The History of a Family

by boombangbing

Summary

In 1916, Bucky's mother arrived in New York with her father, the future owner of one of the most popular speakeasies in Brooklyn. In 1927, Bucky met Steve Rogers and realised there was a world beyond that of favoured son and the clean streets of his neighbourhood.

The Barnes family, 1916-present.

Notes

This whole fic grew out of a vague idea I had when I first watched TWS, that Bucky's slicked back hair in the flashback made him look like an old movie gangster. Then it grew into a lot more than that. I pulled some stuff from the comics, but it veers significantly from 616 canon. Other minor characters/pairings will be added as I post chapters.
As a general note, Bucky (and others) express prejudiced opinions from time to time, but I will warn more specifically on each chapter.
His ma always said that he had parents with a love story; she was proud to have married for love. In 1916, her kind papa, Lucio Barone, had decided to move the family from their native Sicily to New York, and his beautiful eighteen year old daughter Florentina was happy to go. Her fiancé, the handsome Agostino, had travelled with them to marry in the New World, but beautiful Florentina had only settled for him at the behest of her father and found handsome Agostino's manner belittling, and his eye roving.

On the Lower East Side, she met the wiry Eugen while exploring the city alone against her father's wishes. He was pouring water onto the sidewalk outside a shoemakers and scrubbing the concrete with a wire brush. He splashed her lovely blue walking suit with disgusting muddy water, and looked up with horror at her dripping visage.

“He was the spit of you,” Ma always said to her beloved son.

Her fury was quickly quelled at the sight of him. He stood up and tried to smooth down his tatty shirt to no avail. His eyes fell on her fantastic turban with its single ostrich feather; she puffed herself up and lifted her chin, and... he laughed.

“I am sorry,” he said in heavily accented English, “I have never seen hat like that.”

“It was very expensive,” she insisted. She spoke English much better than he did, she had tutors throughout her girlhood.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Here, you get robbed. I walk you to better place?”

He walked her out of the Lower East Side and she was in love.

Her papa was dismayed to learn that she now wished to marry a poor Romanian boy with a dirty face and a quiet temperament, but kind Lucio couldn't deny his beautiful daughter, and so handsome Agostino was dispatched back to Italy and Florentina was married. Wiry Eugen's surname was unpronounceable to the common American and Lucio sought to assimilate the family into America, so Barone became Barnes and Eugen became George Barnes. Florentina took the name Winifred among friends, but never with family. When asked about his former surname, George would shrug, look over his newspaper with his little round glasses, and say he couldn't remember, so long ago.

On March 10th, 1917, the first true Barnes was welcomed into the world – perfect James Buchanan, named for a president of Florentina and George’s beloved new country (he commiserated over presidential names with Steve years later, who said that his own parents had considered Ulysses instead of Grant, so he thought himself lucky). On December 24th, 1917, Rebecca Pearl Barnes was born, a little small but perfect nonetheless. Later, the twins came, but Bucky never found stories about them very interesting.

Bucky's earliest memories were of his grandfather's club, The Baron in Vinegar Hill. Lucio had once been known as the Baron of Sicily, and now, despite the name change, he became the Baron once again. Bucky's mother had a delusion that she would be a famous singer one day; she never would, but her father let her take the stage as often as she wanted. George had Bucky and Becky on his lap at the back of the club, puffing away on a cigarette, while Florentina sang a song that Bucky never knew and George could never remember. It was January 17th, 1920, the last night before the
Eighteenth Amendment came into effect. Prohibition, Lucio's favourite thirteen year period.

By the time Bucky and Becky were six, they both knew how to make bathtub gin and malt liquor just as good as Grandpa's boys, they both knew how to use and disassemble handguns. Their parents didn't let them see most of what Grandpa did, but they knew anyway. Ma liked to think she was a star, Papa was a shoemaker, toiling all day in his little shop, and Grandpa was a criminal. He didn't break many laws himself, aside from the liquor hidden in the cellar underneath the club, he had people to do that for him. Enforcers. Bucky saw the bloodied fists, the whispered conversations, the money passed under the table to the beat cop that walked up and down their street.

They lived in the biggest house in Park Slope. Bucky was taught to play the piano by his tutor, Becky was enrolled in the best ballet schools. Bucky took up baseball, Becky sang like an angel in the local church choir. Bucky played chess with their father, Becky took pictures of the family with the camera Lucio had gifted her for Christmas.

Lucio lived on the top floor of the house. They knew not to go up there without permission, when his 'friends' were visiting, but the days that he did let them come up were the best of their childhood. He had all sorts of trinkets, pictures of their late grandmother, stories about the old country. He was reluctant to teach them Italian, but could deny his beautiful grandchildren just as little as he could his daughter. He played old records on his gramophone, grand operatic compositions that Becky danced to. Lucio always gave her a standing ovation.

Each weekday morning, Lucio would drive the two to school, Bucky to Trinity and Becky to the Convent of the Sacred Heart; he didn't trust any of the staff with the children. No expense was spared in their education; by eight Bucky was reading Shakespeare and Arthur Conan Doyle, and Becky was completing workbooks full of algebra. Their teachers loved them.

In 1926, the twins were born, named Florence and Eugene for their parents' former names. Ma was so happy when she told Bucky and Becky that she was having twins, but Bucky didn't feel the same delight – he understood then why mother was getting so fat, and once they were born, he felt scorn at them getting such special names. Why wasn't he named after his father? Why wasn't Rebecca Florence? The house was filled with the crying and wailing of babies, no more of his mother's voice singing her favourite songs. Grandpa carried the babies all over the house, Dad played peekaboo and let them pull his glasses from his face. Grandpa's operas were no longer played for fear of waking the babies, Bucky was directed to run around outside when he had energy to burn, and was no longer allowed to slide down the bannister.

Ma didn't like Bucky straying too far outside of Park Slope, Grandpa even less. He did so anyway, taking a trolley to Red Hook one Saturday afternoon. Ma was especially disdainful of Red Hook, filled with its slums and 'lowlifes'.

He bought a bag of candy from a dirty looking candy store and walked down the street. There were beggars at every other doorway, grizzly and beaten by the sun, and he stowed his candy in his bag. There were lines of clothes stretched out in the space between buildings, fixed at either window, the sidewalk was cracked and hard to traverse, cars wheels dipped down into large potholes on the road, the drivers swearing profusely.

Maybe Ma was right.

His stomach started to feel wobbly, fear seeping in. He turned to retrace his steps to the station when he heard groans and muffled blows coming from an alleyway. They were familiar sounds, heard from his bedroom window followed by his Grandpa's low order, “I better never see you around here again.”
Ma always told him not to get into fights, but Bucky figured it couldn't hurt to take a peak. He peered around the corner of saw two kids – his age, he figured – wailing on a little kid. A really little kid!

“I ain't giving you nothin'!” the little kid shouted at them.

“Hey!” Bucky called and turned the corner into the alleyway.

“Stay outta this,” one shouted back. “Ain't none of your business!”

“You shaking down little kids is my business,” he yelled and advanced on them.

Grandpa had taught him how to fight, and baseball made his arms strong, so the punch he sent the first kid's way wasn't any trouble. The second came out swinging a brick towards his head while the first had an iron grip on the front of Bucky's shirt. The little kid picked up the lid of a trash can and hit the second kid across the back; Bucky ducked out of the way and the brick hit the first kid in the face. Not hard enough to send him to the hospital, but hard enough to make him burst into tears. The two of them tore off.

“Yeah, keep running!” he yelled at their backs, then turned to the little kid. “You okay?”

“I woulda worn 'em down eventually,” the kid said, pushing back a mop of blond hair.

Bucky laughed. “Yeah, when they died of old age.”

The kid's face hardened. “You wanna go a round or two?” he said, lifting his bloodied knuckles.

“Cool it, kid,” Bucky said, spreading his hands. “I come in peace, only trying to help.”

“Yeah, well, I didn't need your help,” the kid muttered. He had a funny sounding voice, his vowels more pronounced than Bucky's. He sounded like the guys who worked for Grandpa at the club.

“All right, I just don't like seeing older kids beat on the little ones.”

“I ain't that little! I'm eight years old.”

Bucky laughed again. “You're not eight!”

“The hell I ain't!” the kid insisted. “Born July 4th, 1918!”

“Aw right, aw right, kid! I believe you! Truce?” he stuck his hand out. “James Buchanan Barnes. My friends call me 'Bucky.'”

The kid looked suspicious, but shook his hand anyway. “Steve,” he said. “I ain't seen you around here before, you new?”

“I live over in Park Slope.”

Steve widened his eyes. “Wow, what're you doing here? Sightseeing?”

“I guess so.”

“I'll be your tour guide for twenty cents,” Steve said, looking up at Bucky. He had to be four foot nothing, the top of his head only reached to Bucky's shoulder.

Bucky thought it over. “I got some candy?”
“Deal,” Steve said, and smiled.

Steve gave him the tour. The corner store sold candy half price after six pm on Sundays, the bakery gave away its stale food a half hour before closing, the kosher butcher fed stray dogs in the alleyway, Abraham at the news stand let kids read the funnies without paying so long as they didn't crumple the newspapers.

“I learn my reading and writing in there,” he said, pointing across the street to a run down church.

“That's a church,” Bucky said.

“Yes,” Steve said, popping the 'P'. “Nuns run a school for poor kids. Where d'you go to school?”

“Trinity,” he replied, beginning to feel embarrassed. “In Manhattan.”

Steve whistled. “You are lost.”

Bucky shrugged, looking down at his shoes. Steve had a beat up pair of Oxfords on that looked far bigger than his feet could be. There was a corner of newspaper sticking out of the left shoe.

“Why've you got newspaper in your shoes?”

“The paper makes them fit better.”

“Why don't you get shoes that fit?”

“Why don't I get a pony?” Steve said, and scuffed the tip of his shoe against the sidewalk. “cause I'm poor.”

“Oh.” Bucky had a pony, out at a stables on Long Island. Rebecca had one too, and Ma was talking about getting two little ones for the babies. “Sorry.”

“sall right,” Steve muttered, and gestured to an obvious tenement. “This is where I live.”

“Oh,” Bucky repeated.

“Hey,” a beggar sitting at the base of the stairs called. Bucky tensed and looked away.

“Hey, Billy,” Steve said, and began to approach him. Ma always told Bucky to never talk to strange people like that.

“How's your mother doing?” Billy asked. Bucky willed himself not to edge away. The man didn't have any teeth.

“She's doing good. Is your chest feeling better?”

“It's all good, those pills fixed me right up. Thank her for me, will ya?”

Steve smiled. “Sure.” He looked back at Bucky. “I better get home. I don't know why you'd come back here, but maybe I'll see you around.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bucky muttered. Steve climbed the stairs with some trouble and slipped through the front door as a woman with a lot of poorly applied make up and bright red hair came out. He looked at Billy, who smiled back, his tongue poking out between his teeth.

“Honey, you're the cutest little thing I've ever seen,” the woman said, and patted him on the head as
she passed.

He watched her leave, then felt around in his bag for the brown bag of candy. “Um,” he murmured, and approached Billy. Billy kept smiling, dirty tendrils of hair framing his face. Bucky placed the bag of candy on the ground and quickly backed up.

“Hey, thanks, kid!” Billy said and dug his dirty nails into the candy.

Bucky ran all the way back to the bus.

Becky thought he was dumb for going to Red Hook by himself, but she didn't tell on him. She was good like that, she could keep a secret.

After his trip, the streets of Park Slope seemed boring, and his school even more so. He wondered what it was like to be taught in a church by nuns. When he was little, he was scared of their habits, but he wasn't dumb like that any more. He took some more trips to Red Hook on the weekends, sometimes Becky even came. Ma and Dad were too wrapped up in the twins to notice.

Playing with Steve was fun, he knew about all sorts of things, used words that Bucky wasn't supposed to use, like 'fuck' and 'shit' and 'Goddamn'. He crossed himself after he said 'Goddamn', though. Some of his lady neighbours were prostitutes. Bucky didn't know what a prostitute was, and Steve said they were real pretty women who brought home lots of friends.

