm—what? Come on, I just—"
"Steve?" Rumlow interrupts, grabbing Bucky's shoulder to get a better look. Bucky shakes him off with a snarl, but not before Steve and Rumlow make eye contact. Rumlow starts to laugh. "Oh my God. You're Steve Rogers."

"Get out, Brock," Bucky snaps.

Rumlow ignores him. "Steve fucking Rogers. As in, American-State-Steve-Rogers."

"I said get out!" Bucky roars, breaking through the gravel in his voice. "Get out, get the fuck out, let me handle this!"

A wicked, skeletal smile takes over Brock Rumlow's face, as if he is merely amused by Bucky's outburst.

"You're out of control." Still laughing, Rumlow leers between the two of them.

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut. Steve can feel the tension all the way to Bucky's fingertips, where they are still buried in his sweatshirt.

"We need a muzzle for you, Barnes."

"Get out!"

Rumlow flings the door open and backs out of the room, still smiling. Still laughing. Like this is a joke, like it's funny the way Bucky gasps for air, like these emotions are just a glitch in need of repair.

It burns Steve around the edges.

Even after Coach Rumlow is gone, Bucky doesn't move right away, not even to release Steve. Doesn't even open his eyes.

Steve wants to throw up. The look on Bucky's face is so twisted, so shattered and lost, gasping for air, a gaping canyon of betrayal and confusion.

"Bucky?"

He twitches at the sound of his name.

*No one's called me that in years.*

"Bucky—"

"What the fuck are you doing here?!" he says, shoving Steve against the wall again for emphasis.

"I don't—I want to help—"

"Why are you here?" Bucky looks at him fully. Eye-to-eye. His face is drowned in rage, like gazing into the darkest crevice of a thunder cloud.

Bucky is going to hit him. Steve knows it, without a shred of doubt in his body, and he also knows he won't do anything to stop it.

And then Bucky is kissing him.

It is hard and inelegant. It is a brand against his lips, pressing so hard they could count each other's
teeth. This is what it feels like to be struck by lightning, Steve thinks. He is paralyzed, trapped in a column of unholy fire.

Steve doesn't think to close his eyes, so he is still staring at the blur of Bucky's eyelashes, just inches from his nose, when it ends—just as abruptly as it began. Bucky reels away, holding up both hands as if they've betrayed him. In a daze, he stumbles to the door and undoes the security lock so the handle can latch shut. Then he buries his face in his hands. He takes a breath, and the air rushes between his fingers.

"Bucky …"

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's—"

"Brock's gonna be back." He lowers his hands to his mouth, glaring at the door to his hotel room, as if he expects Rumlow to reappear any second.

"It's none of his business—"

"I'm gonna be sick," Bucky hisses.

"Me too," Steve says, stomach blazing. "That was so out of line, a coach—"

"No," Bucky cuts him off, his voice hoarse. "I mean—I'm—"

He turns, a little unsteady on his feet, and half-trips his way into the bathroom.

"Oh, god—" Steve darts after him.

When he flicks on the bathroom light, Bucky is already on his knees in front of the toilet. Steve only just has time to dive forward and pull Bucky's hair out of his face before he shudders and throws up. Bucky grabs the edge of the bathtub to steady himself, rocks on his heels, and takes a deep breath. Then he pitches forward and vomits again.

"Oh, Bucky," Steve whispers.

He whines, but otherwise doesn't respond.

Steve gathers Bucky's stringy hair into one hand, and uses the other to rub Bucky's back. "I'm so sorry."

This goes on for some time. Bucky purges his system of all the savagery and anger and violence bubbling inside, and of whatever potent cocktail of painkillers kept him on his feet for the duration of the Northern Athletic Conference Championship Game. Steve eases onto the edge of the bathtub, never losing contact with Bucky. He stays by his side, strokes his hair, rubs his back, and murmurs words of encouragement.

It takes forever. Every time Bucky is able to relax for a few seconds, his body spasms again and he crumples forward to throw up.

"There's nothing left!" he sobs, pleading to no one in particular, after breaking down in dry heaves for the third time.

"Shh, it's okay," Steve says softly. "You're doing good. You're doing so good."
Eventually, the retching deteriorates into dry coughs and painful shivering.

After a few minutes of measured breathing, Bucky lifts his head and pushes himself away from the toilet. Steve can see his face, his eyes streaming from the effort, his lips curled back in a grimace. It almost makes Steve sick, himself. It's like an icepick twisting into the little divot below his collarbone.

"You're okay," he whispers, mostly for his own sake.

Bucky falls off his heels to relax on the floor, dragging the toilet seat shut on his way. He wipes his mouth on the front of his white T-shirt, leaving behind a smudge of scarlet. With a groan, he sprawls across from Steve, his back against the cabinet under the sink. His knees are splayed, his head tilted back, his throat exposed.

Steve's eyes drift to Bucky's left arm. A thick rope of white scar tissue snakes up the inside of his elbow. Steve thinks of the compression sleeve he wore until the surgery; he thinks of the heavy brace Bucky wears during the games; he thinks of Sam Wilson's back spasms; he thinks, absurdly, of the Old Guitarist.

Steve is so lost in thought that he jumps at the sound of Bucky's voice.

"Why did you come?" he croaks.

"I wanted to see you."

"You shouldn't have come." Bucky's voice sounds like a blunted knife.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Bucky doesn't answer and he doesn't move for several minutes. Steve waits, hoping that the neatly quilted layers of silence will soothe Bucky, somehow.

Steve can be patient. He listens to the high whine of the fluorescent light and the distant, padded footsteps of hotel patrons down the hall. He notices the way sweat beads on Bucky's forehead and around his shirt collar.

Steve has to fight another pang of nausea. "Does this happen a lot?" he asks, and winces at the way his voice cracks the silence.

He doesn't think Bucky is going to answer, at first. Eventually, though, he rubs at his watering eyes and curls his chin into his chest. Just enough that Steve can't see the look on his face when he says, "I guess."

"Damn."

"It always hurts."

Steve frowns. His mind drifts to a dull ache and a smiley-face scar on his elbow.

Bucky's answer is so quiet that it couldn't unsettle the dust on the floor. "I get sick sometimes."

"I wasn't talking about—wait." Steve's hand goes still again, and his eyes widen. "Are you always in pain?"

Bucky has an uncanny ability to remain silent and motionless. It almost seems like he does it on purpose, as if he enjoys the suspense.
"No," he says, finally. "Not enough to make me sick."

Steve closes his hand into a fist to keep it from shaking. "...Okay," is all he can manage. "Okay."

"Steve?"

"What about Rumlow? Does he ... yell at you ... a lot?" This is not the question he wants to ask. It doesn't at all encompass the avalanche of inappropriate actions he just witnessed Brock Rumlow commit, and he has to swallow down the bile rising in his throat just at the thought of letting him get away with it all. But this is also the gentlest wording he can come up with.

"He yells at everyone," Bucky says curtly. "He's a dick."

Steve drops to his knees. He reaches, tentatively, toward Bucky's ankle, stretched across the tile floor.

Bucky frowns at him. When he doesn't protest, Steve takes it as a signal to go ahead. He beckons, and Bucky sticks out his foot.

"You were amazing tonight," Steve says, swiping a thumb under the arch of Bucky's foot. "Still looked painful, though."

"No one could tell," Bucky mumbles. "They shoot me up with enough drugs beforehand, and even I can't tell I'm injured."

"I can tell."

"Yeah," Bucky says. It comes out with a rush of air, like a laugh, or a sigh. "I bet." He winces, pulls one knee to his chest, and covers his eyes with his right hand. "Do the lights have to be so fucking bright."

That triggers a memory for Steve. Any nausea? Dizziness? Sensitivity to light?

He stomach does a clumsy somersault. "Bucky?" he asks tentatively.

Bucky spreads his fingers enough to see Steve through the slits.

"You okay?" Steve asks.

He nods.

Experimentally, Steve traces his fingers around the fine bones of Bucky's ankle. "How's your head?" he whispers.

"Physically or emotionally."

"Well—" His stomach trips again. "Physically."

Another long, pressurized silence. Bucky covers his eyes again. After a few minutes, he says, "Shit," and that's all.

It takes a second for Steve to realize that was an answer.

Bucky goes on, "Everything feels like shit. Everything always feels like shit."

His hands drift to his stomach. He clutches his shirt, twisting the fabric in his fists.
"I'm sorry," Steve says, clearing his throat. He slides forward across the bathroom tile, closer to Bucky; close enough to touch, but far enough for some breathing room. With measured movements, he reaches out to brush a fingertip against the scar on Bucky's arm. "This is new."

Bucky sucks in a deep breath. "Mm." His left hand twitches, as if he wants to hide it, or to grab something. When it becomes clear that he isn't going to speak—isn't even going to uncover his eyes—Steve runs his finger down the scar. "What happened?" he murmurs.

"Surgery."

Holding his breath, Steve glances up. Hears the click in Bucky's throat as he swallows; sees the the sliver of white teeth between his lips.

His fingertips flutter around Bucky's elbow. Ice is so dense and so cold and so brittle.

"What kind of surgery?"

"Arm surgery."

Steve's lips are tingling, aflame with a thousand pins and needles. "When was it?"

"The community college."

The atmospheric pressure drops around Steve's diaphragm. "What happened?" he whispers. He feels a little like he's begging.

The lines on Bucky's forehead deepen, but he doesn't speak.

"We match, you know," Steve says with a matter-of-fact smile.

"What?"

"We match."

Bucky opens his eyes and raises an eyebrow.

"Here, look," Steve says. Twisting his arm, he shows Bucky the scar there, the delicate crescent smiling under the crook of his elbow.

Bucky's hand drifts toward Steve, but something stops him halfway, fingers shaking. His eyes are fixed on the scar. "Not really a match."

Steve looks at his own elbow, its neat, curved pink line; and then at Bucky's, bearing an eight-inch ragged rope of scar tissue. He shrugs. "But we've both had surgery."

"What kind of surgery?" Bucky frowns at Steve's arm.

"Arm surgery."

Bucky's eyes flick to Steve's face. He sees the grin there. "I'm serious," he deadpans.

"So was I."

"You first."

It's not the familiar banter that widens Steve's grin; it's the way Bucky's lips twitch as he tries not to
"Tommy John surgery." Steve folds up to sit cross-legged, and one of his knees brushes against Bucky's. He pretends he can't still feel the kiss burning his lips. "Freshman year. I was supposed to redshirt anyway. I got here, I started training, throwing on campus, and I was in pain every day. When I told our physicians, they checked me out. Said surgery would help."

"That was risky, you know."

"We thought it would help in the long run." Steve shrugs. "I figured it was worth the risk."

"Did it?"

"Did it what?"

"... Did it help?"

Steve brushes Bucky's anklebone with his fingernails. "Yeah," he whispers. "I feel better than ever."

Bucky catches Steve's hand and holds it still. It is the lightest touch, the kiss of a summer breeze, but for some reason it makes Steve's fingertips go numb. He can't speak. Can't even breath. He runs a thumb along each of Bucky's fingers, along the rough, broken skin, and yearns to kiss away all the bruises and scars. His lips ache with it.

Then Bucky speaks, and steals all of Steve's attention.

"I broke my arm," Bucky begins. "Went up for an interception and got flattened into the ground." His voice is a steady whisper, a gentle wind curling through crisp autumn leaves. The kind of sound that doesn't ask to be heard. The kind of sound you have to listen very closely to hear. "Compound fracture. Just above the elbow."

With his free hand, Steve brushes his fingers over Bucky's scar.

"I needed surgery to repair it," Bucky goes on, perhaps even softer than before. "Bunch of plates and screws."

"Shit."

Bucky sucks in a breath. "And then I transferred to Southeast, and, um—" he laughs bitterly, "—they took the plates out and cleared me to play. And I re-broke everything."

His head tilts back and he closes his eyes.

"Oh, Buck."

"So, you know. They cut me open again and put in more hardware."

Steve stares at Bucky's arm. "Is it still there?"

Bucky nods.

"I bet you drive airport security nuts."

"Metal detectors love me."

Bucky's lips twist into a noncommittal smile, and Steve's stomach flips. Something occurs to Steve,
then, and he holds his breath. He doesn't want to ask. "Are you okay, though? Is it—does it still hurt?" His voice cracks.

"Everything hurts," Bucky says bitterly.

He said that once, before. Steve can't let it escape. "What do you mean?"

Several breaths pass between them.

"I broke a few ribs when we played you."

"—What?"

"Three cracked ribs," Bucky says, fingers hovering over the left side of his torso. He chuckles, and then winces. Steve begins to feel ill.

"You played with broken ribs?"

Bucky shrugs. He lets go of Steve's hand and reaches around to grab the sink. Wincing, he pulls himself to his feet. "In the second week of the season I got a nasty hip pointer."

"Buck…"

"And when we played Wisconsin, I tweaked my ankle."

Steve stands up, too, but doesn't know what to do with his arms. "What—"

"I'm just a walking injury report, you know?"

"Oh my god, Bucky."

"I'm used to it." With a sickening nonchalance, Bucky unwraps one of the plastic hotel cups, fills it with tap water, and rinses out his mouth. He spits a disgusting pink color into the sink, then refills the cup and drinks the whole thing.

When he turns around to face Steve, they both seem to realize, at once, how small the bathroom is. Bucky is very close; Steve can see where sweat has dampened his hairline; he can see the sticky blood stain smeared on the front of Bucky's shirt.

Steve gazes at his lips, shining with drops of water. From this close, Steve could count the little lines laced across Bucky's lips like stitches.

"Don't."

Even though he is staring right at them, Steve can barely see Bucky's lips move. But he hears it. One word, enough protest to bring him back to his senses.

"Don't," Bucky says again, reading Steve's mind. "I shouldn't have … I'm sorry."

Steve runs his tongue over his teeth, and imagines he can still feel the indent of Bucky's against his own.

"Why did you come?" Bucky whispers. He hunches his shoulders and studies Steve's collar bone.

"I want to see you."
"You shouldn't be here." For the first time, Steve detects some inflection in Bucky's voice. A strained, thready quality. A plea.

"The hell I shouldn't."

Bucky shifts, and Steve flinches, instinctively. He thinks back to all the times he almost got punched this afternoon. He might have deserved some. Bucky draws nearer, and Steve braces himself—a storm—rain lashing against his bones—and then, on an exhale, Bucky winds his arms around Steve's neck.

Instantly, the winds die. Everything inside Steve stutters to a stop.

Bucky's embrace is firm. He tucks his face into the side of Steve's neck and breathes. After a moment, an overwhelming moment of flooded circuits, Steve hugs him back. He wraps his arms around Bucky's waist and holds him, shaking with the effort not to squeeze too tight. He thinks of the broken ribs and feels heat gather behind his eyes.

"You shouldn't be here," Bucky whispers, even as he tightens his hold.

"The hell I shouldn't," Steve says again.

He hasn't held Bucky like this in years. The muscles in his shoulders unfurl for the first time in years.

Everyone looks at Bucky and sees a storm: brutal, relentless, unforgiving. They see destruction and ruin in his wake. They see something wild and want to put it in a cage.

But he isn't a storm, at all. Bucky is the eye.
The Bowl Championship Series

Chapter Summary

The regular season ends--but that's really where the drama begins.

Chapter Notes

informal summary
Everyone: Steve don't do the thing
Steve Rogers: [does the thing]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After each year of college football, several dozen teams compete in a post-season bowl game—a final match-up that provides an opportunity to play an out-of-conference adversary and win another trophy for the school. An opportunity to cap off a successful season. An opportunity to pad your record.

It began with the Rose Bowl in 1902, and his since grown to include over 70 teams, 16 states, and over a month of post-season extravaganza. In fact, college football bowl games came before the Super Bowl itself. Inspired the name and everything.

The Bowl Championship Series was instituted in NCAA Football in 1998. It initially addressed the need for a means of determining one unanimous champion after each college football season. Though bowl games had been around for decades before the BCS, there was no game or record or tournament to identify a definitive champion. Several different polls voted on rankings, but did not necessarily agree on those rankings. This resulted in teams splitting championships, claiming championships after undefeated seasons regardless of rankings, and skewing record books.

The BCS system is an imperfect solution. It relies on biased statistics and computer calculations. It carries the weighted task of reconciling the different playing styles of a hundred teams divided into a dozen conferences of various populations, regions, incomes, skill sets, and recruiting bases.

But it does crown a champion every season.

The BCS Championship bowl game has eluded Steve ever since he became American State's starting quarterback. He has dreamed of it, yearned for it, come so close for the last four years.

Now, holding Bucky in his arms, the same Bucky Barnes he played catch with across parked cars outside his apartment in Brooklyn, Steve Rogers would give up a hundred championships if it meant fixing this. That rational, sober understanding clicks into place for him as definitely as the warm muscles twitching under his hands.

It's the difference between seeing pictures of a natural disaster and then seeing the devastation in person. He didn't witness what happened, but the sickness and brutality are obvious, now. Steve is only just beginning to feel the truth of it sink in. This whole situation still seems surreal, like the
arbitrary injustice of a tornado, the way it can rip up one house from roots to rafters and leave the house next door untouched.

Bucky breathes in and whispers against his neck, begging him to leave even as he tightens his hold around Steve's collar. It's gentle. It's just a hug, but Steve feels like he's choking.

*I can't*, Steve thinks, his throat closing up around the words; *I can't, how could I, don't ask me.*

"Steve." His voice sounds like it's coming through a wood chipper. Steve flinches at the sound. Bucky was so sick for so long—and so tired, god, he just played four hours of football—Steve's own throat aches just listening to him. "You should go," Bucky rasps. "My roommate will be back."

The cruel irony of relativity gnaws at Steve's bones. He thinks of a hot stove, a hot stove versus *this*, his fingertips locking into place in the notches of Bucky's spine, and he just wants more *time*. He wants to dig in, but he can't without breaking something.

"It's okay, Steve."

The words throw ice water over him. Bucky offering him comfort like he's the one who needs it.

"You sure?" Steve asks, and he's surprised by how resistant his own voice is to being used.

Bucky unwinds his arms and starts to pull away and it is *agony* letting him go. Every tendon in Steve's body frays under the strain.

"I'm fine," Bucky says.

"There's blood on your shirt," Steve points out. The stain is a delicate red flower blooming over his abs; Steve traces the petals with the pad of his thumb.

"… I said fine, not fantastic."

Bucky drifts out of reach. He slides toward the bathroom door. Steve can feel his chest collapsing. In the entryway to Bucky's hotel room, the air buzzes, faint gold light and deep black shadows.

Bucky inhales deeply through his nose and gazes at the spot where he pinned Steve against the wall, where they—

"Sorry," Bucky says, grimacing.

"Don't be," Steve says instantly, and only after he says it does he wonder what Bucky is apologizing for.

"I am, though. That's not how I wanted … tonight … everything. Anyway. You know."

*I don't! I don't know! Tell me, tell me everything, tell me how to help, I don't know!*, Steve thinks, his head screaming. What he says is, "Don't worry about it," and means every word.

Bucky scrubs his face, then makes an ambiguous gesture toward the opposite wall. "Sorry for making everything weird."

"It's not weird," Steve says. He says, "I promise," and he means that, too.

Bucky lowers his chin so that his hair hangs in his face and says "sorry" one more time.

"Come back with me," Steve says.
For a moment, they lock eyes, and it is clear that they are both thinking the same thing. Both imagining it together—imagining if Bucky just walked out of the hotel and went home with Steve to his creaky house and his bronze prairie grasses. At once, they both also know it can't happen.

"I'm enough of a headache for the school lawyers as it is."

"You should come visit," Steve says, not to be deterred.

"Your place?"

"Let me give you the address," Steve nods, pulling out his phone before Bucky can argue. He texts the information to him, and Bucky doesn't speak, and from somewhere deeper in the hotel room, Steve can hear a cell phone notification ding. "You don't have to come," he says, only in an effort not to stifle Bucky. "But I'd like to see you again."

Steve smiles. Bucky doesn't smile back. In an absent, familiar motion, he runs his thumb up and down along the scar on his arm. The broken skin catches the faint light of the entryway. It shines more than the rest of him.

"This isn't high school, Steve."


Bucky's eyes flick to the closed door. "You should go."

"Who's your roommate?"

Bucky's gaze drifts back toward the cranberry wallpaper. It's a simple question, and he gives it more thought than necessary. Licking his lips, he finally says, "Maximoff."

"That's weird," Steve says. He's buying time, at this point. He studies Bucky's posture; the way he slouches into the wall; the way his attention flags. "Weird for offense and defense to room together."

"Yeah." Bucky closes his eyes and tips his head back. Steve can see his throat move as he swallows. "I speak Russian."

There is a lot Steve doesn't know about Bucky, these days. He seems to be full of green secrets: tiny precious buds that sprout between the cracks in the concrete, and Steve only sees them when they fight through. That secret, certainly, is one Steve never expected to learn. Russian. In high school, Bucky could hardly focus long enough to conjugate a single verb. He used to grump at Steve and Gabe Jones when they spoke French for more than two sentences.

"You really speak Russian?"

Without opening his eyes, Bucky says something in Russian, and though it doesn't make sense to Steve, it does answer his question pretty effectively.

Steve takes the opportunity to stare at Bucky. Neither of them speaks. The room is quiet enough to hear the TV next door—a high whine and a gentle murmur of voices like rolling hills.

Bucky opens his eyes. They are dark, with heavy lines and heavy lids. Steve feels a tug in his throat—a sharp, unbidden memory of that night two weeks ago, when Eli woke him up every two hours throughout the night, dragging Steve out of exhausted sleep—and he wants to hold Bucky again. He wants to heal him. He wants the world to stand still, just for a moment, and let his friend rest. He wants so much.
"When can I see you again?" Steve asks.

"I don't know."

"I can, though?"

Bucky cracks his jaw. "Yeah." He adds, as an afterthought, "see you later."

Later, when Steve bundles into his driver's seat of his shiny blue Dodge Charger, he doesn't start the car right away. He tries to put the key in the ignition, but it is shaking so badly that he almost drops it. Instead, he wraps it in his fist. The metal teeth bite into the palm of his hand. Panting, he folds forward until his head is against the steering wheel. He loses track of time sitting there, curled in his sports car, which still smells faintly of new leather, digging the car key into his skin to keep himself from bursting into tears.

It's after midnight when Steve forces his heavy old front door open, but everyone in the house is still awake and loud and bright and bombastic. Steve's roommates, along with Sam Wilson and Natasha Romanov, bombard him the minute he enters the living room.

Their voices are chaos. "Can you believe it?" someone says, and "Did you hear?" and "Did you see?" and "Did you ever think this could happen?"

Steve laughs, holding up his hands in surrender. He turns to Sam, the last person to speak, and says, "Crazy, right? Southeast dominated."

"No," Sam says, wide-eyed. He shakes his head. "Did you hear about TCU, man."

"… What?"

Clint grabs his shoulder. "TCU lost to Iowa State."

Beat.

Steve looks from one face to another. "Is this a joke?" he asks, though all of his friends look deadly serious.

"Where have you been, man?" Clint demands.

"It's all fucked," Isaiah adds with his usual descriptive eloquence.

Steve feels like eons have passed in the last two hours. Time has been playing tricks on him. How long was Bucky in his arms? How long was Bucky coughing up blood into the toilet? "What's fucked?" Steve asks.

"Everyone has one loss," Clint says. His eyes are round and feverish.

"Well, everyone but Southeast," Natasha points out.

Clint buries his fingers in his hair. "Right, but everyone, everyone else, everyone has one loss, they could pick anyone."

"Pick anyone …" Steve says. His mind reels with images of Bucky tackling that tight end, Clint missing the only field goal of his life, Eli throwing a touchdown pass on senior day, the Target painting by Jasper Johns.
"The BCS championship."

"We could get in."

"We have a chance."

Steve runs a hand over his face. "What about the SEC?"

The Southeastern Conference traditionally dominates bowl season. The voters always favor the SEC in rankings and awards and every other subjectively-based award under the sun. It's tiresome, to say the least.

"Auburn won," Clint admits. "But they still have that bad loss to Alabama, and that was only a week ago, and Bama sucks this year."

Clint makes a solid point. The room dissolves into thoughtful silence.

Southeast State is in. That's not up for any debate. They've gone undefeated in one of the toughest divisions in the country, and have been ranked number one for weeks, now. But tomorrow, the BCS will release its final rankings and decide who Southeast will face for the national championship.

An argument could be made for several teams. Auburn is the undisputed SEC Champion, but their record is marred by that loss to a low-ranked Alabama team. TCU and Stanford each only have one loss, but their conferences don't hold a championship game. The Big 10 crowned co-champions, each of whom also suffered one loss. Then there is American State, also with one loss, sitting on a high ranking in every poll.

"…We could get in," Steve says numbly.

Sam beams and nods vigorously. "Hell yeah, we could get in."

The argument for them is simple; though they have a loss, it is the best loss in the country. All those other teams with one loss gave it up to a mediocre team; ASU gave it up to the number one team in the country.

Natasha and Clint have already returned their attention to the TV, where analysts are going wild over college football rankings. Steve feels like he's about to collapse, and like the world is spinning, and like his skeleton is on fire. He feels like he hasn't slept in five days, but just shot back three cans of Red Bull and even though he's wired, the world is going a little pink around the edges.

It has been a long day, to say the least.

When Natasha speaks up ("The Big 10 doesn't even have a champion, this guy is a fucking idiot!")), she momentarily distracts everyone in the room, and Steve steals the chance to escape and head for the staircase.

He's on the upstairs landing, fumbling with his car keys and the hook where he keeps them hanging outside his door, when Isaiah catches up to him.

"Steve."

He whirls at the voice. His keys crash to the floor.

Isaiah Bradley stands before him, thunderclouds and lashing winds. He looks distinctly less enthusiastic now than he did downstairs. It's hard to read his features in the shadowy corridor, but his
arms are folded and his shoulders squared. Sam Wilson bobs over his shoulder, biting his lip and blinking rapidly.

"Where have you been?" Isaiah asks. He flicks the light-switch, and a naked bulb floods the hallway.

Steve squints. This feels like an interrogation. "I was … watching the game?"

"Where?"

"… Chicago."

"You went into the city to watch …" Isaiah trails off, frowning. His voice grates with a bitter solemnity. "You didn't get a ticket, did you?"

"No, I just watched from a local bar."

"Okay … why?"

"Barnes."

But it's not Steve who answered. He and Isaiah both turn to look at Sam Wilson, who gazes at Steve Rogers, his expression caught between awe and exasperation.

Steve's stomach feels bolted shut; a solid steel safe. Because Sam is right. Because it's as simple as that. Barnes. Steve isn't trying to keep some big, dark secret. He just can't explain it all. How do you put it all into words, the hot chocolate and the four years of radio silence and the Old Guitarist and the broken ribs and Brock Rumlow? The kiss? Steve can feel his bones buckling under the weight.

It takes a moment for Sam's statement to sink in, but when it does, Isaiah whirls on Steve again. "Is that true? Did you drive all the way to Chicago to see James Barnes tonight?"

"Come on, Ice, I just—"

"Don't you come-on-Ice me!" he barks. "Do you realize how fucked up that is? How the hell is it a good idea to start meeting up with a rival linebacker the day he played in the conference championship? In a big city? Where anyone could have seen you?"

"Don't turn this into some kind of scandal, it's not—"

"He plays for Southeast, Steve!" Isaiah shouts.

Sam lays a hand on Isaiah's shoulder. Steve can't tell whether he's trying to hold him back, or trying to encourage him. The world is tilting. Steve's head begins to ache, like when the wind howls, incessant and torrential and dire, until your ears throb.

Steve takes in a lungful of air. "He's my friend."

"He gave you a concussion!"

"That was an accident and you know it!" Steve bellows. They are so close, now, that he could count the pores on Isaiah's nose.

Steve is taller than Isaiah Bradley. He had never noticed before.
"Of course it looks like an accident!" Ice shouts.

"Sam saw it!" Steve waves at Sam Wilson, who looks frozen and flabbergasted at being put on the spot. "Back me up here! Bucky's not a bad guy, alright, he's a good football player, that's not a crime!"

"He's messing with your head, Steve."

"He is not—"

"Be careful," Isaiah barks. "You be careful, you hear me? And when it all falls apart, don't say I didn't warn you." He whirls around and retreats to his bedroom at the other end of the hall, slamming the door behind him.

Sam and Steve blink at each other, silent except for Steve's heavy breathing.

"You gonna call me out, too?" Steve demands.

Sam's face furls; he looks much younger than Steve. He is much younger than Steve. He is like a puppy, curled up and rejected on the side of the road.

Steve leaves him there. Later, he will not be proud of that act, even though he's spiraling, sinking, drowning.

He leaves Sam in the hallway, surrenders to his own room, and collapses onto his bed, fully dressed.

---

**Bucky**

200 S Michigan Ave

Steve blinks blearily, first at the text message, and then at the alarm clock on his nightstand. The number pulse in the darkness of the room, a bright, billowy green: 7:47. Steve sucks in a deep breath through his nose, a tired breath, and it feels like the first air that has reached his lungs in hours. He rolls onto his side and gathers his bearings.

Bucky texted him an address. Steve's initial, irrational reaction is dread, heavy and metallic in his stomach. Is this an S.O.S.? After half a second of mild terror, he takes another breath and rubs one eye. Use your brain, Steve.

Last night, Bucky had said *see you later*. Steve enters the address into a maps application, which reveals a Starbucks in downtown Chicago.

**Steve Rogers**

*What time?*

After sending the message, Steve flips his phone face down on the mattress and buries his face in his pillow, fully expecting to go back to sleep. Almost instantly, the sheets vibrate with his phone's text notification.

**Bucky**

*tonight?*

**Bucky**

*is that too soon*
Steve Rogers
*good

Steve Rogers
I'll be there! What time!

He tosses his phone back on the bed and hops out of the pants he fell asleep in. It's no easy task changing into clean jeans with one leg asleep from the knee down, and he almost falls over twice in the process. He also learns that it's not very practical to tie your shoes and brush your teeth at the same time. Division I athlete, indeed.

After cleaning himself up rather haphazardly, Steve checks his phone again. Bucky has responded with simply "2" and a question mark, which Steve confirms.

That means he has to leave town before 1 p.m., and that means he has about four hours to cram in a run, weights, and as much homework in the study hall as possible. After throwing his laptop, notebooks, and random textbooks into his backpack and tries to sprint silently down the stairs.

He darts into the kitchen and fusses impatiently with a container of Folger's Breakfast Blend. Clint will yell at him for using his coffee machine, but he needs the caffeine if he's going to power through a day's worth of work in four hours.

Steve tries to do everything as quietly as possible, but somehow manages to drop a coffee mug on the counter in the process. It doesn't break, thank God, but does clatter across the laminate surface and topple over an empty beer bottle from last night. After the commotion, Steve freezes, listening carefully for signs of life from his roommates. Nothing. If he's lucky, Clint won't even have his hearing aids in, this time of morning.

Waiting for the coffee to brew is torture. When he finally has a travel mug of the strongest medium-roast he can concoct, Steve sneaks out the front door. He tries to close it gently, but their door is monstrous and heavy and warped and never latches on the first try, so it's not exactly quiet.

Then he dashes down the driveway, rounds the hood of the car, and almost bowls over Natasha Romanoff.

"Holy—Natasha, you scared the crap out of me!"

She smiles, but doesn't look up from her fingernails. "Sorry," she says without sounding at all sorry.
Steve grips his mug tighter. A quick glance at the surroundings tells him they're alone outside the house. She looks utterly calm, the glow of the sunrise igniting her red hair, dressed in sweats and running shoes, as if this is a normal time and place to run into your boyfriend's roommate.

"Do you, um." He pauses, adjusts the strap of his backpack, and shifts his feet. "You need something? Or—I think Clint is still asleep, if—?"

"I came to talk to you," she says curtly. Her gaze travels up the zipper of his jacket to study his face. She looks at him intently, soundlessly, for several seconds. Steve can feel heat rising in his cheeks, but Natasha seems unfazed by the thorough scrutiny.

Steve fumbles with his keychain.

"You shouldn't go," Natasha says, pushing herself off the driver's-side door. She's standing directly in front of him now, feet planted, gaze steady.

"Go where?" Steve says, and winces. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he knows they sound fake.

Natasha knows it too. She smirks. "I know you're going to see him. And I'm telling you it's a bad idea."

"Why?"

"Come on, Steve," she says with a withering look. "The National Championship is in a month. Don't play dumb."

Switching tactics, Steve draws his shoulders back and crosses his arms. He's a foot taller than Natasha, easy, and normally he wouldn't take advantage of that, but the clock is ticking. "You can't exactly stop me."

Natasha doesn't look intimidated by Steve's shift in posture. In fact, she looks distantly proud, like a parent watching their child take down another seven-year-old in a karate match. Then she narrows her eyes. "I'll tell Fury."

"… You—I'm—you'll what?" Steve stutters. "When the hell do you ever talk to Nick Fury?"

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Okay," Steve holds up his hands, backtracking. "Okay, okay. We both know where I'm going. That's fine."

"You're going to Wisconsin."

Steve sighs. She's not exactly right, but she's also right. "Is there a problem with that?"

"Um, yeah. I bet a lot of American State fans would have a problem with you, right now."

"For literally hanging out with my best friend?" Steve tries to sound skeptical, but Natasha retaliates with a look that screams best-friend-my-ass.

Steve groans and scrubs his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"You can hang out with whoever you want," Natasha says. Steve gets the impression she means more than what she is saying.
"Bucky and I are friends. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I'm not saying there is," she says. He thinks she's being honest. "I'm not. But other people won't feel the same way."

"Like who?"

Natasha ignores his irrelevant questions. "Remember that, will you? Tell me you'll remember that. Whatever happens, remember that not everyone will see your side of things. Whatever happens, be ready to defend yourself."

"I don't care about that."

"And be ready to defend Barnes."

Steve's throat closes up. He has to focus all his energy on breathing for a moment, before he can speak again. "I'll do what I have to do."

She sizes him up again, then sighs. "You aren't going to wait until they release the rankings?" she says, her voice softening. "You won't wait for that, at least?" Natasha has a unique skill for being both blunt and cryptic at once.

"I'm not doing anything wrong," Steve says, a fierce red feeling clawing his throat. "I'm not the one doing anything wrong."

Natasha cocks her head. Steve can't read her face at all. He stopped trying years ago, but he kind of wishes she would speak her mind now, of all times.

"I want to—help him," Steve elaborates.

"Does he need help?" Natasha asks.

They look at each other for a long time without blinking. Steve wonders if she can read his face, or if there are things she wonders. If she has questions about him, too. "Yes," he says, finally. "Yes, I think he does."

Natasha breaks their gaze, disrupting the spell; she rubs her hands together. Blows warm air over them. "That sucks," she states.

"So … are you still gonna try and stop me from leaving?"

Natasha smiles, looking genuinely amused. "You're a big boy. You can make your own decisions."

She steps away from the car, and Steve inches toward it, but still doesn't move to open the door. "Really?"

"I'm not going to tell Fury," she assures him. "I just wanted to get your attention."

"Okay," Steve says, still a little wary. "I appreciate the advice, Natasha. Honestly."

"I'm not gonna stop you," she repeats. "But I want you to think long and hard about this."

"I will."

Clearly, Natasha doesn't believe him. "If you keep driving up to Wisconsin, or meeting half-way, or whatever it is you do—sooner or later you're gonna get caught."
"Don't really care if I do."

"Would Barnes care?"

Steve becomes hyper-conscious of his breathing, and the way only thirty percent of his lungs seems to be working. He thinks of James Barnes, the recluse, the animal they keep locked up in Winter Station until gamedays. He thinks of all the cold shoulders and no-comments. *Technically I'm still in the closet.*

"I'll think about it, Natasha," he says. "I'll be careful."

"You'll end up all over the internet."

"I'm not exactly Brad Pitt, here," Steve counters. "I'm not getting chased down by paparazzi."

"No, but the more time Steve Rogers spends on the Southeast State University campus, the more likely he is to get recognized by a college kid with a popular Twitter account. And then? Boom. All over the internet. Steve Rogers and James Barnes, just weeks before the BCS National Championship."

"It's not like anyone's going to catch us in a compromising position, or anything. Jesus."

One side of her mouth curls in a half-smile. "You still don't want to invite trouble like that."

"How is that trouble?"

"It won't be on your terms." She reaches out to lay a hand on Steve's arm, and he blinks. "And it won't be on Bucky's terms."

The highway is dreary, and Chicago is dreary, and Starbucks is dreary, and thunder rumbles in a distant, non-threatening way as Steve slips inside and scans the dining area for Bucky Barnes. He is already here, hunched at the other end of the counter, waiting for the baristas to complete his order. Over his shoulder, a TV silently displays ESPN, running through today's NFL predictions.

As usual, Bucky is bundled in layers of black, slouched under the hood of his sweatshirt. He's chewing on one of his hoodie's drawstrings. From a distance, his image hardly seems real; he is dark and fractured; he dissolves in the cracks of the crowd. When he glances up and makes eye contact, Steve can feel the crackle of kindling in his ribs.

Steve bypasses the line of customers and strides toward Bucky, pulling him into his arms. At first, Bucky seems taken aback, but he returns the hug and even huffs something that could be a laugh against Steve's shoulder.

When they pull apart, Bucky looks up at him, mouth twitching. "It's only been a couple hours, man."

Steve grins outright. "What can I say. Happy to see you."

Bucky shakes his head and pulls the drawstring back between his teeth. His eyes drift to the counter.

"Did you order yet?" Steve asks.

"No, I just like to stand here and creep out the baristas," Bucky shoots back.

It takes Steve a split second to laugh. "Alright, alright," he surrenders. "I'll go get in line, then, creep."
Bucky doesn't answer, and doesn't look up, but Steve thinks he can see the corner of his mouth twitch.

It takes more than fifteen minutes, because Starbucks is perpetually slow and its customers perpetually demanding, but eventually Steve and Bucky settle into a round table tucked into the corner between the TV set and the huge glass walls facing Michigan Avenue. The table is tiny, bright, and warm, soaked in cloud-filtered sunlight and protected from the winter winds.

Steve has a sandwich and the strongest Americano the barista was willing to make for him; Bucky nurses a smoothie the color of Pepto-Bismol.

"I didn't know they even made smoothies," Steve remarks as he crams his long legs under their spindly hipster-sized table.

"Really?" Bucky pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and stares pointedly at the back wall. Steve follows his gaze and notices, for the first time, a series of huge posters advertising different smoothie flavors.

"Oh, come on," Steve says, unable to stop himself from grinning. "Who reads a menu at Starbucks? It's a coffee shop."

"It's okay to admit you're boring, Steve."

"I'm not boring!"

Bucky points at Steve's sandwich. "Turkey, lettuce, cheese?"

Steve narrows his eyes. "I am not the one who ordered a pretentious-ass smoothie from a national coffee chain."

"And I ain't the one who's gonna get strung up by trainers for poisoning himself with espresso."

Steve realizes, for some reason, that he's breathing heavily. Maybe because he feels like laughing and, absurdly, like crying at the same time. "You're a jerk," he says fondly.

"Yeah," Bucky says, and then, for the first time, he chuckles. A genuine laugh. He sounds like he might say something else, but instead he just repeats, "yeah," and takes another drink.

When Steve shifts to get more comfortable, their knees knock together under the table, and he instantly feels his face heat up. Bucky shows no reaction. Steve kicks him again, gently, to get his attention.

"What have you been up to?"

Bucky cracks his neck. "Trying to sleep. Mostly failing. You?"

"Not much," Steve says with a smile. "I ran a few miles and lifted for like ... too long. But the season's over, so no big."

"Mm."

"I logged a couple study hours. I don't remember a single thing I read, but whatever."

"Story of my life."

Bucky is all high-contrast photography here, sitting between the clean lines of an urban Starbucks.
Despite the dismal weather, the sun is bright, as if it is reflecting off solid steel clouds, and it catches all of Bucky's sharp features. The bright white of his eyes, the cut of his jawline, the sharp cleft of his chin. And his shadows are just as dark: he is outlined in black ink. Steve studies his face for a moment, taking note of the dark circles under Bucky's eyes, like bruises, like aching.

"How do you feel?"

Bucky chews the end of his straw while he thinks of an answer. "Sore," he determines.

"I bet."

They don't speak. Steve's senses grow more acute in the swollen, empty seconds. The murmur of the crowd swells to a roar, accompanied by the low thrum of coffee machines, accented by the tinkle of machinery. The sharp, acidic smell of espresso drills through his sinuses. He runs his tongue along his teeth, wishing maybe he hadn't picked that bitter coffee, after all. Over Bucky's head, the TV screen flashes, vibrant and dissonant.

And, despite the noise, despite the distraction, despite the way his voice sounds throaty and under-used, when Bucky speaks, his words still cut through like a knife. "I think I owe you … something. An explanation."

Steve looks at Bucky, momentarily stunned. "… No," he manages dumbly. "It's fine, I promise."

"Let me just say this."

He bites his lip, and Steve stares, and his stomach does a series of complicated gymnastics. His heart goes wild, like it is beating in triple-time, but somehow none of his blood is moving, frozen in place; he sucks in air and it all leaks out through his ribcage.

Bucky's lips shine a quiet pink, and Steve remembers, with a sudden, vivid clarity, how those lips felt pressed against his. Strong, slightly chapped, unyielding, a hint of teeth braced underneath.

"I'm not like you, Steve."

He snaps out of the stupor. Sucks in a breath. His first breath in decades, it feels like. "What do you mean?" he breathes.

Bucky's eyes are mostly hidden by the shadow of his hood. "I'm not good like you."

"Yes you are," Steve says. He watches, perplexed, as Bucky balls his hands into fists on either side of his half-full cup. "You're the best defensive player in the country."

Bucky sighs. "That's not what I mean."

"Buck, I don't—"

"Parker wasn't the first person I hurt."

"… Okay."

"I hurt a lot of people."

"It's okay." Their knees are still propped together under the table. Steve's foot is falling asleep, but he doesn't move. "People get injured. It happens."

"No. The thing is, Steve. I'm. The thing is … it doesn't just happen. I do it on purpose. I hurt them.
On purpose."

"... Yeah, but football is a physical game by nature."

Bucky shakes his head. "Pierce … My coach, he … there are names. There's a list. Every week, there's a target."

If Steve's stomach was doing gymnastics before, now it is in free-fall.

"Or more than one target," Bucky croaks.

"Bucky..."

"The Xavier quarterback. The Leviathan quarterback, and their big tight end."

"Buck."

"The Atlantis running back. Peter Parker." His eyes flick up to meet Steve's. "… You."

Bucky's face twists. He ducks his head and covers his mouth with one hand. He looks like he's going to be sick again.

"Bucky?"

"Shit," he whispers, but doesn't look up.

It's as if a storm howls around them, but here, in the center, witnessing all that pain on his friend's face, Steve feels calm. All the different stages of his life lock into place.

He leans across the table and lays a hand over Bucky's shaking fist. At the contact, Bucky gasps; he doesn't look up, but he doesn't pull away, either.

"So anyway, yeah," Bucky rasps, squeezing his eyes shut. "I'm that guy. I'm fucking scum and I play for fucking dirtbag cheaters and we keep fucking winning and everything's fucked up and you're about to win the fucking Heisman—we can't keep—"

"Bucky!" Steve cuts him off. "None of that is your fault, you're not scum—"

"I know what I am, alright?" Bucky says, opening his eyes to glare at Steve. "I know what I am, and I can live with that. But this?" he turns his hand over and grips Steve's until his knuckles crack. "Whatever this is, whatever you're doing here … can't. We can't."

"What can't we do?"

Bucky yanks his hand back. He looks like he is about to answer, but at that moment a small commotion erupts in the middle of Starbucks. They both whirl around, attention drawn to a table full of half a dozen teenagers.

"Turn it up, hey, turn this up!"

"Do you have a remote?"

"Check this out!"

The kids all bounce out of their seats and start calling toward the café employees. They gesture wildly at the television screen, which is still muted.
"Can we hear this?!!" one of them shouts.

Steve and Bucky both turn to stare at the TV. Steve's stomach reaches the bottom of that free-fall, collapses in on itself, turns to jelly.

A barista clambers over with a remote control, but the volume isn't really necessary. A neat graphic underneath the ESPN logo tells the entire story.

Bucky sees it too, then turns back to face Steve. He tilts forward, staring blankly at the surface of the table. His face looks like the soundless howl of wind through thick branches.

The TV screen lists all 25 of the top teams in college football, but only the first two matter.

1. Southeast State (13-0)
2. American State (11-1)

Chapter End Notes

bounty hunting is, unfortunately, a thing in football (both NFL and college.)

also, if you're thinking "the BCS system is a load of bullshit!" well then, 1) you're not wrong and 2) you're not alone. in fact, it was disbanded a couple years ago for being arbitrary, ineffective, and endlessly controversial. and yes, one time, two teams from the same division of the same conference ended up facing each other for the national championship.

i fear i might be painting college football in a negative light. .....i love this sport, honest.
The Heisman

Chapter Summary

Warnings for sarcastic banter, inappropriately timed holidays, and gratuitous fluff.

Chapter Notes

thank you to circuschickadee and fate-motif for talking me through this chapter. it's probably not what either of them expected but anything good here, the credit is theirs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve Rogers
How much am I worth?

Bucky
what

Steve Rogers
The hit list

Bucky
oh my god stop

Steve Rogers
Was I the most expensive one?

Bucky
we are not talking about this

Steve Rogers
Just tell me I'm worth more than Summers he's a jackass

Bucky
steve fucking rogers your not supposed to be proud of this

ESPN films specials on all the Heisman Trophy candidates to air the week of the ceremony. They fly Steve out to New York City early, and film him in Brooklyn for his featurette. Undertones of the prodigal son.

It ties into a unifying theme: the other two finalists, Pietro Maximoff and T'Challa Bashenga, were both born overseas, so each of the videos highlights the Heisman candidates' origins. Of course, Steve is the only one who gets to film his on location, but it's still a pretty neat marketing trick.

ESPN produces a thirty-minute feature on Maximoff, filmed right in Winter Station—which is frigid
and bleak enough to pass for Russia on a nice day. They talk a lot about his adoptive parents and how loving and welcoming they are. They talk about running fast. He's trying to break the record for the 40-meter-dash at the NFL combine, so they have him run it a few times for the cameras. He almost beats it then and there.

They talk about growing up poor and training night and day under unconventional circumstances. Apparently he raced against horses on foot and chased chickens as a kid, which is supposed to explain his inhuman speed. It's very Rocky IV with a Russian underdog.

T'Challa's story is fascinating in its juxtaposition. He was raised in a small African nation called Wakanda, where his father was a rich and powerful politician. T'Challa grew up playing soccer on the streets until his father's work relocated them to the U.S. and he became a lunatic for American football.

Next to the two of them, Steve feels like the most boring kid on the playground.

For his segment, the camera crews drag him in front of every Brooklyn landmark they can think of, probably in an effort to make him look more interesting alongside a Russian immigrant and the son of an African ambassador.

They also visit his old high school field, and Steve plays catch with the current quarterback, a teenager with a solid arm and stars in his eyes.

"You know, I didn't even play varsity until my junior year," Steve tells the reporter.

She is a tall woman made taller by blood-red pumps, with freckles on her nose and lines in her face from smiling so much. "I'm glad your coach came to his senses."

"Well, it wasn't the coach's fault," Steve admits. "I was a scrawny kid. About five feet tall and a hundred pounds soaking wet. If they put me on the field with varsity linebackers, I would've left in an ambulance the first time I got tackled."

"Really?" Her camera-ready mask of neutral friendliness shifts into genuine astonishment. "I have to say, I find that hard to believe."

"It's true," says Steve, and when they go inside, he shows them old team photos next to the trophy case.

The camera-man zooms in on the JV team from his sophomore season. String-bean Steve Rogers kneels in the front row. For comparison, they also zoom in on the following season's team picture. Steve is taller, there, and his shoulders broader. He's standing next to Bucky Barnes, whose short black hair and sunny smile make Steve's throat go numb. That Bucky bears almost no resemblance to the one who just won the NAC Championship. No one in the film crew points him out, so Steve keeps his mouth shut, too.

---

**Steve Rogers**

[Image]

**Bucky**

cool

**Steve Rogers**

That's it? The Brooklyn bridge is just "cool"?
Bucky
can't really see the bridge, someone's big head is in the way

Steve Rogers
WOW

Bucky
learn how to take a selfie old man

Steve and the camera crew visit MetLife Stadium, where the New York Giants play their home games. It's Thursday afternoon, so it's not crowded, and with all the fancy ESPN name badges, it's a simple task talking their way through locked gates.

"I spent a year's worth of holiday money on Giants tickets one time," Steve confesses to the microphones.

The reporter laughs politely. "Was it worth it?"

"I remember it was freezing," Steve says. "I thought I would lose half my toes to frostbite, but I was too stubborn to leave before the end of the game. Giants ended up winning though, so yeah, I guess it was worth it."

He's downplaying the real story.

Possessing the boldness unique to fourteen-year-olds, he and Bucky took advantage of neglectful parents by spending most of their savings on football tickets one November, then proceeded to underdress and spend most of the game huddled in the upper deck, crying from the cold winds. Bucky forced Steve to wear his hat, because Steve, of course, forgot one of his own.

Steve smiles as he tells the story, even though he leaves out names and details.

Steve Rogers
Have you been back to NYC?

Bucky
nope too broke

Steve Rogers
You have permission to tackle me as hard as you need to afford a plane ticket to New York

Bucky
omg steven

Steve Rogers
Seriously all the old hangouts!

Bucky
… are boring

Steve Rogers
We can do it together!
"The Game of the Century. Can we talk about that?" the reporter asks. "Pretty dramatic, right?"

"That's what they tell me."

"Was it dramatic on the field?"

Steve inhales deeply. Across the street, a dog tugs so hard on its leash that her owner can barely keep up. "It was intense. It was definitely intense."

"You seemed to be at each others' throats." She is speaking very conversationally, as if they really were just taking a stroll down the sidewalk in New York City; as if there weren't a pair of cameras and four microphones in their faces.

"Both teams came to play."

"The big story after the game, of course, was your health status," she says in a falsely casual voice.

A burning sensation creeps into Steve's throat. "Not much of a story, really. I didn't even miss a day of practice."

"Some people say Barnes should have been flagged for that tackle." She pauses, and when Steve doesn't speak, she adds, "Some people say he's too violent."

"Football is a violent game."

"He hurt you, though. And he's hurt other people."

In his mind, Steve can hear Bucky's voice saying the exact same words. He plasters on a smile before speaking. "I mean, he gets hurt, too. That's the nature of the game.

"The whole country gets up in arms when he tackles people, but look at his side of things: James Barnes played the whole NAC Championship with three broken ribs. He's played through broken bones and sprained ankles and head injuries. It comes with the territory. We put our bodies on the line every day. It can scare some people, sure, but as football players, we know exactly what we're getting into.

"I'm just out there to do my job, and Barnes is just doing his. You can ask Pietro and T'Challa, they'll tell you the same thing. I'm sure they've taken some hard hits, but that doesn't stop them, you know?"

"When you get hit, you can't complain; you can't whine about it; you can't give up. All you can do is scrape yourself off the ground and try again. You won't ever win without fighting for it."

The reporter asks, with a knowing smile, "Are you ready for the rematch?"

Steve simmers in a thoughtful silence before answering. A car horn blares in the background.

"Yes," says Steve. "We'll be ready."

---

Bucky

*lol sure*

---

*Steve Rogers*

*Do you watch ESPN much?*
Bucky
only when there's nothing on TLC

Steve Rogers
Are you serious?

Bucky
no

Bucky
when there's nothing on TLC I watch Food Network

Steve Rogers
Thank god

Bucky
I'm not cooking you dinner

Steve Rogers
I'm just glad you don't have to witness all this Heisman BS

The Heisman Ceremony would make a red carpet look like the Nebraska county fair. They cordon off half of Times Square for cameras and flashbulbs and voice recorders and fine jewelry and Italian shoes. Steve cleans up well enough—or thought he did—but he feels like a kid in Sunday school next to T'Challa's fitted three-piece suit and Pietro Maximoff, long and lean in gaudy silver. What Steve thought was a nice red-white-and-blue fashion statement turns out to be more of a mundane expression of humble ineptitude.

Nick Fury is there with him, answering just as many questions from reporters, if not more. He has better charisma than Steve when it comes to national television. Probably comes from the years of practice as a high-profile coach. Steve, on the other hand, feels more and more like that tiny nobody on the JV team.

He is shunted from room to room, microphone to microphone, squashy armchair to squashy armchair, and asked to rattle off clichés about positivity and hard work and team spirit.

Past Heisman Trophy winners introduce themselves to Steve—Eddie George, Herschel Walker, Desmond Howard—Steve is losing his mind—they introduce themselves, not the other way around—it's nuts—and he forgets those conversations as soon as they walk away because he's so awestruck.

As for T'Challa and Maximoff, Steve sees a lot of them, but gets almost no chance to speak to them.

"Congratulations!" T'Challa says, shaking his hand with a firm grip. "The Notre Dame game was wild! Incredible job!"

On the other hand, "I am practicing!" Pietro says with a wicked glint in his eyes. "We are getting ready!"

Presumably, he means the National Championship. And when he says "we" he probably means the entire team, but Steve is suddenly overwhelmed by images of Bucky working out, and doesn't know how exactly to respond.
Steve also meets Alexander Pierce for the first time. Even in old age, Pierce carries himself with the strength and poise of a ‘40s movie star in a political thriller. He is the type of person who can command a room without even opening his mouth; all he has to do is put his hands on his hips and square his shoulders and everyone's attention zeroes in on him, magnetized.

Years ago, media outlets nicknamed Pierce the "Secretary of Defense." Steve can see it in his presidential demeanor. Alexander Pierce is a man who is never out of control.

He gives Steve a perfect, gentlemanly handshake when they are introduced.

"It's good to see you here at the ceremony. Congratulations. I never doubted it for a second," he says, every syllable carved out of marble. "We have a lot of respect for you in Winter Station, Rogers."

"Oh, well, trust me, the feeling is mutual," Steve stutters. "The work you do at Southeast is really … impressive. Especially this season."

"Well, the season's not over yet," Pierce smiles and gives him a friendly wink. "You certainly pose a special problem to our defense, Rogers."

"I do my best," Steve replies.

He has no personal quarrel with Pietro Maximoff, but Steve suddenly wants nothing more than to win the Heisman Trophy, just so Alexander Pierce can't bring one home.

That's all Steve can think while he's sitting in the front row, watching past Heisman winners step up to the podium, listening to them speak, listening to announcers speak, listening to the host speak, and not hearing a word of it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve can see Maximoff staring at the trophy itself. It's on display, the focal point of the evening, solid and clunky and burnished bronze. It looks like it could double as a wrecking ball. Steve tries not to stare, himself. (T'Challa doesn't seem to struggle at all with self-control. He looks downright relaxed, however that is possible.)

Steve checks his watch. He feels an acute sense of inadequacy. He can think of a million reasons to give T'Challa this award—he's a scoring machine—or Pietro Maximoff, who sprinted to an undefeated season. What is Steve doing here, sitting between the two of them?

From the next row back, Nick Fury squeezes his shoulder, an unspoken good luck.

All of the previous Heisman Trophy winners are gathered onstage, each standing under his own portrait, a formidable wall of football royalty. As the ESPN host steps up to the podium, the room reaches a new level of quiet; a stuffy, humid quiet; library-quiet. The host is talking, talking, saying things no one hears, he is holding an envelope, he is opening it, more talking.

And, the way it went in all his dreams for the last ten years: "Steve Rogers."

Flashbulbs pop in his stomach. The old fashioned kind that are one-use-only and leave a carpet of glass crunching underfoot.

The walk to the stage feels unusually long, and his feet feel unusually large. When the host hands him the trophy, all he can think is, don't drop it don't drop it don't drop it.

Steve never prepared a speech. It came too close to tempting fate. He'd thought about what to say, usually while in the shower or on the bench press, and never gotten farther than a list of names he'd like to thank. So when he steps up to the microphone, the first thing out of his mouth is, "I didn't
drop it!"

The audience laughs politely.

"Wow. It's heavy," he adds, and cringes at the sound of his own voice. "Wow."

Hundreds of people smile patiently up at Steve. He can feel the eyes of the past Heisman winners surrounding him, watchful, ready to accept him into their ranks.

He runs his fingertips along the blocky base of the trophy and takes a deep breath. "I don't do this very often, so bear with me," he says, smiling weakly. More sympathetic laughter. "I want to start by saying that, wo I am so grateful right now.

"This award means so much to me, and it is a bigger honor than I have ever dreamed of. I never imagined I would be standing in front of you like this, giving a speech and holding this trophy. So thank you.

"This is insane. I should not be standing here. I don't deserve this award. I could name ten people off the top of my head who deserve this award more than I do. Pietro Maximoff is an incredible running back. T'Challa Bashenga put up once-in-a-lifetime numbers.

"And that doesn't even include all the football players who weren't invited tonight. Cam Newton just won the SEC. Andrew Luck is the kind of quarterback NFL teams fight over. Everyone said James Barnes would be the first defensive player to win the Heisman in over ten years until that targeting call.

"Half of my own teammates deserve this award more than I do. Isaiah Bradley helped carry this team for years and never got any thanks for it. Sam Wilson plays like a senior, not a true freshman, and you all know it.

"The Heisman Trophy is meant to honor the most outstanding player in college football. I gotta say, I don't feel very outstanding. I'm not trying to impress anyone; I'm just trying to do my job to the best of my ability. So I want to take this opportunity to dedicate this award to my team—the American State team that fought through the entire season and somehow, against all the odds, has a chance to prove that we are the best. I couldn't have done it without them.

"And let me also say thank you to my coach, Nick Fury; and to my mother for encouraging me all these years, and thank you to the voters for giving me this incredible honor. I am so grateful.

"Thank you all for your support. Thank you for your trust and your belief in me. Thank you for making me the first openly bisexual Heisman Trophy winner in NCAA history."

Everyone knows Steve Rogers can't keep a secret.

Especially one that isn't much of a secret, at all.

None of his friends are surprised by the announcement. Nick Fury gives him a knowing smile after hugging and congratulating him on the win; back home, Sam Wilson asks how long he'd been planning on coming out; Natasha Instagrams a photo of the ASU gymnastics team with a bi-pride flag congratulating Steve; the Bradleys give him almost identical, suffocating hugs; and Clint makes a new Twitter account for the sole purpose of declaring Steve Rogers to be his hero.

The rest of the world, however, is rocked so hard it almost falls off its axis.
Steve becomes a sensation overnight: one of the first and only athletes in a major sport to come out as part of the GLBT community, and easily one of the highest-profile. It's always memorable when someone breaks the notorious mold of intolerant machismo that hangs over the sports world, but Steve doesn't break that mold so much as crush it to dust and disavow its very existence.

Steve isn't surprised by the attention. He is surprised by the outpouring of love and support.

Almost across the board, media outlets go out of their way to congratulate him; to declare their respect, admiration, compassion, and support. The positive reaction overshadows the smattering of negative voices.

For two weeks, Steve appears on camera and in interviews; he answers reporters' emails; SportsCenter livestreams him into their program at least three times. Local and national news sources are onsite when he and Nick Fury unveil the official display for his trophy on campus. In the whirlwind of attention, he loses track of photoshoots. (It's a good thing classes have let out for the semester. Between workouts and press appearances and eating, Steve doesn't have a minute to spare, these days.)

One response stands out among the rest, of course.

Bucky
nice speech

Steve Rogers
I thought you didn't watch ESPN ;)

Bucky
like i would ever miss you winning the heisman

So December is a crazy time for Steve Rogers. Before he knows what's happening, Christmas is three days away. Clint Barton loads his bags to visit his parents in Nebraska, taking Natasha along. Sam Wilson books a flight for Atlanta. The Bradleys pack up Kate and the girls for the Quad Cities. Normally, Steve would accept their invitation to join, but this year, he politely declines.

Are you sure, they ask, and Mama won't mind and so on. Steve insists he has work to get done, and assures them that he won't be lonely. He doesn't tell them about the text keeping him in town.

Bucky
got any christmas plans

Maybe Steve Rogers can keep certain secrets.

"If we keep meeting here, this is gonna become our Starbucks."

Bucky blinks at him, not a crack in his expression. "Is that our celebrity couple name."

It takes Steve a split second to laugh. "You calling me a star?"

"Hell no, there's just stars all over your clothes, General." Bucky nods at the American State Generals logo embroidered on Steve's jacket.

"No, I think you're calling me a star," Steve teases. "Is it because I'm out of this world?"
The barista steps up to the counter with a coffee cup in each hand. She calls out Bucky's name. As he takes the drink, Bucky makes a point of telling her, "I've never met this guy before."

The barista blinks.

"He's joking," Steve clarifies.

"Nope," Bucky says. "Not joking. Not even a little bit."

The barista inspects the other cup, spinning it slowly so she can read the name. "Steve?"

"That's me," Steve says.

"I wouldn't know," Bucky cuts in.

The barista doesn't let go of the cup right away. "So it's okay if I leave my number on Steve's cup?"

Bucky dissolves into such a violent coughing fit that patrons start to shoot him disdainful scowls. When he ducks outside to catch his breath, the barista grins at Steve. "You're welcome."

"… Thank you," Steve says, pretending his cheeks aren't burning with the heat of a thousand suns—but she smirks at him, and the cool air outside is a blessed relief.

Bucky appears from the shadows of the awning. He bumps Steve's shoulder and steers him into an easy stroll down the sidewalk.

If Chicago is a miracle any other month out of the year, then in December, it is otherworldly. Gossamer lights stretch from street to street, icing drizzled over a cold dessert. The shop windows glow with holiday fantasies and the air tastes like mint. It hasn't snowed yet, so everything is a perfectly frozen sharp-edged photograph. Now, late at night on Christmas Eve, it is bright but quietly focused; crowded, but genial, full of last-minute shoppers and desperate romantics.

Bucky and Steve draw a meandering path from one sidewalk to the next, passing under the leafless trees coated in candy lights and frost. Steve is bundled in a lined winter coat. On the other hand, Bucky is in his usual uniform: black sweatshirt with the hood up and official SSU sweatpants.

Bucky's eyes flick to meet his, and Steve immediately diverts his gaze. He takes a drink—a holiday-themed mocha—and asks, "Hey, Buck, you remember that Giants game we went to sophomore year?"

"… What about it?"

"It was cold as death," Steve says with a chuckle. "I think we both got the flu afterwards. Who did we play, again?"

Bucky inhales audibly. "Um."

"Was it the Buccaneers?"

"… I don't remember."

Steve steals another glance at Bucky. The corners of his mouth are curled in a close-lipped smile, but his eyes are trained on the sidewalk.

"You made me borrow your hat," Steve adds.
A genuine smile crosses Bucky's face, just for an instant. Then his face goes numb, again. "I don't remember any of that. … Sorry."

"It's fine!" Steve says truthfully. "It was a long time ago."

"Sort of."

The awkwardness from their museum visit starts to creep in. It's as if, with one gust of lakeside wind, their easy banter starts to tear away. They cross the street quietly, sipping their warm drinks. Steve is about to change the subject when, miraculously, Bucky breaks the silence.


"Please." Steve ducks his head. "Didn't really expect it, to be honest."

Bucky casts him a sideways glance. "I always knew you were gonna do big things."

"Yeah, all it took was a growth spurt!" Steve jokes. "Turns out football is a lot easier when you're six-three."

"Oh. I wasn't talking about football."

Beside them, a chain of cars rolls to stop at a red light.

"And I know my teammate was there, and all," Bucky adds, "but I'm glad you won."

Steve's heart pounds in red and gold. He wants to say so many things, but he keeps it safe. "Was Maximoff mad about it?"

"Nah." Bucky shrugs, finishes his hot cocoa, and throws it in the nearest trash can. "He's like, your number one fan, now. His sister, on the other hand … she had some interesting nicknames for you."

"Such as?"

"They don't translate well."

Steve chuckles. They wander into Millennium Park, toward its ice rink rolled out between streetlights and park benches, a carpet of white emblazoned under the black and gold cityscape. Together, they step up to the railing and watch skaters of all ages drift back and forth across the ice, bundled in puffy coats and knit hats and wool scarves. A pair of little girls buzzes by at light-speed, and an old man glides the other direction with his hands folded serenely behind his back.

"Who finished second for the Heisman?" Steve asks after a moment.

"Don't remember."

"Clint would know," Steve says, pulling out his cell. "I could text him." He selects his previous messages, where Bucky's series of texts is still at the top of the screen.

Bucky tilts closer. Half his weight comes to lean against Steve's shoulder. He reaches for Steve's phone, angling it for a better view. "Just 'Bucky'?"

Steve looks at the name attached to the text messages. He never bothered to add the "Barnes" when he saved the number. "Don't need the last name," Steve says. Bucky is still hanging onto the phone, his cold fingers wrapped around Steve's. "How many Buckys do you think I know?" Steve asks.
"Don't I get a fancy emoji or nothing."

Smiling, Steve pulls up his contacts to edit the "Bucky" profile. "I think there's a football one."

"I was thinking a middle finger, but yeah, whatever works." Bucky releases his hold on Steve, but remains in his personal space, pressed shoulder-to-shoulder.

"How about this?" Steve shows him the screen, which displays "Bucky," and next to his name, a little red heart.

Bucky's eyelashes flutter. The corners of his mouth tighten and, after staring a second too long at Steve's phone, he diverts his gaze toward the ice skaters.

"You ain't even bought me dinner yet," Bucky teases. He speaks from the bottom of his throat.

At first, Steve identified it as the hoarseness of underuse, but he's learning that Bucky's voice just always sounds that way—like six-thirty in the morning, brittle winter wind, rumpled bedsheets, the early kindling of sunrise. Like cynicism and secrets. Like every conversation in his life is private. One-on-one.

Bucky's chin is tilted upward, lifted toward the skyscrapers soaring in the dark. His face catches the soft glow of fairy lights, and he looks more like himself here, now, a solid song in the liquid night.

This time, when he turns to make eye contact, Steve doesn't look away. They hold the gaze for a long time—long enough for a spark to catch on every single one of Steve's nerve endings. The warmth from his coffee floods every cell of his body. His mind asks questions, dances and spins with them.

Bucky blinks, and his lips part just enough to speak. "I have a Christmas present for you."

"Oh," Steve lets out a lungful of burnt air—a cloud of steam. "You didn't have to."

"Wasn't much effort." Half of Bucky's mouth turns up in a smile. He digs into his pocket and procures a crisp cut-out from a newspaper.

With a suspicious smile, Steve accepts the gift. The paper is stiff and off-color with age, almost tearing apart along the creases. He unfolds it and his mouth falls open.

"This is the last present I got you," Steve says numbly. He looks up at Bucky; his expression is neutral, but the city lights glitter in his eyes. "You kept it."

The paper shivers in his hands, either from the wind or because he is shaking so damn hard. It's that old newspaper article from their homecoming game junior year, the article celebrating their victory, the article Steve cut out and gave to Bucky before he disappeared.

"It's a classic, man." Bucky states. "Vintage Steve Rogers memorabilia, right there. You should start a scrapbook."

"Oh, Bucky," he whispers. Then he looks up again, his heart stricken. "I didn't get you anything."

Bucky shrugs.

"I can't keep it," Steve insists. He feels around in his own pockets, but he already knows he won't find anything but his wallet there. "I don't have anything for you. Man, I don't even have any cash on me." He feels so much, so hard. His veins throb with it all.
"Dude, it's fine," says Bucky, giving Steve a playful shove with his elbow. "Just thought you'd get a kick out of it."

"Yeah."

"… You okay?"

"God, Bucky," Steve says. "Of course I'm okay, this is—it's incredible. Do you remember when I gave this to you?"

Bucky narrows his eyes. "It was when I left."

"The day you left. You got me that sleeve, remember?"

"Right," Bucky says, avoiding Steve's eyes.

"I wore that thing for every practice and every game, not gonna lie," Steve tells him. He folds the newspaper up and slides it carefully into his back pocket. "It saved my life."

Bucky angles his shoulders toward Steve, forming an intimate vee between them. Absently, he tugs the string of his hoodie. "Merry Christmas, I guess."

The streetlamps cast a woolly glow over Bucky's features. Steve watches him fiddle with his sweatshirt's drawstring, and then snags Bucky's fingers and holds them still against his chest.

"Sorry I didn't get you anything."

"It's fine," Bucky rasps, gazing studiously at Steve's collarbone.

Steve twines their fingers together and holds on tighter. Bucky's hands are very cold, he thinks, just as Bucky says aloud, "Your hands are warm."

A puff of air escapes Steve's lips. Bucky looks up at him, and Steve is just floored by it, the look in his eyes, so near and so restless; he won't ever get used to it.

He closes the distance between them and catches Bucky's lips with his own.

For a moment: breathless, golden uncertainty. They are still touching in places—Bucky's hip against Steve's thigh, his arm curled between them, their hands clasped—but all of that, all the world has crystalized like snow in winter clouds. All Steve can feel is the point where their mouths touch.

It doesn't last long. They part on an exhale, but not by much. Their noses bump gently, and the bow of Bucky's lip brushes against Steve's, and his eyes are blurry, they are so close.

There are poems on the cold caress of the wind. Ginsburg and Eliot and Sandburg and Neruda, planted like seeds in the creases of their skin, roots tangled in their bones. Steve thinks, for a second, that Bucky might speak, but he doesn't. He slides his free hand to the nape of Steve's neck, tightens his fingers there, and drags him down for another kiss.

This time it is more passionate, more musical. It reminds Steve of that wretched moment a week ago when they crashed together in Bucky's hotel room after the conference championship—it has heat and blank pages and prayers but, unlike that collision, this kiss is more like a kiss.

Steve presses closer, winding an arm around Bucky's waist. When he tilts his head, Bucky responds in the same language, parting his lips—just a sliver—just enough to taste Steve's tongue and to test it —
A wolf whistle shrills from the ice rink and, at once, both of them jolt apart with the shock. They stare at each other, panting.

And then Bucky laughs, a clear peal of bell tones ringing in the night. Even though they're no longer touching, Steve can feel it down to the toes of his shoes.

Bucky covers his face with both hands. A muffled curse word breaks through the cage of his fingers.

"That bad?" Steve says, falsely indignant.

"That good."

Bucky lowers his hands, but the smile lingers.

"You okay?" Steve asks.

Bucky doesn't answer right away. He backs against the railing and slumps there, then shifts in order to see the ice skaters over his shoulder. They are oblivious; they dance on without attention to spare for a pair of confused boys in football gear. Whoever whistled at them must have done so in passing amusement.

After a long pause, Bucky tucks his chin to his chest. "What did I say about buying me dinner first."

"Okay, when are you free?" Steve says instantly, even though he knows Bucky was teasing.

Bucky chuckles again, weaker this time. "I'm sorry. We shouldn't—I shouldn't have."

"But you wanted to?"

"I mean, yeah. But." With a sigh and a sad smile, Bucky looks at Steve one more time. "Doesn't really matter."

"It does," Steve insists. Careful not to crowd him, he steps just close enough to lay a hand over Bucky's where it rests on the railing. "That's all that matters to me."

Bucky gazes across the ice rink. It casts a pale glow over his features, steals the realness of his form, pulls him into the faded, stippled edges of a black and white photograph.

"We still got a game to play."

Chapter End Notes

1) In fact, Michael Sam was the first publicly gay player to be drafted into the NFL, and probably the most famous college athlete to come out. at least recently. in general, media coverage was extremely supportive and understanding.

2) they did the thing!!!!! tell me what you think!
The Winter Soldier

Chapter Summary

Steve Rogers has a lot of love to give. Sometimes, it can overwhelm the people who are close to him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winter is a season defined by absence. Absence of daylight and warmth and energy and color. It steals the leaves off the trees and the moisture off streets and glass and grass. Off of skin. It takes everything and puts it nowhere. People can brace themselves and bundle themselves but no bonfire can heat what isn't there.

Kissing Bucky Barnes is the best and the worst act Steve has committed in his life. It is a buoy in the storm, but one he can't keep. It is blessed; it is both hands tied behind his back. It is beautiful and brutal. Bright bronze rooftops burnt under the sun, then buried in snow.

As he and Bucky part ways on Christmas Eve, Steve can't help but think that even gold plating is cold.

Winter takes that too.

Bucky

pietro says not to knock the shit out of u this time

Steve Rogers

Tell him thanks. I think.

Bucky

he said at least wait til we get to the nfl

Steve Rogers

Okay he needs to tell your coaches to cool it then

Bucky

haha

When Steve's phone vibrates twice in quick succession, he knows that it's a call, not a text or some other ignorable message. He frowns. No one ever calls him.

He stands up from the couch so that he can reach into his pocket. The screen flashes insistently: Bucky. In that moment, Steve fully understands the cliché about guts and butterflies.

Eli's voice cuts through the daydream. "Whose name on the caller ID got you smilin' all goofy like that?"
Steve looks up, panting slightly. Eli and Isaiah both shoot him identical stares and raise identical eyebrows from the other side of the couch.

"I bet I can guess," Isaiah says, bursting to his feet so abruptly that Steve almost drops his phone. Face just inches away from Steve's, he adds, through his teeth, "Barnes is messing with your head, Steve. And you're letting him."

"Ice— " Eli protests. But it's no good.

Isaiah swirls from the room.

Stunned, Steve looks first at Eli, then at his phone—still vibrating, but he can practically feel the voicemail getting ready to snag the call—and he opens his mouth. He feels desperate and bewildered and helpless all at once, like when you step on a dog's tail and don't know how to apologize.

"I'm—"

"Answer your phone, man," Eli says, his voice soft and deep and reassuring.

Steve does so; fumbles for the green button on his screen before the call disappears altogether. Who knows if Bucky would ever call back, or answer a returned call, or leave a voicemail? Who knows why he's calling to begin with?

"Hey, man," Steve says, shooting Eli a look full of remorse and confusion. "Hey, I'm—just a second, Buck."

Steve edges toward the door, but doesn't leave until Eli shoos him away. Steve slinks up to his bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time. Every step squeals a protest on the way up.

Once the door to his room is latched, Steve lets out a deep breath. "Bucky. Hi. What's up?"

"Oh, do I have your attention, now?"

"…Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine. I'm messing with you," Bucky assures him, though he is still hard to believe. Over the phone, his voice is even more deep and cracked than usual, the bottom of a dark canyon, filled with static.

"Right."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine," Steve says, then winces at the sound of his own voice, too high and too tight. "I mean, I think my roommate wants to hit me, but other than that."

"Who's your roommate?"

"Um. Isaiah Bradley."

"What the hell, Steve," he rumbles. "Only you would start a fight with that guy, he's terrifying."

Steve flops backwards across his mattress, laughing openly. "You know me."

"What's he mad about?"
Steve sucks in a breath. "It's—I mean, we're not fighting." He says so with more hope than conviction.

"You need me to come down there and break it up?"

"Need to what?" Suddenly, Steve's mind is filled with images from their junior year of high school—

"Like junior year, back in high school," Bucky says. "What, did you forget already?"

Steve's heart thunders in his chest.

Steve has always had a bad temper, and Bucky has always known it. The summer before their junior year, they made a pact: anytime they saw a fight break out on school grounds, they would take it upon themselves to break up the fight—provided the on-duty cops didn't beat them to it. The benefits were twofold. It reduced the acts of violence among the student body, and allowed Steve to get his frustrations out in a healthy way. Relatively healthy.

He never thought Bucky would remember a thing like that.

"No—no," says Steve, breathless. "I just—I didn't think …"

"You never really do before throwing a punch."

"It's not that kind of fight," he says, and then instantly corrects himself: "There is no fight!"