He knew all the places to explore, like the Atlantic Basin where they could watch cargo ships coming in with their goods. Steve speculated that they were bringing treasures from distance lands, Bucky figured they were smuggling alcohol in from Europe. When the workers caught them looking, they chased them off, and Steve burst into such a coughing fit that Bucky thought it might never stop. When they were far enough away from the sailor for him to stop yelling, Bucky sat Steve down and held his shoulders.

“What's wrong?”

“'sall right, 'sall right,” Steve struggled out. “Asthma.”

“Asthma?” Bucky had heard the word before. Grandpa said only head cases suffered from that.

“What do I do?”

“Nothin', nothin', I just gotta——” He pounded on his chest, making gagging noises in the back of his throat for a minute before leaning over and coughing something up. It looked all white and slimy.

“Ugh, gross,” Bucky said.

Steve smiled. “Mucus,” he said.

Bucky gagged at the thought of it.

In the summer, right around Steve's birthday, he came up like usual but couldn't find him anywhere. He checked all their favourite places, until he eventually came upon Billy, who told him Steve was sick and his momma was keeping him inside. This went on for months, he missed his birthday entirely and at the end of September Billy told him sombrely that Steve was real sick and the prostitute with red hair called Eva told him that she'd pass on the little toys he brought as get well presents, but he wasn't allowed up because Steve's ma didn't want anyone exciting Steve in his condition.
He wondered if Steve would die of his mysterious illness. Bucky had never faced death before, except the animals in the garden that his cat killed, but Bucky had cried over the poor little birds before Grandpa disposed of them. Grandpa and his parents noticed his mood but he couldn't tell them why because he shouldn't have been in Red Hook in the first place. Becky started to fret too, she liked the little kid, he was nice and drew her pictures. Their parents despaired at their two serious little children.

In late October, he went to Red Hook on a Sunday and bought a bag of candy as usual. The shopkeepers on the street recognised him now and said hello when he passed by. People didn't really talk to him in Park Slope.

“Kid, kid!” Eva called out to him from across the road. She looked like she was in her Sunday best, in a big hat and fur coat. She ran across the road to him and grabbed his hand. “Sarah said you could come visit Steve today!”

She dragged him all the way to the tenement and up the steps. He'd never been inside before, Steve always said goodbye at the stoop. Inside, the wallpaper was peeling, the carpet spongy, and the place smelled like piss. There was an old woman standing at the doorway of a room on the ground floor, puffing away. Dogs were barking from inside.

“Hi, Dot!” Eva said as she ran up the stairs with Bucky. She took him up to a door and knocked on it. Bucky hardly knew what was happening.

A woman opened the door. She was little, only a few inches taller than Bucky, skinny as a beanpole, deep bags under her eyes. She had the same angular face as Steve, dark blonde hair falling around her shoulders.

“Sarah, this is Bucky,” Eva said, patting him on the back.

Sarah smiled. “Steve's been talking about you a lot.”

“Mam!” Steve yelled from inside. His voice sounded hoarse.

She laughed. “You can come in for a little while, so long as he doesn't get too excited,” she said and let him into the room. It was a kitchen, or close to it, anyway. There was a bathtub against the wall with a piece of wood over the top of it. They didn't have a refrigerator. Beyond the kitchen there was a doorway with windows either side, which seemed funny because they were on the inside. Bucky walked through to the other room, which was a mix of bedroom and living room, a single bed and a cot in the corner, a chair and a table. Steve got up off the bed.

He looked sicker than Bucky had ever seen anyone look. His skin was yellowy, face gaunt, cheekbones standing in sharp relief. Bucky didn't think there was much more weight Steve could possibly have lost.

“Hi,” he said. “Are you better now?”

“I'm okay,” Steve replied. “Thank you for the toy cars.” He gestured to a small collection of metal cars on the table.

“No problem.” He looked around the room, suddenly shy. “What was wrong?”

“Scarlet fever and then rheumatic fever.”

Bucky knew what scarlet fever was. Becky had had it when they were little. The doctor made it better. He didn't know what rheumatic fever was, though. “What's rheumatic fever?”
“It makes your joint swell up and hurt, and you get real tired.”

“But you're okay now?”

Steve nodded. “Uh huh. I'm still a little tired, but I'm okay.”

“Sit down, honey,” Sarah called from the door where she was still talking to Eva. Steve sighed and sat back down on the bed. Bucky wasn't sure if he should sit down too, so he stayed standing and looked around the room again. There were some drawings tacked onto the walls and a stack of books on the floor. Bucky crouched down and looked at them.

“What kind of books do you read?”

Steve got up and sat down on the floor next to him. “Whatever people give me. I also go to the library a lot when I'm not sick. Sister Margaret Catherine brought a bunch a few weeks ago. She said she didn't want me to forget how to read.” He scowled. “As if I'm gonna forget. The landlady gave me this one. It's a baby book. I only read it 'cause I didn't have anything else.” He shoved the copy of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* away with a blush rising to his cheeks.

Bucky thought about the room full of books in his house. “What kind of books do you like?”

“I like books about finding treasure and having adventures. And pirates! This one is my favourite.” He showed Bucky a battered copy of *Treasure Island*. “I like the illustrations too. I'd like to do that one day.”

“Have you read *War of the Worlds*?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah! And *The Time Machine*! I'd love to travel to the future!”

“Yeah, me too!” Bucky grinned. “Hey, I saw them bringing big heavy boxes off the ships at the docks. I think they're full of gold.”

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When he went back home, he filled up a box with books from his shelf, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* among others. Becky gave him her copy of *Little Women*.

“This is a girl's book,” he said, screwing up his face.

“If he's smart, he'll like it,” she replied. “If he's like you, he won't.”

Steve tried to make him take the books back when Bucky brought them the following weekend, but eventually settled on promising to return them when he was finished reading them. Sarah insisted he stay and have his dinner with them, potatoes and some kind of flavourless meat. Bucky thought about all the food at home, oranges and cakes and cheeses, and his body that Ma described as 'husky'. Steve was not 'husky'.

It started snowing in November and Steve wasn't allowed out of the building, not that the building was much warmer inside. Bucky told him he should come to Bucky's house next time; Steve had to beg for days for Sarah to agree, and send him out with approximately one hundred scarves on and a hat. Steve was furious.

Bucky had been vague in asking permission to have a friend over. It had never been a problem before, so long as Grandpa had enough forewarning to hide anything he needed to hide, but Bucky
knew that Ma would get steamed up if she knew where they met. On the other hand, she was too wrapped up in the babies to notice Bucky's vagueness.

“Jeeesus,” Steve muttered when they reached the house. He crossed himself.

Bucky felt his cheeks warm, and ran up the steps, ducking his head a little. He unlocked the door and held it for Steve. Steve nearly tripped over his own two feet staring up at the ceiling.

“I never been anywhere this big before,” he said. He looked down at his dirty shoes. “Should I take off my shoes?”

“Um, yeah...”

“Master Barnes, would you and your friend like some refreshments?” the butler asked from the drawing room door. Steve froze halfway to his shoes.

“No, that's fine,” Bucky said quickly. “We'll be in my room if, uh, Ma asks.”

“Very good,” he said, and receded back into the drawing room.

“Who's that?” Steve whispered behind Bucky.

“Davis, the butler, nothing to worry about.”

Steve's eyes went round like saucers, but he pulled his shoes off and followed Bucky up the stairs to his room. Steve was silent as he looked over the room, and Bucky wished that he'd hid the toybox under the bed, or taken off the dumb patterned quilt, or closed the door to his closet full of clothes.

“You have a nice room,” Steve said.

“Thanks... Do you want to play with my train set?”

Steve had never seen a train set without the glass of a toystore window in the way, so that kept them good and occupied for an hour before Becky stomped into the room and scowled at Bucky.

“Haven't you even shown him the house?” she said, like Bucky was dumb. “You have to show guests around the house.”

“We're playing,” he argued.

“You're being rude,” she replied. “Come on, Steve.”

Steve scrambled up, then looked back at Bucky with a grin. “I wanna see the house, you might never invite me back.”

Bucky glared at the back of his sister's head. “I'll invite you back,” he mumbled and followed the two out the door.

Becky marched them around the house like a drill sergeant. She showed Steve the drawing room, and the living room, the parlour, the dining room, and the library (which Steve loved the most), and then onward back upstairs to explore the bedrooms and playrooms. She pointed out things she felt were of special interest, like her favourite lamp or the terrifying oil painting of their great grandmother.

“This is the twins' room,” she said, gesturing into the floral wallpapered bedroom. She was more fond of them than Bucky was, but she still didn't waste too much time on them.
“Are you two twins as well?” Steve asked.

Bucky pulled a face. It wasn’t the first time it had been suggested, they had the same round face, dark hair and blue eyes, and they spent a lot of time together, or they had before he became friends with Steve. She was a little taller than him, but Ma promised him that boys just grew slower than girls and that he’d be taller in the end.

“No, I’m older,” he said. “I was born in March, she was born in December.”

“Oh, Irish twins.”

Becky frowned. “We're not Irish, we're Italian and Romanian.”

Steve laughed and shook his head. “Nah, it means siblings born in the same year who aren't real twins. It's Irish on accountta how quick Irish people have kids.”

“Oh.” She didn't like people knowing things that she didn't. “Well, that sounds dumb. Let's get some food from the kitchen.”

She bargained with the cook for some lemon cake that Cook had made for dinner that evening, and they ran off to the living room to eat it and listen to the radio. *House of Myths* was on, and they laughed at the jokes that Bucky understood enough to know were about sex but not enough to know what they meant. He didn't hear the door creak open.

“Cuccioli, you know I don't like you listening to this,” Ma said behind them.

Bucky grimaced. *Puppies*; he hated when Ma called them that. “It's almost over,” he said.

“Mm, are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Bucky sighed and got up, Steve stumbling up beside him. “Ma, this is Steve.”

“Hello, Mrs Barnes,” Steve said, and held out his hand. Ma took it and looked him up and down while Steve shuffled his feet. Having seen his other clothes, Bucky knew Steve was dressed up in his finest, but the hems of his pants were still frayed and his socks showed evidence of being darned many times over. Ma pursed her lips.

“Hello, Steve, are you staying for dinner?”

“Um...” Steve murmured, and glanced at Bucky, who smiled. “If that's okay.”

“Of course it is. Are you allergic to anything?”

Steve shook his head. “No, ma'am.”

“I'll have Cook prepare dinner for when your father gets home,” Ma said to Bucky and Becky. “No more dirty radio.”

“Yes, Ma,” they chorused.

Dad arrived home at six thirty like he always did, and by sixty forty five the five of them were seated in the breakfast room, which they used for casual dining. Grandpa had important business that was going to keep him occupied all evening. Bucky squirmed in his seat as Cook served lamb, mashed potatoes, peas with butter, and bread rolls. Steve's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets at the spread.
Steve wasn't very good with his knife and fork, he held the knife too firmly in his right hand and found it difficult to cut the meat. Bucky's parents didn't comment.

“Where do you live, Steve?” Ma asked.

Steve struggled to swallow a big piece of bread and cleared his throat. “Red Hook, ma'am.”

Ma's eyes narrowed. *Shit*. “And how did you meet James?”

Steve spared a quick glance at Bucky; everyone knew not to tell their mothers about scrapping, so he used the same lie he told his own mother, “We met at the candy store.”

“Mmmh, in Red Hook?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Steve replied. It wasn't his fault, he didn't know. Bucky couldn't tell him that Red Hook was a shameful place to be, that you shouldn't talk to bums or prostitutes. Ma's eyes drifted to Bucky and he knew he was going to get it later. Dad placidly ate his potatoes.

“And what does your father do?”

“He's dead, he died before I was born, in the Great War. He was a hero, ma'am.”

Bucky looked at his father. Dad never fought in any war, he hid on a boat with the rats and snuck into America because he was an orphan and the government didn't want orphans. Grandpa had smoothed over Dad's illegal status and he was naturalised when Bucky was seven. It would have been earlier but Dad took years to learn English properly. Dad had never been a hero.

“My ma's a nurse,” Steve continued. “She looks after all the sick people in the neighbourhood as well.”

“That's very admirable,” Ma said. “We'll have to have her round for tea.”

Steve smiled. “She'd like that, we don't got much food at home, nothin' like this.” He snapped his mouth shut, and ducked his head.