"Better not be."

"I'd still like it if you came down here, though."

There's a rush of air and static from the other line, an indication that Bucky might have actually laughed. All he says is yeah, one syllable, a rock dropped into the bottom of a well.

"Do you have a car?"

Again, just "yeah."

"You should come down," Steve says, both determined and nauseated. Bucky doesn't answer right away. Silent seconds throb through his veins.

"I don't get the best gas mileage."

Bucky never got a driver's license when they lived in Brooklyn. Neither did Steve, for that matter. They're more hassle than they're worth in the city, especially when your daily life is within walking distance, and the rest of the world is a train ride away.

Within a month of moving to Illinois, Steve went to the DMV and the dealership. It's practical. Plus, he likes his Charger. It makes a statement without breaking his budget.

(And that's one of the silkiest secrets about being a Division I athlete at a major university: the loans won't ever hurt.)

Bucky probably got his license in Wisconsin. Perhaps Texas. Steve tries to picture what the car might be. Lots of things get bad gas mileage. Could be an SUV, but that seems too uptown; could be a truck, but that seems too redneck; could be a clunker, but that seems more of a waste than it's worth.
Now that he's thought about it, he *wants* to know what kind of car Bucky has, but the silence has dragged on too long to ask. Instead, Steve crosses his ankles where they dangle over the edge of the mattress and says, "So what did you call for, Buck?"

"Can't a guy just say hi?"

"He could …" Steve says carefully, and finds himself trying to hide a smile, as if Bucky were right in the room with him. "But he could just send a text to do that …"

"Thought you might like to hear the sound of my lovely voice."

"You think you got a lovely voice?"

"What are you wearing, darlin'?"

That's the last straw for Steve; he dissolves into undignified giggles, rolling over on the bed and burying his face in a pillow. With his own laughter muffled, he can almost make out the sound of Bucky chuckling on the other line.

"So," Bucky says. He huffs a laugh, and then clears his throat. "I just—how's practice going?" The words weigh nothing at all, in a very self-conscious way.

Steve allows him the deflection. "Practice is good. We've been working on the triple option."

A long silence stretches in response. After a few seconds, Steve begins to worry about dropped calls, but then he hears static and muted shuffling in the background.

"Are you for real?" Bucky asks, finally.

"No, Buck."

Another silence, briefer this time, and then: "Fuck you."

Steve snorts.

On the other end of the line, there is a burst of static and clattering and muffled voices. Bucky says something in Russian, his voice tinny, as if he has tucked the phone against his shoulder. Another, more distant voice responds.

Hearing Bucky speak another language makes Steve's chest tear itself inside out. He feels a crinkled sepia wanting; an acute nostalgia for a place he's never been. An ancient, half-imagined city with stone sidewalks and vines creeping up belltowers.

"Steve?"

There are vines creeping up his throat, choking him.

"Oh," he says weakly, "do I have your attention, now?"

Bucky exhales, part sigh, part laugh. "Yeah."

"What's up, Bucky?" His words are low, now, and humid where they flutter against the pillowcase.

"Coach sent me the list."

The humor starts to cool over. Steve is still smiling, but he props himself up and gives Bucky his full
attention. "The list list? For the championship game?"

"Three names."

Steve twists the corner of a sheet around three fingers. "Let me guess."

"So, um. It's not just me," Bucky says. His consonants burst with fuzz.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't want to hurt anyone." His breath crackles through the receiver. "But I can't stop the others."

Steve pictures it: a tableau of black and white uniforms, Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley and Steve Rogers splattered with targets, and eleven opponents trapping them in the crosshairs. Ten, if Bucky bows out. If Bucky can bow out.

It comes to Steve, then, like cold water dripping on the back of his neck. The consequences of the hit list—both for him and for Bucky.

"Do what you have to do," Steve says. "We can take care of ourselves. I can take care of myself."

"I don't have to hurt you," Bucky says, as if he is speaking to himself. "That's it, you know? I never really felt like I'd get out, but now … the National Championship. It's a week away, and that's it. I'm out, and I don't really know … but there's the NFL draft. And something. You know."

He says it like a wish. He says it like he wants Steve to know all the gruesome carnage of his life, but doesn't want to tell him.

For once, Steve can recognize the feeling, however distantly, from whatever different perspective. There is a wild world looming outside the cage of college football, and as every week, every day, every minute passes by, the locks on the cage erode.

"Just take care of yourself, Buck."

Bucky laughs his static-burst laugh. "Someone's got to, I guess."

---

**Bucky**

*pietro wants ur autograph*

**Steve Rogers**

*Sorry that's against NCAA rules*

**Bucky**

*that's what i said. he pretended not to understand*

**Steve Rogers**

*He does understand though right? He's not gonna get in trouble or anything?*

**Bucky**

*i told him in 3 languages i think he got the picture*

---

It begins on Christmas Day. "All football activities." They begin at full speed and never relent.
Every game is different, but there is always a turning point in the preparation: a moment when Steve's feet settle underneath him and his shoulder blades braces against his spine in perfect alignment and it becomes easy to breath.

In practice on New Year's Day, though—nine days before the National Championship game—Steve has not reached that turning point.

They run offensive walkthroughs late in the afternoon. Steve exhales under center, and he calls an audible, and the offense shifts, and the defense shifts in response. Sam crosses the field in a slot route, double, maybe triple-covered. Steve throws the ball out of bounds.

It's like driving a car. When Steve can call plays from the field—when he can shift the gears and get a smooth response—that is when the game becomes a neatly paved road. But sometimes the road fights back, rough and twisting, and there are steep embankments on the sides.

And Steve is careening to the end. (He thinks of Bucky, of the pressure where his fingers slot between Steve's, of the world outside the cage, of dirt between his cleats, of facing him in the National Championship.)

Whether or not Steve ever gets control of the steering wheel, the end of the road will come.

Eight days before the game, Sam Wilson yells at him.

"How many times I gotta beg you, Steve?!" he cries. "Quit throwing the ball out of bounds!"

"You were double covered!"

"I can take care of myself!"

And Sam keeps crossing the middle of the field, keeps egging on linebackers, keeps posting up in double coverage, but all Steve can think of is Sam Wilson's name on a list and a pack of dogs hungry for blood.

Seven days before the game, there's an incident in the weight room—another pothole in the highway.

Isaiah is on the bench press, and Steve is spotting. Or, he should be, but half-way through the first set, something across the aisle distracts him.

Luke Cage is at the lat pull-down, working on his back and shoulders, wincing—but that's not what steals Steve's attention. What steals Steve's attention is the printed photograph taped to the top of Luke's machine. Southeast State, number 45.

He stares at Bucky's image. The arm brace is there, but not the visor, which means the photo was taken just weeks ago, when they traveled to the Frozen Wasteland. He thinks about those pictures, and what, exactly, they stand for. Revenge, danger, anger, hunger.

Steve can feel the wheels of the car veer off the highway, and feel the jolt of the gravel on the shoulder.

"… paying attention, I'm—shit—dammit Rogers, I'm—a little help, here?"

Isaiah's voice finally penetrates Steve's fuzzing daydreams like a fucking screwdriver. Steve whirls around and sees Ice struggling with the barbell. When returning it to its cradle, he must have caught it under the bar. Of course, Ice is a monster and he could probably handle it on his own, but it's slow going, and what the hell is a spotter for anyway, goddammit Steve Rogers—
After he rescues his teammate, and after Ice says "damn Rogers, what got you distracted?", Steve makes the mistake of glancing across the aisle again. Ice follows his gaze, and you can practically taste the moment his blood runs bitter.

"Listen, Steve. You're my best friend. You're like my brother. I ain't sayin' this with no hate, but please, man." He folds his arms. "Pull your head out of your ass."

"It's not—I'm fine," Steve says firmly.

"You better be able to play a damn football game without that boy getting to you, you hear me?"

"He's not getting to me."

"Okay," Isaiah says, pulling himself off the workout bench. "But in the meantime, I'm gonna find myself a spotter without his head in no clouds. Or in Winter Station."

Six days before the game, they end practice by running a trick play.

American State doesn't really have trick plays. Even this, their only trick play, is hardly a trick—more slight-of-hand than sawing women in half.

They have been practicing this play all season, just in case. They have yet to use it in a game.

It is, essentially, a field-goal fake. The team lines up as it normally would to kick a field goal, with Barton in place deep behind the line of scrimmage, a row of blockers, and Eli Bradley crouched, waiting for the snap, waiting for the whistle, waiting to snatch the ball out of the air and hold it for Clint's kick. The trick is in the timing and the subterfuge. When everything goes to plan, Clint pretends to kick, Eli catches the snap, holds it for a split-second—and then surges to his feet, peels right, and dumps a pass into the back corner of the end-zone, where Sam Wilson should be waiting to claim six points.

It requires impeccable precision on Eli's part; he has to stand up at the right time, has to pinpoint Sam Wilson with perfect accuracy and minimal preparation.

Sometimes Eli misses the pass. Sometimes the blockers fold and don't give him enough time to pass at all. Sometimes Sam's route veers, and sometimes he drops the football. Sometimes Clint himself gives up the trick with a botched fake.

In practice, the play succeeds about fifteen percent of the time.

Six days before the National Championship is not one of the fifteen percent. The ball ends up bouncing just out of Sam's reach, and the team prepares for a morose march back to their facilities.

So, taking in the flat scowls and dismal faces, Steve decides to speak up.

"Can I try?"

He takes Eli's place, and the road is smooth; the pavement worn to a rumbling groove. Steve connects with Sam for an easy touchdown. They end the practice on a high note.

Until Clint catches Steve between the practice field and the locker room.

"Why'd you have to make Eli look bad, man?"

"…What?"
"He's been working on that for six months, and then you just step in like some kind of hero?"

"It's not about me, Clint!" says Steve. "Didn't you see everyone's faces? The game's less than I week away. I didn't want the whole team to get down."

"What about Eli?"

Steve looks over his shoulder. The Bradley brothers are a dozen yards away, walking together and talking together, looking no more somber than usual.

"You know you can't run that play in the game," Clint says. "Not if we really need it."

Steve scowls at the ground and listens to the rapid machine-gun-fire of cleats on concrete. "I will if I have to."

After practice, none of Steve's roommates speak to him beyond cursory small-talk. As he's packing up his equipment, Steve asks Sam if he'd like to hang out after practice. Sam hesitates for a split second, and Steve braces himself.

"Sure thing."

Steve exhales.

"But listen," Sam says, waving a finger at Steve. "If Ice decides to lecture your ass, I ain't getting between that."

"Fair enough."

When they arrive home, it is instantly, ominously clear that something is wrong. Anxiety trips the wires in Steve's spine. He peers at Sam, who also looks suspicious of—something. Neither of them speaks.

The first thing Steve notices is the beastly sports car crouching in the driveway; a black behemoth with barbs and bleeding trim.

"You know anyone who drives a Corvette?" Sam asks carefully. "Or a … fighter jet?"

"No," Steve says, before killing the engine. "No, I don't."

They make eye contact—brief solidarity—before opening their doors and sliding out of Steve's Charger, suddenly an insignificant thing in its own home.

The second thing they notice is a dark, lonesome figure hunched on the top step of the porch. Nikes and sweatpants and the metallic smoke of a ghost, half here, half in shards.

When he reaches the bottom step, Steve knows who it is, and he can taste his own heartbeat. "Hey, Buck."

The figure doesn't look up.

Steve shoots a wary glance back at the monstrous car with its tinted windows, burning just this side of legal. Sam catches his eye and shrugs. Steve can see the tension coiled like a hot wire in his shoulders. He turns back to the porch, and takes a small step forward.

"Bucky?"
Without a word or any kind of warning, Barnes launches himself off the ground. Steve doesn't have time to react before he hears the sharp crack of Bucky's fist against his cheekbone.

He stumbles.

His senses come back to him one at a time.

First, it's the air—so cold he can taste it—and it grounds him.

Then his nostrils burn on the frozen wind.

After that, he becomes aware of the ringing in his ears, dull brass, the echo of a church bell. As it fades, Steve can hear angry voices and scuffling in the background.

Then he feels it: pain staining the right side of his face like liquid seeping from a shattered glass.

When he regains his bearing, he looks up and sees the back of Sam's neck.

"Fuck off, Wilson, I don't have a problem with you." Bucky's voice.

"You wanna calm down, soldier?!"

"Out of my way." Bucky tries to push past him, and Sam retaliates by grabbing both of his wrists.

"Why don't you tell us what—"

"What the hell, Steve?!" Bucky shouts over Sam's bicep.

Steve's heart rate skyrockets at the sight of Sam and Bucky fighting, so, in spite of the pain buzzing in his eye socket, he intervenes. After a brief struggle and a string of colorful curses, the three of them shove each other in three different directions, arms outstretched, wary.

Finally, Steve gets a good look at Bucky. He is glowering at Steve, the grim bass notes crunched at the bottom of the piano, percussive and bony. It's the kind of stare that could put people in their graves.

And Steve barely registers it. All he can see is the magnificent purple bruise blooming across the bridge of Bucky's nose. A pair of black eyes: bolder and darker on the right side, jaundiced on the left. His hair hangs limply in his face, but doesn't hide any of the destruction.

"Oh my god, Bucky," he breathes. "What happened?"

"Fuck you, like you don't know."

"I don't," Steve says plainly. "What's going on, w—"

"I should have known you couldn't keep your mouth shut!" Bucky roars back.

Steve tries to find a grasp on the situation, but it's like tumbling down the face of a cliff, scrabbling for purchase, tearing his hands to shreds on the way down. He looks to Sam for help, but Sam appears to be just as dazed and lost as Steve feels.

Bucky thrusts his smartphone under Steve's nose so that he is forced to read the headline there.

SOUTHEAST STATE UNDER INVESTIGATION
"Investigation for what?" Steve asks weakly.

Bucky raises his eyebrows, but doesn't speak. Instead, Steve scrolls down to the subtitle, which declares, **PIERCET AND STAFF FAIL TO REPORT INJURIES, FACE STEEP FINES FROM NCAA.**

The throbbing ache in Steve's eye has begun to leak across his face and to both temples. The prairie wind is an incessant rush in his ears, and his nose is raw from the cold.

Everything in the world is so unrealistically sharp.

He tries to read the article, but can't keep his eyes focused. He gets bits and pieces.

"Statements by Steve Rogers lead to … failed to name players on injury reports … heavy fines … interviewers spoke with team doctors … treated Barnes for broken ribs and head trauma … missed practice … secret history of debilitating injury … damages his NFL draft value …"

"Draft value," Steve reads aloud, blankly.

Bucky's laugh is humorless steel. "So you got to the good part," he says as he buries his phone in his pocket. "How about that, right? Now everyone knows I'm damaged goods."

"But … you're not …"

"Shut up!" Bucky cries. "Just for one second, shut your big fucking mouth! Don't you get it? Every practice I missed, every pulled muscle and every broken bone and every shot for the pain—no one knew about it until you ran your fucking mouth!"

"What do you mean no one knew?" Steve can't wrap his head around this, the grisly black brace on Bucky's left arm, all those times Bucky limped off the field and all those horrible things he played through. It seemed like everyone knew. How could they not? "You told me … You told me you sat out a whole week of practice. You told me you broke your arm, and your ribs—weeks ago, you told me—"

"Yeah, Steve, I told you," he cuts in, every syllable chopping Steve to bits. "Because I thought you cared. I thought I could trust you." He buries his hands in his hair and roars in frustration.

Steve went to the zoo in Chicago, once. The free one downtown. He saw a jaguar. It paced in its cage, back and forth, letting out little grunts and snarls, baring its teeth—all this, without paying any attention to the people watching. This is the same, Steve thinks. This is like watching a restless animal floundering in its own frustration.

"Fucking Christ, Steve," Bucky says, every word hacked by a table saw. "What am I gonna do now?"

"What do you mean?" Steve's words are as soft as Bucky's are hard; the thin fibers of torn cotton balls. "You can do anything, God, you're—"

"Don't lie to yourself, and don't lie to me," Bucky shouts. "This is it, this is all I am. I've fucked everything else up, alright? All I can do is play football."

"That's not true, Buck." Steve squares his shoulders. "Don't say that. You're funny, and smart, and—and—"

"Not a very long list," Bucky says, showing his teeth.
"Bucky, please, I can't even begin—"

*There just aren't words for the way sun shines after a hurricane.*

"This is all I have, Steve!" he bellows, like a swiping a match across a striking surface. "This is all I'm good for!"

Steve doesn't know what to say. His head spins. Absently, he raises his hand to his face, checking for any signs of bleeding or broken bones. Seems to be in one piece.

Bucky stares at him, face wiped blank—and then, nonsensically, he laughs, wild and catlike. "And isn't that just … great," Bucky croaks. "Isn't that great. Fuck. All I'm good for is hitting people."

"That's how the game is."

"I almost knocked you out, Steve!" Bucky cries. It takes a moment for Steve to realize he's not talking about the punch. "You were on the ground forever, and you didn't move, and you sat out those plays, and it was my fault—you—"

"Bucky, I'm fine. I promise I'm fine, I don't even remember that night. I got right back up and—"

"You what?" Bucky says. He stumbles and grabs the railing for balance. He looks as if a mortar just went off in his stomach. "You don't remember?"

"It's all a blur, but I was fine the next day, it's not—"

"Oh my god," Bucky says; his voice starts at a whisper, and ends up firing like a cannon. "You can't remember. That's a big deal, Steve!!"

"It's not your fault."

"All I'm good for is hurting people."

"You get hurt too!" Steve cries. He feels like he's lost his mind. Why doesn't anyone else get this? "For crying out loud, look at your face!"

Bucky spreads his arms and grins, and he looks like a vulture ready to take flight. "This? My face? This is nothing compared to Peter Parker, is it?"

"You're a good football player, Bucky, that's not a crime!"

"I'm only good as long as I'm hurting people! Southeast State knows it, and they know how to use it. They gave me a chance, and how did I repay them? I spill all my dirty secrets and they get slapped with six-figure-fines."

"Southeast, fucking—" Steve wants to scream. "Southeast is fucked up, Bucky, and you know it. They work you to death up there. They're the ones hurting people, you included."

Bucky swings at a post on the porch, and his knuckles connect with the old wood with a dull thud. "They're the only ones who ever gave me a chance. I wouldn't even be here without them."

"That's not true—"

"And guess what, Steve Rogers? *You* took that away from me."

Bucky might as well have punched Steve in the chest, rather than beating up the front porch. "I
promise, I didn't—"

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Alexander Pierce," Bucky snarls. "He's the only one who would take me, he made me something, and now—now—"

"Alexander Pierce is a jackass and you know it!"

"Newsflash!" Bucky barks. "So am I!"

"I don't believe that," Steve says, but his world is bleeding.

"Face it, Steve. This was it, football was the one thing I had, and now—now—" he chokes on the words before he can continue, "now I won't even have that," he gasps, as if he's drowning. "No one's going to—draft—no one wants—I can't even—walk straight—can't breathe—" he takes a series of sharp, icy breaths, and stumbles on the top porch-step.

He is hyperventilating.

"Bucky, Jesus—" Steve darts forward and grabs his elbows to hold him steady. Bucky's chest hitches with all the oxygen, too much of it, tripping breakers and blowing transformers.

Steve says, "Let me help you."

And Bucky says, "You can't fix this, Steve." His words boil off into steam. "You can't—fix—this."

"Please let me help," Steve says, again, because it's all he wants, with everything in him; everything he has that could ever be taken away. He just wants to help Bucky. Take the rest.

"What are you gonna do?" Bucky pants. "Run your mouth again?"

"I'll do—"

Air hisses through Bucky's teeth. "You want to hear all my secrets?!"

"What?"

"I haven't had a haircut in a year," Bucky spits. "Must not grow too fast."

"... What are you—"

Bucky's pupils are blown, his chest heaving, but he is on a roll. "One time I hit a cat while I was driving in Winter Station. I ran it to a vet and everything, but—but. There was nothing … I sat in my car and cried about it for half an hour afterwards. Got my ass handed to me for being late to practice, but I couldn't tell them—I didn't know what—"

"I don't care about—"

Bucky rips himself from Steve's grasp. "When I was babysitting Pietro's fish last Christmas, it died, and I replaced it before he got home. Still haven't told him." Suddenly, his eyes glaze over and he stares into the middle distance, as if something has dawned on him for the first time. "Wow. I've killed a lot of animals, haven't I?" Rounding on Steve again with a wicked glare, he adds, "Bet ESPN would love to hear that."

"That wasn't your fault, Buck, don't—"

"I got a ton of secrets, Steve! Why don't you just tell them all!" he cuts in with a wild, breathless,
unhinged laugh. "I used to use fake names for all my hook-ups. I kind of like the Yankees. I own all of Rihanna's albums."

"Please, I'm not—"

"And that's not even my best secret, Steve Rogers." Snarling, he steps forward and grabs a fistful of Steve's shirt again. Pulls him in until they are nose-to-nose. Until Steve could count his teeth.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Late-night phone calls and text messages and Georges Seurat and high school locker rooms and hot chocolate and furtive half-smiles and a hand in the cold when Steve needed it most. Kisses. More than one, graduated from a dim hotel room to a gleaming city jewel on Christmas Eve.

When Steve looks at it all from a distance, the picture becomes clear. And he finds, with eerily calm realization, that it isn't a surprise.

"Not much of a secret, Buck."

A poisonous laugh bursts from Bucky's lips. "Yeah. Maybe not anymore. Since you can't keep your mouth shut."

"I haven't—"

"Go ahead. Run off to your next press conference," Bucky says. He pulls the trigger. "Tell them that. Tell them James Barnes used to be in love with Steve Rogers. They'll eat that up. Doesn't matter, no NFL team wants me, now."

He's shooting to kill, and he has good aim.

With that, he whirls around and storms down the porch steps.

Steve just wants to stop him from running, and that's why he says the first thing he can think. "What do you mean 'used to'?" Then, because once the fuse is lit, it just keeps burning, "Are you—still?"

Instantly, Bucky stops. He turns to face Steve. "No."

His vision blurs—Bucky swims in front of him, a haze of black anger—and Steve can't tell if that's because he is crying or because his eye is watering from the pain. Heat rises, volcanic, in Steve's throat; his ears; behind his eyes. He is angry and frightened, and the heat is both at once.

"Then why did you kiss me?"

The Corvette makes sense to Steve as he looks into Bucky's dead stare. The empty black, the smeared bruise, the scowling headlights, the sharp knife-edge of the spoiler.

Bucky's voice is all consonants when he answers.

"I was messing with your head."

His frightful car howls to life and rips down their quiet residential street. Long after it is gone, Steve can still hear the vibrations in his chest.
i'm so sorry. usually i eat angst for breakfast, but this chapter just hurt all the way. it took awhile to get this update out, too. i think i was in denial.
Isaiah

Chapter Summary

Arise, O princes; oil the shield!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve Rogers would build a bridge across the Atlantic with his bare hands if he had the time for it. Not if he had the strength, because he does have the strength, try to tell him otherwise; not if he had permission, because trying to stop him is like lighting a fuse; not if he had the help, because in the first place he doesn't mind fighting the world single-handed, and in the second place, of course he has the help.

"Steve."

He can feel Sam Wilson tugging on his elbow and saying things.

"Steve."

His words fall like a prologue to rain. For a minute Steve thinks it is raining. The wind blows cold and his face is wet and his feet slip on the slick wood boards of the dank front porch and there are chords rolling down his spine, humming as sure as a Corvette engine,

"Steve."

or the purr of falling water, and his vision blurs like wartorn sycamore and furrows full of mud. He would build a bridge to the other side and bury this feeling. If he could see the other side. If he knew there was an other side.

"Steve."

He peers up at Sam's voice, (up, because at some point, he sat right down on the front porch steps and hasn't moved for who-knows-how-long), and he looks at Sam's outstretched hand, and takes it.

"We gotta get some ice on that eye, Steve."

He allows Sam to guide him to the front door, flung wide and held there by none other than Natasha Romanoff. Her face doesn't look like her face—stretched in odd places and smudged in others. Steve still can't read her expression.

They watch each other for a moment, long enough to let the cold air in the house, long enough for Sam to start fidgeting.

Natasha speaks first. "You told me he needed help."

"I did." Steve has to force the words out.

"I wasn't sure what that meant. I wasn't sure if it was true."
"If you don't believe me, I—"

"I do," Natasha interrupts him. Her accent is slim, almost undetectable except by the hard rhotic falls. She sounds like someone who grew up part of the way speaking Russian, and grew up the rest of the way trying to hide it. "I believe you. You're right, Steve."

Steve says, "I'm going to help him."

Natasha says, "Let's get some ice on your face," which makes Sam Wilson breathe again.

Natasha and Sam take control of the situation together. Force Steve to sit at the kitchen table while they search for ice and anti-inflammatory.

"RICE." Sam's voice sounds faint to Steve's ears. "Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation."

Natasha mutters a muffled answer. She comes back to Steve with a dish towel full of ice cubes. Sam comes back to Steve with a glass of water and a bottle of ibuprofen.

Steve comes back to himself with a tired thank you. He accepts their first aid without fuss, grounding himself in the threadbare towel and the distant burn of pills going down. "I'm going to help him," he adds, again, staring with one eye at a crack in the ceiling.

"He might not let you," says Sam Wilson, gentle and reasonable.

"Well, I can't just ..."

*Stand by and watch a bunch of power-hungry football coaches abuse my best friend?*

Sam sits down on Steve's right side—so he has to turn his whole body to see around the home-made ice pack covering half his face.

Sam looks at the table; the debate going on in his head is almost audible. "I don't know. I heard what he said, Steve. About all of this being a mind game?"

Steve sucks in a breath like thunder, stretching the muscles across his back. "I don't believe it," he says, whether he believes it or not.

"Remember, that's not the same guy you grew up with."

The thunder escapes. "I don't. Believe. It." He jabs a finger toward the front porch. "That was Bucky Barnes, whatever the rest of the world thinks. That was my—that was him, the Bucky who wants to play football, the Bucky who kicks over water coolers, the Bucky who keeps secrets and only tells—that was him. And I don't believe that he's been messing with my head."

Don't. Can't. Either way.

"I'm just saying," Sam says quickly.

"What if you're wrong?" Natasha asks, her expression neutral.

"Doesn't matter," Steve says, and only realizes it as he says it out loud, suddenly, irreparably:

"Doesn't matter if he was messing with my head. He still doesn't deserve to be treated like a thing."

"You gotta take care of yourself, too, Steve."

"God—take care of—did you see his face?!" Steve asks, desperate, because it's all he can see,
Bucky's face busted in, day-old bruises like someone took a Sharpie to a notepad and pressed down until the tip smushed away into liquid and stained the fibers of the paper. Not just on paper. Like someone walked into the Art Institute and jabbed a Sharpie through the Old Guitarist's eye. It makes Steve want to rip down skyscrapers with his fingernails. He says it again, an echo, a hiss of steam: "Did you see his face?"

Natasha looks at her hands.

Sam winces. "Brother, your face ain't gonna look much different in the morning."

"Maybe not," Steve says, and he feels the words curdling in his throat. It doesn't sound like his own voice, at all. "But I got you here, with an ice pack and some painkillers. Don't I?"

Natasha takes a breath as if to speak, but the front door interrupts her with its rustic wooden squawk. The three of them look at each other. They listen in wary silence to the sound of heavy footsteps in the front hall, the thud of a large pair of shoes, a soft indiscernible curse, the rattle of glass as the door shuts.

And Eli Bradley steps around the corner. The room sags with their collective sigh of relief.

Eli takes one step into the room and immediately frowns. At Steve, with his DIY ice-pack. At Natasha, sitting on the kitchen-counter, ankles crossed. At Sam, who looks like he just went ten rounds, even if he's not the one with the black eye to show for it.

"Who hit Steve?"

They all answer at once.

"I'm fine, honestly, I don't even need—"

"Don't worry, it wasn't your brother."

"How could you tell someone hit him?"

Eli's frown deepens. For once, it is impossible not to recognize him as Isaiah's twin. He folds his arms and takes a deep breath and momentarily, Steve fears he might get a lecture; then: "We got real ice packs, you know."

Without waiting for an answer, he strides to the freezer, digs out an ice-pack, and passes it along to Steve, who has to admit, yeah, it's more comfortable than a fistful of ice. Eli slides into the chair on Steve's left and inspects his eye.

"It doesn't look too bad. Does it hurt?"

Steve shakes his head and winces and pretends he didn't wince.

"Steve," Eli says firmly.

"It doesn't, it doesn't hurt," he insists. "I think I'm getting a headache … from. It's just a lot. I took some Tylenol, I promise."

"I hope you mean Advil!" Eli says, because he is the only person in the world who gets worked up about the distinctions between acetaminophen and ibuprofen. Eli rounds on Sam Wilson. "Who hit him?"

"Don't look at me!" Sam protests.
"You'll never gue-ess," Natasha says in a soft, sing-song voice.

Eli and Natasha have a brief staring contest, which Eli soundly loses; then he turns back to Steve. The frown is still there, and Steve thinks, *this must be what his daughters feel like when they're about to get the wrath of God,* but Eli presses his lips together and keeps his cool. "We left you alone for like ten minutes, man," he murmurs.

Steve can't exactly defend himself, there. "Is Ice still on campus?"

Eli nods. "I won't tell him."

Steve is a very visual person. He's good with detail. He's good at reading zone defenses and he's good at drawing forms and he's good at remembering pass routes because he pictures playbooks in his head night and day. He has never had trouble telling Eli and Isaiah apart, and not just because of Ice's pink hair. They're not the same. Plenty of folks out there would disagree, but it's true; they're not the same. Eli has more pronounced eyebrows and a narrow chin, while Isaiah has a squarer jaw and a gap between his two front teeth, which no one ever sees because it's *Isaiah,* who smiles about as often as he reads fantasy novels for pleasure. (That is to say, not often, though still more often than people think.) The differences between Ice and Eli are endless. Steve hasn't drawn portraits in years —hasn't drawn anything *serious* in years, for that matter—but those little differences would make the Bradley twins a superb challenge.

Steve would have to use totally different styles to capture them the way they deserved. Ice would be hard ink outlines. Eli would be charcoal and soft shading. That's obvious to Steve, now, looking at Eli's face and its watercolor edges, so willing to sweep everything under the rug for Steve's sake.

"*I'll* tell him," Steve says.

Three pairs of eyes stare openly. If ever there was a spotlight.

With a soft groan, Steve heaves himself off his chair. "I'm going back to school."

It's like a cartoon, the sudden commotion as everyone rushes to their feet and sputters a protest. Finally, Steve has to raise his voice. "Sam, do you want a ride home?"

"Don't be stupid," Natasha says. "I'm getting my keys."

"What?"

"You can't drive like that." She waves at the ice pack and the hunched shoulders. "Sam, come with me. Eli, drive Steve back to school."

Who could argue.

---

At night, the weight room seems extraordinarily bright, flooded as it is by fluorescent light. The floor-to-ceiling windows are pitch-black, like solid walls, and dripping with condensation from the temperature difference—the negative Fahrenheit outside, the powerful furnace inside. It turns the spacious room into a stark, arctic, artificial landscape.

And silent, except for a soft, metallic clicking and the deep, audible breaths of late reps.

It's probably the only way to make Isaiah Bradley look small. Find him alone, hunkered down in a copse of workout machines in the corner of a weight room the size of a Caribbean island. He's all by himself on a bench press. Steve would lecture him about safety, but he would also be a hypocrite to
do so.

Steve approaches slowly, and apparently unnoticed. Ice has a giant pair of pink headphones over his ears. His focus is inhuman. He shows no reaction at all—not surprise or anger or annoyance or joy—when Steve steps up to the bench and helps guide the bar back into place.

"I said I could find another spotter, Steve." He pushes his headphones up above his ears, face unreadable.

"Don't see anyone else around," Steve counters.

They blink at each other, upside-down, Steve standing over Isaiah.

"You gonna get distracted again?"

"Probably," says Steve.

Ice takes a deep breath, as if forcing down a laugh. Groaning, he pushes himself to a seated position and spins around to face Steve head-on. His eyes narrow. "What happened to your eye?"

"Someone tried to knock some sense into me."

Ice's lips part. The whites of his eyes grow, ever-so-slightly. "Who?"

Steve means to answer; he really does. The name is in his chest, in his throat, right on his tongue, but it dies there on a feather-soft exhale. His eyes feel hot, again; impossibly; embarrassingly.

Ice surges to his feet. "Are you fucking kidding me? Was it—are you kidding me? It was him, wasn't it, and I told you, I told—"

"Come on—"

"No, you come on, you hear me?" Ice raises his voice, French Quarter zydeco accent thickening with anger. "The fuck is this? Barnes plays for Southeast, man, y'all meeting to make deals before the championship—"

"It's not like that!"

"If James Barnes drivin' down here just to bust your face in—"

"His name is Bucky!"

"Right, right, because of y'all high school sweetheart bullshit—"

"Isaiah." Steve barks, full name and everything, straight out of the Old Testament.

They glare at each other, just for a moment: Steve a shattered coastline, Isaiah Bradley towering like thunderclouds. And what a natural disaster they are, together. A storm so righteous it would need both names.

Steve breaks the silence. "Did you hear about Southeast?"

"The injuries."

"Not reporting the injuries."
"Yeah. They're fucking cheaters. You surprised, or something?" Isaiah asks.

Steve growls—out loud—in frustration. "I just keep thinking. If it was someone else. If it was Sam. If our coaches made him play through the back spasms, or something."

"They kind of do."

"Well," Steve cracks his knuckles. Thinking about Sam Wilson hurt kicks Steve's protective instincts to the other side of the field. The anger starts to leak out of him. He sits down. "Maybe that's not a good example. I don't think they'd be able to keep Sam off the field, no matter how hurt he was."

"Maybe that's how Barnes is, too, you hear me?" Isaiah settles back onto his own bench across from Steve. When Steve doesn't answer right away, he corrects himself: "Bucky."

"That's exactly how he is." Steve turns his palms up to see the lines folded there. He doesn't know which lines are which, or what would qualify as long. One of them is a life line, and something about hearts and health. "He puts his life on the line and doesn't even think twice about it."

"Sounds like somebody else I know."

Steve attempts his best, most withering glare—but no glare on earth is a match for Isaiah Bradley's glare.

Ice says, "Spot me."

"What?"

"Spot me," he says again, then stands up to add pounds to his barbell. "I wanted to add more weight, but not without a spotter, you hear me?"

"Sure," Steve says dumbly. He helps balance out Ice's bar, then stands back while he lies across the bench and begins a fresh set.

Ice does the first ten reps in silence. Steve helps him replace the bar. Waits while he catches his breath.

"What happened?" Ice asks before launching the second set. "With Bucky, I mean."

Steve tells him.

He feels like he's treading water, submerged up to the neck; his lungs don't fill all the way and his joints ache and he can't grab any footing. As he explains—everything—whatever happened over the last hour—as he describes it all, Ice lifts weights and sucks in deep lungfuls of air and listens.

Steve does not spill any of Bucky's secrets.

But he does spill one of his own.

"We kissed."

Isaiah does two more reps, then replaces the bar with a soft *clang*. "Before or after he hit you?"

"Before," Steve says instantly. "God, before. He—we met up on Christmas Eve. And he gave me. He gave me a present, but I was an idiot and didn't bring him anything and. We ended up—" he covers his mouth.
"You ended up kissing."

Steve nods, staring upside-down at his roommate.

Isaiah closes his eyes. For several seconds, the only sound in the cavernous room is his faint panting. It's too quiet to echo, but too loud to ignore. "Was it always like that? You two."

"No," Steve says, and really thinks about the answer. "No, that was the first time we ever. You know." He thinks of that lethal kiss in Bucky's hotel room and the mocha-flavored kiss in Millennium Park, and he thinks of red stains and Bucky falling asleep on his shoulder. It had to start somewhere.

"What about high school?"

"We were just friends in high school."

"What about the Southeast game? The Frozen Wasteland?"

"…We weren't anything in the Frozen Wasteland."

Ice takes a deep breath, reaches for the bar, and starts another set. He struggles a little. Just at the end. Steve has to help him finish the tenth rep. He's such a freak, though, that's the thing; who the hell benches 300 the week before a game? When he is finished, he pushes himself up and adjusts the hem of his T-shirt, carefully avoiding Steve's line of sight. "So, Cap?"

"Yeah?"

Ice continues to fiddle with the seams on his T-shirt. "Mama's gonna have to go back to the hospital."

Oh.

Oh, God.

Steve is getting real tired of hindsight, if he's honest. "Isaiah—shit. I'm so sorry." He walks around the barbell and sits right down on his ass in front of Isaiah's shoes.

"It's—it could be nothing," Ice says. He wrings his hands. Cracks one knuckle at a time. "The last blood tests wasn't so good, but they gotta double check things, or something. She might have to do another round, but. Or. I dunno."

Steve feels as if his heart is too big for his chest, everything is too big for his chest, everything pressing between the cracks of his ribs. He gazes up at Isaiah's face: his lids heavy, his lips parted, his teeth bright and white, framed by black-and-pink hair.

"I'm sorry," Steve says again. Sometimes it's all there is. "How long have you known?"

"She told me today." Sometimes it's all there is. "How long have you known?"

"She told me today."

"Does Eli know?"

Ice winces. He rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands, and they both pretend he isn't close to crying. "I haven't seen him, and I ain't wanna text him something like that, you hear me?"

"Damn," Steve whispers. "I really am sorry, Ice. I can't believe … and I've been all wrapped up in my own stupid problems."
"Your problems aren't stupid."

Steve chuckles weakly. "Well. It's not life and death, over here. If you need anything …"

"Yeah. I hear you."

"Anything."

Neither of them speaks for a moment. Isaiah lifts his head and scans the weight room, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth. Maybe his portrait would work in watercolor, after all.

He sighs, and then says, "When Mama was first diagnosed … I wasn't—I didn't take it so good."

Steve holds his breath.