“I'll call her, are you on a party line?”

“We don't have a telephone, but I'll tell her.”

Ma smiled and nodded. “All right.”

It was long past dark when Steve left, and Ma insisted that Dad walk with them to the bus stop. Dad questioned how Steve would get home at the other end, but he promised that his 'uncle' Billy was going to be there to meet him. Dad was easy to convince, as usual. He'd always shrug his shoulders when Bucky would get difficult about what he wanted to eat or where he wanted to go on the weekend. Path of least resistance, that was his father.

They walked half the way home in silence before Dad said, “You weren't supposed to go to Red Hook.”

“I know. Will Ma be mad?”

“Probably,” he replied. “But she'll get over it.”

“She'll stop me from going again, though.”
Dad shrugged. “Don’t tell her.”

Ma made them get ready for bed as soon as Bucky got home, for which Becky muttered under her breath at him. She hated going to bed before Grandpa got home. Ma insisted on tucking them both in, which she hardly did any more, and Bucky stated three times that he was old enough to put himself to bed.

“Topolino,” she said as Bucky tugged the bed covers from their hospital corners.

“Ma, stop calling me animal names,” he complained.

“But you are my little animal,” she said and started tickling him. He squealed and squirmed as she wrestled him under the covers. Finally, once he was all tucked in, she relented. “You were very bad not to listen to your mother, Jamie.”

He rolled his eyes; third person and a nickname he hated. “I know, Ma, I’m sorry.”

“Mmhm,” she murmured, and sat down on the edge of his bed. He felt the mattress bounce beneath him; the twins were almost a year old, but she was still big all over. Her cheeks were fuller and her body soft where it used to be skinny underneath her robe de style dresses. Bucky thought about Sarah Rogers and her sunken cheeks and tiny, skeletal hands. “I don’t tell you not to do things just to make your life hard.”

Bucky was fairly sure that was a lie, but he nodded anyway.

“You be careful when you go again,” she finished, and smiled when he looked at her with surprise. “I am not the ogre,” she said and kissed his forehead. “Goodnight, I love you, polpetto.”

He swore, she did that on purpose.

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For Becky’s tenth birthday party, Ma invited all of Becky’s class, and half of Bucky’s. At the breakfast table, Bucky asked if Steve could come too.

“The little Irish boy?”

Bucky groaned. “Ma! He’s just as American as me!”

Ma cast a look at Dad, who lifted his eyes from the paper and shrugged.

“All right, you can invite him. I still want to meet his mother, though.”

“She works a lot at the hospital,” he said.

She pursed her mouth and nodded. Ma didn’t think it was quite right for a mother to work.

Becky’s party was the last weekend before the Christmas break, and it was bitterly cold, frost everywhere and an icy wind blowing without respite. Bucky worried that Steve wouldn’t be able to make it, or would hurt himself or be suddenly struck down with rheumatic fever on the trolley, but he arrived early, knocking on the door at one in the afternoon. He had on a coat that was much too big for him; it also looked like it might be for a girl.

“It’s Eva’s jacket,” he said with a grimace. “It’s warm.”

“Steve!” Becky yelled, thundering down the stairs. Ma had dressed her up in shiny pink shoes with
white socks and a pink taffeta dress. Bucky had got off with just pants and a grey sweater. “Don’t say a word about this dress,” she added.

He shook his head and held out a brown paper wrapped present. “Happy birthday.”

She grinned. “Can I open it now?”

“Ma said you had to wait until after the cake,” Bucky reminded her.

She clicked her tongue. “I wasn't asking you, dogface.”

Steve handed the present over and she tore it open. It was a book; she flicked through the pages and Bucky saw the front cover, *When Patty Went to College*.

“It's about a, about a girl that goes to college.”

“I guessed,” she said. Bucky laughed.

“Oh. Well, it's, it's good, it was my ma's favourite when she was a kid. It's about girls, like *Little Women*. I-- I like that book.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Steve,” she said, and kissed him on the cheek. Steve went suddenly, violently red and made a thin squeaky sound.

“I made a card too,” he said, pulling something from his pocket, only he said it real quick so it was hard to make out. “Sorry, it got kinda crumpled.”

There was a delicate looking drawing of a birthday cake and balloons. Becky smiled wider. “It's really pretty,” she said, then kissed him on the other cheek.

About forty kids came to her party. They were all snooty kids that Bucky saw all day at school and they looked down at Steve, like their nice clothes made them morally superior to a scrawny Mick with newspaper in his shoes. Steve didn’t seem to notice. The only thing he reacted to was how big and scary Grandpa was, but Grandpa just shook his hand and told him he was a good influence on Bucky.

Cook made a whole bunch of food: pineapple upside down cake, chocolate jelly, chocolate caramels, lemon and raspberry neapolitan. Becky got all sorts of presents, books and toys and clothes, the kinds of things they always got. There was a magician and a clown, and Steve was bright-eyed and bouncing on his toes the whole afternoon.

“At three, Grandpa corralled all the kids into the living room for the magic show. Becky, Bucky, and Steve sat at the front, watching rabbits coming out of hats and wands collapsing. They watched with rapt attention until Steve started coughing. He quelled it for a minute before another fit took over and he scrambled up and left the room. Bucky thought he’d get it under control and come back in like when they were playing, but after a couple of minutes he could still hear coughing from the hallway. The magician was about to saw the pretty lady in half, which Bucky really wanted to see, but he knew he had to check on Steve. He got up quietly and followed Steve out.

Steve was sitting against a wall, shuddering with each cough, his shoulders drawing up to his ears. Bucky ran over to him and crouched down.

“Hey, are you okay?”
Steve shook his head. He sounded *awful*, the worst Bucky had ever heard; he could practically hear the gunk in Steve's chest. He pounded Steve on the back like Steve had told him to before, to break up the mucus and let Steve bring it up.

It didn't work. Steve's lips were starting to look blueish.

“What are you doing out here?” Becky said, scowling at them from the doorway. “You're missing the magician-- is Steve okay?”

“Get, get...” he stammered, “get Ma!”

Becky ran back into the room and returned a few seconds later with their parents. Ma dropped down beside them.

“What's wrong?” she asked. Steve was all curled up on himself now, his fingers digging into his darned socks.

Tears prickled in Bucky's eyes. “He has, he has asthma,” he said between gulps.

Dad touched Ma on the shoulder and bent down to look at Steve.

“Does he have medicine?” he asked. When Bucky didn't respond, he turned around and said, louder, “Bucky! Does he have any medicine?”

“I don't know,” Bucky said quietly.

“Did he bring a bag with him? Where is it?”

Bucky started to cry. “I don't know,” he said plaintively.

Dad turned back to Steve, put his arms around him and picked him up. He carried Steve swiftly to the kitchen, the three of them following close behind.

“Tina, is there any coffee left?”

What did Dad want with coffee at a time like this? He was useless, he couldn't do anything right.

“I think so...” Ma said, and peered into the pot. “Yes, there is.”

“Fill up measuring jug, all the way to the top,” he ordered. Bucky had never heard him sound so in charge. Ma did as she was told, and Dad put Steve down on a chair. “Give me jug, hold his head.”

Ma handed him the jug and stood behind the chair, holding Steve's head back. Dad pulled Steve's mouth open, muttered in a language Bucky didn't understand. He poured the coffee down Steve's throat and Becky took Bucky's hand and squeezed. Steve jerked and coughed some of it back up, which Dad dabbed away with his shirt sleeve, and slowly Steve's coughing subsided.

“Drink more,” Dad said, and held the jug to Steve's mouth. Steve wrapped his frail hands around it and drained the jug. “Do you have medicine?”

Steve lowered the jug and took a congested breath. “No, the neb—nebuliser ran out. Mam's trying to get more.”

“All right. I will make you some hot water and lemon.” Dad moved away and Ma took his place, crouching down beside Steve and touching his face, then rubbing his chest. He smiled shakily.
“How did you know to do that?” Becky burst out and dropped Bucky's hand.

“I had a brother with asthma,” Dad said, putting the kettle on the stovetop.

“We have an uncle?” Bucky said.

Dad looked back at them sadly. “No.”

After Steve had had some hot water and lemon and Ma had rubbed ginger on his chest, Dad decided that he'd drive Steve back home in the car. Bucky insisted on coming along, and Becky gave Steve a hug goodbye. Ma gave him a tupperware tub of caramels to take home for his mother.

When they arrived at Steve's tenement, he tried to say he could go up on his own but, amazingly, Dad didn't shrug and agree, but instead got out of the car and escorted them into the building.

“Say happy birthday to your sister for me,” Billy said as they passed him in the doorway.

“I will,” Bucky muttered. Dad gave him a look.

They climbed the stairs slowly to the second floor. Eva was there on the landing, smoking a cigarette in her negligee, her breasts very visible beneath the sheer fabric. “Kid! How was the party?”

“It was good,” Bucky said.

She grinned, then gave Dad a quick, appraising look. Dad nodded and knocked on Steve's door.

Sarah’s face turned ashen when Dad quickly explained the situation, and sent the two of them inside while the adults talked.

“I'm sorry I ruined the party,” Steve said sadly.

Bucky shook his head. “You didn't ruin it. I'm sorry all the excitement made your asthma so bad. I guess you won't want to come back again.”

Steve brightened. “Are you kidding? I've never gone in a car before!”

Dad called him back out a few minutes later and Eva winked at them as they went back downstairs.

“Was Mrs Rogers mad?” he asked.

“She was worried. Kids with health like Steve, they're fragile. And if they don't have money for medicines... That's a bad combination.”

Bucky nodded. Dad opened the front door and let him go first. “Are you going to tell Ma about...” He gestured vaguely. Billy smiled toothlessly and Bucky waved back.

Dad walked down the steps with him and turned back to look up at the building. “I lived in a place like this when I came here. Worse.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I was only a little older than you when I arrived. Thirteen. I lived in Jewish slums with people I didn't even know. I lived worse in Romania. The pogroms took your grandparents.” He sighed.

“Your mother doesn't mean to be judgemental, she is just not used to this type of life. It is a bad way to have to live, she is trying to look after you.”
“She should try harder, then,” Bucky said with thinking.

Dad looked down at him. “I should put you across my knee for that. Your mother loves you, and so do I.”

Bucky bit his lip and Dad looked away, up at the sky. “It's snowing,” he says. “If it is settles, we make snowmen tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Bucky said and smiled.

“All right, in the car,” Dad said and hurried Bucky back into the car.

When Bucky was older, he thought he never understood his father like he did on that day in December, 1927.
Warning: some anti-semitism and use of the word 'Negro' to refer to African American characters, which was considered by many to be the correct term at the time. Passing reference to suicide.

It wasn't long before the Barnes family and the Rogers family were firmly entwined with each other. Sarah wouldn't allow them to pay for the rent of a nice place for her and Steve to live, but she wasn't so proud as to turn down money for Steve's medicine, and so from 1928 on, he had a steady supply of Epinephrine. Bucky had his first of many sleepovers, taking over the entire living room and camping out with Steve on improvised beds made out of couch cushions. Becky wasn't invited.

Steve was real quick and figured out before long about the club and Grandpa's activities, but he didn't tell his ma. He told Eva, though, and she got a job as a singer on the quiet nights, and she'd let them in the back door to watch the performances, because Ma said the club wasn't a good place for boys their age to be. His first taste of alcohol swiped from the bar ended with him spewing and Steve giggling.

On October 29th, 1929, Grandpa and his parents and all the adults he saw out on the street got very uptight and stressed, and it took him longer than he'd ever admit to figure out that the 'Wall Street Crash' wasn't a car crash on Wall Street. Grandpa was angry and yelled a lot for the first few days, but a month later said that there were more customers in the club than ever.

“People always want to drink their sorrows away,” Dad said from behind his newspaper.

Grandpa thumped his hand on the breakfast table. “And a good thing too, George!”

Steve's clothes got even tattier and he seemed thinner and more pale than ever.

“One of my neighbours did himself in last night,” he told Bucky quietly on a cold afternoon in December. “Did his wrists in the tub.”

“Did you see?” Bucky said, and brushed snow from his face.

“Nah, Eva found him. She cried a lot, Mam gave her some pills and let her stay in our room.”

“Did you know him?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, he was a real nice guy, had a bunch of comic books he let me have.”

Other than that, the crash didn't affect him much; it wasn't until he was older that he realised that it wasn't just Steve's neighbour that killed himself, it was lots others besides, and it wasn't just Steve that got thinner and thinner.

When Bucky was thirteen, Becky still twelve, and Steve eleven, Becky decided that she didn't want to be called Becky any more. She barged into Bucky's room while he and Steve were playing with Bucky's toy soldiers and announced her plans.
Bucky pulled a face. “What else are you gonna be called?” he asked.

“Becca,” she said.

“That sounds dumb.”

“You sound dumb. Becky is a stupid name, I don't want to be all matchy-matchy with you. Sometimes Dad calls me Bucky by mistake.”

“That's because he doesn't remember your name.”

She wrinkled her nose and knocked over him and Steve's painstakingly accurate depiction of the battle of Bunker Hill with her foot.

“Hey!” he said.

She smiled sweetly. “Steve, what do you think?”

“I think it's a nice name, Becca,” he replied, a nice smile on his face.

“Thank you, Steve,” she said.

Bucky shoved him on the shoulder.

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Steve had more bouts of rheumatic fever, whenever he got too run down and when Bucky was allowed to visit, he mostly complained that he couldn't draw with his fingers all swelled up. Bucky thought it looked like how his Grandpa's hands looked sometimes, but he didn't say that. Because of his health, Steve had never gone to a normal elementary school, and learnt everything from his books and Sister Mary Catherine. Bucky's place at Trinity was assured, but when Sarah decided that Steve needed to go to school proper, she was able to get him enrolled in the local public high school at thirteen – the principal looked at some of Steve's writing and said he was as smart as a fourteen year old. Bucky thought that was right, even though he thought Steve was still too little to be in high school.

His fears bore out. On his first day, Steve came home with a split lip and two black eyes, and a story about a tenth grader who came to his rescue and got a split lip and two black eyes for his trouble. Steve thought Arnie Roth was swell for that.

Arnold Roth was a tall, stringy Jew with black hair and a Semitic nose who lived above his family's grocery store on Van Brunt with his parents and six siblings. His mother wore a headscarf and his father had a big beard and small round spectacles. Arnie wore his little hat – a kippah, Steve corrected Bucky once – all the time, even at school. Steve thought that was real brave.

Steve thought Arnie was a real nice guy. Bucky thought he should get friends his own age, but he begrudgingly accepted the guy's presence. He had to, Steve woulda been mad otherwise. Not mad, maybe, disappointed, like his ma always said, “I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed, James.”

Steve didn't do so well with school, though, even with his new best friend. He liked history and English, and his English teacher said his composition was good, and obviously he loved art, but he couldn't get the hang of math at all.

“I ain't gonna get this, Buck,” he complained, sitting on the edge of Bucky's bed. “All these numbers, they're just... they're just all numbers...”
“Lemme see,” Bucky said and slid the workbook over. It didn't look so hard.

“My teacher said if I don't get good at this, I'll have to go to trade school, do metalworking or somethin', but I ain't gonna be good at that, neither. I ain't gonna be good at any job. Gonna be a dumb Paddy the rest of my life...”

“Hey!” Bucky said. “Don't say stuff like that about yourself.” He took the pencil from Steve and started filling in the answers.

“What're you doing?” Steve said. “That's cheating! Bucky, you can't do that!”

“I'll teach you it, but you have to show them that you can do this stuff.”

“But I can't!”

“You will once I teach you, all right? You think I can't do that?”

Steve sighed. “I think I can't do that.”

Bucky slapped him on the back. “I'll get you there, don't worry.”

He did. Steve was probably never going to be Einstein, but by the end of the year, his teacher stopped threatening trade school and Sarah was proud at his report cards filled with Bs and Cs. Steve looked like he was going to bust open with happiness about that.

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On Steve's fourteenth birthday, Grandpa took them to watch the Dodgers play the Giants at Ebbets Field. Steve asked if Arnie could come, and Bucky told him it was his birthday and he could invite whoever he wanted.

Arnie wore his Goddamn kippah underneath the baseball caps Grandpa got them all. Bucky didn't like this kid one bit.

Bucky had never heard Steve holler as much as he did at that game. He yelled encouragement to the Dodgers and insults at the Giants, Grandpa joined in so Bucky did too. Apparently Arnie didn't like to shout, so he just watched. Steve had to suck away on his nebuliser to keep going, but he didn't seem to mind.

When the hotdog seller came around, Steve clamoured for one with lots of mustard. Arnie turned it down when Grandpa asked what he wanted.

Bucky leaned around Steve and sneered. “Is that a Jew thing?”

Arnie blinked as Steve's eyes got wide and he said, “Bucky!”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “I don't know if it's pork or not, better not to risk it.”

“What would happen if you ate it? Would you grow a second head? Go to Jew hell?”

“Bucky!” Steve said. He sounded pissed. “Don't say that, that's horrible!”

“We eat kosher so that we don't absorb the bad traits of non-kosher animals,” Arnie said, all flat and measured like he knew it by heart.

Grandpa swatted the back of Bucky's head. “Your pa's a Jew, have some respect, boy.”
“Sorry, Grandpa,” he muttered. Steve looked at him out of the corner of his eye, with a look of something like shame. He felt about an inch high.

Grandpa took them to the zoo later, not that Bucky deserved it, he was quick to add. Steve seemed okay, but it still weighed on Bucky's mind so while Steve was looking at the elk, Bucky turned to Arnie and said, “You're not sore, are you, about before?”

“It's okay,” he said. “Forget about it.”

“Really? That's it?”

Arnie sighed and adjusted his prissy white button down. “If you do it again, I'll, uh, I'll knock your teeth out. Is that better?”

Bucky smiled. “Guess it'll do.”

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In mid July, Becky-- 'Becca' had an audition with the Bolshoi Ballet Academy. If she got it, she'd be going to Moscow to train for four years. Ma didn't like the thought of it, she said girls weren't treated right in those places and she cried in the kitchen with Dad, while Bucky listened outside the door. But it had been Becca's dream her whole life – Ma wouldn't let her audition any earlier because she didn't trust them to educate her passerotta right; there was nothing worse a girl could be than dumb, she said – but she felt that fourteen was old enough.

Bucky didn't feel right about her going, the babies were six now, not babies any more, and Bucky would have to take on all the duties of an older sibling on his own.

She left early in the morning with Dad to travel into Manhattan for the audition – the judges were only going to be in New York for a few days, it was important to be on time. Bucky had plans to meet up with Steve and Arnie and go to the movie theatre near his house. It was hot as hell, so they came inside first and had some home made lemonade.

Ma got domestic when she was anxious.

They left the house with batches of chocolate caramels that were sure to melt before they got there when Dad's car pulled up and he and Becca got out. Bucky licked the chocolate of his fingers and stopped. Dad touched Becca briefly on the shoulder and nodded to the boys before going into the house.

“How'd it go?” he called.

“You have chocolate all around your mouth,” she said. Bucky wiped his mouth on the back of his wrist, then licked it clean. She grimaced.

“Did you get in?” Steve asked.

She paused and pursed her lips before beginning, “They said... they said I was excellent, but... too tall.”

“I'm sorry,” Steve said.

She sniffed and wiped at her face, shuffling her feet. Bucky knew what that meant; he shoved the package into Arnie's hands and hugged her. “They're dumb, Becky, don't take it hard.”
She cried, not much, but a little, before pushing him away and wiping at her face again. “It's Becca, dumbo.”

Arnie pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it out to her. She smiled at him and took it to dab at her face. “What are you guys doing?”

“We're going to the pictures.” Bucky paused a beat. “You wanna come?”

She shrugged. “What're you seeing?”

“Freaks,” he said.

“We could see somethin' else, though,” Steve added quickly. They could? Steve had been going on about seeing *Freaks* for weeks now.

“I want to see Red-Headed Woman,” she said.

“We could see both,” Steve said.

They saw both. They hid Steve behind them when they went up to the box office – they rarely cared about kids seeing things they shouldn't, but Steve was a surefire way to mark them as too young. *Red-Headed Woman* was on first, so they only bought tickets for that and Bucky planned to sneak them into *Freaks*, to the disapproval of Steve and Arnie. God, Steve found someone just as straight as him.

At the concession stand, he bought a big tub of popcorn and Becca got a bag filled with candy and said, sighing, “Nothing to stay thin for now.”

They sat in the middle row, Arnie, Becca, Bucky, and Steve at the end, and watched as Jean Harlow seduced her way through a line of men. Becca watched with rapt attention and Steve squirmed every now and then and stuck his hand into the tub of popcorn without taking his eyes off the screen. Bucky wasn't so sure about the whole thing.

When it was over and they shuffled out of the theatre, Steve suddenly burst out with, “Jean Harlow sure is pretty, isn't she?” When they were older, Steve told him that he'd had a kind of sexual awakening in that movie theatre seat.

*Freaks* scared the bejesus out of Bucky, not helped by Steve whispering 'one of us, one of us' behind him as they walked to a greasy spoon.

“Cut it out!” Bucky shouted, then grabbed Steve in a headlock and dragged him the rest of the way to the restaurant. “Will you cut it out?” he repeated, punctuating it by letting go and shoving Steve inside.

“I don't want no trouble!” the owner yelled at them as Steve grinned and tidied up his hair.

“We're no trouble, sir,” he said and gestured to a booth. They sat down and a waitress brought over menus and sullenly said that there were free refills on Coca Cola, the blue plate special was meatloaf with mashed potatoes and corn, and the Selectophone cost a nickel.

They sat facing each other, Steve and Bucky on one side, Rebecca and Arnie on the other. Bucky bit his tongue regarding what was kosher and what wasn't. They got a basket of fries to share.

“So, what you gonna do now?” Steve asked Becca.
“Eat my burger?” she said, eyebrows raised.

He ducked his head. “With school, I mean.”

She smiled. “I know what you meant. I guess I'll keep on at Sacred Heart and then go to college.”

“What do you want to study?” Arnie asked.

“Math, maybe, or music. I'm not sure. I was pretty set on ballet.”

“You can still dance, just, uh...” Steve started, then cleared his throat. “Not professionally, I guess...”

She sighed. “That makes me feel real good, Steve.” Steve grimaced and Bucky patted him on the back. “What about you, Arnie?”

“Medicine, probably, don't think my mother would let me do anything else.”

Becca kicked Bucky under the table. He leant down and rubbed his leg. “What? Jeez.”

“You next.”

“I dunno. English, maybe? Or History? Shit, I dunno.” He never really thought about college more than idly. Grandpa said he'd go to Harvard or Yale, he seemed sure of that. That would mean having to leave home, and he wasn't so sure about that.

“You're a fountain of wisdom, Buck,” she said, and looked at Steve. He stopped with his meatloaf halfway to his mouth.

“What?” He glanced around the table. “Aw, come on, I ain't going to college. I mean--” He smiled. “I am not going to college.”

“Why not, you're smart,” Arnie said. Bucky pursed his lips, though he didn't disagree. Steve could do just as well as him at college, probably better. “Mr Hensley has your paintings up all over the art room.”

“I don't need college for that. Anyway, I'd never pass an entrance exam.”

“That's not true!” Bucky said, and gave him a little shove. “Hey, that's not true.”

Steve just shrugged and went back to his meatloaf. Bucky didn't like it when Steve talked about himself like that, like he was no good just because he was little. He was the best guy Bucky knew.

Becca got up and looked at the Selectophone. “Anyone got a nickel?”

Arnie dug around in his pockets and found one. He got up and joined Becca, and they chose a record, Fats Waller, Bucky thought. He played at the club a lot, let Bucky listen to him practice a few times. If Bucky could play like that, well, he'd be pretty swell.

Becca started singing quietly, putting words to the tune. “I know for certain the one I love, I'm through with flirtin', you that I'm thinkin' of...”

“You could go to college,” Bucky said. “We could go together.”

Steve laughed. “Buck, we ain't going the same places. That's okay, I'm not sore about it. Maybe I'll join a freakshow. Gooble gobble, gooble gobble.” He got right in Bucky's face, grinning. Bucky pushed him and they tussled for a bit, until the owner hollered at them to cool it. When they came up
for air, there was a girl standing by the table; Steve started.