"I was like—all football, and fighting in the neighborhood," Isaiah goes on. He cracks his jaw, this time. "And flunking half my classes 'cause all I could think about was football and fighting. So the more I fight, the more everyone like, 'you're dumb, you a thug, you can't play ball, you just wanna hit people.'"

In a distant way, Steve can relate. "The more they say 'you can't,' the angrier you get."

"Yeah, you hear me."

"You had a right to be mad, though."

Isaiah shrugs. "When I got held back, and like, spent a year ineligible, everyone kinda thought that was it."

"Sorry," Steve says under his breath. He can't imagine boiling up in all that anger and not being able to take it out, somehow. Not being able to play football.

"Elijah the only person who stuck by for me."

A small smile tugs Steve's lips. "He's good about that."

"There was folks who thought he was an idiot, too, don't get me wrong," Isaiah runs a hand down his face. "He and Kate fought about it non-stop. About me, I mean. There was times … for awhile there, I thought he might have to make a choice."

"Between you and Kate?"

"Stupid." Isaiah's voice is deeper, more from the throat. "Stupid bullshit. Looking back, you know, it was bullshit. I was being angry and stupid and childish and all. But I was hurting—I was hurting bad, I know that, now. And Elijah didn't give up on me."

"It's not stupid," Steve whispers.

Isaiah inhales deeply, and turns to face Steve, full-on, eye-to-eye. "I was lucky, really. I think, at the end of the day, people like me and Barnes … we're lucky to have guys like you and Elijah around."

"Oh," Steve says, because the wind kind of dies away, there, and he can open his eyes and see better, now; doesn't have to brace himself against the storm. "Ice, you're … trust me. You're not stupid."

Leaning forward a little, Isaiah rests his elbows on his knees and smiles at his hands. "You still like
"Even though he hit you?"

Steve huffs. "Even though he hit me. I still like him."

With a grunt, Isaiah pushes himself to his feet, then holds out a hand for Steve. They stand across from one another, level. Chiseled from granite, from marble. From ice.

"Come here, you crazy motherfucker," Isaiah says, and tugs Steve into a hug. Claps him on the back.

When Steve pulls away, he says, "National Championship."

"Hell yeah."

Their eyes drift, perusing the weight room, the equipment, the rows of ASU logos and clusters of stars. Steve's gaze comes to rest on the machine across the aisle. Bucky's photograph hangs there, cruel motivation.

Isaiah moves swiftly. He crosses the aisle, gently tears the paper down, and crumples it into a ball.

Heat rises to Steve's cheeks. "Be careful, Ice, I think you're starting to melt."

"Nah, man, nah." Isaiah grins. "We got a game to win. Don't want my quarterback gettin' distracted." They both laugh, and Isaiah looks at his feet. "You, uh … you won't, will you? I mean."

"Get distracted?"

"I mean, I know you care about this guy," Isaiah says, still addressing his shoes. "But you don't want him to win, or nothing, do you?"

Beat.

"Oh my god."

Isaiah inspects the crinkled-up paper in his hands. "Be real with me, yeah."

"Trust me," says Steve, "I wouldn't do something like that."

"Alright." Isaiah avoids his eyes. "I just want you to think of—of Sam, you know, 'cause he looks up to you, and all. And Clint—he's been through enough this year. And this will be Elijah's last game, you hear me, and—"

Steve steps in front of his friend and lowers his voice. "Isaiah. Look at me." He does. "Isaiah, I promise—I want to win."

"Yeah."

"I want to annihilate Alexander Pierce." The words are crimson. Shattered clay. "I want to kick his teeth down his throat and watch him choke on them." Steve can feel it, now, vicious thorns bursting between his bones. "Isaiah … I want to win this game."

They search each others' faces. Stormwinds and thunderclouds. Isaiah shows his teeth.
"Let's do it, Captain."

**Steve Rogers**

*I know it doesn't do any good now, but I'm sorry. I promise I wasn't trying to hurt you. I just messed up. I'm sorry.*

Pink accessories are Eli's idea, but Steve is the one who makes sure they are implemented. Predictably, the NCAA is stubborn. They don't approve pink shoes, socks, gloves, or other accessories, because that would be "against the NCAA specifications for equipment as set forth by Section 4 of the NCAA Rules and Regulations."

After a lot of negotiation (and complaining), Nick Fury, Steve Rogers, the Bradleys, the NCAA, and Under Armour executives come to an agreement. When American State takes the field in Glendale, Arizona, each player will have a pink ribbon emblem on the back of his helmet in honor of breast cancer awareness. They also have pink hand towels on the sidelines. (There's talk of mass-marketing pink American State gear, because capitalist figureheads always go wild for noble causes when they can be turned for profit.)

The trip to Arizona is a blur; the hotel is unmemorable; the walkthroughs before the game are perfunctory; and the meals and meetings shared among the team are both loud and quiet at the same time. Loud, because there is so much conversation, so many voices raised by adrenaline and anxiety; quiet, because it all washes out into white noise.

Steve approaches Clint one night after team dinner in the hotel banquet hall. "You still tapped into the news?"

"A little," Clint says. "Couple days ago the jokes started popping up again. About needing a new kicker for the Championship. So I've been kind of off-and-on." Steve must make an ugly face, because Clint adds, "You gonna go all mama-bear on Twitter again?"

"No," Steve says quickly. "You can take care of yourself."

Clint raises his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Captain, what do you wanna know from the social media sphere?"

That's how Steve keeps up with "*Scandal State*", as it has been so cleverly christened.

News is: James Barnes has been reticent, as always, and Alexander Pierce has been simultaneously diplomatic and opaque, as always. Pierce reasons that none of the Barnes injuries were serious enough to report to the NCAA, and that there was never any plan—or need—to sit him out of a game, *so where exactly is the issue here?* and other circular nonsense.

Interestingly, issues of safety and bodily harm never come up.

Bucky doesn't text Steve back.

Steve's team holds two practices in Arizona leading up to the big game. They run the trick play twice, and flub it twice. Steve tells his team not to worry about it. "We're not gonna need trick plays
after Ice Bradley scores his fifth touchdown, anyway."

Isaiah rolls his eyes, but doesn't protest.

The day of the game is not unlike the day they played in the Frozen Wasteland—but also, somehow, wholly unlike the day they played in the Frozen Wasteland.

It's the same opponent, and the stakes are similar. Last time they faced Southeast, they thought it would decide the National Championship Game; and now, well—here they are. Take two.

And yet this is not the same game. It is different. A real, touchable, acoustic difference, the difference between listening to speakers versus live music, ten thousand decibels howling in Steve's veins, a bloody bass line throbbing between his hip-bones.

As the lower-seeded team, American State is assigned the visitors' locker room, like in Winter Station (though this locker room is not moldy, and doesn't rest below 25 degrees Fahrenheit). The carpet is gray and the rows of lockers are unadorned. The lack of identifying features is nice; it doesn't grab your hand and lead you any direction; it allows you to find peace in the moment.

As much peace as possible before playing the biggest football game of your life, anyway.

Buried deep in the bowels of the locker room, Steve feels as if he is part of the pulse of the stadium itself. The pressurized high. The blood pounding through concrete arteries. The perfect low strings throbbing in red and blue.

Sam Wilson sidles up to Steve as he is tying his cleats and says, "I think I'm gonna puke."

(This earns him a poisonous scowl from Isaiah Bradley, who has spent three pitiful seasons perfecting pre-game-puking rituals.)

Steve rarely feels compelled to puke when he is nervous. Poised to take the field at the National Championship Game itself, he only feels the distant roar of adrenaline in his veins. It's like standing waist-deep in choppy surf, watching the breakers roll in—the way you can feel the churning water deep into your bones even before the wave strikes you.

The sound is like a stormy seaside, too, when they emerge from the visitors' tunnel in University of Phoenix Stadium. The oceanic chorus of cheering and booing all swirls together in a rush of noise.

No, it doesn't make Steve sick. It makes him want to fight.

Southeast takes the field at the other end of the stadium, a noxious black fog seeping across the grass. Steve thinks of hurricanes. Standing on the docks watching across the long horizon, and how beautiful the storm looks at a distance. How heartwrenching—the sweeping brushstroke of nauseous colors, still as a photograph and stained by age. The smell of a cold you can't feel. He thinks of prophesies bound to the deserts and seas. He thinks of Bucky, and he knows he shouldn't. He wonders if Bucky's broken ribs have healed, or if he still has a black eye, or if he had a concussion that one night, or if his arm would break when you hit it just right. Steve thinks of the statues standing outside the Frozen Wasteland: faceless, numberless. Every player, just a replaceable part in Southeast State's machine.

God, Steve wants to beat them.

Chapter End Notes
1. originally, my goal was to complete this story before civil war came out. missed that one by a mile. (in my defense, i also thought this story would be about ... half as long as it's turned out to be.) on the other hand, i'm one of those unlucky suckers who can't see the movie until May 6, so i have a few hours, still.

2. sorry this chapter took forever.

3. the response for this fic has been so kind, your comments and kudos and questions and support have BLOWN my mind. it's like you knew fic reviews are the staple of my diet, or something. thanks y'all.
The National Championship Game

Chapter Summary

At the end of it all, Steve just can't separate himself from Bucky.

Chapter Notes

warnings for hints of abuse, football jargon, rehashed weather metaphor, and a super subtle civil war spoiler slipped by in cyrillic. also alliteration.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The captains meet at the middle of the fifty-yard line. In the center of a spinning storm, a seething sea of fans, red and black and white and blue blurred together into a bruise, Steve stands across from Bucky. Once again, no visor. Seeing his eyes is so much worse, sunken and glassy, trapped behind the bars of his facemask. In the shadows of his helmet, and through the eye black smeared across his cheeks, it's impossible to tell if Bucky still has a black eye. Steve's eyes drift to Bucky's left arm—the compression sleeve and the heavy black brace hiding scars and secrets and stainless steel.

"This side is heads," the referee announces, holding out a massive ceremonial coin for the players to see. "This side is tails." As if it matters.

Steve glances at Bucky, who scowls back at him from hooded eyes. Heart thumping, Steve looks at the ref, then back at Bucky. That stare.

"Captain?" the referee says.

Steve doesn't break Bucky's gaze. "Yes, sir."

"As the lower-seeded team, American State will call the toss."

"Yes, sir," Steve says again. Not blinking, not blinking; staring resolutely into Bucky's eyes. He thinks of Picasso's blue period and the Frozen Wasteland and the hearts of men and dew points and the way those eyes blur a little when they are close enough to kiss. How remarkable, he thinks, for it all to lead to this moment, suspended on the fifty-yard-line, on the precipice of the past and the future at once.

On his left, he sees the referee flip the coin. On his right, Isaiah Bradley stiffens.

"Heads," Steve says, clear as daybreak.

It is tails. And Steve smirks.

As if it matters. A tornado rips up one house by the roots, leaves the house next door untouched. None of it matters until there's a row of zeros across the board.

"Southeast State wins the toss. Would you like to kick or receive?"
Bucky glowers. He doesn't answer.

The player beside him speaks up in a sharp voice. "We defer."

Breathing in, Steve can almost smell the below-zero kick-off from two months before, hard as ice in his nostrils. Steve Rogers has nothing but loathing for Southeast State, for Pierce and Rumlow and their ugly cold. They always defer. They always put their defense on the field first. It's not even a disadvantage, for them.

"Which way would you like to kick?" the referee must say.

Steve concentrates on not blinking. Isaiah answers for him.

The referee's voice sounds distant when he says, "Let's have a good clean game, boys."

Before Bucky can escape, Steve darts forward and grabs his hand in a forceful handshake. Pulls him so close their facemasks click together.

"Take it out on me, Buck," he says, and his voice barely makes it past his teeth.

Bucky glares back at him.

"One name," Steve says. "Do what you have to do, but take it all out on me."

That is when Isaiah pulls him away. "Are you trying to bait the Winter Soldier?" he hisses.

Steve doesn't answer. The last things he sees before the game are Bucky's eyes, color burning around their edges, red and blue. Everything red and blue, the crowd, the uniforms, the taste seared in the back of Steve's throat, the blood running in their limbs.

Before kick-off, the world is overexposed. Liminal. The ground is so far away, and all of them—Sam, Isaiah, Bucky, Steve—they are all still forming in the atmosphere—clouds, ice, lightning, thunder. Careening through cold and weightlessness.

Then the stadium shudders with the force of the kick-off, and Steve takes the field, and it's like crashing back to the earth. God, it is good. Steve's cells pump in time with the roaring crowd, waves beating against the shore. God, it is good. He wants to live inside that feeling. Currents surging through floodwaters, fingertip to fingertip, neck to toes.

Both teams square off for the first play. Steve Rogers stationed behind his offensive line; Bucky Barnes prowling across from him, gaze level, wrapped up in barbed wire. Steve inhales and scans the defense; exhales and inspects them; inhales and analyzes Bucky's trajectory. He has always had such wicked aim. Inhuman. Inhumane.

Bucky looks dangerous, lurking there on the strong side. He looks like a predator who's already pinpointed its prey. Steve calls an audible. Raises his voice high into his sinuses so the whole city can hear.

Johnny Storm goes into motion. Isaiah inches to the left. Steve almost smiles—

And another voice calls out over the thick, roiling crowd.

"желание," it barks.

The Southeast State defense shivers and shifts in response to the American State offense.
The noise of the crowd, and the thrum of electricity in Steve's limbs—it all skips for a split second, like a car crunching over a pothole; like the pin on a gramophone jumping.

"Brooklyn!" Steve cries, trying to read the change in defense. Bucky doesn't move. "72 Brooklyn!"

Isaiah rolls backwards, out of Steve's line of sight. The time on the play clock spills away slowly.

"Семнадцать." It's Bucky's deadly metal voice, a drop-point knife through football noise. He still doesn't move. What does he know?

"Strong!" Steve shouts back, "72 Strong!" and adds, under his breath, "Come on, Buck, give me something." It's just nonsense now. Just trying to back the defense in the corner, but the play clock is running dry, and Bucky still doesn't move. "72! Hike!"

At once, all eleven men on offense burst to life, and Southeast State swallows them. Steve dances out of the way of a lineman, only to find himself face-to-face with a long-legged cornerback. Who the hell blitzes the cornerback? It's mad. It forces Steve to throw the ball away.

In the huddle, Ice smacks Steve on the shoulder. He looks as if someone just asked him to hand the football directly to James Buchanan Barnes, wrapped in a neat, pretty bow. "He's calling audibles for the defense!"

"I heard," Steve says sharply.

Bruce Banner calls in the next play, which requires an extra tight end. With a string of curse words, Sam Wilson darts off the field so the substitute can take his place.

Both teams face off again. Bucky stalks right up to the line of scrimmage. "Рассвет," he says, like speaking, but in ten thousand volts. "Рассвет," again.

The defensive line shifts around Bucky Barnes.

Steve hikes the ball, and the blitz comes. Bucky strikes like lightning. All Steve can do is not fumble, don't fumble, hold onto the ball.

As they untangle themselves and stand up, Steve steps between Bucky and his team.

"I'm sensing some anger there, Buck."

"Got a plane ticket to buy."

"—Yeah?"

Bucky shrugs one shoulder, face like steel. "Thought we were going to New York."

A referee swoops in then, cutting them off and trying to separate them, or something. It's cute. "All right, boys—"

"So that's what you call tackling?" Steve says, ignoring the official. "That's not gonna get you a plane ticket. That's not gonna get you a gallon of gas, Buck."

"You wanna know how long you were laying on the ground?"

" Barely felt a thing."

Bucky smirks. "Let's go again."
"Boys!" The referee looks almost frantic, now, as if in his mind a brawl has already broken out between the rival teams. "Back to business!"

Bucky bares his teeth, and Steve gives the ref a mock salute before returning to his teammates in the huddle.

Isaiah snags him by the shirtsleeve. "Does Barnes know your play count?" he demands.

"No," Steve says. He thinks he's smiling, and he shouldn't be smiling, but he's not sure, and he couldn't stop, anyway. "No, he's just good."

Which is true. On the next play, Bucky tackles Isaiah for a short gain and American State has to punt before two minutes have even passed on the clock.

Southeast State scores first. It happens abruptly, it happens at the end of the first quarter, and it happens because Pietro Maximoff is fast.

Steve says so as he stands on the sideline, watching Maximoff and his teammates celebrate in the end zone.

Sam grunts and folds his arms. "Bet he's fast in bed, too. Fucker."

Steve manages a half-smile. He doesn't manage a laugh, though, because the scoreboard is gleaming with a big, bright 7 under Southeast's name, now, and Steve and his team are looking right up at it.

Ice steps up to the sideline and bumps Steve's shoulder. "What now, Captain?"

"Time to go to work," Steve says. "We weren't gonna win without scoring a touchdown of our own, anyway."

The first quarter ends in bright ink, and the second quarter begins with their fresh 7-point disadvantage. The American State offense takes the field and Steve tells his team:

"Our turn."

"Our turn," Sam agrees before they set for the next play.

On first down, Steve finds Johnny Storm for nine yards. After that, it's slow going. All Steve can think about is that list, three names, that list.

"72! Brooklyn!"

"Девять."

"Manhattan!"

"грузовой вагон."

Every Russian syllable another link in the chains around Steve's wrists. Because it is Russian, Steve understands, finally—Bucky is shouting in Russian, directing his troops in a vicious foreign tongue. There's some kind of key to it all, but this Bucky is a mystery, even to Steve. He can't figure it out. Every time Bucky shouts, words like cinderblocks, like bricks broken on concrete, the defense tilts one way, tilts the other way, and Steve can't figure out the pattern. He listens carefully and tries to remember the Russian, tries to remember which gravel syllables he's heard before, but it's too swift and sharp to catch.
It is not their turn.

Their offense chugs forward like a car on fumes, guttering and stilted.

Isaiah crashes against the line again and again. A battering ram, chipping slowly, but never breaking through. Sam Wilson and Johnny Storm swoop into double coverage, and Steve avoids putting them deeper into danger. Steve himself, Heisman Trophy quarterback Steve Rogers, feels feeble in the face of the defensive fortress. He resorts to short passes and frustrating screen plays and paltry gains. The Southeast jerseys are everywhere—Bucky is everywhere—every time Steve throws the football, he can read Steve Rogers like a book, like the thousand pages chronicling their history.

Of course Bucky knows where Steve is going to throw, how he is going to throw, when he is going to throw; Bucky has seen it all before. He's been Steve's primary target his whole life. How do you undo a lifetime, how do you undo everything you've already lived? How do you unmake something you don't want to lose?

So the first half of the game is a flurry of short gains and American State can't string together more than one first down at a time and it's fucking ridiculous. They have the best offense in the country, and Southeast is the one scoring.

Steve fights for short yards. Takes a sack. Throws the ball away. Dances out of bounds to avoid a hard hit.

"желание."

"ржавый."

"Семнадцать."

Steve is losing his mind, and Maximoff is running for another touchdown.

Clint Barton carries them through. He is unbreakable. He kicks four field goals in the first half alone. He is the reason they stay in the game at all. He is all twelve points they take into the locker room at halftime, he is the reason a 14-12 score isn't looking so bad.

"You're my hero!" Steve shouts over the roaring crowd, shouts to be heard as they travel toward the locker rooms. "Goddammit Barton, you're my fucking hero!"

Clint waves at one ear and shrugs. Steve grabs him by both shoulders and plants himself right in Clint's line of sight so he can read his lips loud and clear.

"You're my hero."

A sardonic laugh escapes Clint's lips. "We can't keep trading touchdowns for field goals," he says, a little too soft, because the crowd isn't as loud, to him. "That's a shit rate of exchange, Cap."

It is.

In the locker room, Steve sits on the edge of the seat in front of his locker. Two trainers hover over him, one massaging his throwing arm, the other checking the tape around his ankles. Sam Wilson is stretched supine on the floor before him, wincing and grumbling while another trainer helps him perform deep spinal twists.

"Your boy's fast," Sam says without opening his eyes. "And huge. Makes no damn sense."
"You're faster than him, Sam."

"Well yeah," Sam scoffs, "but it's like he knows where I'm going before I do."

Steve chuckles—a sort of laugh with no smile. That's the Bucky he knows. He's bigger and stronger and faster, now, but Bucky has always been able to read offenses like they're as simple as Dr. Seuss.

That's when Bruce Banner bears down upon them.

"What's gotten into you two?" he says, his voice cold and his face hot.

Sam cracks one eye open. Steve blinks.

Banner turns to Sam. "It's like you've never run a route before. He can't even try to throw your way if you're always double-teamed! And you!" he whirls on Steve. "You know the field is a hundred yards long, right?"

"Yes sir."

"I don't know if anyone's told you, but you don't have to go four at a time."

The thing is, Steve can't even be mad at him. He can feel it, too, the shortness of breath, the way his passing game has gone into rigor. "Their defense is swarming. They just don't get tired," Steve says through his teeth.

"Is that all?" Coach Banner says icily. "Or is Barnes getting to you when he calls audibles?"

At the mention of Bucky Barnes, Sam pushes himself onto his elbows, eyes wary.

"He's not getting to me," Steve says.

"Really?" Banner asks. "Because we don't have time to dance around the sidelines just because your past came back to haunt you."

"He's not getting to me," Steve says again, enunciating very carefully. "But we've been preparing for weeks, coach—we've watched film from a dozen games—and he's never done this before."

"It's still the same Southeast defense we've been studying, Rogers."

"I can't run our offense with them adjusting to every play!"

"There's nowhere for me to go, coach," Sam adds, shaking his head.

Banner takes a deep, calming breath. "Listen to me." His voice is gentler, now. A little. His knuckles are white where they grip the edges of his playbook. "You just need to relax. You need to trust yourself and trust each other. Barnes is messing with your head, that's all it is. You just need to play your game."

"He's not—he's not messing with me," Steve spits, stumbling over an all-too-familiar phrase. "There's a pattern. He's reading our offenses, he's—there's a reason Sam can't get open!"

"Play your game, Rogers," Banner insists.

Steve grits his teeth.
"Let's go, let's show them what we're made of," Sam Wilson roars, bouncing on the sideline. Their defense isn't even off the field yet, and Sam is running his mouth, as usual. It's like caffeine straight to Steve's veins. He glances over at Isaiah and smiles, not so much a smile as an axe splitting firewood. Isaiah, of course, does not smile. Isaiah Bradley never smiles on gameday. But his eyes glitter, and he nods in time with Sam's monologue.

The second half of the game breathes easier, like a fresh start.

A fresh start with a 2-point deficit. But still.

American State has extra energy—Nick Fury's halftime speeches tend to have that effect—and they definitely have healthier legs. Most of them got shots for pain in the locker room, or light massages, or fresh wraps, gauze, and athletic tape for support. Even the crowd is revitalized, their batteries fully-charged and screaming. Literally. Every time a skill-player touches the football, a small explosive goes off in every corner of the stadium.

Steve can't stop smiling the freshly-sharpened smile, even as he takes the field, calls the play, settles under center, raises his chin and makes eye contact with Bucky Barnes. He can feel the smile, even then, even though he can't control it.

Bucky is a steel-reinforced wall, as ever. With Russian vocab, as ever.

"Manhattan 18!" Steve shouts, his voice a brass bell.

"желание," Bucky counters, his voice cast-iron against concrete.

Bucky moves, this time.

Steve narrows his eyes. Watches as Bucky backpedals, drifting into deep coverage. There's a pattern to this, Steve knows there is; Bucky isn't just doing this to mess with Steve. He's reading the offense like he always has.

Steve hikes the ball.

Sam streaks downfield, and Steve swallows hard and thinks of all the times Sam cursed at him for playing it safe. He slings the ball deep down the right side of the field. It soars in a slow arc and Steve watches it slice toward its target.

Bucky and Sam both go up for the ball; it twirls off their fingertips; they tangle in mid-air, and they both go down hard. Steve jogs toward them, heartsring strumming dominant chords in his bloodstream.

Sam Wilson gets up first, moving stiffly, both hands on his lower back. When Steve offers him a hand, he waves it off even while he winces. Steve glances downfield. Bucky's teammates are helping him to his feet and stuffing his shoulder pad back into his uniform.

Bucky knew.

He knew Sam was going for a deep pass. Steve ducks his head so only Sam can hear. "Take a break, yeah?" It's not uncommon for receivers to rest after sprinting downfield, let alone landing as hard as Sam just did. "Catch your breath."

Sam looks like he wants to protest, but a trainer is already upon them, tugging Sam toward the sideline.
With Sam Wilson out of the equation, Steve can test his theory.

They set up for the next play, Bucky looming in the middle of the field, broad and menacing as always.

"East Side, East Side!" Steve shouts.

Instantly, Bucky stalks to the line of scrimmage. "Pacccem," he says, that harsh throaty voice, like a big wild cat and his half-bark-half-roar. He crouches just feet away from Steve, the defensive line shifting subtly around him. The blitz is obvious, but that's the point. Titans and gods.

Steve hikes the ball and the play bursts to life.

Bucky surges through ASU's offensive line like a current through copper wire.

Steve dumps a clumsy pass up the middle and doesn't even see if Johnny Storm catches it before Bucky barrels right through him. It's like stepping in front of a Mack Truck on a six-lane highway.

The world spins for a moment. The earth presses into his back, pitching and rolling—then a person swims into Steve's vision, standing over him with an arm outstretched. There are three of him, then two, then he comes into focus, the broad shoulders and black uniform of a Southeast State player. It's Bucky. Of course it's Bucky.

Steve shakes his head a little to clear things up, then takes Bucky's hand. Bucky pulls him upright and grips him by the elbows. Holds him steady.

"... good, Rogers?" Bucky is saying. "You good?"

"I'm good."

Bucky's hands disappear, and Steve wobbles—reaches for Bucky's wrist—

"Thank you," Steve says, low and urgent.

"For what?" Bucky hisses. "For almost killing you?"

"For being there," Steve says.

Bucky's eyes swim with that strange red-blue quality again; gaping at Steve through shadows and streaks of eye-black and the bright reflection of the sun on shallow water; and then he is gone, swept away by referees and black uniforms.

Steve has been stupid. The whole first half of the game, stupid, stupid, stupid. Of course Bucky Barnes can read his mind, but why should that mean he can't read Bucky's?

Slightly dazed, Steve doesn't speak to his team's huddle right away.

Sam is back; he is there beside Steve. "—can't even see straight! I step off the field for one goddamn play, Steve—"

"I'm fine," Steve says. He's not lying, this time. He listens carefully to Bruce Banner's voice in his headset, and then relays the play to his teammates.

American State settles into formation, and Southeast sets the board with their counter. Steve doesn't say anything, just studies Bucky Barnes. Swaying slightly on the balls of his feet. The play clock ticks lower. Neither of them moves. Except—and Steve notices, because he knows where to watch
—Bucky's eyes flick to Sam Wilson and linger for a second too long.

"Brooklyn!" Steve barks, followed by a string of meaningless numbers.

Sam Wilson goes into motion.

Then, and only then, Bucky speaks. "Семнадцать." Bucky directs his troops. "Семнадцать." The defense bends around him while he remains still, lurking far away in the secondary. Steve watches closely: watches Bucky's eyes follow Sam settle into his new position on the line of scrimmage. "Семнадцать."

Of course there is a pattern. Of course Bucky knows what he's doing, has known all along. Of course they would try to shut down Sam Wilson. It's tactically brilliant. It limits Sam, American State's most physically gifted player, and limits Steve Rogers, their Heisman Trophy winner, by taking away his deadliest weapon.

Of course they would send their best defender to guard Sam Wilson.

Steve thinks back on weeks and weeks of practice, and of throwing the ball out of bounds to keep Sam from getting hurt. And he gazes across the chessboard at his oldest friend, at Bucky Barnes with eye black smeared across his cheekbones even though they're in a dome where the sun can't shine. They shout back and forth, their nonsense bilingual dialogue.

So he looks Bucky right in the eye as he hikes the ball, sets the play into motion; he watches Bucky more than his own team, to be honest. He grew up playing catch with Bucky Barnes, and knows that footwork better than anyone: now, he watches Bucky shadow Sam Wilson. They slant across the middle of the field together, glide toward the sideline, off to Steve's left. Then he turns his back on them, tucks the ball safely in the crook of his elbow, and sprints toward the opposite sideline.

First down.

"You're a freak, I tell you you're a freak?" Sam probably hasn't stopped yelling since he came back on the field.

"You're the freak," Steve shoots back. "Listen, listen Freak, I got an idea."

"Hit me."

Steve huddles with his teammates and describes the play, imagining, the entire time, how Bucky will try to beat it. He will try to stop Sam, that much is clear.

Steve is counting on it.

"72! Brooklyn!"

"Семнадцать."

"72! Manhattan!"

"желани."

"72! Hike!"

Sam Wilson rockets deep downfield, a defensive back on his tail, Barnes sailing after them as a safety net.
Leaving Isaiah Bradley wide open in the slot.

Steve tosses him the football like nothing, like a flower on the breeze, and then watches him work. Isaiah is dangerous in an open field. He moves like a missile. He's not known for his agility, like Sam or like Pietro Maximoff; he's rather known for his *unstoppability*.

He sprints downfield, trucks through the nasty Southeast linebackers, dials up the sound on the American State crowd. The stadium shudders like an overblown stereo and rocks and thrills right down to Steve's bones.

Isaiah doesn't score, but he gets them damn close. After Clint's fifth field goal: 15-14, American State.

Steve meets Isaiah on the sideline. Almost tackles him to the ground in his excitement. It's pandemonium. Everyone grinning and shrieking and pounding each other on the back. Well, Isaiah doesn't smile. Isaiah never smiles. But he tosses his hair back and runs his tongue along his teeth, like he can taste it, anyway.

"Hey, you fuck!" Sam says, filling up Steve's line of vision.

"Sorry?"

"*You fuck!*" he repeats. But he is smiling fit to burst. "You used me as a decoy!"

"What can I say," Steve shrugs. "You're really distracting."

Their success doesn't ease the tension. A one-point lead means nothing at all until the game is over.

And figuring out Bucky's pattern doesn't make him any worse of a football player. He still backs Steve into corners and clotheslines Isaiah for short gains and double teams Sam just when he's about to get open. God, he's good. Plus, Pietro Maximoff doesn't get any slower as the game drags on. He's probably the only football player on the planet who *gains* speed as the clock winds down.

"Brooklyn!"

"Девять."

"Manhattan!"

"*Грузовой вагон.""

It's like walking a tightrope over the mouth of a volcano.

Of course it doesn't last.

Southeast State scores another touchdown. 21-15.

The fourth quarter begins. One of the marching bands plays "Eye of the Tiger". The other plays a wicked Lil Wayne arrangement. Together, they form some kind of brazen, dissonant mash-up spanning three decades of music.

Clint Barton makes another field goal, his sixth. 21-18.

American State needs a field goal to tie, a touchdown to win.
In the fourth quarter, it all falls apart.

They don't even see it coming. It's like stepping on a landmine, everything coming apart in a spray of shrapnel and dirt.

"It's our time!" Sam wails. "Our time, our turn, gentlemen!"

Steve lets him yell. It's good for him, and it's good for the team. It's third-and-eleven, game's almost over. They need all the help they can get.

He sets the play in motion before Bucky can spit out any more Russian codewords.

The play unfolds beautifully. Steve's throw soars, effortless, a gentle sine wave right over Bucky and into Sam Wilson's arms. The crowd crescendos to a roar, bringing the blood straight to his skin, setting his hair on end.

Then it goes to shit.

Two players shove Sam out of bounds on the Southeast sideline. They're not gentle about it, and Sam doesn't take it well. Steve drifts toward the play, wary: so do the referees and all the players on the field. He can't hear what Sam is saying, or what his opponents are yelling back, but he can see spit flying and arms waving.

The Southeast defense streams before him, weaving through the American State offense, black and white uniforms bubbling together.

Sam's voice rises over the din. "Why don't you shut the hell up?"

It's like detonating a bomb. Southeast State uniforms explode on the scene, and half a dozen American State players respond to the tidal wave. Sam Wilson swirls in the center, not helpless, not helpless, but exposed there, right in the line of fire. The two Southeast players who dive at him are big. They're big and ugly and mean and they each weigh twice as much as Sam and Steve can't get there in time—he darts through the crowd—struggles against the current—but he just has to watch, that's all he can do, watch as a massive defensive end grabs Sam by the shirtfront.

Another black uniform fights its way into the fray, beats Steve there—Steve, who is still worthless and trapped downstream—

"Dammit—Sam—"

The new figure rips off his helmet and throws himself between Sam Wilson and the Southeast players.

It's Bucky. Of course it's Bucky, shouting and cursing where Steve can't hear; he can only see Bucky's lips carving out the words as he stands in the middle of it all. And realization tolls like a bell in Steve's chest—Bucky is trying to break them up.

Bucky struggles with his teammates, brief and brutal. He tries to peel them away from Sam Wilson—and instead takes an elbow to the face.

Which is when Steve finally breaks through the throng. "Bucky!" he cries.

Bucky has one hand on his teammate's chest, holding him at bay; he cups his other hand around his nose, checking for blood and broken tissue.
"Get him out of here," Bucky growls.

"Are you okay?!"

"Get Wilson out of here."

Referees begin to converge on the scene with their whistles and bright yellow flags, and Steve does as he's told.

Sam is scorched by fire. "Let me at 'em, Steve, just let me—"

"Shut up before they kick you out of the game," Steve bites, herding Sam through the crowd of angry uniforms.

It's a mess. Both sidelines have spilled across the field in angry disarray, snapping and bickering. It takes almost ten minutes to douse the flames and get it all under control, and at that point, the referees have to make sense of everything, doll out penalties and somehow, somehow, move on with a football game.

A football game. Just the biggest game of the year. Of the century. If they already played the Game of the Century, what is this?

"Stay focused!" Steve orders, for Sam Wilson, for all his angry teammates. "Stay focused, now, this isn't what we're here for. We're here to play football. We're here to win a football game." He's not even paying attention to himself—he doesn't even hear what he's saying. He keeps seeing Bucky and Sam in the middle of things: Sam swearing when a Southeast player grabbed him by the shirt; Bucky's head snapping back when his own teammate elbowed him in the face.

When the dust settles, and both teams are safely penned on their respective sidelines, the referees turn on their microphones and make their announcements.


Steve isn't surprised to hear them penalize Bucky Barnes. He was in the middle of things, after all. Steve Rogers might have been the only person in the world who noticed that Bucky was just trying to break things up.

"That's bullshit too," Sam mutters.

Steve smiles at him, ready to burst with gratitude.

"Those penalties offset." The referee is still droning.

The sidelines of a football field are pretty far apart, all things considered. It's hard to see details on your opponent's sideline. But now, with the field empty, as Steve gazes across the expanse of artificial turf at the Southeast State sideline and its seething wall of black—like an upturned hive of furious insects—now, Steve can see the opposite sideline very clearly.

He can see Brock Rumlow grab Bucky's facemask and yank him close; he can only watch, horrified, as Rumlow manhandles Bucky, jerks him back and forth by the facemask and howls in his face. Bucky scrabbles at the fastenings on the side of his helmet, as if to remove it, but he can't escape fast enough. Steve rips off his own helmet to see better—just in time to watch Rumlow shove Bucky Barnes into a small group of his teammates. Bucky stumbles against them. Grabs one of their shoulder pads in order to stay on his feet.
There is gasoline in Steve's veins.

Ears ringing, he whirls around to face the jumbotron—just in time for it to cut away from Rumlow and Barnes. *He's not the only one who saw.*

It's hard to say where the fire starts: in Steve's throat, or behind his eyes, or in the stormstricken chambers of his heart. But it blazes to life in seconds, and it roars through his limbs like a natural disaster, laying him to waste. He saw the jumbotron, and everyone else saw it, too:

And Sam saw everything. He sums it up pretty well. "Oh, let's beat 'em," he says with a wild grin. "Let's beat the shit out of 'em."

"Sam Wilson," says Steve, "you read my mind."

At the end of it all, Steve just can't separate himself from Bucky. How could he, how would he even begin? Bucky Barnes knows him down to the deepest blue; knows his scars and his fears; knows the things Steve himself doesn't even know. Bucky is written on his bones, written in full color down the slope of his spine. It doesn't matter who says it, or how often—"he doesn't know you," or "he's not the person he used to be," or "you have to leave it in the past."

*"Your past came back to haunt you."

Yeah. *Yeah* Bucky is his past. He is Steve's memory and his accent and his countless senses and every line traced into his skin. He is the hot and cold crushing Steve's throat. There's bad weather in Steve's veins, and Bucky keeps it at bay. He is the reason Steve can throw a touchdown in the rain. He is the callouses on Steve's fingertips where the football seams align with his knuckles. He put them there. He put it *all* there. *Yeah* he is Steve's past. That is why he is so inextricable from Steve's present.

The trick play is Sam's idea.

Steve and Isaiah and Banner got them into field goal territory with mere seconds left on the clock. But a field goal won't win the game. It will only tie.

So Sam suggests the fake.

"If we take this into overtime, Maximoff will just keep running," Sam says. He's talking to everyone—to Fury and Banner and the Bradley brothers, everyone—but he's looking at Steve Rogers.

"You're right," Steve agrees. "Fake the tie," he says; "Go for the win."

Which is how Steve ends up on the sideline during the National Championship game, watching, watching, watching, watching while his team goes out on a limb for the win.

And he thinks of his Heisman speech, which he pulled right out of his ass—meant every word, but still. He never expected anything, that night, least of all the words that came out of his own mouth.

That award was never just for Steve.

Clint Barton lines up to kick, and Eli Bradley crouches behind the line, waiting for the snap, and James Barnes, Bucky Barnes, a skulking predator on the opposite side.

Steve trusts his team. Trusts them so much. It doesn't matter that they rarely complete this play during practice. It doesn't matter that Eli is a backup quarterback and a second choice, or that the Heisman
Trophy winner is on the sideline. It doesn't matter that Sam Wilson is a true freshman. Bucky may be able to read Steve Rogers like a book—but he doesn't know Eli Bradley.