She was nice to look at, a little blonde with finger waves and a checked orange skirt. “I've seen you around here,” she said.

“Me?” Steve said.

She blinked and jerked her chin at Bucky. “Him.”

“Oh,” Steve said, and looked back at his plate.

“Do you live around here?” she continued.

“Nearby.” Becca and Arnie were watching and Bucky sent a quick glance their way. “You?”

“I live on Windsor. My name's Belle. What's yours?”

“Bucky.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Your parents named you Bucky?”

“James,” he said. “No one calls me that, but that's my name.”

“James.” She smiled. “Is the priss your girlfriend?”

“The priss?” He looked around, and Becca waved. “That's my sister.”

“Good.” Someone called her name, and Belle looked back for a second before smiling down at him. “Maybe I'll see you around.”

“Sure,” he said.

She winked. “See you later, James.”

“See ya,” he said, as she walked away. Steve elbowed him.

“She liked you,” he said.

Becca slid back into her seat, followed by Arnie. “She did. 'Priss'. I guess girls are gonna start liking you now, even though you're hideous.”

Bucky chewed on the inside of his mouth, belatedly replying, “Thanks,” without really listening.

Bucky was fifteen and his puppy fat was starting to come off. Ma said he wouldn't be her cucciolo for much longer if he kept getting so handsome. Girls like Belle started talking to him more and more, especially after he joined the football team and Coach was quick to make him quarterback. He was good at slamming the shit out of other guys. He was five foot seven now, a whole seven inches taller than Steve.

“Just you wait,” Steve would say. “I'll have a growth spurt and one day you'll wake up and I'll be six foot tall.” He'd said that all the way until he was twenty.

He also discovered what it felt like to wrap his hands around his dick. The priest at church said that was sinful, but Bucky couldn't get the words out at confession, he only confessed to having unkind
thoughts towards his siblings, same as every week. Doctors thought it made you go nuts, he read that once.

He wondered if Steve did it too. Steve was a real good Catholic, he read his ma the Bible when she wasn't feeling so good. What would Steve think if Bucky told him he sinned like that? He didn't have anyone else to ask; when he tried to broach the topic with Dad, Dad just changed the subject. Bucky wasn't brave enough to bring it up again. He couldn't ask his Grandpa, and who else was there, fucking Arnie? He thought about asking Eva, he understood about what she was now, but she was a girl, so how was she going to help?

He psyched himself up for days over it, until they were in his room doing homework; he still filled in some of Steve's answers, even though Steve was conflicted about it.

“Can I ask you a question?” he asked while Steve was lying on Bucky's bed, toiling away on his History essay.

“Sure,” he said, then muttered, 'damn' and flipped his pencil around to rub a word out. “Louisiana is 'iana', right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, as Steve muttered to himself some more. He wasn't paying attention, but that made it easier to blurt out, “Do you ever... touch yourself?”

Steve took a second to stop writing and slowly look up. His eyebrows drew together. “Touch myself where?”

Bucky shifted around. “You, you know...”

Steve's eyes got real big; God, he didn't, it was only Bucky who sinned like that. Steve was going to think he was a big sinner now. He looked down at his lap, unable to make eye contact.

“Um... yeah,” Steve said. “Yeah, sometimes.”

Bucky dug his fingers into his quilt. “Really?”

“Uh huh.”

Bucky didn't think Steve would lie about a thing like that. He breathed out. “Do you confess it to the priest?”

“Yeah.”

That was brave. “What does he say?”

“Three Hail Marys and an Our Father, and that I should study my Bible harder.”

“That's all?”

“Yep.”

He dug his fingers into the quilt really hard. “What if... you just want to stop doing it?”

Steve let out a breath. “Jeez, I dunno, Buck, eat some corn flakes?”

Bucky glanced up; Steve's face was bright red. He tipped the corner of his mouth up and Steve laughed, shaking his head.
“Talkin’ to me like I'm a doctor or something,” Steve muttered. “I can't even remember what year the Louisiana Purchase was.”

“1803,” Bucky said.

Steve sighed and shook his head.

So, he didn't stop doing it, but he confessed it to the priest, who sighed and told him to do ten Hail Marys and two Our Fathers. Bucky didn't think it was fair that he had to do more than Steve.

He also started to help out at the club, Grandpa said he was old enough if he really wanted to, and Ma didn't argue about it. He carried barrels of beer and fixed broken taps, and the pretty barmaids smiled at him and brought him food while he was working.

In the cellar, along with the booze, Grandpa had guns coming through, wiping them clean of identification and sending them back out into the city. Grandpa wouldn't let Bucky touch the guns, but he could watch and get the barrels of beer ready.

“I guess you'll be joining us soon, now that you're getting older,” one of Grandpa's associates said.

Before Bucky could answer, his Grandpa said, “Absolutely not. He's not like us dumb fucks, he's going to college. Him and his sister.” The associates all murmured ascent and said it was a good thing to get educated. Grandpa puffed up his chest with pride and Bucky nodded and went back to work.

At the end of the year, his team had their first big game against Canisius. It was a brutal game, the guys on the other team beat the shit out of them, and when Bucky took his headgear off after, he realised his mouth was filled with blood, although he couldn't pinpoint the source. He got his first of many concussions.

But it was exhilarating, he felt all filled up and light. Steve said that was from all the knocks to the head, eyebrows knitting together. That might have been right, but Bucky didn't care, he sat in the back of the car, listening to his Grandpa rave, and bathed in the glow of his concussion.

He had his first kiss with Belle just before Christmas. She wanted to go steady, but she always called him 'James' and she didn't ever want Steve to go places with them. He broke up with her on New Year's Day. From then on, he had a succession of girlfriends as he grew taller and ever more handsome. None lasted more than a couple of months.

- Twelve days after Bucky's sixteenth birthday, Roosevelt legalised beer and wine with a low alcohol content and previously dry establishments started selling booze. The club took a hit and Grandpa spent a lot of time in his study, poring over the books.

His newest girl, Shirley, was the best so far by his estimation. She had long black hair, wore red lipstick, and had one hell of a pair of tits. She was nice to Steve, too, and Bucky knew he had a crush on her. That was okay, he didn't mind.

Shirley liked to have a good time; she went to a girl's school and was stir crazy at the end of every day. Boy crazy too, Becca said. Becca wasn't a fan.

She liked to dance, and Bucky promised to take her to a dance hall, but Ma would only agree if he took Steve and Becca. Shirley had a friend for Steve, and Ma had some plans for Becca.
“You remember Angelo, the Fierros' boy?” Ma said over the breakfast table. “His mother used to bring him over to play with you and your brother. Anyway, he's twenty now, he's about to take over his father's restaurant. He's beautiful to look at.”

Becca glanced at Bucky, who grimaced in sympathetic. Ma tried to set him up with every Italian girl in the tri-state area.

“I already have someone to go with,” Becca said. That was the first Bucky had heard of it. Florence spilled her cereal, sending milk spreading out over the table and Bucky grabbed a napkin and started mopping it up.

Ma arched an eyebrow. “Who?”

“Arnie.”

Bucky stopped his mopping and stared at Becca. Arnie? Since when was she interested in that guy?

Ma maybe felt similarly, since all she said was, “The Jew?”

Dad lowered his newspaper slightly.

“Ma,” Becca said. “He's a nice guy, Steve is good friends with him.”

“Well, if Steve thinks he's okay.” Ma sighed. “All right. At least his family own a grocery store. Not as good as a restaurant, but I suppose it'll do.”

They told Ma that they were only going to the local dance hall, but instead jumped on the subway and went to the Savoy in Harlem. Ma would never have let them go if she knew.

Shirley's friend was a little brunette called Carol, who curled her lip at Steve and stage whispered to Shirley that he was 'eleven years old or something'. In fact, he was just under a month away from turning fifteen, but he turned his head away and pretended not to notice. Arnie was wearing that damn kippah.

The Savoy was one of the few truly unsegregated dance halls in the city – there were more Negroes in there than there were white people. The place was huge, pink and mirrored, and densely packed with people. Chick Webb's band was playing and Lindy hoppers were dancing their hearts out.

“Jeez,” Steve muttered behind him. “I think I'd drop dead of a heart attack if I did that.”

“Come on,” Shirley said, and grabbed Bucky's hand. “Let's dance.”

Of course, they couldn't dance like most of the people there, and Bucky was both fascinated and embarrassed to try. Shirley frowned at the pretty girls that went wild, their feet going so fast he couldn't watch for long without getting dizzy. Carol couldn't stand to be seen dancing with Steve, and Arnie and Becca cut a sad sight. When Shirley dispatched Bucky to get her something to drink, he collared Steve and took him along.

“Isn't going so great,” Steve murmured.

“She'll warm up,” Bucky said. “Or she won't, no loss.”

“Not to you.”

Bucky raised his hand to get the bartenders attention and looked at Steve. “I'll find you someone better next time,” he said, and patted Steve on the head. Steve smacked his hand away.
On Bucky's other side, a girl came up to the bar. Bucky looked at her out of the corner of his eye as he gave the bartender his order – she was tall, dark-skinned, in a red dress that made her seem even taller. She glanced at him, then away, and ordered her drink. He bit his lip and took a breath.

“Hi,” he said.

She looked at him. “Hi.”

That was all he had. “Uh.”

“I saw you dancing out there,” she continued.

“Yeah? How’d I do?”

She smiled. “Not so great.”

“Not great, huh?”

She shook her head and accepted her drink. “I could help you out with that...”

“Yeah?”

Her cheeks turned a shade darker. “Mmmh.”

“Buck,” Steve murmured.

He cast a glance back. “What?”

“Shirley's waiting for her drink.”

“Well, she ain't gonna die of thirst for a couple more minutes, is she?” He turned back to the girl and held out his hand. “I'm Bucky.”

“Hazel,” she said, put her drink down, and took his hand.

“I guess I'll watch the drinks?” Steve called after them as they went back to the dance floor. Bucky gave a thumbs up over his shoulder.

His attempts at learning the Lindy Hop were pitiful, but dancing with Hazel sure was a lot more fun than dancing with Shirley – he stomped on Hazel's feet more than was polite, but she took it in her stride. Before he knew it, an hour had passed and Shirley and Carol had left without saying goodbye. He was covered in sweat and exhilarated like he had been after the football game; he didn't care one bit about the girls leaving. Before he left, Hazel told him that she came to the ballroom most Saturday nights and he should come again.

“That was pretty mean,” Steve said as they walked back to the station. “Forgetting about Shirley like that.”

“Yeah, I don't think you'll be stepping out with her again,” Becca said. Arnie had his arm hanging around her shoulders, though he looked awkward about it, like he did everything.

Bucky shrugged. “No loss.”

“I thought you liked this one,” Arnie said.

“She's just a girl, there'll be more.”
“Hey!” Becca said, and gave him a wet willy.

He cringed away and almost knocked Steve on his ass. He threw his arm around Steve and stuck his tongue out at Becca.

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He did go back, without the others – Steve wasn't really into it and Becca could throw cold water on just about anything Bucky liked. Hazel was there and just as patient in teaching him a the first time. She was seventeen and wanted to dance on Broadway or act in pictures. Her father was a musician, though he'd never hit the big time, and her mother had passed years before.

She was beautiful, hazel eyes to match her name, the most elaborate hairdos he'd ever seen. He liked her a hell of a lot. He thought she liked him too, but she wouldn't hold his hand except in the ballroom and she kept at least half a foot of space between them if they walked out on the street. It didn't stop people shouting at them sometimes.

In August, Steve's boarding house finally installed a phone. They just had the one downstairs, and Dot the landlady preyed over it like a vulture, answering every call and interrogating the caller about why they wanted Eva or Mr Adamczyk who kept chickens in the alleyway or Steve Rogers who was surely in bed at this late hour of eight pm.

The Dodgers didn't have a great season, which only made Steve's loyalty even greater. They sat in the stands at Ebbets field at least twice a month, yelling and eating hotdogs.

“How's it going with Hazel?” Steve asked in the seventh inning stretch.

“Really good,” Bucky said, and grinned. “She's a hell of a girl.”

“That's real great,” Steve said. Bucky could hear him breathing, the rattle in his chest. “You been taking her out?”