Steve kneels on the sideline. He's not afraid to watch—but he is too superstitious to watch. He kneels down and rests his head in one hand. Isaiah appears beside him and twines their fingers together, his gloved hand rough against Steve's palm.

Steve watches the grass, and he listens.

He listens to the steady rise of noise in the crowd. It swells and then, for just a fraction of a second, it dies; the stunned silence before the storm as American State snaps the ball. Like all the sound in the world is suspended in a vacuum; like all of Steve's blood is suspended in a vacuum.

Then heinous screaming, a storm at sea on all sides—and a collective gasp, just in time, just quiet enough that Steve can hear an ugly crack. Lightning, followed by thunder.

"He did it," Isaiah bellows over the booming crowd, right in Steve's ear.

Steve looks up, eyes wild, eyes hot, eyes ragged with the stress—

"He did it, we did it," Isaiah repeats as he tugs Steve to his feet. "We did it, we did it, we did it—"

Isaiah drags him up, drags him toward the end zone, toward the giant scoreboard and the 00:00:00 on the clock and the score, the American State: 24, Southeast State: 21. They won. Toward the crush of uniforms, of white caps on black waters—

Bucky Barnes and Sam Wilson lying on the ground.

"Ice—Isaiah, what—what happened—" Steve stammers over the thunderous celebration, over the American State fight song, over the shower of confetti. They won. He shakes his hand free from Isaiah's grip and grabs his shoulder, instead, and demands, "What happened?"

"They went down hard, Steve."

Slowly—with help from Eli and from Luke Cage—Sam Wilson gets to his feet. From yards away, Steve stares. Bucky doesn't move.

The fire rekindles in his pulse, beating through his throat and his hands and his lips. He weaves through the throng, shoving players aside, dizzy from it all—they won—dizzy with fear, stabbing fear, burning to ashes. He pushes his teammates aside and swipes confetti out of his eyes. He reaches the end zone—they won—and reaches Sam Wilson.

Sam, who still hasn't left Bucky's side.

Bucky is sitting up, now, clutching his chest. Swaying slightly, from—what, from pain, from shock, from the deafening noise?

"Steve, I'm sorry—" Sam's hands scrape over Steve as he tumbles to Bucky's side.

Everything else, the sound and the color and the overwhelming fire of victory, it all shrinks away as Steve sinks to the ground beside Bucky. With his free hand, Bucky gropes at the straps on his helmet.

"Buck—hey, Bucky, let me—" Steve says, trying to yell over the crowd and still sound gentle. "Let me help."
Together they unsnap Bucky's helmet, and slowly—tenderly—Steve slips it off. "Does that hurt?" he asks, inch by inch. "Good? Tell me if it hurts."

Finally, Bucky's helmet slides away. He gasps for breath, hair askew, and lists wildly. Steve's hands dart out to keep him upright.

Bucky's eyes, like frosted glass, drift across Steve's face and into the crowd.

"Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck, it's me." Steve grips his shoulder to hold him steady. "It's me, I'm here."

"Steve." Bucky blinks heavily, and his eyes roam a slow, fuzzy track until coming back to rest on Steve's torso. "I hit you. Oh my god." He fumbles with Steve's uniform, fingers hooking into the collar of his pads. "I hit you and you didn't get up."

Steve shakes his head. "I—I did, Buck. I'm fine."

"I hurt you." Bucky's voice starts to rise, and he blinks harder. Frantic fingers tug at Steve's shirt. "Steve, I'm sorry—"

"Bucky, Bucky, hey, Bucky, look at me," Steve curls a hand behind Bucky's ear, trying to steer his gaze, trying to make eye contact. "I'm fine, you didn't hurt, me, I promise. Bucky?"

"Is Wilson okay?"

Steve's brain is spinning out. He's skidding across the asphalt on his rims, here. "Y-yeah, Buck, Sam is fine. We're all fine."

"I'm sorry," Bucky says. Steve can't tell if his speech is slurred or if the stadium raucous is distorting his words. "I'm sorry I didn't text you back."

"Didn't—? Bucky, hey, I don't care about that."

"After the accident, my phone … broke? And I couldn't remember your number?"

Steve tears his eyes away from Bucky just long enough to glance at the crowd—the sea of red white and blue, the shower of confetti, the khakis and flashbulbs and microphones—where are the doctors?

Bucky whimpers. "I couldn't remember—I'm sorry—"

"It's fine, Buck, I promise, I don't care." Steve whirs to face him, tries to be reassuring, but he can hear the panic in his own voice. "Can you look at me?"

Bucky's eyes glaze over. "What if I can't remember again?"

"Please look at me?" Steve begs. He takes Bucky's face in both hands and finally, finally, Bucky's eyes find Steve's. They are splattered ink and screeching rubber, sunken, more black than blue, and as Steve looks into those eyes, he's not certain Bucky is seeing him at all.

Sluggishly, Bucky blinks again, and he speaks again. "Steve?"

"Yeah." Steve is choking on metal shards. "Yeah, it's me, it's Steve."

"Steve, I'm sorry." Bucky leans closer. Two deep creases form between his eyebrows. "I lied, I'm
"It's okay, Buck, don't—"

"I love you," Bucky rasps. He sways a little, and tightens his grip on Steve's collar. "I do love you. Steve. I'm sorry."

Steve's mouth falls open, and nothing at all comes out. There is ice water on his nerves, flushing his veins, flooding his lungs, clutching his chest and squeezing, driving out all the oxygen and replacing it with a high-pitched whine. He can feel each individual cell in his body ringing, bursting into numbness.

Air hisses in his throat. "Buck … you … what?"

"What if I can't remember again?"

Someone grabs Steve by the elbow and yanks him to his feet.

"No, wait—" Steve shouts as he stumbles and finds his bearings.

Brock Rumlow's face swims before him, leery and sickening. "Why don't you go celebrate with your team, Rogers?"

"Bucky," he struggles to see over Rumlow's shoulder. A wall of Southeast trainers blocks his view.

"He'll be fine," Rumlow says.

"He'd better be!" Steve barks. "You'd better take care of him! He'd better be fine! I—"

"Yeah." Rumlow chases Steve's bark with a growl of his own. "He'll be fine."

"If you lay another hand on him, I swear to God—"


Steve's vision burns bright at the edges. He squares his shoulders and plants his feet. "If you hurt him, you'll have me to answer to."

Somehow, painfully, Rumlow is grinning. He takes a step closer so that his lips almost touch Steve's ear. "You can't protect him from everything."

Isaiah Bradley appears and rescues Steve. In fact, he rescues Brock Rumlow from a painful, bloody demise: but theoretically, he rescues Steve and drags him back to the living.

"Hey, Rogers, come with me," Ice says loudly. "I got a bet to win."

Bet. A bet to win—what kind of—reporters? Something about reporters and interviews.

Steve shakes his head. "But Bucky—"

"Not now," Isaiah hisses, for Steve alone, this time. "Not now, yeah. He got doctors, Steve. You got a trophy to accept."

Chapter End Notes
i have now seen Civil War twice and i am just bursting with emotions about it all. that whole distraction is probably why this chapter took awhile. sorry. also, i ship sam and bucky EVEN more now, we're talking heaven and beyond. so that might have crept into this chapter, too. (it's ok buck, i would stare at sam wilson a lot, too.)

guys! i love you all so much. let me take this opportunity to thank all of you amazing readers for your kudos and bookmarks and the COMMENTS! the wonderful comments. they sustain me.
Bucky Barnes

Chapter Summary

Steve Rogers has a lot of love to give. Sometimes, it can overwhelm the people who are close to him. But Bucky Barnes? He needs a lot of love.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It isn't wildfire in Steve's blood, anymore. It's a torch.

*They won.*

A reporter with a heavily-gelled comb-over stuffs a microphone into Steve's face. "I'm here with Steve Rogers and Isaiah Bradley—tell me, how did it feel, watching from the sideline on that incredible last play?"

Vertigo is strange. It's not exactly dizziness; in fact it isn't a head-phenomenon, at all. It really manifests in your solar plexus. In the strange internal muscles that allow your ribs to expand; in the thread of tissue between your voice box and your navel. Steve can feel it, now. A gentle tug on that thread. A strange slow-motion twisting.

He looks at the reporter's straight teeth, and he looks at Isaiah Bradley, an officer, silver bars polished to a scowl.

The reporter tries again. "Did you have any words of advice for your teammates before they took the field?"

It's almost like Steve's feet are dangling, even though they are planted on the turf.

*They won.*

Steve says, "No."

The reporter glares at Steve through his smile. "I'm sorry?"

"I didn't have any advice," Steve tells him, "for anyone. We've been practicing … we've been practicing that play all year. Eli and Sam know what to do."

The man turns, very deliberately, to Isaiah Bradley. If he thinks this tactic will gain him more eloquent quotes for the camera, then he has really half-assed his research for tonight's game. "What about you, Mr. Bradley? Did you have any words of wisdom for your older brother before that trick play?"

Silence.

The oppressive, crushing silence of several thousand delirious fans. It seems like everyone in the building is screaming except for Isaiah, Steve, and this poor bastard trying to interview them.
Isaiah’s scowl deepens.

Steve takes pity. "You know Isaiah is twenty minutes older than his brother?"

The reporter's smile widens, as if he can mask his horror and discomfort in some grotesque display of affability.

After another beat of booming silence, they are all rescued by an assistant coach, who tosses championship gear into Isaiah’s and Steve's arms before herding them toward a platform on the fifty-yard-line. The grounds crew must have carted a stage onto the field sometime between when Bucky collided with Sam Wilson and when Bucky told Steve I love you. Steve is still freaking out about both.

And the fact that they won.

Steve stumbles toward the stage, watching, dumbfounded, as all of his teammates and coaches celebrate. The shower of confetti turns everything into a surreal, grainy, red-white-and-blue film footage.

Eli has tears streaming down his face. Luke Cage is giving Danny Rand a piggy-back-ride. Clint Barton is making a snow-angel in the piles of confetti. Bill Foster hovers by the crystal trophy, waiting for a BCS executive to hand it over. At center-stage, Nick Fury overlooks it all; an arc forms around him of NCAA officials, assistant coaches, ESPN reporters, and American State players in championship hats and T-shirts with the tags still on.

Steve inspects his own T-shirt. Gray. American State and Champions in big block-letters. The shirt looks huge. He squeezes it on right over his uniform and his pads.

Sam Wilson, already onstage, sticks out a hand and pulls Steve up to stand beside him. Steve does the same for Isaiah. Media personnel herds the three of them toward Nick Fury and the trophy.

From the stage, Steve can see the last Southeast State players trickle off the field into their locker room.

He remembers, years ago, drawing a human heart with brick walls and oil and empty chambers. His own heart isn't brick or empty. It is something else, overflowing until it pops at the seams. He understands why Eli is crying. He might be crying, himself. He doesn't think he's crying, but he might be crying.

"We did it!" Sam Wilson grabs the front of his new T-shirt and gives him a good hard shake. "We did it!"

Steve can feel it, the moment his face cracks; the moment his fuses all blow at once. When he looks at Sam Wilson, his beaming face and the National Champion logo emblazoned across his gray snap-back, Steve just shatters.

"… American State University."

Nick Fury raises the trophy, a life-sized football of Waterford crystal.

He passes it to Steve Rogers first, which is stupid. Steve takes it, of course, and he hoists it up just long enough to admire the way it refracts in the banks of stadium lights like a red-white-and-blue prism. And immediately, he hands it off to Sam Wilson. Sam, who caught the game-winning touchdown. Sam who beat the Winter Soldier. It will make a pretty picture in all the newspapers.
After the win, the ASU locker room is a rave scene. The only thing missing from the celebration is champagne. Half the team is underage, after all. But they're drunk enough on euphoria. (Clint is dancing badly in the middle of the room. When the defensive linemen beg him to stop, he just turns off his hearing aids. Then Sam Wilson joins him, and it's all downhill from there.)

Steve is giddy, and Steve is torn. He wants to celebrate this win for the rest of eternity; and he wants to slink away into a dark corner to text Bucky. No—he wants to see Bucky. In the flesh. To hold Bucky's face in his hands and hear his voice and know that he is still in one piece.

Either way, he can't really have what he wants.

The locker room fizzes with a brief, super-charged celebration before shuffling young men out of uniforms, into showers, and in front of cameras.

The press room is like a bizarre firing squad—dozens of media personnel with their barrels trained on American State representatives. Nick Fury, Tony Stark, and a handful of players with household names shuffle to the front of the room. They sit in front of a bright blue wall stamped with alternating logos—American State, NCAA, and Dr. Pepper. Steve wonders vaguely how much they paid for that product placement. He faces the forest of microphones, the constellation of camera flashes. Several reporters in the audience hold up smartphones in place of recording devices.

Then they fire questions.

"How did you prepare for the rematch?"

"Was it very different facing Southeast on neutral ground?"

"Who would you say really stepped up on defense today?"

Fortunately, most of the questions are directed toward the coaching staff. Tony Stark likes it when people ask him questions because he can wax poetic about his favorite topics: defensive schematics and himself. Nick Fury likes it when people ask him questions because he derives sick pleasure from frightening reporters.

"Does it look like I started coaching yesterday?" is one of his favorite answers. The eye patch adds a unique intimidation factor.

But, although it's a relief not to have to answer questions, it does make the process drag at a snail's pace. After the third Tony Stark Monologue begins, Sam Wilson kicks Steve underneath the table.

Steve frowns.

Sam raises his eyebrows pointedly.

Steve looks at the empty water bottle in his hands. His knuckles are white, and he has twisted it beyond recognition.

A reporter's high tenor voice draws Steve back to reality. "What did you think of the fourth-quarter penalties? Were they fair? Should Barnes have been ejected?"

"Didn't hurt nobody," Nick Fury answers.

"It was a pretty prolonged altercation," the reporter argues. "Do you think calling it a draw was the right way to go?"
"I didn't see what happened on the field," Fury says. "It wasn't clear to me whether or not there was any violence. Or who might have initiated any violence. Wasn't clear to me."

"What do the players think?" another reporter cuts in. "Steve Rogers, or Sam Wilson—you were in the middle of it all—what was it like to be on the field when the fight broke out?"

"Man, I'm just glad I walked away in one piece, you know?" Sam says instantly. "That Southeast defense surrounding you on all sides? It's freaky."

The media hounds just won't give up. "James Barnes has a track record for violence on the football field. Did you fear for your safety at all?"

Steve crushes his empty water bottle in one hand. A vicious crack echoes in through press room.

"Not from Barnes," Sam shrugs, as if Steve had not displayed any sort of emotional outburst.

But it's useless. Once they jump in the rabbit hole, there's no way to dig back out. A brave reporter clears her throat and addresses Steve directly. "This is for Steve Rogers—at the end of the game, we saw you approach James Barnes. Could you tell us what that exchange was about?"

Steve's stomach feels like the ruined water bottle in his hands. "He and Sam Wilson went down hard," he says carefully. "I wanted to make sure they were both okay, that's all."

"Did he say anything to you?"

Yes, Steve thinks. He said everything.

Still, Steve can't help but picture Natasha Romanoff—Natasha in leggings and pink Nikes, standing in his driveway, her hair lit up by the cold morning sun; Natasha reminding Steve to protect himself and to protect Bucky.

"No," Steve says hoarsely. He clears his throat and tries again. "That's between me and Barnes."

"Did you have a problem with Barnes getting physical during that altercation?" another reporter adds. "Do you think he got away with a slap on the wrist?"

"No one got away with anything," Steve barks. Every head in the room—and every handheld recording device in the room—swivels to face him. "Emotions were running high. That's how it is when you're on the field playing the biggest game of the year. Things got heated, and we moved on. End of story."

The ensuing silence lasts just long enough for Steve to hear Isaiah swallow audibly.

Then another reporter picks at the open wound. "You say emotions were running high. Who started the fight?"

"Do you really think that's an important issue, right now?" Steve is standing up, now. He's not sure when that happened. "We just won the National Championship. You think we're worried about a little disagreement on the sidelines? You're just trying to stir up drama." Steve pauses to take a breath, but no one interrupts him. "That so-called fight had no bearing on the outcome of the game. Emotions got out of hand, and we handled it on the field, and we moved on. I think this line of questioning should move on, too."

"To be fair, it happened at a critical—"
"You think these questions will tell the story of the game?" Steve interrupts. "I think you're asking the wrong questions. Ask about how Clint Barton single-handedly kept us in this game. Ask about Luke Cage and Danny Rand holding Pietro Maximoff to two touchdowns. Ask about me and—James Barnes calling audibles until the play clock ran out.

"Ask about the trick play. You know?" Steve taunts. "Why don't you ask about the fake field goal? Ask whose idea it was. I have a hint for you: It wasn't Nick Fury or Bruce Banner. It wasn't me. You might be surprised by the answer, and it might give you a good story for your article. But you're still worried about blowing a little argument out of proportion.

"If you want a good story, you have to ask good questions."

Steve sits down.

The silence is almost as deafening as the crowd after the game.

On his left, Isaiah rests his chin in his hands; he's hiding a smile behind his fingers.

On his right, Sam nudges Steve again and mutters, "You need a microphone to drop?"

Which is funny, because Sam Wilson himself is the one who puts a stamp on the evening.

A reporter in the back of the room breaks the silence rather bravely. "So," he says. "How does it feel to finally be the number one team in the nation?"

"We been number one," Sam speaks up. "Any team that's got Steve Rogers? That's a number one team. And Ice Bradley and Clint Barton? Of course we're number one. We've been number one. And now we have a trophy to prove it."

Steve smiles.

Winning is a hell of a drug. And the crash? That's apocalyptic.

It starts during the trip to the hotel, the mundane reality of a bus ride that reminds Steve—it's not Hollywood, here.

It all feels so big when you're standing in the middle of the stadium, in the middle of 70,000 fans and 4000-watt LEDs, but when you drive away, when you watch the horizon and the dark night sky swallow that stadium right up, it doesn't feel as big anymore. It already feels like two lines of text on the NCAA Wikipedia page.

And now that his mind is reeling back to the dirt and the desert, all Steve can think about is Bucky's glassy eyes. He wracks his brain, running through their conversation over and over so he won't forget: something about hurting Steve, something about forgetting phone numbers, checking on Sam Wilson,

I love you.

Steve taps his foot incessantly through the drive to the hotel. The rest of the bus rocks with three different group chants and a tuneless rendition of "We Will Rock You" that the white boys must have started.

Steve texts Bucky a simple You okay?, but doesn't expect a response and doesn't get one.

When they finally reach the hotel, Steve's internal systems are going haywire. The euphoria of
victory has nosedived, but he started so high in the atmosphere it's becoming hard to breath—the imbalance of oxygen—all the meters in the cockpit spin out of control—he just wants to know if Bucky is okay. He just wants Bucky to be okay.

So Steve's pretty much delirious when they enter the hotel, split into groups, and go their separate ways. He drifts onto an elevator with Sam and the Bradleys. When they reach their floor, Steve turns down the hall for his room on autopilot—then stops in his tracks.

There is a man in black leaning against his doorframe. The corridor is empty except for this dark motionless figure with a duffel bag strapped to his back. Steve is suddenly very conscious of his breathing.

A voice sounds from behind Steve: "Did Eli lock himself out again?"

Steve's friends all laugh.

"I'm right here!" Eli protests from the back of the group.

"That's not Eli," Steve whispers, pace accelerating—heart accelerating. He breaks away from his teammates and strides down the hall, like tripping, like falling, like pointing the nose of the plane straight toward the earth. Like plummeting forward and just barely catching himself with every step.

The dark figure looks up as Steve approaches, but doesn't move.

Steve wraps his arms around Bucky's waist and kisses him on the lips.

Numbness starts to creep up his limbs—probably from the buckets of adrenaline careening through his bloodstream, a fire and flood every fifteen minutes since the game started. But God, his heart is so big, right now, so loud and so real. If any heart could take it, it's Steve's.

What kind of kiss.

Steve has never kissed anyone like this. A direct line to all the empty spaces in his chest.

All of Bucky is so strong: Steve can feel it under his lips and under his fingertips, the molten resilience warm and dormant under Bucky's skin. Steve presses harder and leans closer. He can't get close enough. His hands press into Bucky's spine, and he still can't get close enough. He opens his mouth and Bucky sighs and draws him in and he still can't get close enough.

One of his teammates whistles. Steve and Bucky don't let it stop them, this time.

Steve's body systems are all rebooting. He can't feel anything that isn't in contact with Bucky—which is fine—that's perfect, he doesn't need anything else—

Then Bucky touches him, and Steve sucks in a sharp breath through his nose. Bucky's hands come to rest on his face, leaving fingerprints on Steve's jaw, like lavender and cirrus clouds. His hands slide behind Steve's neck, and his fingers thread through his hair. He finds the dimple at the base of Steve's skull and whimpers.

Steve has no idea what his own hands are doing. He can't focus on more than one thing, and right now, that one thing is the feel of Bucky's bottom lip under his own.

He can't get close enough. He presses in for more contact, from knees to navel to sternum. He backs Bucky into the wall, and he can feel the jolt when his fingers are trapped between Bucky's jacket and the wallpaper.
Bucky breaks the kiss and hisses and presses both hands to Steve's chest.

Horror washes over Steve. "What's wrong?!

Bucky grimaces. "Sorry," he pants, eyes fixed on Steve's mouth.

"What—no, don't be—what's wrong?" He steps back, but keeps his hands on Bucky's waist in case he needs—anything. Support? What's wrong?

"Sorry. It's..." Bucky swallows. His eyes flicker. Steve can see the faint green of a lingering bruise near the bridge of his nose. "Dislocated shoulder."

Beat.

"You—you have a dislocated shoulder?"

"Wait, you what?" That would be Eli, stepping closer, eyes wide.

"Well." Bucky looks down again. "It's relocated now."

"When did it happen?" Steve asks.

"That—when me and Wilson went up for that deep pass. And landed on top of each other."

Steve wracks his brain. "On the last play?"

"No," Bucky says. His eyes dart between Steve and each of his teammates. "Before. We were winning. It was a go route."

It's all kind of a blur in Steve's memory: images of Sam Wilson in deep coverage, Bucky lining up as a safety, zone reads, go routes, post routes, slant routes. He can remember Sam tumbling down on the sidelines, and something occurs to him: "Was it the fight?"

"No," Bucky answers, and Sam speaks at the same time:

"No," Sam says, staring at Bucky, a nauseated expression curling his lip. "No, it was in the third quarter. Right after halftime," he clarifies, and everyone knows he is right.

Steve begins to feel a strange, localized ache in the hinge of his jaw. "You played the whole second half with a dislocated shoulder?"

Bucky shrugs. And then winces.

"Holy shit," Isaiah breathes.

"I mean, we popped it back in, first," Bucky backtracks.

"Still," Eli hisses, then leaps into action. "No wonder it hurts—Steve Rogers and the kiss of death, over here."

Steve opens his mouth to protest, but Eli talks over him. "Come on, come inside, I have a couple ice packs in the freezer." Eli fumbles with the key-card and shepherds Bucky into their room. Once they're inside, he relieves him of his duffel bag—working carefully around his left shoulder—and shoves it at Sam without looking, then guides Bucky onto the end of a bed. Once he is settled, Eli turns to rummage through their mini-fridge. "Steve, grab me one of our hand-towels, yeah?" he orders.
Steve does so. When he returns from the bathroom, he stops in his tracks. Bucky is perched on the edge of Steve's bed, a little wide-eyed, but calm. Eli hovers over him, inspecting Bucky's shoulder. Sam sneaks the duffel next to the TV, then catches Steve's eye and shakes his head, clearly trying not to smile.

The entire tableau punches all the air out of Steve's lungs.

Steve eases onto the corner of the empty bed. Eli doesn't even acknowledge him, his focus trained on Bucky. "They check you out?" he asks as he prods the left side of Bucky's back with well-trained fingers.

Bucky nods. He gazes at Eli the way you might gaze at someone who speaks to you in a different language, but nevertheless does so very earnestly.

Eli tugs at the collar of Bucky's windbreaker and asks if he can remove it. Bucky lets him help without speaking and without moving his left arm much. Once the jacket is gone, Eli has better access to Bucky's torso.

"Hospital?" Eli asks.

Bucky shakes his head.

"Broken ribs, too?"

Bucky nods.

"Did they scan you?" Eli goes on, and doesn't wait for an answer. "There's loose tissue, I think. Can you lift your arm?"

"Not really," Bucky says, and proceeds to lift his arm. He almost makes a ninety-degree angle.

"I mean, I haven't seen the scans or nothing," Eli says, and sounds genuinely sorry for it, "But I think there's some kind of tissue damage. Maybe not torn, but ... Can't believe they didn't take you to the hospital."

"We have doctors," Bucky says dumbly.

Eli dismisses that with a wave. "Did they give you anything?"

Bucky blinks.

Eli beckons for the towel, which Steve hands over. "Any drugs?" Eli clarifies.

Bucky huffs, a small sour sound that could be laughter. "You'll have to be more specific."

Steve, Sam, Isaiah, and Eli all stare at Bucky.

Steve thinks back to the NAC Championship Game. "Pump me with enough drugs, and even I can't tell I'm injured." It could mean so many things. Even at American State, players take shots to stave off the pain long enough for a football game. Sam Wilson comes to mind, and his small doses of painkillers and muscle relaxants to alleviate the back spasms.

But Bucky sounds so angry. It's the tone of voice that draws Steve's imagination to dark places.

Eli is the first to recover. He holds up the ice pack, now wrapped in a towel. "I mean anti-inflammatories," Eli explains, "or something to knock you out overnight."
Bucky accepts the ice pack. He turns it over between his hands. He looks thoughtful. He picks at a stray thread on the towel. He doesn't speak.

Sensing the toxic discomfort in the room, Steve is about to step in when Isaiah clears his throat.

"So his arm's not gonna fall off or nothing?"

Eli blinks, then ducks his head. "I mean, he said it hurt," he says sheepishly.

"You ain't have to assault him and force him to strip," Isaiah points out.

"I don't mind," Bucky mumbles.

Sam interrupts, then. "So what do we call you?"

Bucky and Steve both stare at him, mouths open.

"You know," Sam explains. "Do you go by … James? Or Barnes? Can I call you Bucky, or is that like a pet name? 'Property of Steve Rogers' or whatever?" Steve blushes. "Or do you prefer the Winter Soldier?"

"Anything but that."

"Bucky Bear?"

Bucky snorts. "Nice ring to it."

"But really," Sam says, smiling now. "I'm gonna hack into Steve's phone and steal your number so I can send you a ton of pictures of me with the trophy. So. What name do I save you under?"

"... Bucky's fine," he replies with a bemused half-smile.

Steve gazes at him. There is a perfect ache in his chest, like too much color bursting inside and not enough space.

"… out of it. Earth to Steve Rogers."

He snaps back to the present when he hears Isaiah speaking. "I'm—what?"

Sam cackles, which Steve thinks is pretty unfair, since it's his fault Bucky just knocked all the air out of Steve's lungs.

"Maybe we should go," Eli says gently.

"Hell yeah it's time to go," Sam says, rubbing his hands together. "We're going out, right?" He grins at Steve.

Everyone in the room stares at him, shifting awkwardly.

"I don't think they're coming," Eli says.

Isaiah takes Sam by the elbow and steers him toward the door. "We can still go out."

"Wait." Sam plants his feet. "Steve, you …" He looks at Steve, then—looks at him—and seems to see something new; then he looks at Bucky, then Steve again, back and forth. "Oh."

"Sam—" Steve tries, but Sam interjects.
"Holy—okay, okay, I mean, he did bring an overnight bag and shit," Sam says, gesturing towards Bucky's duffel.

Bucky's face turns an impressive shade of crimson. "What."

"Sam—"

"I think you just took their relationship to the next level," Eli cuts in with a sly look.

Sam, on the other hand, has gone from mortified to elated in the span of about four seconds. "What's in the bag, Soldier?"

Bucky levels him with a scowl to match the nickname. "Toothbrush and a box of condoms."

Beat.

Sam is the first to laugh; Steve joins in, but it's weak because he's *reeling* with embarrassment. And distantly, *definitely* turned on.

"Right. We're leaving," Isaiah says pointedly. Sam Wilson is laughing too hard to protest.

After a small commotion ("There's Advil in my bag!" Eli says, just as Sam calls, "Always use protection!") and the hotel door latches with a heavy bang, Steve can still hear his teammates in the hallway, but they are muffled and unintelligible, and they fade away fast, leaving Steve alone with Bucky.

Neither of them speaks right away. Bucky is still sitting quietly on the end of Steve's bed, staring, unfocused, into the middle distance. Steve takes the opportunity to look at him. Properly, and all, without sticking his tongue down his throat or bashing his injured shoulder into a wall.

Bucky is in black sweatpants and black Nikes with red soles. The back of his white T-shirt has a list of dates—probably a catalogue of Southeast State National Championships—while the front bears the Southeast logo: a red elk skull with wicked hooked antlers. His face looks better than it did a week ago. Just a little swollen. Steve probably wouldn't even notice if he didn't know to look. There's a string of bruises on Bucky's arm and his knuckles are tore up and there's still dirt clinging to his nails, but all that's just standard football wear-and-tear. He's got a couple days' worth of stubble, and there's a little crescent patch on his jaw where nothing grows; a small white scar from God knows where, God knows when. His lips are parted. Steve wants to kiss him again. But between the corridor and now, this moment with silence and an ice pack wrapped in a crisp white towel, it doesn't seem so easy, anymore.

"You doing okay?" Steve asks.

Bucky's eyes snap back to life and he looks at Steve. "Yeah." Just *yeah.*

"You want to use that ice pack, or stick it back in the freezer?"

Bucky looks down at the bundle in his lap, like he forgot it was there. His chest rises and falls.

"Here," Steve says, and stands up slowly so he can slide onto the bed next to Bucky's bad shoulder. He gently takes the ice pack and folds it against his arm, the outside of the ball-and-socket joint, right along the seam of his sleeve. "Good?"

"I dunno," Bucky croaks. "You don't have to—I should probably go."
A knot twists in Steve's stomach. He presses into the ice pack a little harder—not too hard—just enough to feel present.

"Why did you come, anyway?" Steve asks.

Bucky's eyes track to his duffel bag, then back to Steve. "I wanted to say I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?"

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut. "I'm sorry I hit you," he mumbles.

Oh.

How ridiculous, Steve thinks. What a small, silly thing, now. He's sitting here with an ice pack to Bucky's mangled shoulder, counting the bruises up Bucky's arms and his face, and that's just the ones Steve can see. He's sitting here in good health and a golden haze of victory, and Bucky is apologizing to him. How absurd. "Oh—Buck, don't worry about that."

"No, look, I'm obviously … messed up and all," Bucky launches into a stammering speech. "I'm sorry I hit you, and yelled at you, and … kissed you. I guess. I'm—I just—I want you to know I didn't mean all those shitty things I said. And the game today, I didn't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm fine," Steve assures him. "I promise."

"Right." Bucky cracks his knuckles. He doesn't look convinced. "Anyway. I've been fucking with you for weeks now, so it's cool if you don't believe a word I say."

Steve gapes at him. "Buck … You were mad. You had a right to be mad."

The look in Bucky's eyes is so specific. Such a localized pain. From a distance he seems hard, and strong, towering marble, but if you look from the right angle you can see the anguish buried in the rock. The fear and sorrow in David's eyes, despite the calm repose of his limbs.

"I'm real fucked up, Steve." He sighs quietly. "I should go."

Bucky lowers his shoulder to wriggle out from under the ice pack. Steve lets it fall to the bed—instead, he grabs Bucky's knee.

"Don't go."

"I shouldn't have come. Steve … I don't want to keep hurting you."

Steve has never been able to deny Bucky anything, but this—he read this wrong, before. Bucky begged Steve to leave him alone, and Steve has let him go too many times. He'd thought he'd been doing what was best for Bucky. All this time, Bucky thought he was doing what was best for Steve.

"You won't hurt me," Steve promises. "You haven't hurt me. None of that was your fault."

"I hit you."

"You think I can't take one lousy punch?"

Bucky snorts; he doesn't smile, not quite, but he looks amused, and Steve counts it as a win. "Wasn't lousy. I'm sorry."
"Nothing to be sorry for. You were hurting too." He pauses there, feeling sober again, and he braces himself. "Bucky, can I ask you something?"

"What."

"Who gave you the black eye?"

He scoffs. "You were on the field. You saw. Wasn't it Creed's elbow?"

"Bucky," Steve scolds him gently. "I mean last week."

He ducks his head and doesn't answer.

"At my house," Steve prods. "Bucky?"

"It's not a big deal."

"Was it Rumlow?"

Bucky laughs, low and bitter.

"It was, wasn't it?"

"No. It … wasn't Rumlow."

Steve's not sure he believes him, but doesn't press the issue. He owes Bucky a little privacy. Just asking is what matters, for now.

Bucky looks up at him through long, long lashes; the same way he has always looked at Steve, a bright blue, the hottest part of a flame.

"Quite a pair, aren't we?" Steve says through a watery smile.

"What's that mean."

"Means I'm here for you, Buck," he says, soft and insistent. "I'm not going anywhere."

Bucky shakes his head. There might be a smile leaking through his granite mask.

Now or never.

"About what you said," Steve says carefully. He squeezes Bucky's knee and rubs small circles into his thigh. "You know, after the game?"

Bucky cringes. "Oh, god. I'm sorry about that too."

"Don't be sorry," Steve whispers—begs, even. *Please don't be sorry. Not for that.*

"I shouldn't have said anything," Bucky says. The muscle of his thigh twitches under Steve's grip. "I was caught up in the moment, you know, and it just came out, and it was totally wrong-place-wrong-time, I'm sorry."

"Did you mean it?" Steve breathes, almost inaudible, because he can feel the cracks under the surface.

Bucky covers his face with both hands. "It's—yeah, Steve, *yeah* I meant it. I just … shouldn't."
"Oh, Bucky."

When he looks at Steve again, his eyes are red. "You don't have to say it back."

"Are you kidding me?"

Bucky blinks. "Um."

"Listen to me, Buck." Steve sinks to his knees between Bucky's feet and looks up at him. It's dizzying. It makes his head ache just to think of it: all the years, all the football games, all the doodles passed back and forth in class, all the times Bucky treated Steve's injuries with ice and stupid jokes. He reaches up to take Bucky's face in both hands. "Listen to me," Steve says again. "For as long as I can remember, every single day of my life, you were the most important thing in it. The best thing. Bucky, I was in love with you before I even knew what that meant."

"Steve—"

"And then you were gone. Just gone, and I felt so … much. There was so much, and I didn't know where to put it all." Bucky is crying openly, now, his nose red and his eyes shining. "God, I don't want to feel that way ever again," Steve whispers. "So yeah, I do have to say it back." He smooths the tears from Bucky's cheeks. "I love you," he says. He says it out loud for the first time in his life as he looks into Bucky's eyes, the eyes he has known and for years, for decades, for centuries upon centuries. "I love you, Bucky."

Bucky's lips blossom for him, parting like the gentle pink petals of morning. At first, all that escapes is a sob. He blinks, hard, and tries again:

"You're a punk."

Steve grins. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You are such a punk."

There is water gathering in the creases of Steve's palms. "Is this okay?" he asks, wiping away more tears.

"This is the worst." Bucky sucks in a breath, and then grabs both of Steve's wrists and squeezes. "Yeah it's okay."

"Okay," Steve says. He feels his own throat growing hot. They're both going to end up crying, probably. He gazes at Bucky's lips, the chapped creases and the swollen spot where he always bites down on it. Steve smiles. "I'm kind of afraid to kiss you again."

"Afraid."

"Well, yeah, Buck, it always seems to go wrong. I try to break your arm, or you end up puking everywhere—"

"Shut the fuck up," Bucky demands, and pulls Steve in for a kiss.

It is stiff at first—more overwhelmed than anything—their noses and their lips crushed together because they need it so bad. Because if they didn't kiss right now they would probably both erupt into color and flame and leave a crater behind in the Arizona desert. After a moment of desperate contact, after the reassurance that this is real, this whole night has been real, Steve relaxes. He strokes Bucky's jaw and parts his lips.
Bucky's hands are restless. They flutter like sparrows from Steve's wrists to his face and his elbows and finally, the fabric of his shirt, where they cling tight and pull him closer. He drifts back, stretches onto the mattress and pulls Steve on top of him. Not that it takes much coaxing. Steve goes hungry and willing. He wraps an arm around Bucky's waist and helps him shift farther onto the bed. Steve nudges a knee between Bucky's thighs, and that doesn't take much, either; Bucky's legs spread easily, and draw Steve in, and how absurd is this, now. It's phenomenal, the goosebumps that break out at the base of his spine and sweep straight to his skull.

Bucky kisses like an ocean. Writhing and fluid and breathless, pulse as natural and magnetic as the tide. He wraps Steve in white foam and surges against him.

Steve's left arm is trapped between Bucky and the mattress. With his right, he gropes for Bucky's hand and tangles their fingers together. Bucky's heel hooks behind his knee and he smiles, but doesn't break the kiss.

Steve grinds against Bucky's hip bone. That earns him a delicious groan.

Bucky gasps softly as he breaks the kiss. "I should probably be careful, you know," he whispers.

"You—? Oh," Steve says, scrambling up onto his elbows. "Sorry! Are you okay? Does this hurt?"

"No, not really," Bucky says, adjusting his left arm.

Steve can't imagine—just—at all. He just can't imagine. He can't picture hurting until it doesn't matter anymore. He wants to fix it so much. He wants to take away all of Bucky's hurt. "Is—? We can take it slow, if you want. I'm sorry. Is this—"

"Steve." Bucky spreads his fingers through Steve's hair and smiles. "I said careful, not abstinent."

He leans up to plant a soft kiss on Steve's chin.

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

"I'm not trying to pressure you though," Steve shakes his head, trying to clear his thoughts. "We can stop if you want."

"Steve Rogers, so help me, if you fucking stop now, you'll—I'll—I will … I'll do something. I can't think. But I'll do something. And you won't like it."