Bucky laid his hand on Steve's back. “Hey, I think you need your nebuliser”

“Huh? Oh.” He leant down and pulled his nebuliser out of his bag, took a few puffs and tossed it back in. “Thanks.”

“I wanna take her out soon, somewhere nice.”

Steve looked at him for a second, then shrugged. “Can't help you there.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and looked back to the game. After a few minutes, Steve put his hand on his chest and tipped his head down.

“You okay?” Bucky said. People around them were cheering, so it was a little hard to hear. “Do you need your nebuliser again?”

“Nah, I think, um, just a little heartburn.”

“Maybe if you stopped slathering everything in mustard, that wouldn't happen.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said and rubbed his chest for a second before focusing on the game.

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He planned to take Hazel somehwere nice; a guy at the club said Smalls Paradise on Seventh
Avenue was a good time. Hazel wasn't so sure about going, but Bucky had a way about him, everyone said so; a face so handsome he could manipulate without even trying. He dressed up extra special and drove over to the ballroom in a car, with his newly minted driver's license, to pick her up at seven. She wouldn't even tell him where she lived.

“So, James Buchanan,” she said. The band was playing behind them as they ate. “What are you planning to do after high school?”

“I don't really know. My parents want me to go to college. I guess I will.”

Her eyebrows drew together a little. “You're just going to do it to make your parents happy?”

“Well, and I don't know what else I'd do.”

“You don't have any plans for work?”

“I guess I'll work in my grandfather's club.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Your grandfather has a club?”

“Yeah, the Baron in Vinegar Hill.”

“Wow,” she murmured. “You must be pretty rich.”

He shrugged, paying attention to his food. It hasn't really come up in years with Steve, except for when he missed a weeks worth of episodes of Buck Rogers (an obvious favourite of theirs) because he hadn't been around to the house since the weekend gone, and Bucky remembered how he didn't have a radio of his own.

“You're just playin' out here, aren't you?”

He looked up at her. “Huh?”

“In the ballroom. Slumming it. You're not the first.”

“I'm not slumming,” he said. She looked away and he leant forward, nudging her foot with his.

“Hey, I'm not, okay?”

She smiled a little, although she didn't meet his eyes. “Okay.”

She let him walk her home after they ate, though it was dark and he couldn't make out the building very well. They necked for a while before she went inside, tucked away in the lip of an alleyway. He asked if he could see her on the weekend, take her somewhere new, outside of Harlem; she agreed. She'd be at the ballroom, she said.

When he arrived at the ballroom on Saturday night, flowers in hand, the bartender leant over the bar and yelled, “You Hazel's boy?”

He smiled. “Yeah, that's me.”

“We wanted me to pass on a message. She's gone.”

“Gone where?”

The bartender grimaced. “California, she got a part out there. She ain't coming back.”
Bucky looked down at the flowers.

“She said you were a nice guy...” the bartender continued. “Sorry.”

Bucky nodded distantly and walked out. He threw the flowers down and took a breath, stood in the street as cars veered around him, didn't know what to do. Someone leant on their horn and he yelled back in response, something crude, he didn't remember.

He got into his car and made his way through Red Hook. It was late, almost ten, gangs were out shaking people down. He knocked a few heads in before he got to Steve's.

More often than not, the tenement door was open even at this hour, mostly because the lock had been broken off. Today was one of those days. He took the stairs two at a time and arrived at Steve's door. He knew that Sarah worked nights on the weekends, so he wouldn't get told to go home. He knocked, and then knocked again; maybe Steve wasn't in.

The door opened and Steve stared out with ruffled hair, in his pyjamas. “Buck? What's wrong?”

“Shit, you're were sleepin',” Bucky said. “It's fine, I'll see you tomorrow.”

Steve caught his arm before Bucky could pull away. “'sall right, I'm awake now. Come in.”

“You sure?”

Steve sighed and opened the door wider. Bucky walked in and he closed it firmly, pressing his shoulder to it to make it latch.

“You don't normally go to bed this early,” Bucky said.

“I wasn't feelin' too good.”

“Are you okay?”

Steve waved him off. “I'm fine. What happened?”

“Hazel took off.”

Steve walked back over to the bed and sat down. “She took off?”

“Yup.” He joined Steve, sitting cross-legged on the bed. “She's gone to California to get her big break.”

Steve whistled. “I'm sorry, Buck.”

“Whatever. She thought I was just slumming it.”

“Were you?”

He sat up straight and stared at Steve. “What? Jeez! No, of course not, you think I'm one of them? Christ, Steve.”

Steve spread his palms. “Hey, I'm sorry. It's just, I can see how she'd think it. I felt like that too, when I was a kid.”

“What do you mean?”
Steve shrugged. “You live in a damn mansion compared to this hole – why'd you want to pal around with a guy like me?”

“'cause you're the best guy I know. Do you still feel like that?”

“Nah.” Steve smiled. “I got your number now.”

Bucky leant back against the wall. “I really liked her.”

“Yeah, that's unusual,” Steve said, and yawned. “There are other girls, right?”

Bucky nodded. “There are always other girls.”

Steve rolled his eyes. They moved onto other topics, the latest episode of the Jack Benny Show, school starting up in a couple of weeks, movies they wanted to see. Steve wanted to go see Baby Face, on account of Barbara Stanwyck, and Bucky wanted to see The Ghoul with Boris Karloff. Steve laughed and said he'd scare too easy and never be able to sit through the whole thing. Bucky emphatically said that he would, and hit Steve with a pillow when he started with that Freaks shit.

Eventually, though, Steve's replies got slower and slower, and his eyelids started to droop.

“I'm keeping you up,” Bucky said. “I better get home.”

“You can stay,” Steve said quietly. “Ma won't be back till tomorrow. She had a bad cough, I wish she'd take it easy sometimes.”

“All right,” Bucky said. It was late and he was too tired to drive back now anyway. He put a pillow behind his head, slumped down against the wall and closed his eyes.

He woke once in the night, to the sound of Steve's laboured breathing. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Steve muttered, and then Bucky heard the puff of his nebuliser.

“You okay?”

“I'm fine,” Steve said, took a rattled breath, and lay back down.

When he woke again the morning, it was to stomping feet upstairs and people talking at the tops of their voices outside the door. He sat up, rolled his neck, and checked his watch. It was eight thirty am.

“Shit,” he said. “Ma's gonna go nuts.”

Steve stirred, and stretched his arms over his head. “What time's it?”

“Eight thirty.”

“Damn. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” he said and got off the bed. He hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

“Your mother's been calling here all hours of the morning!” Dot shouted at him as he ran past. “Tell her not to be callin' here before seven!”

“Sorry,” he yelled and jumped into his car. He was lucky that nothing had happened to it over night, he realised.
He drove faster than he should have back home, and let himself into the house as quietly as he could. He turned and closed the door gently, then turned back and saw Becca coming down the stairs. Her mouth dropped open, then she grinned.

He pushed his finger to his lips, and then laced his fingers together, silently begging her to stay quiet. She pouted at him, then opened her big mouth and yelled, “Ma, your prodigal son is home!”

“Get in here right now, James Buchanan!”

Becca patted him on the back and headed to the breakfast room. Bucky followed, glaring at her back.

They were all seated around the breakfast table, even Grandpa, the entire firing squad. Dad wasn’t even reading his newspaper. Ma looked fit to be tied, and gestured roughly at his seat between Becca and Eugene.

“We've been worried sick! I've been calling all your friends, airing our dirty family laundry for all to see; my son, out all night. We've put up with the late nights, your clothes stinking like cheap booze and cigarettes, but to not come home at all? Anything could have happened to you!”

“I was at Steve's,” he said.

Ma narrowed her eyes.

“Really! You can call Dot back, ask her if she saw me running out the door.”

“And that woman! She wouldn't even go upstairs and knock on the door! Telling me to call back at a 'respectable' time!”

“Yeah...” He ran his hand through his slightly dirty hair and cleared his throat.

“So, why didn't you come back last night?” Grandpa asked.

“Uh... a girl dumped me.”

Grandpa's eyes lit with understanding. “You were licking your wounds?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Becca clapped her hand on his back. “Now you know what it's like. You've been going around breaking hearts all over New York all year, it's getting embarrassing.”

“Becca, leave him be,” Grandpa said.

“Don't be nice to him, papa!” Ma cried. “James, you are not allowed out after nine at all until school starts, and if I see your grades slip...”

He nodded. “They won't, Ma.”

“They had better not. Here, have your orange juice.” She poured out a glass and shoved it roughly at him.

Eugene looked up at him, holding a piece of toast in one hand. He had butter smeared all over his cheeks. “You're in trouble.”

“Yep. Can I have a slice of toast?”
Eugene wrinkled his nose. “No.”

In December, the worst happened. The Twenty First Amendment was ratified; Prohibition was over. The newsreels said that it would create five thousand extra jobs. Grandpa said as many bootleggers would lose theirs. The night of the fifth was wild, the club was heaving with people and Bucky was on hand to help out, pulling drinks late into the night.

He was dating a real dizzy broad, Penelope with strawberry blonde hair and a high-pitched laugh. She set herself up at the bar and hung off him all evening, even though she was only fifteen. She thought Steve was 'cute', like a puppy. Bucky thought maybe it was too mean to break up over Christmas, but come January...

By his seventeenth birthday, takings at the clubs had gone way, way down. New nightclubs were opening all the time, people were buying liquor at stores and drinking at home. Grandpa continued to fret.

But things were going to get worse.
He was studying for a history exam on an afternoon in April when the telephone rang. It rang a lot, Ma had a whole life Bucky barely knew a thing about, and Grandpa had his associates. Bucky didn't think anything of it until Davis knocked on his door and informed him that Steve was on the line. He ran down to get it.

"Heya, Steve," he said. "You're saving me from this mountain of school shit. What's happening?"

"Mam's been... she's..." Steve's voice sounded thick and nasally. Bucky didn't think it was from asthma. "The doctor's here, he says she's got TB. They're taking her to the sanatorium in Jersey. I'm not allowed to come..."

"Jesus. I'm coming over."

"Don't, it's okay."

Bucky shook his head. "Steve, c'mon, I'm coming."

There was a long pause as Steve sniffled, then he mumbled, "Okay."

He pushed the speed limit getting over to Red Hook and as he drew near the building, he saw an ambulance sitting outside, residents from the tenement clustered at the door. The ambulance was readying to pull away, and he shouted at them to wait as he jumped out of the car, but they took off anyway.

Eva grabbed his hand when he approached. "It's the worst thing," she said.

"I know, is he up there?"

She pressed her lips together. "Yeah. He's in a bad way. You'll look after him, right?"

"Yeah, I will, I promise."

Eva nodded and squeezed his hand, then let him go into the building. It was uncharacteristically quiet inside, tenants sitting and standing around. Dot was holding one of her little dogs, a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. "I helped her give birth, you know," she said as he passed. Bucky didn't know; Steve had lived here his whole life? That was a hell of a thing.

He ran up the stairs and stepped carefully into the rooms. Steve was pacing the floor and didn't notice him at first. When he did, he about jumped out of his skin.

"It's okay, it's okay, only me."

Steve nodded. "They're taking her to Essex Mountain Sanatorium, they said I can't go see her there."

"I'm sorry," Bucky said.

Steve wrapped his arms around himself. "She worked on a TB ward a few years back, she must have picked it up there."

"They're taking her to Essex Mountain Sanatorium, they said I can't go see her there."

"I'm sorry," Bucky said.

Steve wrapped his arms around himself. "She worked on a TB ward a few years back, she must have picked it up there."
“Okay... Let's pack some stuff up and go back to mine.”

Steve shook his head. “It's okay, I can stay here, I'm not a kid.”

“It's not 'cause you're a kid.”

“Eva said I could sleep on her floor.”

Bucky was sure that was an exciting prospect but it still didn't seem right. “My ma would give me a hell of a talking to if I didn't bring you back.”

Steve swallowed and looked at the floor. “The doc said that... I could have it too. It's better if I don't...”

“Steve, you ain't got TB.”

“How do you know?”

Bucky huffed. “I just do, all right? Pack your stuff up.” He knew because anything else didn't bear thinking about.