Steve couldn't argue if he wanted. "Oh yeah?"

"Fuck."

"You don't want me to stop?"

"I don't want you to stop."

Steve leans in for a kiss again, a rich slide of lips against teeth. He tugs gently at the hem of Bucky's shirt and drags his fingernails across the ridges of his stomach.

The noise Bucky makes is sunset and surf and sin. Steve kisses that sound. He slides his left hand out from under Bucky's back and into the front of his pants. That's a good reaction, too: Bucky's hips jump, as if jolted by an electric current.
Steve wants to know every single one of Bucky's reactions, wants to learn every perfect way to make Bucky squirm. He fumbles with Bucky's waistband, and that is fingernails against Steve's scalp; he wraps a hand around Bucky's dick, and that is a hiss of air through teeth; he strokes once, up and down, and that is a low whine in Bucky's throat. He tightens his hold, and that is Bucky's hand slipping into Steve's pants, grasping him and caressing him in return, which—damn, you know.

Steve trails kisses along Bucky's jaw until he finds the soft spot under his ear. Bucky's pulse speeds up, his breath speeds up, and his hand speeds up.

"Oh, God, Bucky," Steve groans.

That's all it takes. Bucky arches his back, spilling over Steve's fist, gasping for air.

As Bucky spirals back to earth, his grip on Steve's cock tightens and his pace quickens. Steve grinds down into his hand, desperate and fevered, and it doesn't take long for him to come, too.

And that—God Almighty—that doesn't feel like a small thing. That feels like a great deal more than two lines of text on a Wikipedia page.

Steve tries to catch his breath, panting hard against the hollow of Bucky's shoulder, leaving a warm, damp patch in the fabric of his shirt. Bucky twitches under him. Static currents and shallow breath. The dappled violets and whites and yellows of the sea at sunset.

Steve is careful not to crush Bucky underneath him. Even in the dense fog of sex and happiness, he is so, so conscious of Bucky's hurts. If anything, Bucky is more delicate, this way; supine and pale and fragile under the tips of Steve's fingers.

Steve traces the lines of Bucky's abs—Jesus—he would count them if he could see straight. He wipes his hand on Bucky's hip bone and asks, "You want to clean up, or anything? You're welcome to use the bathroom."

"You hinting?"

"Am I—? No, it—I just—"

Bucky is grinning, though. His stomach shakes with laughter, and Steve gapes at him—miles of smooth skin, threads of cum shining on his stomach. It's terrific and terrifying and it's obscene. Steve can't even think in words.

Bucky pokes him, hard, right near the collarbone. "You want me to clean up?"

"… I don't ever want you to leave this bed again," Steve breathes.

Bucky just laughs some more.

"What are you giggling at?"

"I ain't giggling."

"Oh yeah?"

"I don't giggle."

"What do you call it?" Steve says, running a fingertip from Bucky's sternum to his bellybutton, a slow, subtle trail.
Bucky covers his eyes so all Steve can see is his smile and the way his throat bobs when he swallows.

He can't get enough. He drinks Bucky in like a *drug*, every detail, every little meaningless deed. The way one side of his smile is higher than the other; the fine hair on his arms; the mess on his stomach, drying and tacky and glistening in the lines that define his abs; the way his knee sways back and forth; the T-shirt bunched up under his armpits.

"I don't giggle," Bucky repeats. Then he uncovers one eye to look at Steve. The tip of his tongue peeks between his teeth. Steve wants to kiss it. He wants to kiss it all.

"Okay," he whispers. "You don't giggle." He kisses Bucky's elbow, which is the nearest thing within reach.

It must tickle, because a noise escapes Bucky's lips. A noise that is absolutely a giggle. "Shut up," he says before Steve can even open his mouth.

"Not a word."

Chapter End Notes

1) yoooooooooooooo
2) i'm so sorry this chapter took so long. but i'm also not sorry, because i was pretty nice, i think.
3) for those who don't know, i'm a professional orchestral musician. tonight i played a rad concert that was 100% music from superhero movies. (cap was the finale before intermission.)
4) thank you for your support and your kudos and the COMMENTS. they are all so kind. i can't wait to hear what you think about this roller coaster!
Love Letters

Chapter Summary

Bucky still doesn't want any pity; but he doesn't smile so much, now. Steve would rather not think about why that is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky and Steve catch their breath together, afterwards. Bucky's face and his stomach and chest flush the fresh rose of tree fruit. Steve basks in it. He is stunning, and Steve feels so grateful to him, and so grateful for him, and so angry.

News articles, ESPN specials, Heismans, Championships, everyone in the country showering Steve Rogers with everything they can get their hands on—they are the same people who go out of their way to demonize Bucky, and try to use Steve against him.

Steve lays next to him now, next to thunder, the full-bodied tremor of it clutching at his bones, and he is just baffled. How dare they. How dare they stake a claim on Steve's success when Bucky was the one who believed in him first. How dare they give Steve all the credit when Bucky was the one who made him.

Bucky is stunning, he thinks again; the whole thing is stunning, and Steve is so lucky, to have that person beside him again. He reaches up to stroke Bucky's jaw, and rests a forefinger in the dimple of Bucky's chin. "So, that happened," he says tentatively. Smooth. "Hmm."

"How you doing?"

"I'm alright," Bucky says. Or that's what Steve thinks he says. It all comes out in one mumbled syllable.

"Just 'alright'?" Steve teases, and wonders if he ought to feel anxious or insulted.

Bucky tilts his head to peer at Steve through one eye. "Not all of us just won the National Championship."

Oh, yeah. That.

Steve leans in close and nudges the hem of Bucky's shirt with his nose. He presses his mouth to the skin there and breathes in the scents of musk and sweat and the latent spice of body wash.

"You want the trophy?" he whispers.

Bucky takes a long time to answer. Finally: "What."

"I'll give it to you," Steve says, tattooing the words over Bucky's ribs with his lips. "It's yours. You can have it. You can have everything."
"Sure."

"You can have it. I don't care about it."

Bucky wraps a hand around the back of Steve's head. Steve can feel his fingers ruffling the little hairs at the nape of his neck. "Yes," Bucky says softly. "You do."

It's true. God help him, he does care. He has cared about that trophy since he could hold a football in one hand. But the thing is, he's cared about Bucky Barnes for even longer than that. He cares about both. He cares too much.

Steve spreads his palm over Bucky's stomach, covering as much skin as he can reach, which is a lot. He has an athlete's hands. Big and steady and calloused in places, but sensitive. An athlete's heart.

"How's the ribs," he whispers against Bucky's skin.

"Still broken."

"How's your head?"

"Physically or emotionally."

"Physically," Steve says, because sometimes you have to pick your battles.

"Still attached."

"Yeah?" Steve wants to know, though. "How do you feel? Good or bad?"

"Little of both," he says, then re-evaluates: "Lot of both."

Tears sting hot behind Steve's eyes. He hides his face against Bucky's chest. "How can we make it good?" he pleads. "What can I do?"

He takes a minute to gather himself before looking up at Bucky. A ghost of a smile haunts his features, but doesn't really shine through. Steve can still see that smile in his memory. His heart aches for it.

Bucky says, "I don't know." His fingers trace a design on the back of Steve's skull.

"I don't want you to hurt anymore," Steve says.

"I'm used to it," Bucky says, his words brittle and earthy, like russet potpourri. "This is what it is, you know? It's not something you snap your fingers and suddenly I'm better. It's not my job to complain or daydream about greener fucking grass. I just gotta … make it through the day."

Maybe they're not just talking about Bucky's physical well-being, after all.

"It's not fair," Steve whispers, and he knows he's being childish and stubborn.

"This is what I have to work with. So I work with it."

Bucky never liked when people worried about him. He always shrugged it off. Steve can still remember that night, years ago, homecoming, the newspaper article that Steve saved for Bucky and that Bucky saved for Steve. He can remember Bucky lying on the grass and smiling through the pain just so Steve wouldn't worry about him.
Bucky still doesn't want any pity; but he doesn't smile so much, now. Steve would rather not think about why that is.

_This is what I have to work with. So I work with it._

"We," Steve says, correcting him.

"…What."

"We work with it. Together," Steve promises. "I told you, I'm not going anywhere." He strokes Bucky's stomach, noticing one side—the side with the broken ribs—is warmer and tighter. He kisses the pink skin there. "Playing injured is stupid."

Bucky chuckles, making his stomach jump under Steve's lips. "You're telling me."

Steve reaches around to grab the hand towel, the one that had been wrapped around the ice pack. He hands it to Bucky so he can clean himself up. A little, anyway. Propping himself on one elbow, Steve watches Bucky's face as he wipes off his stomach and fixes the hem of his shirt.

Bucky's eyelids are starting to droop.

Steve brushes the back of his finger against Bucky's temple. "Are you good?"

"Mm," Bucky answers. Or doesn't answer. He looks a little woozy, to be honest. Then, "Are you good?"

"I'm good," Steve assures him. "You're the one who got hurt."

"Nah."

Steve tries to keep his voice light, even though the words are heavy. "Bucky, you seemed pretty out of it after the game."

"Yeah. Long day." He tries to smile, but can't hide the tired redness in his eyes. He blinks again, slow again, and his face hardens with an earnestly he doesn't often show. "I meant it, Steve. I … I promise. I maybe lost control of my filter, but I meant every word, okay?"

"I know, I know you did," Steve tells him. "It's just—is it the drugs they give you?"

"What do you mean."

"Do they … knock you out?" Steve tries the same phrase that Eli had used earlier. "They make you drowsy or anything?"

"Oh," he says. "No." And that's it. He closes his eyes, and Steve half-expects him to drift off until, after several seconds, he elaborates: "They're wearing off."

"Damn." God, if that doesn't hurt Steve just to think about it. "What—maybe I shouldn't ask, but I just—what kind of drugs are they?"

Bucky opens his eyes again and studies the ceiling. "Some kind of steroid. And painkillers and uppers, I think. It's some fancy thing … doesn't show up on tests. I dunno, I have—I have the info on a form s-somewhere. But. Yeah."

"They never explained it to you?"
"Not like I could say no."

Jesus shit.

"Buck?"

Bucky blinks slowly. A tear slips from the corner of his eye, and Steve catches it with his knuckle. "So I know Eli's a little crazy," Steve begins, "but I was thinking. Maybe you could come down to our place. Maybe you could let our staff check you out?"

"We got doctors."

"I know, but—but our guys—they took care of me, you know? They took really good care of me, and we have concussion specialists, and I just—I don't know." *I wouldn't trust the Southeast staff with a healthy Labrador retriever, let alone the man who just came all over my bedsheets, let alone my oldest and best friend.* "Another opinion wouldn't hurt," Steve finishes lamely.

For some reason that makes Bucky smile, even through more tears. "Yeah," he chuckles. "I'm already as hurt as it gets."

Then he starts to cry harder and, bizarrely, he laughs. Steve has no idea what to do. His throat crunches; he feels like he walked in half-way through a movie and missed all the important scenes leading up to this moment. Except he was here the whole time.

"Fuck," Bucky sobs. He digs the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Fuck, fuck."

"Bucky, what—?"

"This is the most embarrassing night of my life."

"Embarrassing? It—what? That was … that was … nothing to be embarrassed about. Like … the opposite." The air rushes out of Steve's lungs in a desperate laugh.

Bucky scrubs his face, which is bright red, but he's still grinning, so Steve just kind of stares at him like the open-mouthed love-struck idiot he is.

"Totally embarrassing," Bucky confirms.

"Why?"

"Are you kidding?" Bucky raises his eyebrows. "I just snapped my arm off, concussed myself, lost the National Championship game—to a team we *already beat*, remember—and barely made it through a sloppy ten-second hand job before crying on my crush's shoulder." His eyes widen, and then he covers them with his hands again. "Shitting fuck. My 'crush.' How fucking old am I, *twelve*? See what I mean?"

But Steve started chuckling somewhere around "sloppy hand job" and now he's laughing his ass off.

"Oh god," Bucky groans. "You're a punk."

He rolls over to leave, and Steve panics.

"No, I'm sorry," Steve says quickly. "I won't laugh, come on, Buck—" He grabs Bucky around the waist to keep him still.

"Ow!"
"Fuck! I'm sorry!"

Bucky is cackling now, too, face shining with half-dried tear-tracks. He flops back onto the mattress, clutching his side, and gives Steve a playful smack with the back of his hand. "I'm not going anywhere, asshole. I gotta pee."

Steve takes a deep breath. His cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. "You're okay though, right?"

"Dude, I played an entire football game tonight, and that hug is what you're worried about?"

"You calling me weak?"

Bucky pushes himself off the bed with a grimace. "You're a fucking quarterback, hell yeah I'm calling you weak."

He walks stiffly to the bathroom, and Steve stares after him, smiling. He can't tear his eyes away.

"I would throw a pillow at you," Steve says, "but I'm afraid you might snap in half."

"I'm terrified," Bucky says drily before shutting the bathroom door with a soft click.

Steve settles at the head of the bed on the pile of pillows and reaches for his phone. He's got about fifty text messages and the game ended like two hours ago, tops. Some of them might even be from people he knows, but damn. Who has the energy. He does open his messages, though, just to scan them for his teammates' names. All he finds is Sam Wilson's string of increasingly incoherent sexual innuendos. He's considering whether or not to respond when Bucky collapses next to him, shoulder-to-shoulder, and lets his knee fall across Steve's thighs.

"Oh, you're that guy," Bucky says in that early-morning foothills-thunder voice of his. "One good fuck and then you just roll over and start texting."

Steve grins at him. He takes in Bucky's features now, up close: the way he chews the inside of his lip, and the way his totally inappropriate eyelashes leave shadows on his cheekbones. "'Good fuck'?

Steve teases. "I thought you said I was sloppy."

"Oh, it was a team effort."

"We can practice?"

"Mm-hmm," Bucky says, tipping his head back into the pillows to smile at the ceiling. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. His chest expands, rising and falling under the long stretch of his throat. He looks beat to hell. Beautiful, but beat to hell.

"Not tonight, though," Steve says gently. "We got time."

Bucky hums again.

"Hey Buck, I got one question."

"'Sup."

"How did you know which room was mine?"

Bucky snorts. "I asked."

"Like at the front desk?"
"Yup," he says, shrugging his good shoulder. "Guess the clerk isn't a football fan. Told him I was Steve Rogers and he handed me a room key, no questions."

"That's ... creepy."

"I'm very creepy." Bucky's voice is getting deeper and cracking around the edges. He twitches and stirs a little. Lifts his head and rubs his eyes. "Shit, I'm about to pass out. I should go."

"You don't have to."

"Yeah." He bumps Steve's thigh with his knee. "Our buses leave for the airport in the morning."

Steve sighs. "Will you at least rest awhile? I can wake you up in a couple hours."

Bucky stares at him for a long time without answering. He looks expressionless. Thoughtful, if anything. His eyes flick to Steve's lips, just for a second, before he leans in to kiss them.

Bucky kisses Steve.

And it's so good, such a privilege, like when you are lying in unmowed grass and a butterfly lands right on the back of your hand. It doesn't last long. Bucky pulls away—just a fraction—and then back in for another brief kiss, like punctuation. His face scrunches and his cheeks flush and he drops his forehead onto Steve's shoulder.

"Wow, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Steve agrees. He does know.

Eventually, Bucky falls asleep with his head on Steve's shoulder. Steve tries to sleep, but mostly dozes, nose full of whatever fresh-scented frat-boy shampoo Bucky uses, eyes full of tears, heart full of a steady rainpatter.

He wakes Bucky up before sunrise. Steve uses the bathroom to piss and scrub off his face, and when he comes back to the room, Bucky has his jacket on, his bag slung over one shoulder.

Bucky bites his bottom lip. "What are you staring at."

"You."

"Gonna turn into a sappy rom-com now."

"Yeah," Steve says. "Definitely. You're gonna take the elevator down to the lobby and ride that team bus to the airport, and I'm gonna have to chase you down and kiss you in the terminal while an orchestra plays in the background."

"Mm. I think I've seen that one."

"It's good, right?"

Bucky smiles at the carpet. "How 'bout you just kiss me here, instead."

Steve steps closer and slips his arms around Bucky's waist. "I can do that."

He does.

And it's hard to let Bucky go, after, but he does that, too.
Eli Bradley comes back to the room before breakfast, and he finds Steve conked out face-down on top of a still-made bed.

"Long night?" he asks, wagging his eyebrows.

Steve chucks a pillow at him, which Eli catches neatly. "Shut up," Steve says lazily, "I know you left the girls in Illinois. What were you and Kate up to all night?"

"I do not kiss and tell, Captain Rogers," Eli scolds as he continues to pack up his gear. Steve is still rubbing sleep out of his eyes when Eli speaks up again. "What's this?" He holds up an unmarked manila folder.

Steve frowns. "Dunno."

Eli considers it for a moment, then tosses it onto the bed near Steve's feet. "Could be Sam's or Isaiah's, want me to text them?"

"I think it's Bucky's," Steve says slowly as he opens the top flap of the envelope and peeks inside. There's a small stack of papers there, and the first thing he sees is the Southeast State logo. He only has to read the first one to realize what he's holding.

Emails. A few dozen of them. Printed out on official Southeast State stationery, timestamped and sent between the personal accounts of James Barnes, Alexander Pierce, and Brock Rumlow, among others. Steve swallows and gathers himself to read the details. His hands shake as he flips through the pages. Almost fifty illegal bounties over the last two seasons, specific rewards, and in some cases, threats against noncompliance. Steve can feel the blood pounding around his jaw. He stares at the numbers—five thousand, six thousand, more—and at the punishments. Portions of financial aid revoked. Dosages altered. Playing time augmented or taken away. Steve sees his own name as he's shuffling papers—twice. Montee Ball, Scott Summers, Sam Wilson, Isaiah Bradley, Peter Parker.

At the bottom of the stack, Steve finds an exclamation point: The treatment forms from Bucky's training staff, the ones he mentioned with drug names and combinations. Vague descriptions of the medications he takes on game days. Prescriptions from a doctor named Arnim Zola. Steve covers his mouth with one hand.

Eli has stopped moving around in the background. "Love letters?" he asks with a wary smile.

"No," Steve whispers. He shakes his head and, very deliberately, slides the stack of papers back in the manila folder. He gazes at it, then glances up at Eli. "Ammunition."

---

**Steve Rogers**

*How soon can you come*

**Bucky**

*i usually like a little foreplay first*

**Steve Rogers**

*OK THAT can be arranged if you COME VISIT*

**Bucky**

*this weekend?*
Steve Rogers
Yes!

Bucky
got a date right?

Steve Rogers
What?

Bucky
with ur doctors right

Steve Rogers
YES I'll set it up asap

The late Friday afternoon sings in orange and bronze, and Steve spends it waiting for Bucky to arrive. His appointment with the ASU staff is scheduled for Saturday, but Steve somehow convinced him to visit a day early.

So it's nearing dinner time on Friday, and Clint and Natasha are in the middle of an intense Call of Duty match-up, and Steve watches them with mild interest. It's not that exciting, but neither is combing through his junk mail to weed out the good sports agents from the bad—which is why Steve still has his computer open in his lap, even though it fell asleep about ten minutes ago.

On the TV screen, Clint turns a corner and promptly eats a shotgun shell. While his character regenerates, he grabs the back of the couch, pulls himself up, and peeks out the front window.

"Nat, did you get a new car?"

"Stop trying to distract me," she says absently, attention on a sniper in the corner of her screen. "We drove here together."

Steve chuckles. He and Natasha exchange a smirk over the screen of his laptop.

"No, look …" Clint doesn't even notice when his character gets mercilessly slaughtered again. "Who drives the wicked Chevy?"

Nat rolls her eyes. "Ice has had that Camaro for a year and a half, were you really not paying attention?"

"Dude, seriously. I thought I was the deaf one," Clint says.

His genuine concern finally draws Steve's attention. He closes his laptop and leans over for a better view of the driveway.

Clint is still babbling. "… a beautiful piece of machinery. What I would give—I think I'm actually getting turned on right now, is that a Stingray?"

At that point, Steve is already in the front hall. He throws the front door open.

"Bucky!"

"Thanks for not making me knock. Knocking on your friend's door is weird. Right?"
"Come inside, jerk."

The corner of Bucky's mouth curls in an almost-smile.

He looks incredible, which is to say he looks the way he always looks: layers of black, cotton and fleece, with a Southeast State baseball cap. Steve is frozen in place. He's not sure if they're allowed to hug, or kiss, or if they should fucking shake hands. This, he thinks, has been one of his biggest fears: whatever happens after you reconnect with your best friend from high school and then kiss once or twice and maybe he gives you a black eye before jerking you off in a fancy hotel room … what. What then.

Shit.

"So this is the place," Bucky says, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt and chewing the inside of his lip.

Steve has a fleeting memory of Sam visiting for the first time. He wasn't good at giving tours then, either.

"Yeah," he says, "You want to, um? The living room is right here." He waves around the corner. Bucky doesn't move, so Steve takes a deep breath and leads the way.

"So this is Clint Barton. Clint, this is Bucky. Or—I mean—"

"Why is James Barnes in our living room?" Clint interrupts. The look on Natasha's face suggests she might have chosen harsher wording.

Steve's stomach falls. "This—he's not—at the game, the championship, after … we made up."

Natasha's eyebrows shoot up to her hairline.

"It's fine, we're ... friends," Steve says.

Natasha glares at them for another few seconds before rounding on Clint and unleashing an avalanche of angry Russian. Clint responds, and they argue for a few moments while Steve gawps at them, mouth hanging open. Eventually, the two of them must reach an impasse. Natasha folds her arms again and turns to glower at Steve.

That's when Bucky speaks up. "Um." He looks at Natasha. "What do you mean, you saw me hit Steve?"

Natasha's eyes go perfectly round. It's honestly one of the most satisfying moments of Steve's life. He's never seen Natasha Romanoff surprised—he's never seen her show any emotion stronger than skepticism, really—and this? This is utter shock on her face, right now.

She recovers quickly, of course. "Вы говорите по-русски?" she demands.

Bucky responds in Russian. Somehow it sounds extra foreign coming out of Bucky Barnes' mouth.

And just like that, Natasha and Bucky are carrying on a swift Russian dialogue, which looks friendly but also vaguely threatening.

"Should I be jealous?" Clint asks airily.

"That's what I was about to say," Steve agrees.
Five minutes later, they're both only half-joking.

Steve is about to ask Clint if he'd like to go a round on the Xbox, since Bucky and Nat seem engrossed in one another, when Natasha suddenly whirls to face her boyfriend and plants her hands on her hips.

"He's cool," she declares.

"What?" the three of them all say at once.

"He's cool," she repeats, addressing Clint.

"He punched Steve in the face," Clint points out.

Natasha tosses her hair back and curls back onto the couch, holding out an Xbox-controller for Clint. "He's a sniper. We need a sniper." She looks at Bucky, and one side of her face lifts in an expression Steve has come to recognize as amusement.

Bucky's face is burning up.

That's when the rest of Steve's roommates burst through the front door, with Sam Wilson in tow.

"Yo, look who it is!"

"How's the shoulder, man?"

"So you're going out with us tonight, right?"

"No, it's cool, we weren't in the middle of a game, or anything."

Isaiah is the only one who doesn't offer any input. He hovers in the doorway over Steve's shoulder through the cacophony of introductions.

Steve glances at Bucky. His shoulders are hunched and there's more white than blue to his eyes, but he's also biting down on a smile. He looks back at Steve and raises his eyebrows. "You didn't tell me we were going out."

"You found out the same time I did." Steve holds up both hands innocently.

"So, Bucky," Sam interrupts loudly as he falls onto the couch beside Clint. "I feel like we're friends, at this point. You know. Buddies."

Bucky doesn't speak, but he fixes his gaze on Sam. His face settles into its natural, hungry-bird-of-prey look.

Steve is still getting used to the intensity of Bucky's gaze.

Sam, however, doesn't seem fazed. "So, since we're buddies, I think it's okay for me to ask …"

And he hesitates, just long enough to make Steve squirm.

"I'm flattered, Wilson," Bucky offers, breaking the awkwardness. "But you're not my type."

There is a beat of dumbfounded silence, and then Clint explodes with laughter. After a split-second of shock, everyone else joins in. Steve glances over his shoulder and—Isaiah has disappeared. Steve shoots Eli a questioning look, but Eli waves him off.
"Okay!" Sam says breathlessly, drawing everyone's attention again. "Oh my God. I asked for that. Okay, what I wanted to ask is—what kind of a name is Bucky?"

Steve bites his lip.

"Oh." Bucky nods, as if he had expected this. "My middle name is Buchanan."

Narrowing his eyes, Clint glances at Steve, then back at Bucky. "So it's short for Buchanan?"

"Yeah."

"Right." Sam relaxes back onto the couch. When he speaks, it's quiet, introverted, as if thinking out loud. "James Buchanan Barnes."

Bucky's eyes find Steve's. It's just a split second, but Steve feels it in his gut, like a gust of wind slamming a screen door.

"Your name is James Buchanan … Barnes," Natasha adds.

"Yeah."

"Are you named after James Buchanan?" Sam asks.

The silence that follows is almost long enough for Steve to step in and answer himself.

"No," Bucky says, finally. "They're both family names."

"And you just happen to be called James Buchanan."

Even from six feet away, Steve can feel Bucky bristle. "You got a problem with U.S. presidents or something."

"Nah, it's just funny."

"Yeah, you're welcome for the Civil War," Bucky says. "He was a real winner."

"Also super gay," Sam points out. "… You know? James Buchanan w—"

"Yeah, thanks, no one has ever pointed that out to me before," Bucky says, rolling his uninjured shoulder.

Sam blinks. "So that's just a cute coincidence?"

"Jesus Christ, who is this guy."

"True freshman," Steve says apologetically.

"Well, fuck, maybe he should get practicing and get his head out of the freshman history books."

Steve's eyes widen. For a split second, he thinks Bucky might actually be serious.

"I don't think they put that kind of stuff in history books," Eli says, trying to lighten the mood.

Sam takes a different tactic. "You know, Bucks, I could take you down the block to look at my trophy if you want?" he says with a shit-eating grin.

"Is that a pick-up line," Bucky says, and somehow manages to sound both menacing and suggestive.
"You want it to be?"

Sam howls with laughter, and Bucky finally cracks a smile, too. The rest of the people in the room blink at each other, absolutely mystified.

Bucky sinks onto their old herringbone armchair and leans toward Sam with a conspiratorial smirk. "You know, Steve's middle name is Grant," he says.

"... Like Ulysses?" Sam asks.

"Just saying."

"Damn, Rogers," Sam grins at him. "I wish your first name was Ulysses."

Steve pulls a face. "I'm really glad it's not, actually."

"Wait, what does the S stand for?" Eli asks, perking up. "Ulysses S. Grant?"

Steve winces. "Hopefully not Steven."

"It's nothing," Bucky cuts in.

They all stare at him, and he hunches his shoulders a little, but goes on. "His real name was Hiram Ulysses Grant."

"Are you trying to confuse me?" Clint asks.

"Это не сложно," Natasha says.

Bucky laughs out loud.

"Hilarious," Clint says drily. He leans forward to snag the remote off the coffee table. "I guess this means no more Call of Duty," he says, and changes the channel while the rest of them bicker.

"So why did Ulysses S. Grant change his name?" Steve asks, because he is actually interested.

Bucky shrugs. "He didn't. It was a typo on some paperwork."

"And he just rolled with it," Sam laughs. "Sounds like my kind of guy."

"Yeah." Bucky leans back and looks at his lap. "So his fake initials were U.S.—like United States—or Uncle Sam—so it stuck."

Steve toes at their old wood floor. "Makes you wonder," he says. "Would people have liked him as much without all that? The symbolism, the Uncle Sam shit?"

"He was a good leader," Bucky says, glancing up.

Clint flicks through TV channels. "Gotta be, with a name like Ulysses."

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve can see Bucky's lips quirk in a small half-smile.

"So how'd you get arrested?"

"Oh my god, Sam!" Steve scolds.

"Which time?" Bucky asks slyly.
"How many times are there?!!" Sam exclaims.

"Uh, guys?" Clint says hesitantly. "I can't hear a thing, but this looks like something you might want to see." He sits up and gestures toward the TV screen.

Steve takes a step back so Eli and Bucky have a better view. Clint has found one of the many ESPN channels cable has to offer. The news anchor, her hair curled and her dress starched, gives a solemn report. Beside her, the studio has superimposed the subject: a photo of Steve and Bucky together in downtown Chicago.

Suddenly, weirdly, Steve can feel the precise way all of his internal organs work. And don't work.

"Turn it up," Natasha demands, her voice strange and hoarse.

No, don't, don't, please not that, don't—

They catch the reporter half-way through the story. "… clearly shows evidence of a relationship going back several weeks, even before facing one another in the National Championship Game."

The photo beside her changes every few seconds, a damning slideshow of their first Starbucks rendezvous. Steve recognizes Bucky's smoothie and the steely clouds of mid-day. (It's a small blessing to know their Christmas Eve kiss is nowhere to be seen.) "The public appearance of these photographs prompted further investigation, which led to the surprising news that Steve Rogers of American State and James Barnes of Southeast State both attended the same high school for some years." The photo dissolves into a grainy screenshot of one of their team pictures.

"Aw, that's just mean," Sam says, his voice pointedly light. "Digging up old prom pics."

No one laughs.

"While it's not unheard of for opponents to be friends, it's unusual for it to be so secret for so long. And it's certainly unusual for close friends to face each other at a National Championship level. Several news outlets across the country are already asking the most obvious question—Was there any sabotage involved?"

"Sabotage?" Sam asks.

"Oh, what bullshit," Natasha spits.

Steve's heart thuds to a stop. He turns to face Bucky. His face is ashen, and he has a tight grip on his left elbow, in a sort of half-aborted self-hug. Steve is about to say something when Bucky's eyes—still fixed on the television—suddenly go round and his mouth falls open.

Steve spins around and sees Alexander Pierce onscreen, looking dapper in a silver suit and standing at a rich, dark wooden lectern. He speaks calmly into half a dozen microphones.

"At no time did Southeast State University have any knowledge of a relationship between Steve Rogers and our own James Barnes. We are as shocked and disturbed by this news as anyone. The fact that the relationship goes as far back as high school years, perhaps further—not to mention the clear familiarity between the two men—is especially unnerving." He bows his head, apparently deeply troubled. "We as an organization have no choice but to analyze this from an objective point of view."

"Oh, no," Eli mutters.

"The fact is, we defeated Steve Rogers and American State quite handily in November."
"Handily?!" Clint protests.

"The fact is, our defense was comparatively lackluster in Arizona during the Championship Game. The fact is, Barnes had fewer tackles and more penalties in that game, despite playing more minutes."

"His arm wasn't attached!" Steve snaps.

Pierce continues, "The fact is, recent photos suggest a close relationship with Rogers dating back to a month before the rematch. We have no choice but to suspect unsavory conduct. We are saddened, of course, but our priority must lie with the whole fleet—not with an individual ship. Certainly not one that has veered so drastically off course."

"Ship? He's a fucking person, you piece of—"

"What the fuck is he trying to say?"

"Um, guys?"

"What?"

Everyone turns to face Clint, whose face is screwed up in confusion. "Where's Barnes?"

Chapter End Notes

i keep forgetting to mention, i can be found on tumblr at queenmabscherzo.
Fear electrifies all of Steve's systems. He scrambles to the foyer, but the front door is still latched and a glance out the window shows Bucky's car safe and sound in the driveway. He's not sure where Bucky would go, though—so he just darts from room to room. He'll catch up eventually, right?

Nothing in the dining room; Eli's bedroom door is shut; nothing in the bathroom. Steve skids to a halt outside the kitchen when he hears someone speak.

"It's fucked up, you hear me?!"

_Isaiah._

Because that's exactly what they need, right now: Bucky Barnes and Isaiah Bradley throwing down in the middle of their kitchen. Steve's about to leap into the room when he hears Bucky respond. Steve stops short outside the doorway.

"He's lying."

"What do you mean?" Ice asks.

"Pierce. He's lying. He found out about us weeks ago. He's just playing the media."

"… Your coach knew about you and Steve?"

"Not—I mean, he knew we were friends. He knew about us meeting up."

"When? How?"

"After Steve, um," Bucky clears his throat, "after Steve ran his mouth to the press, you know? Blew the lid on the injury report?"

"Yeah."

Steve doesn't mean to eavesdrop, but his feet are frozen in place right outside the door. His knees feel weak. All he can do is listen.

"Pierce was so pissed. It was ugly," Bucky says with a humorless laugh. "The only people who knew about the injuries were me and Pierce and the doctors. So the only way Steve could've known, was, you know. I had to tell him." He pauses again, and adds, at a whisper, "Pierce was real pissed."

"He can't just blame you for everything," Isaiah points out.

"He's always been a jackass."

"No shit."

"It's my fault anyway," Bucky adds, more softly. "I shouldn't …" he laughs. "Well. Pierce has a right to be mad. After everything he did for me."

"Nah, man," Ice says sharply. "He recruited you, and you broke every bone in your body for him."
You don't owe him shit."

Steve agrees. He can't keep quiet anymore. Gathering himself, he turns the corner into the kitchen and almost trips on his own feet. Bucky is leaning with his back to the kitchen sink, fingers curled around its lip, knuckles as white as the old porcelain. Isaiah sits perched on the counter next to him.

It shouldn't surprise Steve—deep down, Ice is one of the warmest and most helpful people Steve knows, despite the nickname—betting foot rubs and back massages was his idea, after all—but still, it's surreal seeing the two of them crashing together in the middle of Steve's kitchen.

This is where they're at, now.

"Bucky?" Steve says carefully. "You disappeared, we—are you okay?"

Bucky nods.

"No you're not," Isaiah gives Bucky's shoulder a good shake before hopping off the counter. "Sorry about the shit rap."

Bucky smiles and hangs his head. "I asked for it."

"What are you going to do now?" Steve asks, because he's scared and stressed and he feels like the only one who's still freaking out about this. His bones feel like they've been laced up too tight. Two minutes ago, he thought Bucky had run away—what's going on. "What are you going to do when you go back to Winter Station?" He doesn't add, what are they going to do to you?

Bucky slides his hands into his pockets. "I don't have to go back," he says without looking up from his shoes. "My eligibility's up, and I'm not really close to a degree. I could go to Florida or something."

Steve steadies himself with a hand on the counter. He feels like the channels are changing too fast for him to keep up. "... Florida?"

"Training camps, Steve," Ice steps in, as if Steve forgot his basic multiplication tables. "For the combine? Set you up with agents and shit."

Bucky nods.

"Agents?"

"Rogers, are y'all serious with me right now." Ice hasn't looked this exasperated since the last time Eli stole his last frozen pizza.

Steve rubs his eyes and tries to clear his head. He knows what they're talking about, once he figures out what page they're on.

When a player enters the NFL draft, it's not uncommon for him to leave campus to train. There are all kinds of facilities in Florida and California—warm climates—where trainers round up prospects and get them working on diets and regimens to prep them for the NFL. It's something Steve has been putting off, because—well, he hasn't found an agent he trusts, first of all; and he hasn't talked about the draft, second of all. Technically, he could spend another year at ASU ... but after winning the Heisman and the National Championship, his stock couldn't possibly get higher. It's a terrifying thought.

Hence the procrastination.
He studies Isaiah's face before asking, "You're entering the draft?"

"Yeah," he nods, licking his lips. "Done deal. I'm putting my mama in a good hospital, you hear me?"

Honestly, the world doesn't deserve Isaiah Bradley.

Steve's eyes slide over to Bucky.

"Don't look at me," he mutters. "I don't have a choice."

"You—well." Steve cuts himself short. You don't have to play football at all, he wants to say; but that's a big ship and it hasn't even weighed anchor, yet. He's considering whether or not to bring it up in front of Isaiah when another voice interrupts.

"So, we don't have to call missing persons?"

Steve spins around to find Eli standing in the doorway, smiling, with one eyebrow raised.

"Damn, all y'all worry so much," Bucky grumbles.

Ice manages to stifle a laugh without cracking a smile.

"Did you know your brother's going to the NFL?" Steve demands.

"Yeah," Eli shrugs. "You didn't?"

"No!"

"It happened like eight hours ago!" Ice says desperately.

Eli crosses the room to open the fridge. He pulls out a can of Dr. Pepper, pops the tab, and takes a long drink.

Isaiah glowers. "That's my coke, Elijah."

"I'll owe you."

"You already owe me."

Steve and Bucky make eye contact, raising their eyebrows at each other.

"What about you, Eli?" Steve says smoothly, hoping to stave off a Bradley Brother Beatdown. "Are you entering the draft, too?"

Eli makes a face. "I mean, if someone wants to sign me, I wouldn't say no. But I don't think nobody's looking for career back-ups to add to their roster."

"Elijah got his own gig lined up," Ice adds, his irritation dissolving into fondness.

"Really?" Steve asks.

Eli's cheeks darken and he smiles at the floor. "Fury said I could stay on staff."

"On American State staff?!" Steve exclaims.

"He's gonna let me work with Banner and McCoy."
Steve rounds on Eli and wraps him up in a hug.

"Steve-oh-my-god-I'm-gonna-spill," Eli sputters, like it's all one word.

"I don't care."

"I care," Ice grumbles. "I paid for that coke."

Eli gingerly pats Steve on the back. "It ain't the Dallas Cowboys, or nothing."

"Thank god," Bucky says in a low voice. "Fuck the Cowboys."

Everyone laughs, half-amused and half-surprised, while Steve releases Eli. "Do you know what you'll be doing, exactly?" he asks, folding his arms across his chest.

"I'm an intern for now," he explains. "Still in the athletic training thing. I'll probably just spend the season wiping sweat off Sam Wilson's face, but still."

"No way," Steve laughs. "You're too good. You want to get into the medical stuff?"