Steve bit his lip, then nodded and picked up a suitcase. He packed a few sets of clothes, his parents wedding photo, a few other pictures and books and, when he thought Bucky wasn't looking, a stuffed bear. Those were all his possessions in the world.

Everyone said goodbye to them as they left, Eva slipped some money into Steve's hand that she refused to take back, and Dot even promised to keep their rooms empty. Steve thanked everyone, but by the time they got into the car, he had fallen silent. They drove back to Park Slope in silence until they were a few streets away from the house and Steve suddenly said, “How am I going to get to school?”

“I'll drive you,” Bucky said.

Steve nodded and looked down at his hands. “Okay,” he murmured. Bucky looked at the road, and when he turned back to Steve, Steve was crying. He was quiet about it, but Bucky still didn't know what to do. He pulled over and after a moment put his hand on Steve's neck and squeezed.

“It'll be okay,” he said.

Steve swallowed and nodded. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face. Bucky started the car again and pulled around to the house, idling there for a few minutes before getting out and retrieving Steve's suitcase. Steve mumbled something that he waved off, and jogged up to the front door, letting himself in.

“Bucky!” Ma called. “Davis said you ran out of here without telling him where you were going!”

She approached the door, hands on her hips. She'd really been at him since Hazel, riding him about shit. He was pretty sure that she thought he was going to fail out of high school and not become the first person in the family to go to university.

Steve stepped up behind him and she frowned.

“Steve's ma has TB,” Bucky said. “She's been taken to Essex Mountain.”

She put her hand to her mouth, then bustled Steve into a hug. Bucky always froze up when she hugged him, but Steve leant into it, closing his fingers loosely into the fabric of her dress as she ran
her hand over his hair. Bucky looked away in embarrassment.

Becca walked out from the living room and mouthed, ‘what's going on?’ to him as she watched Ma and Steve hug. Bucky shook his head. Finally, Ma let go and Steve stepped back and rubbed at his face.

“I'll get Davis to set up another bed in Bucky's room. Would you like something to eat, dear?”

He smiled briefly. “I'm okay.”

Ma hated when people didn't eat, but she nodded. “I'll tell Davis.” She squeezed his shoulder and left for the kitchen, leaving just the three of them in the hallway.

Steve cleared his throat. “Hey, Becca.”

“Hi...” she said, frowning.

“Steve's ma has been taken to a TB ward,” Bucky said.

She widened her eyes, then walked over and gave Steve a hug. It was a lot shorter and less motherly than Ma's; Becca had never been anything more than a friend to Steve, although Bucky wouldn't have minded if it were more. It'd certainly be better than Arnie.

“I'm sorry, Steve,” she said when she pulled away.

He nodded. “Thanks.”

Bucky tapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, we should take your case up to my room.”

Steve looked relieved, and nodded.

The evening dinner was a sedate one. Ma said a prayer for Sarah and they kept conversation to a minimum. Steve excused himself to bed straight after and Bucky stayed downstairs with Becca and tried to study. Becca had called Arnie, now in his first year at Yeshiva University, and he thought they should all go out soon and do something nice for Steve. Bucky bit his tongue and said it sounded like a good idea. When he went up to his room to go to bed, Steve seemed to be sound asleep, but Bucky thought he heard some muffled crying in the night.

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The kids like having Steve there. Florence liked to paint and Steve helped her draw the figures and Eugene had another person to tell his long, meandering stories about his day to. Steve was a lot more patient than Bucky about it. Becca was a little annoyed at first, especially when Steve ran into her in her curlers, without her make up on, and Bucky leant over and said, “Takes away some of the mystery, huh?”

Steve shrugged and looked at Becca shyly. “Girls are still plenty mysterious to me.”

The drive to school on Monday morning was hard. Steve didn't talk much, and kids outside the school whistled at the nice ride. Bucky had only seen Steve's school a couple of times, but it looked worse every time, dirtier and more graffitied. Bucky tried to insist that he'd come and pick him up after, but Steve said he'd take the bus.

Steve came to their church with them for Saturday mass the next weekend. Eugene had just become an altar boy and took to it with gusto; Bucky and Steve had both had their own brief terms. Father
Joseph had taken Ma aside and told her that Bucky was too lazy to carry out the responsibilities, to her eternal shame, and the priest at Steve's church very diplomatically said that Steve was 'too spirited' for the role; i.e., a pain in his ass.

He lit a candle for his ma and Father Joseph asked the congregation to keep Sarah in their prayers. Steve kept his eyes downcast the entire service.

It took Steve a little while to get used to the morning routine in the house. Bucky knew that at home, their whole lives were in two rooms, with a kitchen table that doubled as a bathtub – he doubted there were any wholesome family meals around the breakfast table. In his house, though, the family breakfast was near mandatory, except for Grandpa, and Ma laid out a spread of fruit and cereal and toast each morning. After she had quizzed them all about their classes and any leftover homework, and after Eugene had recited his times tables up to twelve, Dad lay his newspaper down, got up, and retrieved the measuring tape. Bucky bolted for the pantry door, followed closely by Becca and the kids, and skidded into place. Becca stuck her tongue out at him.

Steve remained at the table, looking confused.

"Measuring day," Bucky said.

"We record everyone's heights on the door frame," Ma said. "Right since Bucky first stood up."

Dad placed a cookbook on top of his head and drew a pencil line on the door frame. Bucky was already taller than him, had been for at least a year, but he thought he'd got a lot taller recently. He stepped away and turned around. The door frame was littered with marks, each one with a corresponding name, date, and height written on the wall beside it. Dad drew out the measuring tape and measured. He hummed slightly, then wrote neatly on the wall, blocking Bucky's view.

"Six foot," he said.

Bucky threw his hands up in celebration. Becca rolled her eyes and took her place. She came out at five foot eight, a modest improvement on five foot seven and a half six months ago. Back then, Bucky came in at five foot ten.

"Steve, would you like to be measured?" Dad said.

Ma patted Steve on the shoulder. "Go on, it's fun."

Bucky could see in his face that wasn't his kind of fun, but he sloped over anyway and stood up as straight as he could. Dad deliberated for a long time before saying,

"Five foot three," he said.

Steve sighed.

"Hey, you're going the right way, at least," Bucky said.

"He'd be a medical marvel if he wasn't," Becca replied.

Steve sighed harder.

Eugene and Florence were four foot four and four foot five respectively. Florence smiled, looked up at Steve, and said, "I'm catching up to you."

"You sure are," Steve said, with a trace of a smile.
Arnie's idea wasn't a bad one; they saw *It Happened One Night*, which Bucky tolerated and Steve enjoyed. Anything to get him to cheer up, Bucky was all right with. They went to their usual diner to eat after, Becca put the usual records on the Selectophone, Steve ate his usual blue plate special.

“That girl's making eyes at you,” Steve said after a while, tipping his head slightly to the other side of the diner, where a girl with orange curls was looking at them. Bucky looked up and away quickly.

“Maybe she's making eyes at you,” he said.

Steve looked at him like he was stupid. Bucky grinned.

“Well, why not? You've got that whole Douglas Fairbanks Jr. look about you.”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“What?” Becca and Arnie were looking at him like he'd grown a second head. “What?”

Steve shook his head and went back to his food.

It was a couple of weeks before the doctors at Essex Mountain let Steve talk to his ma on the telephone; he got quiet afterwards and didn't join in with the dinner conversation. Ma didn't mind.

The thing of it was, even though it was under the worst possible circumstances, Bucky really liked that Steve was there. He didn't mind sharing a room, and when he thought of something he wanted to tell Steve, Steve was right there to tell it to. He wished it was under better circumstances, but it was like their childhood sleepovers all over again.

In mid May, Bucky passed all his exams with As. Steve failed math. His teacher said he could do summer school and make up the grade to move to tenth grade in September and Bucky promised that he'd help Steve study for it. Steve wasn't so excited at the prospect.

Nevertheless, it was the summer and Bucky wanted them to enjoy it, even if he had to force Steve into it. Which Bucky reflected would be likely as he watched Steve sullenly drag his spoon back and forth in his cereal at breakfast on their first official day of summer vacation. On the front cover of Dad's newspaper read the headline: *Outlaw Barrow and Girl Shot Dead*.

“So, what are you kids doing today?” Ma asked.

“Daddy's taking me to work with him,” Eugene said, and grinned. Bucky could count on one hand how many times he'd been to work with Dad, and certainly not in the last few years. He couldn't think of anything more boring than putting soles on shoes.

“What about you two?” Ma asked him and Steve. “You should get fresh air, it gets too stuffy in this house.”

“I dunno,” Bucky said and looked at Steve. “You got any ideas?”

Steve lifted his eyes, looking cornered. “Uh... Well, there's an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum I wanted to see...”

“Oh, the block prints?” Becca said, “I wanted to see that too!”

“Great, the three of you can go together and me and Flo will have a girls' day in!” Ma said. She was always desperate to get them out of the house for the summers.

Bucky couldn't suppress his grimace. “Oh... yeah, sounds like fun,” he murmured. Becca smirked.
Bucky had been to the museum more times than he cared to remember, and never found it interesting. No matter how many classes he took and how much he learnt, he never found museums interesting. Trudging around after someone, looking at paintings and some shit from Britain or France or India or wherever, was so boring he wanted to defenestrate himself.

Steve and Becca were in their element, though, completely unconcerned with Bucky's dragging feet. They were so damn excited about a picture of wave, Bucky thought maybe they could go to the actual beach and have a swim; it had been so goddamn hot recently. They shrugged off the suggestion.

“Can we at least get an ice cream after this?”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, we can do that. There are some sculptures I want to see first, though.”

Bucky got an ice cream and a hot dog, just to spite them, and had seconds at dinners too. Honestly, Bucky ate like a horse all the time – Ma said that was why he was getting so tall – while Steve picked at his dinners. He always cleared his plate, but slowly, and rarely asked for seconds.

In the summer, Ma didn't fuss about when they went to bed, so long as it was still dark outside. The three of them stayed up until past midnight, listening to the radio and talking. Becca talked about her art classes at Sacred Heart, all the new techniques they used and paint and shit; Steve was fascinated and a little jealous. Bucky wished he could talk art like that sometimes, even though he thought it was as boring as shoemaking.

Eventually Steve said he was going to do his teeth and turn in. Bucky waited for him to clear the stairs, then lit a cigarette. He'd started smoking after getting an engraved lighter from Grandpa for his seventeenth birthday, but the smoke made Steve cough something awful.

“You think Steve is going to be okay?” Becca said, pulled the cigarette from his mouth and gave it a drag before giving it back.

Now it had her spit on it. He sighed and continued smoking. “I dunno, fucking doctors won't let him go visit.”

“Well, they don't want it spreading,” Becca said. “It's not ideal, but it's the best they can do at the moment. Arnie said they're doing a lot of research into it, though.”

“Wouldn't you risk it?”

“I guess I would for Ma,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “So, how is Arnie?”

She narrowed her eyes slightly. “He's good. His exams are coming up soon.”

“Oh yeah? Jew university is going well for him?”

Becca rolled her eyes and got up. “Eat some sugar, Buck, you sound more bitter than usual. I'm going to bed.”

Bucky pulled a face at her back. Becca gave him the finger. He stubbed the cigarette out and followed her upstairs. There were two bathrooms on their floor, one for the girls and one for the boys, and they muttered goodnight to each other and split off. The boys' bathroom door was half open and he pushed it open without giving it much thought, only to be confronted with the sight of Steve in his drawers, strapping some kind of... corset on. Steve looked up at the mirror, focusing on
Bucky's reflection. He looked over his shoulder slowly.

“Uh, can you... give me a minute?”

“Yep, oh yeah,” Bucky mumbled, and backed out of the room. He went to his room and sat down on his bed. A corset? Steve didn't need to get any thinner than he already was – he was like a beanpole! Did people even wear corsets any more? Those went out when he was a kid. That thing looked like a torture device!

The floorboards creaked slightly with Steve's footsteps as he came into the room. He was chewing on his lip.

“So, uh...”

“Why're you wearing a corset?” Bucky blurted out.

Steve screwed up his face. “It's not a corset, it's a back brace.”

“What's it for?”

Steve shrugged. “I got scoliosis.”

“What's that?”