"Not sure," says Eli. "I wanna try the sideline thing. Crisis management, or whatever. Like, I'll work with the people who fix back spasms on the fly and stuff," he clarifies, using Sam Wilson as an example again. "Other things, too—I guess they have doctors who test for head trauma on the sidelines, now, so there's a lot of demand for that. But I could also do the physical therapy thing. Did you know they have GPS trackers for players? Not in a creepy way, just to monitor them during practice, y'know? And see if they're faster or slower than normal, stuff like that."

The more he talks, the more Eli starts waving his hands, getting into it, chattering about all the possibilities. Bucky is watching him closely. His eyes are narrowed, as expressionless and as sharp as a laser, the same way he looked while he was studying Picasso's *Old Guitarist* at the Art Institute.

Eli explains the intricate details of the athletic training trade, making less and less sense the longer he talks. Finally, he stops for a breath and points at Bucky with his Dr. Pepper. "You doin' the NFL thing, right?"

Bucky nods.

"You think you'll be able to do the Combine with … the arm, and all?" Eli asks.

Bucky shrugs. "I dunno. I'll find a trainer. Work out in Florida or something."

"You should stay here," Eli says, then takes another swig of soda. As if it's the simplest thing in the world. "You know, until you figure things out."

Steve's stomach clenches. He looks at Bucky, who is nodding slowly and *somehow* doesn't show any emotion at all beyond mild interest at the thought of living with Steve in Illinois. Ice, on the other hand, tenses visibly.

"Um—dinner?" Ice says, voice as stiff as his shoulders. "Anyone else hungry?"

"Starving," Eli says, heading back to the living room. "Pizza? D'you think three is enough?"

Ice gives him a skeptical look. "No chance." He follows his brother out of the kitchen, snatching the pop can right out of his hand before disappearing to the front of the house. Steve can hear them arguing, and then the low murmur of voices as they coordinate pizza delivery with Clint, Sam, and Natasha.

Bucky chuckles, but he doesn't look at Steve. He shifts back and forth from one foot to the other. "I dunno," he says. "There's … a lot to think about. You know."

"Not for me," Steve inches closer. "You can stay as long as you want. It's up to you."

Bucky's eyes are shining and restless, and he's blinking fast. He sways on the spot, and chews the inside of his lip, and lolls his head to gaze out the kitchen window. "I still don't know what the fuck is going on," he whispers.

"Yeah, this is pretty messed up," Steve says gently. He thinks of the candid photos of the two of them, no doubt burning through the internet like wildfire. He thinks of Alexander Pierce in his pristine suit at his pristine podium with his pristine speech, and his stomach churns. "Is it true?"

"What."

"Pierce knew about us the whole time." Steve doesn't phrase it as a question. He doesn't have to. Even if he hadn't overheard Bucky and Isaiah, he'd know it's true. It's gruesome in its inescapability.

Bucky sucks in a breath. "I don't think he knows about everything."

Steve takes another step forward. He tugs Bucky's hand out of his pocket to hold it between his own. "It's okay if he does."

"He suspected for … a long time," Bucky says. "Then when you told the press about my injuries, he—he knew for sure."

"And he wasn't happy about it."

Bucky doesn't say anything, just presses the toe of his shoe against Steve's socked foot.

"It was Pierce, wasn't it?"

Immediately, Bucky exhales a rush of air, as if he'd been trapped underwater to his last shred of oxygen.

"He's the one who hit you," Steve says, squeezing Bucky's hand.

"Um," Bucky rasps, "Officially, I walked into his elbow." His eyes remain fixed on the linoleum floor. On the small point of contact between their toes.

Gently, Steve removes Bucky's hat and slides it onto the counter. He eases into Bucky's personal space so he can kiss his forehead. He kisses Bucky's forehead, and his temple, and his eyebrow, and the bridge of his nose. He plants a row of kisses across Bucky's cheekbone. He kisses the corner of Bucky's mouth, and Bucky turns his head so that their lips meet. It's a soft, good thing.

Steve curls a hand around the back of Bucky's head and combs his fingers through his hair. He presses their foreheads together. "I'm really glad you're here," Steve says, even though he wants to say something else.

Bucky calls him a sap and tucks his face into the crook of Steve's shoulder.

"I'm gonna kick his ass," Steve says.
Bucky huffs a small laugh.

"I'm serious," Steve says truthfully. "Do you know his address? I'm gonna break his face."

Dinner is loud and messy, mostly thanks to Sam and Clint, who have decided to try five different flavors of pizza and provide a running commentary. ("I get the point of vegetarian pizza, but the Italian sausage would be so good with these peppers and onions," Sam says; "Oh, totally. It's a flavor profile thing," Clint agrees.)

ESPN plays in the background, but the TV is muted. It's a cautionary thing, like a security guard sitting in front of a bank of security footage while playing Candy Crush on his phone.

A handful of melodramatic sports analysts jump on Pierce's bandwagon. They take great joy in pointing out all of Bucky's flaws in the National Championship game. For the most part, however, the sports world seems to think the whole story is a Non-Story. Former college football stars come out of the woodwork to tell anecdotes about playing old high school teammates. Michael Wilbon asks, "If this was really an issue, no one would ever let Eli and Peyton play each other!"; Sage Steele stresses that "Barnes had nothing to do with Clint Barton's six field goals," and Michelle Beadle jokes that "the only person who looked like he was trying to lose that game was Steve Rogers—he barely had a hundred passing yards." (Steve appreciates the sentiment, if not the logic.)

So really, the only drama came straight from Alexander Pierce's mouth. SportsCenter replays his speech a few times, and every time, Sam Wilson comes up with another colorful adjective for "that jackass."

"What good does it do him, anyway?" Eli asks. "So Steve and Bucky are friends. Not like it's the first time friends have played each other. What does he think bitching is gonna solve?"

"Keeps his record clean," Natasha says, as if she's both disgusted and impressed by the cold logic of it. "He doesn't have to admit he lost if he uses James as a scapegoat."

"That's stupid," Clint summarizes.

While Steve and the Bradleys begin sweeping up pizza boxes, paper plates, and pop cans, Sam Wilson stretches across one side of the couch. Bucky pulls his duffel bag out from under Sam's feet with a scowl.

"If I fall asleep, don't draw nothing on my face," Sam says before closing his eyes.

"You can take that upstairs, if you want," Eli says lightly, gesturing toward Bucky's bag. "Steve's room is the farthest left, off the landing. You can't miss it, since Isaiah always keeps his door shut."

Ice fixes Steve with a satisfied smirk.

It takes about twenty minutes to clean everything up after feeding seven hungry athletes. When Steve finally makes it out of the kitchen, he finds Clint and Natasha back on the Xbox, Sam dozing off, Eli ducking into his room to call Kate, and Isaiah opening a bottle of beer. No Bucky.

Steve props his hands on his hips. Without opening his eyes, Sam Wilson says, "Your boy's still upstairs."

Steve blushes, but he's not too ashamed to head straight for the stairs, either.
There's no way to "sneak" anywhere in Steve's old nineteenth-century house, but he holds his breath and eases his bedroom door open as quietly as possible, in case Bucky is easily startled.

His caution turns out to be pointless, since Bucky is totally engrossed in something on Steve's bookshelf. Steve slips into the room for a better look and, sure enough, Bucky is flipping through his stack of old sketchbooks. Steve doesn't have anything to hide, so he takes the opportunity to stare. To reconcile this view, however they got here. To wrap his head around Bucky Barnes, the real thing, standing in his bedroom. Bucky has taken off his shoes and his sweatshirt, so his too-long sweatpants spill around his ankles, and Steve has a better view of those never-ending shoulders through his tight black T-shirt. Christ, Bucky's twice as big as he was in high school. Did he ever once leave a weight room in the last four years? Steve wants to take Bucky's shirt off again, maybe count those abs, maybe explore his back muscles, maybe trace the dimples of his spine until he has to peel back that waist band.

"Shouldn't be nosy," Bucky says without turning around.

Steve jumps at the gravelly sound of his voice. "What?" he asks stupidly.

"I was looking at your sketchbooks," Bucky says. He looks at Steve over his shoulder and smirks and not that Steve's guilty or anything but he feels like Bucky knows exactly where he was thinking about putting his tongue, just now.

Steve bites the inside of his cheek. "Sketchbooks."

"Yeah," Bucky says, holding one up. "I shouldn't be nosy … but I noticed most of them are empty."

"I don't really draw, anymore."

Bucky inspects the book in his hand. The first two pages are full of bad ear studies. The next forty-eight pages are blank. Bucky runs a fingernail along the spiral binding. The metallic pring cuts through the quiet of Steve's room.

"You used to draw a lot."

"I've changed since high school."

Bucky gives Steve a sharp, searching look before turning back to the bookcase. "Why did you stop."

"No time for it."

"That sucks." Bucky slides the sketchbook back to the top of the stack. "I like your room."

Steve glances at the mostly empty walls and tries to decide whether Bucky is being nice or sarcastic. Maybe both.

The only light comes from his single-bulb floor lamp. It casts a strange horizontal glow across the room. There's a New York Giants pennant over his bed and, incongruously, a Philadelphia Eagles calendar next to his desk, which Isaiah bought him as a joke and is still open to October of last year. He has generic navy blue bed sheets and enough pillows for a small army battalion, all in mismatched pillowcases. Instead of a comforter, a fleece blanket with the five-star ASU logo lies folded at the end of his bed. (He definitely did but won't admit to washing his bedclothes this morning. It's not optimism, it's called being a good host.) His most expensive piece of furniture is probably the sturdy little entertainment center nestled between the front windows; it was worth the money because it's got to hold the 42-inch Samsung he bought almost two years ago after winning the starting job at ASU.
So maybe Bucky is being serious. It's a decent-sized room (technically it's the master bedroom, or would be, had the house never been converted into apartments), and what it lacks in personality, it makes up for in football paraphernalia and video game options.

Steve says, "Thanks."

Without turning around, Bucky adds, "You need more stuff on the walls though."

"Fair enough." Steve studies the big blank interior walls and nods. He's not sure what to hang there, but he can come up with something. Maybe his friends will have ideas.

A drumming noise draws Steve's attention back to the other side of the room. Bucky is tapping on Steve's desk with a forefinger. Stepping forward for a closer look, Steve sees the manila folder—the one full of Southeast State documents—sitting on his desk all innocent and smoldering.

"You kept it," Bucky states.

"I did."

"You haven't showed anyone yet."

Steve takes a deep breath. It's true; he didn't even explain to Eli that morning in their hotel room. He's kept the envelope hidden and secret for a lot of reasons, not least of which because its contents terrify him.

Steve asks, "Did you want me to show anyone?"

Bucky traces a winding pattern with his finger, then flattens his palm to the envelope. "I figured you would," he says, which doesn't really answer the question Steve asked.

"Last time I told someone about your secrets, it turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes of my life."

Bucky scoffs.

"It's true," Steve counters. "I hurt you. I almost lost you."

Bucky's right hand drifts to the scar on his left elbow. He traces the puffy skin there with the pad of his thumb.

"After what your coach did," Steve begins, "trying to sabotage your whole career for one game. I mean—not to mention all this." He gestures loosely toward the manila folder. "The way he controlled you for two years, and manipulated you—"

"That's a little dramatic," Bucky says skeptically.

"It's not," Steve puts his foot down. "I read those emails, Buck. I'm not being dramatic. They twisted everything so you couldn't fight back. The bounties are one thing, but the threats—taking away scholarships, taking away playing time—you earned that, for crying out loud. And then drugging you—"

"It's Advil, not fucking morphine."

Steve doesn't point out that the dosages they pumped into Bucky on game days could probably kill a small child. He also doesn't point out the illegal cortisone steroids. "After all that," Steve says patiently, "I was thinking … maybe we should show those emails to the press."
"Scandal State," Bucky says softly. Then, louder: "It puts the National Championship in perspective."

Steve swallows. "Did you get the bounty money?"

"Fuck no," Bucky says with a sad laugh.

Steve doesn't want to ask the next question, but he feels like Bucky wants to answer it. "Were you trying to get the bounty money?"

Bucky looks at the ceiling, blinking rapidly. "I didn't let you win."

"Okay."

"I just don't want to hurt people."

"I know, Bucky," he breathes, and wants to say more, but he's just speechless, enraptured by the boy in front of him, staggered by the simple good in front of him. He thinks of Alexander Pierce and his statement and how horrible it was—but also how useless it was. That man stood in front of the whole goddamn world as witness and he tried to tear James Barnes down for everyone to see, but Bucky is still here, still untouchable. It's astounding. It brings a monster to life in Steve's chest. "Bucky ... Let's get the bastard." He jabs a finger at the manila envelope. "Let's show the whole world what he did."

"It won't matter," Bucky says, smiling softly.

"It will. The bounty hunting, the steroids, all that money going back and forth," Steve says, "That kind of stuff could get Pierce fired."

Bucky fiddles with a corner of the envelope, folding it back on itself, smoothing it flat, and folding it again. "You heard him, this afternoon. He'll never get in trouble. He can twist anything."

"Someone should know." Steve draws closer so he can reach Bucky's elbow. He touches the scar, there. "He can't just keep hurting his students."

Bucky curls his own hand around Steve's, where it rests on his torn-up arm. "Sure. Maybe."

"Plus," Steve adds, "I still want to break his face."

Bucky chuckles. His bright eyes dart around the room, coming to rest on the calendar over Steve's desk. "So … Eagles?" he asks dubiously.

Steve groans. "It was a present, it's not—it was a joke, I swear—"

"Okay," Bucky allows. There is a bright light in his eyes. "Okay, just remember the Eagles are the fucking worst."

"Isaiah was being a dick. I'm just the victim, here."

"Sure. As long as the Giants are still number one."

"They are!" Steve swears.

"I know people change and all, but that would be unforgivable."

Steve says, "I love the New York Giants."
And Bucky asks, "Will you kiss me again?"

"God, yes," Steve gasps, practically falling forward to wind his arms around Bucky's waist.

Bucky's lips are chapped from the cold and the wind. Steve can feel every crease and every pinprick against his mouth. It sends a shiver across his back.

Something occurs to Steve, as he's kissing Bucky Barnes: it occurs to Steve that he's kissing Bucky Barnes.

Not only that, but he has done so before, and he'll do it again, if he can help it. That means he knows how Bucky kisses. Like, which way he tilts his head and where his fingers end up and the temperature of the tip of his tongue and the hint of allspice Steve inhales every time he resurfaces for air.

Bucky doesn't kiss with a lot of elegance; he kisses like he tackles, with single-mindedness and efficiency. While Steve has wandering hands—he knows this about himself—Bucky can break you apart with his lips alone. He is sin. He is sin the way summer is hot and the way winter is cold.

Steve's calves bump into his mattress.

He presses a finger against Bucky's bottom lip. "Hey. Are we—?"

Bucky's eyebrows go up. He leans in close enough to trap the tip of Steve's finger between their lips. It's not a kiss, exactly. It's more like a suggestion.

And then Bucky's hands are at Steve's waistband—they brush against his skin and unfasten the button there—and a wild wind kicks up Steve's spine.

"We—oh!—oh, we're doing this," Steve stammers and scrambles at the hem of Bucky's shirt.

Lips curling, Bucky raises his arms so Steve can get his shirt off, and then he's half-naked in the half-light of Steve's room, carved right out of red oak and—

"Damn," Steve breathes.

Bucky laughs, which involves a lot of muscles in his torso that Steve wasn't thinking about before but wow, he's thinking about them now.

Bucky says, "You have no game."

"I have game!" Steve protests, which is honestly the one thing you can say that proves you don't have game.

Bucky bites down on a smile and reaches for Steve's shirt. He slides it up around Steve's shoulders and then his eyes and then they're both topless and gaping like idiots.

The dim lamplight throws Bucky's muscles into relief in a beautiful way. It also highlights all his scars. The big ugly scar on his arm, which Steve knew about; and others. There is a starburst of puckered skin on Bucky's collarbone, near his left shoulder. Faint white lacerations around his ribs. A neat surgical scar beside his bellybutton. Steve reaches out to touch them and pull them in.

At some point his knees give out and he lands on the mattress, so he kisses what he can reach: Bucky's ribs, and the seam up the center of his stomach. Steve lifts his hips just enough to get his pants around his knees, and Bucky slides them the rest of the way off.
"Socks, too?" Bucky asks as he tosses Steve's jeans to one side.

"What?"

"Please tell me you don't keep your socks on while you're having sex."

Steve gapes at him for a split second, and then he bursts with laughter. He snags Bucky's waistband and drags him in close. "What if I do?"

"Then I guess I'll never see it," Bucky says lightly, "cause I ain't putting up with your weird sock fetish."

Even as he issues the threat, Bucky is easing onto Steve's lap, straddling his hips. Steve curls an arm around Bucky and holds him close, skin-to-skin. He brushes his lips against the scar on Bucky's collarbone.

"I'll take my socks off," Steve murmurs, "when you take your pants off."

That gets Bucky out of Steve's lap and out of his pants pretty quick.

He's wearing tight red boxer briefs that just beg to be stared at. Steve mutters a few curse words and reaches for his socks. While he's taking them off, Bucky tries to climb back in his lap.

"Wait, wait, let me just—" Steve slinks out from under him and darts across the room. He digs through the top dresser drawer for a condom and lube, thinking wildly that it might be time to invest in a proper nightstand. When he turns around again, he finds Bucky sitting in the middle of his bed, fully naked. Steve almost drops everything, and Bucky grins.

A string of nonsense spills from Steve's mouth as he scrambles back to the bed. He kneels on the edge of the mattress, dropping the condom and half-empty bottle of K-Y before curling in for another kiss, tilting Bucky back onto the mattress.

Bucky is shaking. His fingers grip tightly—almost painfully—around Steve's shoulder blades.

Steve noses against his jawline and kisses the soft skin where his stubble begins to fade. "Hey," he whispers. "We can slow down."

"I'm—it's—this is good."

"You sure?"

Bucky swallows and spreads his hands across Steve's back. "I don't want to stop," he says, lips pressed to Steve's temple. "But—but slow is good."

"Anything."

"I just—I'm—I haven't—"

A sharp wind whistles between Steve's ears, and he freezes to a halt. "Bucky," he says, pulling back to look him in the eye. "You've done this before, right?"

The split second that Bucky stares at him is like watching the funnel cloud drop.

Then Bucky lets out a long, unattractive snort. "Yes, I've done this, you dork."

"…Fuck you!"
"Aw, sorry, Steve," Bucky laughs. "Were you worried about stealing my virtue?"

"No, because you don't have any."

That makes Bucky laugh even harder. "It's been awhile, that's all," he admits, still giggling. "Plus, I didn't have any broken bones last time. So. Slow is good."

"Jerk," Steve says.

"How can I make it up to you?"

"You can tell me what you like."

"Steve, really—"

"Tell me what feels good."

"We can—"

Steve kisses him. When Bucky shuts up, Steve relaxes and pulls away—not enough to break contact, but enough to speak. "Bucky Barnes, you've been taking care of me my whole life. Let me take care of you."

The air grows warm against his lips as Bucky gives in.

"What do you want?" Steve asks.

"You."

"It's okay if I top?" Steve wants to hear it, and yeah, Bucky's legs might be wrapped around his waist, but this is not not not something he wants to mess up. "Buck?"

"Yeah," he whispers, grinding his hips against Steve's. "Fuck yeah, I want—you."

It doesn't beg for argument.

Steve takes his time getting Bucky ready. When he reaches around with slicked fingers, Bucky gets him with another one of those .50-caliber kisses, and he just about loses it; he forces himself to breathe deeply and work carefully. Bucky is still tense, and it seems like every brush against his skin winds him up even more. He is a meadow in a late-morning breeze, all shivering grasses and fluttering wildflowers and the weak-whispered rustle of dry leaves.

With his free hand, Steve traces Bucky's muscles. Every spot makes Bucky twitch and whimper. When Steve drags a finger down his stomach, Bucky is lost, gulping in air, short and sharp and shattered.

"God," Steve says reverently. "How many abs do you have?" he asks, and traces them with a fingernail for emphasis.


Steve pauses to gaze at him, beaming. "Okay, Wikipedia."

"Fucking forgive me," Bucky groans. "I'm trying not to come before you even get your underwear off, fucking—oh—fuck—"
Steve slides his fingers out of Bucky so he can strip.

Bucky stares. "This—isn't—come back—" He flails for Steve's hands without taking his eyes off of Steve's dick.

"One second," Steve says gently, and digs the condom out of the mussed-up sheets. He almost drops it twice before tearing it open and rolling it on.

Bucky's eyes are huge. "Jesus shitting God of all—hell—I'm not gonna last very long, Steve."

"That's okay," Steve assures him as he crawls between Bucky's legs. "Just think of more nerdy trivia facts."

Bucky laughs again. What a beautiful thing. And, turns out, laughter is an amazing muscle relaxant.

The fact is, Steve is an athlete in his prime, a virile young adult with a healthy sex life, a student at a major university—he's decent under pressure. Quite decent. So he's not expecting to just sink into Bucky and drown, but here he is. That's what happens. That's where they end up, flushed, all skin and voltage, when Bucky gives a sharp nod for Steve to start moving. That's how they are swept away in water or electricity or both. Gasping for air and rocking against each other like it's their first and last act. It's overwhelming, times a thousand, when he thinks, God—Bucky is right there with him. Gone, totally gone, together.

Bucky's right. He doesn't last long. Steve is still figuring out which way gravity works when Bucky's fingers become frantic. They tug at the little hairs on the back of Steve's head and they slide between their stomachs so he can jerk himself off.

A sharp wail escapes Bucky's lips, and Steve surges forward to shut him up with a kiss.

That, of course, is his mistake. It's the kiss that does him in. Because Bucky's kisses are lethal. What a death, though. What a death.

They tumble down together all carefree and off-balance, and Steve lies there as long as he can stand it, breathing hot against Bucky's neck and listening to his chest heave, until he finally has to admit the condom is too uncomfortable. Even though he slides out as gently as possible, Bucky still hisses at the loss.

"I'll be back," Steve promises.

Bucky hides his face in his hands.

They take turns in the bathroom. They don't put any clothes on. They collapse onto Steve's bed. They face each other: Bucky, half an inch of bed sheets, Steve. They exchange lazy kisses. They talk, and it isn't difficult or strange. They laugh some more.

Chapter End Notes

doyou know how many freaking words of foreplay ????? thousands, my friends. thousands. the boys are back in town.

also—turns out i lied. there's at least one more chapter. yay :)
while researching last week, i found this adorable article about two high school friends who played each other for the college football national championship in 2015. it's the cutest thing ever. and i had no idea this fic was, like, freaking nonfiction.

nonfanfiction. fannonfiction.
Steve dreams of two-a-days. He dreams of wearing layers and layers of football gear on the hottest day in early August. He dreams of sweltering in UnderArmour, wringing out his socks, and licking salt off his top lip. He dreams he's the only man against an army. Monsters out of mythology books that multiply and multiply and multiply. He throws up an arm to shield himself.

Steve wakes with a start.

His left arm waves, then drops back to the mattress. There is a mattress. He is in bed. He is looking at the crackled taupe paint on his ceiling. He breathes in deeply and his lungs stretch to capacity. It was just a dream. The monsters were a dream.

The heat is not a dream.

Bucky Barnes is effectively molded to his side, wrapped up in his ASU blanket, breathing warm puffs of air against Steve's neck, and generating heat like their lives depend on it. Steve squeezes his eyes shut. Beads of sweat trickle around his ears and his collarbone, and his pillowcase is damp. Normally, Steve would kick off all the sheets and turn down the furnace (and piss off his roommates as a result). Today, he presses his lips into Bucky's sweaty hair.

With a sleepy whine, Bucky somehow manages to tuck himself even closer to Steve.

"We gotta get up soon," Steve murmurs. He brushes Bucky's hair aside, pulling dark strands out of his mouth. It's gross. He grins. Thank goodness Bucky can't see him.

"Buck?"

A moan that sounds a little like noooo rumbles against Steve's chest.

"You got a doctor's appointment," Steve says gently.

"I hate doctors," Bucky mumbles into Steve's armpit.

"It'll be good, I promise."

"Let's have sex again," Bucky says, and his voice is ground like dark coffee in the morning. It certainly wakes Steve up the same.

Steve pokes his shoulder. "You awake enough for that?" he teases.

"Mmm."

Steve latches an arm around Bucky's waist and rolls them gently so that Bucky is on his back. "...
Or are you just gonna lay there while I do all the work?"

"Be nice to me, I got a doctor's appointment," Bucky says as he untangles himself from Steve's blanket.

It takes Steve's breath away—Bucky lying naked in his bed, nestled in Steve's sheets and pillows. His hair is a disaster. Steve kisses him.

"Okay." Steve murmurs, "I'll be nice," as he settles between Bucky's legs and kisses the inside of his thigh.

Steve Rogers took a full year to recover from Tommy John surgery. The first four months, he couldn't even throw a football. It was worth it in the long run, but man, what a year.

Steve went under the knife in late November of his first year, around the time American State played Southeast State, which kind of sucked. That game is hyped to the max every year. Steve spent the day in a fucking hospital bed in rural Illinois.

Four months later, he began the slow, bizarre process of re-learning his life's work. Nine months later, the next NCAA football season began, and Reed Richards started as American State's quarterback. One year later, Steve traveled to Southeast State for the first time, and watched his team lose in the Frozen Wasteland. He didn't properly play until his third year of college.

That's a long ass time.

Recovering from surgery is the worst. It's all about starting from scratch and building up a lifetime of football skills in a matter of months. Definitely, certifiably the worst, registered trademark. You feel like you're drowning, like water replacing the air in your lungs, like threads and loose seams replacing your veins, and the doctors have the nerve to say "you're getting better. You're improving so much." They have the nerve to call it recovery.

It wouldn't feel so bad, you know, the 42%, the 52%, the 68%, if you couldn't remember 100%. But of course you can. You can remember the week before the injury when you felt invincible and unbreakable and everything came easy as the low-scudding clouds. That's the strongest memory you'll have—the feeling of soaring on wax wings.

But surgery? It's not an instant fix. It's a process. And Almighty Hell, the weeks after surgery feel like a bigger setback than the day your wings melted. Because you can remember the flying. Every step of the way.

Every minor triumph, every centimeter added to range of motion, every half-pound of resistance, you goddamn might as well be swimming in circles through quicksand. You know it's not good. You know what good is. You know what you're capable of, you know what the clear, open sky smells like, and now you're just looking up at it from a hole in the mud.

Recovering from surgery would be a breeze if you couldn't remember what it felt like to be whole.

The weirdest part, though, is when you're whole again. It is, after all, a process, and there's no glorious, definable moment when the body just starts clicking. When you are finally healthy again, it's hardly noticeable at all.

You get out there. You do what you do. And it's easy to forget the swirling, heavy feeling of recovery. But that process remains there, a part of you, and you are stronger for it.
When they finally peel themselves out of bed, Steve leaves Bucky to the shower and sneaks downstairs in search of breakfast. Or he tries to sneak. He's rummaging through the vegetables in the bottom refrigerator drawer when someone clears their throat behind him. Steve bangs his head on the freezer door as he whirs around.

"Natasha," he groans, rubbing the back of his skull.

She is perched on the counter, ankles crossed, with a steaming coffee mug clasped between both hands. Sam Wilson is there, too, leaning on the cabinets and grinning.

"You should really be more aware of your surroundings," Natasha says lightly.

"I live here," Steve reprimands. "I shouldn't have to keep my guard up in my own kitchen."

"Who knows," she says. "All kinds of people are spending the night here, these days."

Steve stares at her, but what he sees is a thunderstorm on the horizon. His mouth opens.

Before Steve can think of anything to say, Natasha's face cracks, and she laughs so hard she has to set her coffee aside or else she'd spill. "You're ridiculous," she smiles. "No one's gonna hurt your boyfriend, Steve."

"He's not—listen," he orders, even though he doesn't actually have anything else to say.

Sam Wilson hip checks Steve so he can get a milk carton, then shuts the refrigerator door.

"I wasn't done with that," Steve huffs, and re-opens the fridge.

Sam takes a long swig straight from the carton. "That's what your boy said last night."

Natasha snorts. Oh, excellent, they're ganging up on him, after all.

"That doesn't even make sense," Steve says, fully aware of how petulant he sounds. "And whose milk is that? I know for a fact it's not yours."

Sam looks at the carton and shrugs one shoulder. "I think it's yours."

"You don't even live here," Steve grumps.

Before Sam can come up with a snarky response, Bucky shuffles into the kitchen on stiff legs. His hood is pulled up. He's wearing black sweats, but also has Steve's American State blanket wrapped around his shoulders. Something inside Steve gushes open at the sight.

"Hey, Buck," he says softly.

For some reason, Sam Wilson bursts into undignified laughter.

"Oh, sweet," Bucky says, voice still scratchy. "You making me breakfast?" He nods at the egg carton in Steve's hand and sinks into a kitchen chair. "I like them over medium."

Steve stares—at Bucky's smirk, Sam's smug face, at Natasha, clouded in superiority.

"None of you live here." Steve turns his back on them to find a frying pan. "I'm making myself breakfast. You homeless people can all fend for yourselves."

"I ain't homeless," Sam gripes.
"I'm a little homeless," Bucky says.

"You're all children is what you are," Natasha says smoothly. She slides from the counter and slinks out of the kitchen.

"Alright Barnes. Time to get serious."

Steve turns around slowly. Sam has his arms folded across his chest, towering over Bucky, looking down on him with an igneous glare. Bucky looks over his shoulder, where Isaiah has appeared, mirroring Sam's austerity.

Steve clutches the egg carton a little tighter. "Sam—"

"We have a right to know," Sam Wilson interrupts. "What are your intentions with our quarterback?"

The air rushes out of Steve's lungs as he rolls his eyes.

"I promise," Bucky says in deeply serious tones, "my intentions are inappropriate at best."

The stare-down lasts for several seconds. Sam cracks first, giggling like a maniac and collapsing into the chair next to Bucky. They bump fists like they've been doing it for a decade.

"Good freaking morning, degenerates!" Clint shouts as he enters the room. It could be a sign he hasn't turned on his hearing aids yet—but to be honest, Clint always shouts when he enters a room.

"Nat said Steve was making breakfast!"

"Yeah, Steve, get cooking," Natasha says, peeking from over her boyfriend's shoulder.

Eli files in behind them. Their kitchen is cramped enough without six huge boys and a gymnast stuffed inside, so trying to actually cook is about to be an Olympic event. As if on cue, Isaiah plants himself on the counter between the sink and the toaster.

"Really, Ice?" Steve says. "You think you might be in the way, a little bit?"

"Yeah, but would you rather I help cook?" he threatens.

"No, God, never mind," Steve laughs.

Eli ends up helping. They only have the one small frying pan, so they go three eggs at a time, one plate at a time. They end up using almost all the eggs in the house. Eli cracks them while Steve keeps them from burning.

Ice holds out a hand for the first dish, which Steve pulls out of reach, saying, "Guests first."

Sam cackles.

"Lady guests first!" Natasha insists, making grabby hands.

Twenty minutes later, everyone has been served. The first people to eat are already stacking up their dishes and starting conversation when Steve and Eli finally dig into their breakfast. Natasha scoots onto Clint's lap to make room for Eli at the table. Steve remains standing.

"… nervous about the draft, you hear me," Isaiah is saying.

"It'll be great." Sam waves a hand dismissively and looks up at Steve. "So, Captain, how does it feel? You're gonna be the first gay man drafted to the NFL."
Steve chokes a little. From the salt and pepper.

Before he can answer, Bucky's voice grates from under his hood. "Steve's not gay, he's bi."

Beat.

"Right," Sam Wilson says. "Yeah, I just meant—right."

"And he's not the first queer kid to play in the NFL."


Bucky fixes Sam with one of his trademarked Winter Soldier Stares.

"I'm—I just …um." It might be the first time Sam Wilson has ever been rendered speechless.

The silence is painfully awkward, and Steve feels like he should be the one to step in, but he has no idea what to say.

Then an incredible thing happens. Isaiah bursts into laughter.

Bits of scrambled egg fly across the kitchen before he can cover his mouth. He has to catch his breath before waving vaguely at Sam Wilson. "He told you," Isaiah says. "The man set you straight."

And maybe it's the choice of words, ("Ice, did you just say 'set you straight'?!") or the weird snap in tension—the giddiness blazing through the room—but that's when Clint starts to crack up, too. He drops his forehead onto Natasha's shoulder, which is also shaking with laughter.

Sam chuckles cautiously.

Steve steals a glance at Bucky, whose eyes glint from the folds of his hoodie. He fixes Steve with a devastating grin. Steve didn't think he could blush any harder, and yet.

Sam turns to Steve and says, weakly, "you know about this? You know your boy got some attitude?"

"He's got a mouth on him, that's for sure," Steve says, matching Bucky's gaze evenly.

Steve thinks maybe the comfortable limbo of his life is sliding out of place. His non-celebrity college-football status. His unfinished business degree that he didn't care about to begin with. His morning breakfasts with his weird puzzle-piece family. His on-and-off love life which, let's be real, was more of a lust life.

Steve doesn't know what it's like to be in love. For years, he has existed in this unsteady unstrung stasis, and he has spent all his energy caring too much about people and things and never falling in love with any.

He just doesn't know how love fits in his life.

Love is a frightening thing and it doesn't make sense to him. Smaller, simpler things make sense to Steve. The feeling of a go-ahead touchdown. The knife-edged eye contact he makes with Sam Wilson before throwing a short pass. The cold glare of the sun off the bleachers in Memorial Stadium. Georges Seurat. Play-action passes. Pink towels and pink cleats and pink hair. Watching Natasha and Clint insult each other in sign language.
Bucky pulling him up off the turf by one hand.

When Steve looks at Bucky, he thinks of how easy it has been for four years, letting the NCAA make all the decisions for him. When he looks at Bucky, he thinks this is much scarier.

Bucky's good mood has drained away by the time they pull into a parking space under the towering American State University football complex. Without a word, he twists his bag out from the backseat and heads for the big glass entryway. In winter, it looks more imposing than usual. None of the prairie phlox bushes or blue violets that bloom in spring, none of the green leaves that last well into fall and don't turn orange until Thanksgiving. This time of year it's bare branches and smoky grays and sharp corners and exposed concrete. It can't be worse than Winter Station, but if Winter Station is what you're used to, well.

Bucky's red and black training gear sticks out like a scar in the ASU entryway.

"You okay?" Steve asks as he leads Bucky down toward the medical wing.

"I'm fine," he says curtly.

"It'll be good, in the long run," Steve says. "Since you're going to the NFL."

"Hopefully."

Steve cringes. "Either way ... you know you can stay with us. And I'll be there. No matter what."

Bucky levels him with a terse gaze. "You sure you want me around."

"... Of course. More than anything."

"I don't know if your roommates want me around."

Steve doesn't know what to say to that.

American State University's Head Athletic Trainer for football is Claire Temple, a pretty, olive-skinned woman with severe eyebrows and a severe demeanor. She's very single-minded in her approach to injury recovery. To be fair, she's got one of the most important jobs in college football, and Steve can only appreciate her for doing it so well.

Steve loves her, but he also suspects she might be an underground mixed-martial-artist by night.

Bucky, on the other hand, closes off the minute Steve introduces them.

"So," Claire says, shaking Bucky's hand and giving him a careful sweep from head-to-toe. "You didn't mention the 'friend' you were bringing in was Southeast State's own James Barnes."

When her gaze latches on the Tundra logo across Bucky's chest, her eyebrows soar. She turns to Steve and shoots him an acidic smile.

So, not that he's nervous, but Steve is fairly certain Bucky and Claire both want to hit him, right now.

"I know it's a little—weird," Steve says. "But he might have had a concussion on Monday. And, um. Some other injuries."

Bucky is scowling helplessly at the American State mural splashed across the hall.
As Steve had predicted (or hoped), Claire's ethics as a medical professional win out over misgivings she has about rival football players. She drags a mostly unwilling Bucky Barnes through a series of exams, including state-of-the-art concussion detection technology, a cardiorespiratory test on the treadmill, a brief physical, and a series of X-rays. It all takes about an hour.

While Bucky is getting scanned, Steve flicks through his emails. He selects two agencies that seem the most promising and shoots off polite replies. He saves their phone numbers into his contacts.

"The shoulder injury is pretty straightforward," Claire says. She shuffles through X-rays and selects two to clip up on the illuminator. She circles a vague area of the shoulder joint with her finger. "This is some standard wear-and-tear, signs of repeated minor injuries that build up over time, that sort of thing. It's not unlike a baseball player's shoulder. They spend all day throwing, and eventually the motion takes its toll."

Bucky shifts uncomfortably on the exam table, and Steve resists the urge to cross the room and hold his hand. This isn't about him, he reminds himself, and sticks his hands in his pockets.

"I haven't hurt my shoulder that much," Bucky croaks.

"Sometimes it's just from a couple injuries," Claire says, "combined with overuse."

"That's what happened to my elbow," Steve chimes in.

"Exactly," Claire nods.

Bucky doesn't say anything.

"So," Claire says, glancing between Bucky and her clipboard. "The X-ray shows a few other things to look out for." She switches out one of the X-rays. "Here's your left arm. The metal plating right in here. Was the break recent?"

"Couple years."

The X-ray of Bucky's metal arm is fascinating. Bucky's bones and flesh are a ghostly gray, but the metal reinforcements pop out of the frame, stark and white and real. It isn't shaped the way Steve imagined; from this angle, it looks like a crocodile skull in profile, its blunt little teeth sunken into the bones of Bucky's upper arm.

Claire is still speaking. "... would have removed the plates and screws, by now." She frowns. "It really just needs time to heal well."

Bucky laughs, a dark, low sound unlike laughter.

Switching out another slide, Claire gestures toward what looks like Bucky's ribcage. "Here are the ribs you mentioned," she says absently. "This one here hasn't aligned well, but that can fix itself with enough rest. And here..." she switches out another slide, "is the part I wasn't expecting."

A spectral image of Bucky's skull fills the screen. Steve feels a dull ache in his temple.

"If you look closely at the skull here, there are signs of cranial calcification," Claire goes on. She points at a few spots on the X-ray. "The size and placement are normal for people with repeated head trauma. It looks like you've suffered concussions before the Championship Game?" She tilts it like a question, even though the X-ray more or less answers it for her.
"Yeah," Bucky says.

Claire watches him closely for a split second before continuing. "Symptoms are usually mild. Some people don't experience any at all. It can include memory lapses, headaches, problems with concentration and coordination. You ever feel anything like that?"

"Yeah."

Claire nods. "It's common with football players and other athletes who participate in contact sports. How many concussions have you had?"

The way Bucky glares at the X-ray screen, Steve half-expects it to freeze solid. He doesn't answer for a long time. Finally: "Three."

Steve feels another vicarious throb in his own temple.

"Okay," Claire says smoothly. "That makes sense, with what we're seeing here. Were all the concussions football-related?"

Bucky stares some more, and glares some more. It's honestly impressive how well Claire is handling Bucky's ability to drag out silences. His reticence is superhuman, and she just takes it in stride.

"Like I said, it's very consistent with—"

"No," Bucky interrupts her.

She raises her eyebrows. "I'm sorry?"

"The first one wasn't football-related."

"How did it happen?" she asks politely.

Steve holds his breath.

"Car accident," Bucky says, maintaining carful eye contact with the screen on the wall.

"Oh!" Claire looks like she keeps discovering puzzle pieces scattered around her house, and as exasperating as it is, she always knows exactly where they fit. "Well, again, from what we're seeing here, that's perfectly normal. How long ago was the accident?"

Another long, elastic pause. "Four years ago," Bucky says. "About four years."

Steve tries to follow the conversation and simultaneously do the math in his head.

Claire sighs. "Was it a serious concussion?"

"Pretty serious." Bucky's hand drifts to the scar inside his elbow. "I lost some memory. They called it some kind of amnesia."

_Four years ago, Steve had just finished his last high school football season._

"Do you struggle with day-to-day tasks? Or did you forget some things that happened before the accident?" Claire asks, smoothing a hand over the papers on her clipboard. "Maybe the days leading up to the injury?"

Bucky blinks rapidly. His eyes drift toward Steve, but then he jerks his head to face Claire.
"Everything is kind of spotty, when I try to remember," he says. "And a couple months before the accident ... kind of just a blur."

**Four years ago, Steve called Bucky and got a wrong number.**

"Sounds like retrograde amnesia. It primarily affects long-term memories," Claire says. She smiles gently, but Bucky isn't looking at her. "We see this all the time. It's rarely debilitating in any way. As for any other lingering symptoms, we see tons of athletes every year who experience issues with memory, concentration, even depression."

Bucky nods slowly, tracing the path of his scar with a forefinger.

Deep in Steve's chest, a burning sensation begins to flower. It feels the way a campfire looks, popping and crackling, the dark blue center crumbling under the force of nothing.

"Those kinds of things are all very treatable," Claire goes on, flipping to a bottom page on her clipboard. "We prescribe minor pain medications and anti-depressants pretty often, actually."

**Four years ago, Steve thought he would never talk to Bucky again.**

Bucky fidgets.

"I'm not saying we should get into that today," Claire reassures him. "Just saying it's something you can investigate, if you think it's necessary."

"Yeah."

"It all just depends what's the best fit for you and your lifestyle."

"Can I still play football?"

Now it is Claire's turn to fall silent. She frowns and shoots Steve a brief glance before turning back to Bucky. She sets the clipboard beside him on the examination table. "Honestly ... *yes,*" she says, and the sincerity is evident in her voice. Steve covers his mouth with one hand. "There's nothing stopping you from playing football once your body's back to a hundred percent."

"You mean my shoulder."

"And your ribs, and the lingering concussion symptoms." Her face is soft. She looks like Steve feels —like she wants to give Bucky a long hug and maybe wrap him in a soft blanket.

It's difficult to read Bucky's expression. He still looks like he's trying to carve a hole in the floor with his scowl. When he speaks, his voice cracks. "Is it always going to hurt?"

"Listen," Claire says in her firm, Head-Athletic-Trainer-tone. "It's still very important that you take time to let these injuries heal. Continuing to play through this kind of damage is the *stupidest* thing you can do, no question," she says candidly. "I'm serious. None of this 'popping-your-shoulder-back-in-just-to-lose-the-National-Championship' crap. It's a *process.*"

Bucky makes a face, but doesn't argue.

"After that, though, *yes.*" Claire shrugs and picks up a clipboard. "It's a personal decision. There are risks, of course, but there are always risks for long-term injury in the sports world." She licks her lips. "It's a serious decision, though. Further damage to your brain could lead to something ... more permanent."
Bucky frowns, and his eyes roam the floor, as if trying to read something.

Claire's lips curl in a crooked smile. She props the clipboard on her hip. "Now. I've got an appointment with one of our surgeons, but I hope this helped. We perform outgoing exams for all our athletes," she gives Steve a pointed look.

"I'll schedule mine, I promise," Steve says.

Claire rolls her eyes. "And I'm sure Bucky's health is something any NFL team could deal with. Please, really, if you have any other questions, just get in touch."

She breezes out of the exam room, leaving Steve and Bucky alone, burning bright against the sterile white room.

"Want to go for a walk?" Steve offers, because those training rooms are the worst.

Bucky doesn't answer. He slides off the exam table, pulls on his sweatshirt, and bends over to retrieve his bag without looking at Steve. He is sluggish and stiff. Steve wonders if it's because of latent football injuries or something else.

He holds the door open and follows Bucky into the hallway. They settle into a leisurely pace. If it were a different time, a different day, a place without American State football logos around every corner, Steve might reach out and lace their fingers together.


Bucky sucks in an audible breath. "Senior year," he confirms. "Sorry. I would have …"

Steve says. "It wasn't your fault, what happened."

They turn the corner and find themselves at the head of a long glass corridor, overlooking the ASU weight room.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Bucky says. "I'm sorry I disappeared, and all."

Steve has a flashback to the national championship game; to Bucky's desperate confessions after ASU won in regulation. "You don't owe me anything," Steve assures him.

"My friend was in the car, too." Bucky blurts, and he looks away with a pained expression. "He didn't make it."

"Oh my god." Steve almost trips. He hates himself when all he can say is, "I'm sorry."

"When I woke up, I was handcuffed to the hospital bed."

What the fuck.

There is pressure in Steve's ears; the sound of a tin whistle. This must be what it feels like to fall from a thousand feet.

Bucky runs a hand through his hair. "I couldn't remember anything and I was confused and I just wanted to go home." He swallows hard. "But people were telling me I killed this kid. And his parents wanted me strung up."

The words tumble out as if Bucky's exams knocked down some kind of dam, and Steve doesn't want to hold him back—but he also wants to fucking scream.
"Nothing happened," Bucky says. "They tried to press charges, but they didn't really have an argument, and I couldn't remember shit, so I was unreliable as fuck. They just knew what crowd we ran with." Bucky grimaces. "'He was high, he was drunk, he endangered my baby.' They were convinced I was stoned off my ass."

"Were you? High?" Steve tries to keep his voice steady.

Bucky doesn't answer for a long time. He gazes across the forest of workout equipment and the red, white, and blue weight room.

"I can't remember."

A part of Steve's chest shatters.

"I can't remember," Bucky whispers. "I mean, I did get high, that year. All the time. But we were in the middle of play-offs, so I don't think, with drug tests …" Panic begins to rise in Bucky's voice.

"And—I wouldn't—I mean, that's fucked up, I wouldn't—and I never did it before. But I'm—I just can't remember."

"Hey, hey, hey," Steve cuts him off gently. He leans into Bucky's line of sight, and Bucky promptly shuts his eyes. "Listen—they would have known if you were intoxicated somehow. You were in the hospital, they would have taken blood tests, they would have had proof." He says it again. "They would have had proof."

"Yeah. I guess. I ain't in jail, so, you know." Bucky sounds bitter, and he sounds unconvinced. "I just wish I could know. It feels so weird not knowing."

"It wasn't your fault."


"Accidents happen."

"It sucks," Bucky whispers.

"I'm sorry." And Steve doesn't want to ask, but he does. "Were you two close?"

Bucky leans forward to rest his forehead against the glass. "I didn't remember him at all, for awhile."

"Oh." That sweeps any hint of jealousy from Steve's mind, because that's—hell. That's just hell.

"I started getting things back. Later. We called him Toro." Bucky looks away. "Kinda makes it worse, you know?"

"Yeah." Steve doesn't know.

"I remember some of the things we did. We saw a couple movies together. I have really strong feelings about Toro and Steak-N-Shake. Nothing specific, though."

"That's awful."

"Some days, I wish I remembered better," Bucky says. Then he ducks his head and adds, almost inaudibly, "Other days I just wish I forgot everything."

"I'm glad you didn't forget everything," Steve tries.
"Steve, I—" Bucky sucks in a sharp breath and looks at Steve. His eyes shine pink. "I didn't forget you."

"... What?"

"I promise, I didn't forget you," he says desperately. His voice begins to crumble. "I just didn't—I didn't remember you right away." The last words come out in a desperate hiss.

"Oh, Bucky, it's fine, I don't care about that." It's like stabbing; it's like being shot in the gut. Steve can actually pinpoint the moment his heart breaks. Bucky doesn't deserve a fraction of the pain he's suffered, and the worst part is—this is it. This is all Steve can do. If only he could take it away; if only he could soak up all the pain until Bucky was clean and dry and smiling again.

Of all the injustices in the world that he can't fix, this one hurts the most.

"I was just trying to figure things out," Bucky gasps. "Nothing—everything came back slow and it—by then it had been forever, it had been months, and I didn't know how—you weren't there, so—"

Steve's ringtone cuts him off.

They stare at each other for a split second. Steve scrambles for his phone while Bucky swipes at his eyes.

Steve fully intends to hit Ignore—and then sees the name of a sports agency flashing on the screen. "Oh, crap."

"What's wrong?"

"It's an agent," Steve says. He glances at Bucky. "I'll call them back."

"Fuck that," Bucky says bluntly. "Answer it."

"Are you—?"

"Answer. It."

Steve's fist clenches around his phone, and he tries to keep his voice from shaking when he says hello. Bucky drifts down the hall, and Steve follows him a few feet back. He doesn't pay attention to where they're going.

"Hello," a brisk voice says on the other end of the line. "My name is Phil Coulson of Shield Sports Management."

It's funny that so many words fly through Steve's mind and all he can manage out loud is "Oh."

"We're seriously interested in representing you, Steve."

This is happening right now.

They amble down another corridor, one with a series of blue benches along the wall and heavy oak doors on all sides.

"Will you want to see me ... work out, or anything?" Steve asks as he sinks onto a bench.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Agent Coulson says. "I've been watching you for a long time."
And that's how Steve gets an agent.

It's stupid, really, after the weeks he's spent agonizing over emails, the months of nervous energy, telling himself he might not even enter the NFL draft. Steve is still thinking about amnesia and broken bones when he asks, "What do I do next?"

Steve feels dizzy. They discuss training camps and draft regulations and the NFL combine. It's still just a verbal commitment, but it's enough. Steve's not exactly the type to shop around.

Steve stares at the tile pattern on the floor. "Are you the ones who work out of …?"

"New York City."

"Right," Steve says. "Are we … do we need to discuss contracts, or anything?"

"It's a little early for that," Coulson says. "But if you have any specific questions, please feel free to ask. You may already know, NFL agents can claim no more than four percent of a player's contract. But we can discuss other details in person."

"In New York."

"…Yes."

"If you don't mind me asking," Steve says, "who else do you represent?"

Coulson names a few big names in football, including former ASU quarterback Reed Richards. He's also interested to hear the name of female golfer Mary Jane Watson.

This is insane, Steve thinks. He played the BCS National Championship Game five days ago.

"Thank you for your time, Steve," Coulson finally says, his tone formal. "We'll be in touch."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Steve says, but Coulson has already hung up.

When Steve looks up, totally dazed, Bucky is nowhere in sight. He checks the clock on his phone and realizes he'd been talking to Coulson for almost half an hour, which seems like nothing at all when it's your future on the line.

And yet.

Steve is halfway through a totally-not-hysterical text when the nearest oak door swings open and he hears Nick Fury's voice.

Bucky steps into the hall.

"Oh my God, sorry I took so long," Steve says instantly, leaping to his feet and shaking with relief. "I didn't mean to … ditch you."

Bucky's face is blank. He sways a little.

"Are you okay?" Steve wants to ask again and again, are you okay, are you okay, until the answer is yes.

Bucky lists forward, a subtle creaking motion, the mast of a sloop bobbing at sea. It's not really an answer.
Weather patterns are crude and chaotic and unpredictable. But that has never stopped people from guessing. Steve closes the distance between them, and whatever storm loomed on the horizon burns itself out there, furling away into a distant forecast.

Bucky crumples against him. He wraps his arms around Steve's waist, and he tucks his face into the crook of Steve's neck. "I'm tired," he whispers.

"I know," Steve says. "I know you are. I'm here."

Over Bucky's shoulder, Nick Fury appears in the doorway. He is holding an unmarked manila folder under one arm.

Steve clutches Bucky a little tighter.

For a moment, Fury watches the two of them, his gaze steady and studious. He gives Steve a little nod before retreating back into his office and closing the door.

"Come on," Bucky says. "Just five minutes. Just—I won't use my shoulder. I won't even use my left arm."

"You're not lifting any weights!" Steve scolds.

"I'm getting skinnier as we speak," Bucky whines.

"Doctor's orders," Steve says, "You need to rest."

"Sit-ups?"

"You have three broken ribs!"

"Fuck!" Bucky throws his hands in the air. "Do you think these abs just happen all on their own?"

"They sure look like an act of God," Steve says slyly.

"Get a room!" a voice wails. They turn around and find Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley, both in sweaty workout gear.

Turns out they're headed to the indoor field to play catch. As soon as Bucky hears this, he whips around and stares pointedly at Steve. It's a losing battle, really.

When Steve doesn't protest, Bucky starts nagging Sam for the ball. They try to play catch while traveling down the cramped hallway, forcing Steve to dodge ugly passes because his friends are idiots.

"Okay, okay, God, stop!" he shouts, intercepting Sam's already sub-par pass. Sam, Bucky, and Isaiah all watch him with round eyes. Steve sighs. "... At least wait until we get in the dome."

He leads the way, holding the football hostage. Behind him Bucky mumbles, "Dunno why everyone thinks I'm the one with the temper."

"Right?!" Ice exclaims. "Me neither, man. It's 'cause he smiles and bats those eyelashes at all the reporters when the cameras are rolling. Fake as hell."

"I'm not fake," Steve protests, and Isaiah smirks.
"Dude, he's always been that way," Bucky says. "He smiles pretty for the press, then on the sideline he's all cursing like a sailor."

"Yes."

Heaving another exasperated sigh, Steve slips into the indoor field.

ASU practices in here a lot during the unbearably cold winter months. It's not heated well, but it's protected from the Prairie-whiplash winds. There are two full football fields, towering goal posts, terrible lighting, and a winter white dome swooping overhead.

Bucky cranes his neck for a better look around.

"You impressed?" Sam asks smugly.

Bucky curls his lip. "The one at Southeast is nicer."

Sam looks flabbergasted. "You're a liar, man."

"I'm speaking facts!" Bucky says. "Everybody knows Southeast is better than ASU. It's the Nike money."

"The what?!"

"Y'all have a fucking UnderArmour deal," Bucky deadpans, shaking his head as if he's personally ashamed by American State's equipment contracts. "Fucking second rate."

Bucky looks serious, but he's not fooling anyone.

"I'll show you second rate." Sam pushes Steve aside and dashes toward the center of the nearest field. "Hit me!" he calls for a pass.

Bucky probably shouldn't be playing catch, but Steve has managed to talk him down from free weights and cardio and hack squats and even the leg press, which was a near thing. ("Just one set. Please. My legs are fine.") Anyway, he's clearly about to collapse from some kind of football-withdrawal. Plus, he's right-handed. Playing a leisurely game of catch won't set his recovery back any further than a strong handshake.

He sends the football to Sam in a neat arc. While they watch it fly, Bucky turns to Ice with half a smile. "Does Steve still cuss out referees?"

Ice rolls his eyes. "Oh my god. He needs one of those leashes, like the ones for kids? With little backpacks?"

From across the field, Sam calls "Captain!" and sends the ball spiraling back to Steve.

"There was one time this reporter called Sam Wilson a thug, you hear me?" Ice tells Bucky.

"This Sam Wilson?!" Bucky asks, nodding to where Sam roams the field, about thirty yards away.

"Yeah, that puppy dog. A 'thug'." Ice rolls his eyes. "I thought Steve was gonna blow a fuse."

"I don't like bullies," Steve grumbles. "Or racist assholes," he adds bitterly.

"Somebody throw the damn ball!" Sam yells.
"Wait." Bucky puts a hand on Steve's elbow to stop him from throwing. "I'll post up. Let's see if he can defend at all."

He dashes toward Sam Wilson, jogs his route, and Steve hits him in the Southeast logo, easy as ever.

So maybe Steve has selfish reasons for letting Bucky play catch. That's fine.

The four of them run lazy routes and throw looping passes and gently lose track of time. Sometimes they defend each other; other times they throw wrong-handed, which results in clumsy knuckle-balls, except from Isaiah, who turns out to be surprisingly ambidextrous, and Bucky, who is "not allowed under any circumstances to even touch the football with his left hand!" (After Sam gives the order, Bucky proceeds to both catch and throw the rest of his passes one-handed.) Eventually, Steve and Isaiah bow out and flop side-by-side to watch Bucky and Sam play long-toss.

Isaiah bumps Steve's shoulder. "So he's staying, right?"

"You think he should stay?"

"Well yeah, he should stay," Ice says, giving Steve a funny look. "I want him to stay."

The muscles in Steve's face feel strange. "You could tell him that, you know."

"Yeah," Isaiah looks back across the field. He even smiles. "Yeah, I might talk to him."

They watch as Bucky throws another pass, easy and precise, a mathematical curve that lands neatly in the outstretched basket of Sam Wilson's arms.

"Catch it with your hands!" Bucky calls.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Sam shouts, and chucks the ball back.

It's got to be the tightening of his throat, or the feeling like cumulous clouds filling his lungs, that makes it click for Steve. He realizes why being in love had always been such an abstract and unattainable thing for him: not because he had never been in love, but because he had been in love all along.

"Go deep!" Bucky orders, and Sam Wilson does. Bucky waits and watches him run before cocking his arm and launching a fifty-yard bomb into the end zone. Sam catches it with both hands.

"Look at that, Captain," Isaiah says. "Bucky has a better arm than you."

Chapter End Notes

well, friends, this is pretty much the end. the next chapter is kind of an epilogue. i'll be able to gather my thoughts better when i post that ;)

thanks again for all the feedback. it has all been so kind and so overwhelming. i'm addicted. thank you.
Epilogue: The NFL Draft

Chapter Summary

Here's the thing about the NFL Draft: it's all about lists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2011 NFL Draft – Round 1

1. Carolina Panthers
2. Denver Broncos
3. Buffalo Bills
4. Cincinnati Bengals
5. Arizona Cardinals
6. Cleveland Browns
7. San Francisco 49ers
8. Tennessee Titans
9. Dallas Cowboys
10. Washington Redskins
11. Houston Texans
12. Minnesota Vikings
13. Detroit Lions
14. St. Louis Rams
15. Miami Dolphins
16. Jacksonville Jaguars
17. Oakland Raiders
18. San Diego Chargers
19. New York Giants
20. Tampa Bay Buccaneers
21. Kansas City Chiefs
22. Indianapolis Colts
23. Philadelphia Eagles
24. New Orleans Saints
25. Seattle Seahawks
26. Atlanta Falcons
27. Baltimore Ravens
28. New England Patriots
29. Chicago Bears
30. New York Jets
31. Pittsburgh Steelers
32. Green Bay Packers

Kiper's Final Big Board: Round 1 Predictions

1. T'Challa Bashenga, QB, Clemson
2. Nick Fairley, DT, Auburn
3. Patrick Peterson, CB, LSU
4. Marcell Dareus, DT, Alabama
5. Da'Quan Bowers, DE, Clemson
6. Blaine Gabbert, QB, Missouri
7. A. J. Green, WR, Georgia.
8. William Foster, DE, American State
9. Von Miller, LB, Texas A&M
10. Prince Amukamara, CB, Nebraska
11. Cam Newton, QB, Auburn
12. Pietro Maximoff, RB, Southeast State
13. Steve Rogers, QB, American State
14. Aldon Smith, LB, Missouri
15. Nate Solder, OT, Colorado
16. Akeem Ayers, LB, UCLA
17. Victor Creed, DE, Southeast State
18. Julio Jones, WR, Alabama
19. Georges Batroc, LB, Lemurian
20. Mark Ingram, RB, Alabama
21. Adrian Clayborn, DE, Iowa
22. J. J. Watt, DE, Wisconsin
23. Cameron Jordan, DE, California
24. Mike Pouncey, C, Florida
25. Isaiah Bradley, RB, American State
26. Ryan Kerrigan, DE, Purdue
27. Stephen Paea, DE, Oregon State
28. Anthony Castonzo, OT, Boston College
29. Gabe Carimi, OT, Wisconsin
30. Justin Houston, DE/LB, Georgia
31. Ryan Mallet, QB, Arkansas
32. Robert Drake, CB, Xavier

Yahoo Sports @YahooSports ● Jan 16
Pierce, Southeast Under NCAA Scrutiny for Yet Another Violation yhoo.it/29hNn1

NAC @nac ● Jan 21
VIDEO: Pierce addresses accusations of PEDs, bribery, illegal cash benefits, and bounty hunting … bit.ly/4LRs217

Philadelphia Eagles @Eagles ● Jan 28
Brock Rumlow joins defensive staff: phieagl.es/601Rj3b

SportsCenter @SportsCenter ● Feb 2
UPDATE: Alexander Pierce to retire, Fischer to step up in interim. (via @KirkHerbstreit)

ESPN @espn ● Feb 15
Maximoff, Creed, Barnes survive Winter Station Scandal, enter NFL draft … WATCH: es.pn/274RnK8

NFL @NFL ● Mar 1
VIDEO: Maximoff breaks NFL Combine record for 40-yard dash. Watch to see his time … on.nfl.com/417NkP4
Radio City Music Hall is decked out in crystal and fine china and NFL logos. There is a colorful sea of fans in the balcony, and on the ground floor, dozens of football players squeezed into off-the-wall designer suits.

The NFL Commissioner steps up to the podium on stage. The balcony rumbles with a chorus of boos.

"With the first pick in the 2011 NFL Draft, the Carolina Panthers select T'Challa Bashenga, Clemson University."

Sam Wilson throws his hands in the air. "After you beat the man for the Heisman trophy."

"They've been predicting him number one for three weeks," Kate says as settles on the couch with a plate of cookies in her lap.

"You gonna share those?" Isaiah asks.

Kate makes a face.

Isaiah crosses his ankles on the coffee table, and his mother promptly smacks them off.

"T'Challa's a year older than me," Steve points out. "I'm glad the Panthers went with him and not Cam Newton."

It's Thursday, the night of the first round, and Steve is gathered with all his friends at Mrs. Bradley's home in East Moline. He and Isaiah had both been invited to New York City for the draft, and both turned down the invitation. When given the choice between spending the night with mobs of reporters and entitled fans versus spending the night with friends and family, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, well—that's not really a choice at all.

They've set up a live feed in the living room, though. ESPN has the right to stream their reactions when their names get called.

Bill Foster is the first American State player off the board.

"With the third pick in the 2011 NFL Draft, the Buffalo Bills select William Foster, American State University."

Eli almost upends the coffee table.

"That's my boy!"

"Big Bill! Big Bill!"

"Oh my God, look at him! He's like a foot taller than Roger Goodell!"

"Big Bill's a Buffalo Bill!"

It's mayhem. At least until Mrs. Bradley appears in the doorway and gives them all her hands-on-the-hips, Old Testament scowl. Eli's oldest daughter sneaks in under Mrs. Bradley's elbow, and they all have to behave, after that. She crawls into her father's lap and immediately starts asking questions.

"Did you get drafted, Daddy?"

"No, I didn't get drafted."
"Did Ice get drafted, Daddy?"

"No, baby, only three people got drafted so far."

"Did Steve get drafted?"

"…No, nobody got drafted."

"You said three people got drafted."

"Yeah, three people—"

"Did Bucky get drafted?"

"Bucky's not gonna get drafted," Bucky says drily and, unfortunately, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

Monica looks heartbroken. "Why aren't you gonna get drafted, Bucky?"

"Dammit Bucky, four-year-olds don't understand cynicism," Isaiah scolds.

"Daddy!" Monica squeals. "Ice said a bad word!"

"Ice says lots of bad words." Eli scowls at his brother over Monica's head. "And he has to do lots of extra chores. That's why you don't say bad words like Ice."

Isaiah is the first to get a call.

It's a surprise to everyone, since he was predicted to go at the end of Round 1, but not long after the Lions take Maximoff at 13, Isaiah's phone starts ringing. He stares at it for the first full ring. On the second ring he stands up and looks at Eli. On the third ring, he sits down again and stares at the screen.

"Shut up," he says, even though no one is speaking. "Shut up, it's Massachusetts, it's Boston."

"Answer it!"

On the fourth ring, he stands up again. Eli stands up, too, and Steve grabs Bucky's arm. In the next
room, a dozen Bradley aunts and uncles burst into applause.

When Isaiah answers, his voice breaks. He tries again, and manages, "Hello?"

He listens for a moment before sitting down.

He stands up again; "Yes, sir"; he sits down again; "Who is this?"

It's too much tension, it's knotted too tight, Bucky is almost sliding out of his chair and Steve can't feel his fingertips, anymore. Eli is the first to lose it. He launches himself at Isaiah and wraps him in a bear hug before he even hangs up the phone.

"Yeah, doing real good, sir," Isaiah says, a little desperate, limbs tangled up with his brother's. His end of the conversation is a lot of yes, sir, thank you sir, sounds great sir, I'm excited, sir, until, finally: "Thank you, sir, I can't wait to get out there."

He drops his phone right on the ground while Eli pounds him on the back, and honestly, no one in the room worries about cracked phone screens. The Bradley twins are shouting nonsense. Their extended family goes wild; Sam and Clint begin to jump in circles, and Bucky swoops in to rescue Monica from the path of destruction.

"Holy shit, guys," he scolds them. "Be careful."

"Bucky! You said a bad word!" Monica giggles.

"What?" He looks genuinely confused. "No I didn't."

"You did!"

Sam Wilson laughs. "You don't even notice anymore, it's just like a comma to you."

When Eli finally releases his brother, everyone moves to tackle Isaiah—and stops when they see Mrs. Bradley in the doorway.

Isaiah wraps her up in a gentle hug. His shoulders are shaking, and she whispers something in his ear. Otherwise, the room falls quiet again, just enough to hear the television again.

"With the seventeenth pick in the 2011 NFL Draft, the New England Patriots select Isaiah Bradley, American State University."

Bucky leans toward Steve, the four-year-old still propped on his hip. His fingers brush the inside of Steve's wrist. "You're next."

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*Rob Gronkowski @RobGronkowski* • Apr 28
*I see you #IsaiahBradley welcome to New England! #Patriots #DominatetheFall #IceCold*

*Mel Kiper Jr. @MelKiperESPN* • Apr 28

*ESPN @ESPN* • Apr 28
*IMAGE: With the 19th pick the New York @Giants select Prince Amukamara, Nebraska. #NFLDraft*
Steve can sense the storm brewing and he wants nothing to do with it. The reporters and analysts with their live NFL Draft commentary, already trying to stir up trouble over Steve's dramatic fall in the standings. He had been projected to go at twelve. At twenty-six, he's still waiting for a call from an NFL rep. And he doesn't care. It's really not a big deal. He knows he'll get picked, it will come, it doesn't matter when. He doesn't fucking care—until his Heisman speech comes up.

"… unexpected decline in the NFL draft. Rogers has little to no controversy attached to his name."

"It's true. One has to wonder—does this have something to do with Rogers' announcement during the Heisman ceremony?"

Sam cups both hands around his mouth and hollers, "Buuullshiiiiiit."

"Daddy!" Monica gasps. "Sam said—"

"I heard, baby, I heard."

Steve promptly stands up and heads straight for the kitchen, where he knows he can count on Mrs. Bradley for good food and good conversation. She asks him about living in the Northeast, since Isaiah's Boston-bound. He asks her about her chess pie recipe, which she can't actually give him because "I ain't never written it down, you hear me?"

He scoops a slice onto a paper plate, grabs two forks, and heads back to the living room.

"Who did I miss?" he asks, flopping onto the floor and handing Bucky a fork.

"Couple Alabama players," Clint says.

"No one cares," Sam Wilson drones.

"Hey, Steve—"

"The Saints picked!" Eli says.

"No one cares," Sam Wilson says again.

"Steve—"

"Who do you care about, Wilson?"

"Steve!"

"What!"

Isaiah holds out Steve's phone. "You got a text."

The text is from Coulson. One word.

Chicago.

Literally as Steve is trying to process the message, his screen begins flashing with a call. A familiar Chicago area code. His heart pounds. "Hello?" He says, then blinks when the phone rings again. He
hits the answer button and tries again. "Hello?"

"Hello. Is this Steve Rogers?"

"Yes!" Steve gasps.

"You there, buddy?"

"This is Steve. Yeah. Yes."

"Hi, Steve. I'm gonna hand you over to Coach Smith, okay?"

"Okay!" Steve looks up and scans the room, dazed. Eli is quietly restraining his kid; Natasha is quietly restraining Clint; and Isaiah is quietly restraining Bucky.

"Hello, Steve?"

"Hi! This is Steve!"

"This is Lovie Smith with the Chicago Bears."

Bucky ends up hugging him so hard, Steve's feet leave the ground.

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**Chicago Bears @ChicagoBears** ● Apr 28
#Bears pick ASU QB Steve Rogers in 1st round of the #NFLDraft. Welcome to the #Bears family! #BearsDraft

**CBS Sports @CBSSports** ● Apr 28
IMAGE: Southeast State and American State players set aside differences to celebrate draft cbsprt.co/523BnS7

**ESPN @ESPN** ● Apr 28
IMAGE: With the 29th pick the @ChicagoBears select Steve Rogers, American State. #NFLDraft

**NFL on ESPN @ESPNNFL** ● Apr 29
#NFLDraft 1st Round Recap by conference: 9 SEC, 8 NAC, 6 Big 12, 4 Big Ten, 3 Pac-10, 3 ACC, 1 Big East

**SportsCenter @SportsCenter** ● Apr 29
UPDATE: San Diego Chargers trade up for Luke Cage, LB, American State in Round 2 #NFLDraft

Friday comes and goes, as do the second and third rounds of the draft. The extended Bradley family disperses. Clint and Natasha drive home to Simon to fulfill academic obligations that no longer apply to Steve or Isaiah.

What a feeling. What a surreal thing. The day after the storm, indeed. For your college career to end, not with a graduation, but with a two-minute phone call.

Rookie camp is literally days away.

Steve has every right to enjoy the most blissful weekend of his life—but instead, he can't get his stomach to stop churning. He barely sleeps on Friday night. He wakes up early Saturday morning. Everyone else devours stacks of pancakes for breakfast, and Steve hardly finishes one. His
teammates spend most of the day either in the kitchen baking or in the driveway playing basketball, and Steve is constantly biting his tongue as he tags along.

It pains Steve to spend so much time away from the TV. The last four rounds of the draft are today, and Bucky is one of the best available defensive players.

While they're waiting in line to build sandwiches for lunch, Steve leans in close over Sam's shoulder. "We all know the fourth round just ended, right?" he says under his breath.

Sam holds up his phone screen in response, displaying a live feed of the day's draft picks. Eli's not eating. In fact, Bucky is the only one who seems unfazed, halfway through a ham and swiss, talking Isaiah's ear off. Isaiah seems to be half-listening, staring at Steve while he taps his foot under the table.

Steve doesn't finish his sandwich.

After lunch, Bucky drags him outside to shoot more hoops. It's a struggle, but Steve tries to keep a level head. "Were you flirting with my roommate, in there?"

Bucky just laughs and banks an easy fifteen-footer.

"Buck!" Steve reprimands.

"What!" Bucky gives him these soaring, innocent eyebrows. "Like you never flirted with him."

"I don't flirt with teammates." Steve swipes for the ball, and Bucky dodges him easily. "Stop changing the subject."

"He has a twin," Bucky argues. "There's two of him."

"You live with twins!"

Bucky picks up his dribble and screws up his face. "What."

"Oh, please."


"Thank you."

"Forgive me, but your roommates are kind of more my type."

"Me and Isaiah aren't exactly the same type!" Steve squawks.

This is about the time Bucky dissolves into laughter. The basketball rolls gently into a hydrangea bush. "Steeeve," Bucky says, grinning, as he slides his arms around Steve's waist. "What's got you so tense."

"What time is it?" Steve answers.

"I dunno, I left my phone inside."

"Feels like it's six o'clock already." That is blatantly untrue. The sun is still high in the sky. But Steve is just so antsy.

"Why are you freaking out," Bucky murmurs. His lips brush against Steve's chin.
Steve fiddles with the Tundra logo on Bucky's T-shirt. The weather finally warmed up once April came into full swing; they've been wearing short sleeves outside for almost a month.

"I'm nervous about the draft, Buck."

"Nervous." Bucky slides his hands under the back of Steve's shirt. "You're a Bear. Nothin' to be nervous about."

"Bucky."

He runs his fingernails up Steve's back in response. "It'll be fine," he says, before leaning in to kiss Steve. "You're wound so fucking tight."

"Yeah, well. You're … not."

Bucky laughs, then kisses him again. "What? You can't even handle spending two nights apart?"

(Ice and Eli had explained the bunking regulations during the drive over:

"No couples will be sleeping together outta wedlock under Mama's roof," Isaiah had recited.

"Don't take it personal," Eli had added, peeking through the rear-view from the driver's seat; "Me and Kate don't even sleep on the same floor, and we got two kids, yeah."

"Wait, wait, wait," Steve had interrupted. "Your mother knows about us?"

"My mother knows everything, Captain." Ice had said. "I think she knew before I knew."

Bucky had covered his mouth so no one could see him laughing.

The resulting sleeping arrangements: Steve on an air mattress in Eli's room; Bucky on an air mattress in Isaiah's room; Sam on the living room couch; and Kate with her girls in the guest room.)

Bucky catches Steve in another kiss right off the Richter scale. Steve gives in for a few seconds. Minutes. So sue him.

"You're a menace," Steve mumbles, but doesn't stop kissing back.

"I'm just trying to help you relax," Bucky says.

Steve's muscles dance under Bucky's fingers, warm and prickling and alive. It's like dragging the palm of your hand across unmowed grass, except--every inch of your skin. A coarse shiver from your pelvis to your neck. Steve remembers reading somewhere that the tips of your fingers have the most nerve endings, packed all tight into a tiny space, and they feel every feeling times ten. He wonders what the hell Bucky must be feeling, if that's the case. He wonders how many nerve endings are in the tip of your tongue, if they're not compromised by taste. Bucky tastes like Diet Coke. His tongue is cold. His tongue is always cold.

"Um. Not that I want to interrupt or anything."

Steve and Bucky spring apart.

Sam Wilson is no more than five feet away, eyes fixed on their shoes, eyebrows reaching for his hairline.

Sam holds out a cell phone. "You, uh, have a phone call."

Bucky gapes at him.

Suddenly, the last three months careen to a halt in Steve's brain. "Sam, is that—"

"I think you should take it," Sam says bluntly.

Bucky does. "Hello?" he says. And, without further explanation, he sits down hard right in the middle of the driveway. "I'm good. Oh my god. I'm—How are you doing, Coach?"

Steve's mind still hasn't caught up to his body when, all of a sudden, he is hugging Sam Wilson and spinning him in circles. He lets him go just as fast (it's a miracle Sam doesn't crash into the hydrangea), covers his mouth with both hands, and stares at Bucky.

God, he's beautiful.

"Yes, sir," Bucky says. "Thank you sir."

Instantly, Bucky's face crumples and he bursts into tears.

Steve drops to his knees. He presses their foreheads together. He can hear the voices on the other end of the line, tinny and bright, tinkling with congratulations and encouragement and excitement and all the standard scripted welcome-to-the-team narrative. Bucky sobs through the whole thing. He barely manages a thank-you here and there.

Steve can hear something about training camps.

Bucky cries harder. He pulls the collar of his shirt up to cover his mouth and nose. His answers become more muffled.

"I will sir. Thank you—thank you, sir. I will. Good-bye."

Distantly, Steve hears screaming, and his teammates appear in his peripheral vision shouting something about Panthers and Round 6. Kate is riding on Eli's shoulders. Monica swims around everyone's ankles, feeding off the excitement.

Bucky's shirt is soaked with tears, and so is Steve's, for that matter. They're wrapped together in the middle of the Bradleys' cracked driveway in Northern Illinois, rocking gently, while Bucky chokes out these great, heaving sobs and Steve soaks it all in. It's fantastic.

Bucky mumbles something against Steve's shoulder.

"What was that?"

"You good?" Bucky manages through the tears.

Steve rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I'm good, you dork." He presses a kiss into Bucky's hair. "Thanks for coming with me, you know?"

Bucky jerks a little, laughing and crying at the same time. "We're doing this."

"Yeah. We're doing this together."

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Chapter End Notes

the end.

when i started writing this, it was still football season. now it's baseball season. it has been a hell of a ride.

this is a huge thing, so please know that you all have my hugest thanks for reading. thank you to the handful of people who held my hand on tumblr messenger when i needed encouragement late at night, usually about irrelevant bullshit. thank you to everyone who left kudos and bookmarks and comments--THE COMMENTS!--you are all way too nice. thanks for reading my thing.

there's a sequel in the works, officially.

you can also find me on tumblr at queenmabscherzo.

Works inspired by this one
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