“It means my spine curves instead of going straight.”

“Why?”

Steve sighed. “cause I drew the short straw healthwise? If you look closely, you can see that my shoulders aren't level.”

Bucky looked. Now that Steve had pointed it out, he kind of saw it. “Can I see it? I mean, your spine?”

“Um.” Steve drew his eyebrows together, then shrugged. “Sure.”

He started unbuttoning his pyjama top. Bucky had never seen Steve without his shirt on, he felt... weird.

The brace was a leather contraption with buckles and a strap and went over his left shoulder. “This is supposed to pull me back in the right direction,” he said as he released the strap. “I'm supposed to wear it all the time, but it's uncomfortable, so I only wear it at night.”

He pulled the brace away and turned around, but Bucky caught a glimpse of his chest – he had a prominent collarbone, like a girl's, and bony shoulders.

“You can't really tell if I'm standing up straight, but when I bend forward you can see it,” he said. Bucky got up and came over. Steve pulled his shoulders in and curled forwards, and Bucky could see it; his spine flared out to the left below his shoulder blades and then back in again down to his hips. Bucky wanted to touch it, but he didn't. Instead, he cleared his throat.

“Jeez. That looks weird.”

Steve sighed and picked up the brace. “Believe me, it feels weirder having it.”

“Does it hurt?”
He slipped the brace back on and started tightening the straps. “Not yet. When I'm older, though, it probably will.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Steve shrugged his right shoulder. “I dunno. It's embarrassing, how much I got wrong with me, sometimes I get tired of talkin' about it.” He finished tightening the straps and pulled his top back on.

“All right, I get that,” Bucky said. “Um. You got anything else wrong with you that I don't know about?”

Steve finished buttoning his top and sniffed. “Well, I'm colour blind and mildly anaemic.”

“You see in black and white?”

Steve laughed and shook his head. “Nah, things are just.. dulled, I guess? I don't know, I've only got everyone's word for it that red even exists.”

Bucky smiled. He didn't like that Steve hadn't told him that stuff, Bucky never kept things from him, unless it'd hurt him, like some of Ma's choice opinions on proper women and proper childrearing. “Good, I wouldn't want you living in a movie world or something.”

“There's no risk of that ever happening,” Steve said.

Bucky shifted on the spot. “I better brush my teeth.”

“Yeah, I can smell the cigarettes.”

Bucky wrapped his arms around himself. “Sorry. I'll go wash up.”

“You're all right,” Steve said and sat down on his bed. “Closest I'm ever gonna get to the real thing.”

Bucky felt strange, stranded on his bedroom floor while Steve plumped pillows and picked up his copy of *The Thin Man*, on edge for no good reason. “Okay, see you in a minute,” he said quickly, and walked out to the bathroom. He felt as if he was behaving conspicuously weird, but Steve seemed unfazed by it, as he was engrossed in his reading when Bucky came back in.

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Steve had to go to summer school three times a week for six weeks from the beginning of June to mid July. Nine am to two pm, solid math. Bucky liked math, but even he thought that was pushing it. Steve also wanted to get a job, to 'pay his way', even though Ma scoffed at the idea. She didn't think kids needed jobs, and certainly not guests in her home. Dad thought it was fine and said Steve could help out at the shop. Bucky knew Steve was sceptical about it, that he was being brushed off, but it was also rude to turn it down, so he didn't.

Bucky drove him to school in the mornings and picked him up most afternoons. In between, he worked at the club, helping the boys set up. Takings were still in the shitter, and sketchy looking guys came and went all the time from Grandpa's office in the back.

“Who are they?” he asked, tipping his head to the burly guys in hats disappearing into the back.

“Some fellas from Chicago,” a stage hand said.

He normally arrived at George Washington High School early and waited in his car. Kids would cluster around and peer in as he smoked a couple of cigarettes and flicked ash on the sidewalk. He let
them look.

On one blisteringly hot Thursday afternoon, though, he sat cooking in the car for ten minutes after everyone else had fled through the front doors and still no Steve. He got out of the car and locked it up, then jogged up the stairs and went in.

The school was a real insult to the President. Bucky had never been in further than the front doors before, and standing in the hallway he could smell a distinct damp odour. There was writing on some of the walls and deep dents in metal lockers. The place seemed deserted.

He started walking, peering into classrooms. Empty; seemed like even the teachers bailed as soon as they could. Down one hallway, he found a huge collage of paintings, and it wasn't hard to pick out Steve's work. His was clearly better than all the rest, filled with tiny little details, illustrations of the city that were just slightly off kilter. Steve's favourite artist was this Giorgio de Chirico guy and Steve emulated the neoclassical, neo-Baroque style with detailed, slightly surreal drawings of high rises and tenements, interspersed with paintings of beautiful women with finger waves and red lipstick. Steve was nothing if not predictable.

He walked on further and heard scuffling coming from one of the rooms, followed by a quick, angry conversation. He came to the door and listened.

“Keep your nose outta it!” a guy shouted

“You leave kids alone, I'll stay out of your business,” Steve replied.

Predictable. He pushed the door open and went in. There was Steve, gripping the arm of a taller kid with red hair, and a little kid being held up by his collar by the ginger kid.

“This looks like fun,” Bucky said, “can anyone join?”

Steve looked at him and sighed. Ginger looked over too, and this kid, he had a face even a mother would want to punch. Sincerely, if Bucky passed this kid on the street, he'd have to control himself real well to not sock him one as he walked by. He stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered in.

“And who the fuck are you?” Ginger snarled.

“I'm the fuck who's going to smack your head into that desk if you don't get out of here.”

Ginger curled his lip but his eyes betrayed him. Bucky loomed over him and smiled. Ginger was tall, but Bucky was taller. He dropped the kid and Steve let go of his arm.

“You gotta come back here tomorrow,” Ginger said as a parting shot, then took off.

“I was handling it, Buck,” Steve said when Ginger cleared the room. He leant down and helped the other kid up. He looked about fourteen, Bucky figured.

“Oh yeah, you were handling it, all right.”

Steve scowled. “Are you okay, Ian?”

The kid shrugged. “He'll just get me tomorrow, when you're not around.”

“So, kick him in the balls,” Bucky said. “You're short, you've got the perfect shot.”

Ian didn't look convinced, but he picked up his bag and muttered a ‘thanks'. 
“You need a ride home?” Steve asked.

Ian shook his head and headed out.

“Nice kid,” Bucky said. “This school is a shit hole.”

“I know it. You don't always have to ride to my rescue, you know.”

Bucky grinned. “But I do it so well.”

They got comics and malts at a drugstore on the way home, competing to see who could blow to biggest bubbles, and got back a little after three thirty. Becca was sitting in the living room, reading a book. She didn't hear them get in and Bucky put his finger to his lips at Steve, then snuck up behind her. He leant against the back of the couch, surprised she hadn't noticed him yet. She was losing her touch.

“What're you reading?” he asked loudly.

She jumped and slapped the book closed. “Jesus Christ, Bucky!” she said, and hit him on the shoulder with the book.

“Cross yourself, Steve,” Bucky said. Steve rolled his eyes. “So, what's this then?” He grabbed the book from her and looked at the cover. “The Well of Loneliness? Damn, that sounds depressing, what's it about?”

She snatched the book back before he could leaf through it. “It's about a woman who writes books. It doesn't have a pirates in it, so you wouldn't like it.”

He narrowed his eyes, suspicious, but then Steve tugged his sleeve and said, “C’mon, you've got to help me with my homework before all this learning leaks back out my ears.”

Bucky glanced back at him. “All right, yeah, yeah. Let's get something from the kitchen first, though.” He looked at Becca and smiled. “Enjoy your loneliness.”

She pursed her lips. “I will, thanks.”

Midway through June, a new serial started showing at the local picture house, Burn 'Em Up Barnes, about an ace racecar driver and school bus company owner. Steve started calling him Buck 'Em Up Barnes, to which Bucky said that that made Steve his kid sidekick Bobbie Riley. Steve scoffed into his bucket of popcorn, muttering 'not likely'.

For July 4th, Ma decided to have a fireworks party in the garden to pull double duty for Independence Day and Steve's birthday. Steve wasn't exactly fired up about turning sixteen with his ma in Essex Mountain, which was understandable, but Bucky still wanted him to enjoy it.

“You only turn sixteen once,” he said as they got ready for bed the night before.

“You only turn any age once,” Steve replied.

“You're hell bent on misery, aren’t you?”

Steve lay down and opened his book. “It suits me, I'm 'Dickensian'.”

Bucky launched his pillow across the room.
Steve wanted to see *Of Human Bondage*; reading the book was bad enough, the movie bored Bucky to tears. He thought Mildred was an awful bitch, and Bette Davis wasn't much to look at. The guy reminded him of Steve a little, though.

He probably should have remembered Mildred died of consumption, though. They leave the theatre in silence, Steve sucking on his nebuliser for a minute before shaking his head. “Philip was a piece of work.”

“Huh?”

Steve gestured back in the direction of the theatre. “The guy, feelin’ so sorry for himself, obsessing over her like that.”

“Mildred's real evil, though,” he said.

Steve shrugged. “She never pretended to be nice, he was just sad sack.”

“I guess,” Bucky muttered. Steve was the moodiest he'd ever seen him. “Come on, I'll buy us some hot dogs. You wanna go to Coney Island and watch the hot dog eating contest?”

Steve shook his head. “Not really.”

Bucky pressed his lips together. “Okay, what do you want to do?”

“I want to go home.”

“All right, well, we can--”

Steve sighed. “I mean, my home.”

“Oh. Well...”

“It's okay, I'm just not feeling great today.” He shrugged and looked away.

Bucky stared at him for a second. “Hey... do you want me to teach you how to drive?”

Bucky guessed he expected Steve to be timid behind the wheel, but he wasn't. It was a damn good thing that Bucky had taken them out somewhere quiet, because Steve was a menace on the road. After a hair-raising hour of minimal clutch control and sharp turns, Bucky grabbed the wheel and eased it back into alignment.

“When... do you want me to teach you how to drive?”

Steve laughed. He seemed a little brighter, enlivened by the trip. Bucky talked him through easing off the gas – gently! – so that they could pull over and switch seats. Bucky felt infinitely more safe back in the driver's seat.

Steve grinned, then pulled out his nebuliser, the third time today.

“You okay? Maybe you should lay off that thing,” Bucky said.

Steve took a rattling breath and shook his head. “I'm fine.”

“Good. Remember to stay happy for Ma's party.”

Steve screwed up his face.
“I know, I know, but there are gonna be fireworks.”

“Yeah, I like fireworks,” Steve allowed.

The party started at six, all Ma's fancy friends in their finest dresses and summer suits. Becca got dolled up and invited Arnie and his family – his mother looked like a real battleaxe, his father was as stringy as he was, and his older brother as tall as Bucky and nearly as wide. Ma dragged him over to say hello.

Arnie's parents had strong German accents, real Huns. At least Arnie had the good sense to act embarrassed. He gave Steve a book titled *La Ferronnerie Moderne*; ‘The Modern Ironwork’. Steve couldn't speak French.

“I found it in a secondhand store,” Arnie said. “I thought you might like it.”

Steve leafed through it, smiling. “This looks really interesting, thanks, Arnie!”

“Steve can't speak French,” Bucky said.

Steve looked at him and frowned. “I can still look at the pictures. And anyway, maybe I'll learn.”

“I'm sure you could read it to him,” Becca said. “Since you can read French, Mr Oracle of all things.”

“Children,” Ma chided.

“These two,” Frau Roth said, gesturing to Arnie and his brother. “Always fighting. I know the pain.”

“It's terrible, isn't it?” Ma agreed.

Bucky tugged on Steve's sleeve, and gestured for them to escape the gaze of the parents. Becca and Arnie went off to be lovey-dovey somewhere else.

“You know, you could stand to be a little nicer to Arnie,” Steve said once they'd reached the refreshments table. The staff had laid out a buffet of potatoes, ham loaf, gelatin salad, and icebox cookies.

“You can't speak French,” Bucky repeated, because it bore repeating. Steve spoke English and a tiny bit of Spanish. He did not speak French.

Steve flipped the book to the middle and held it up. “It's just pictures, I can figure out pictures, I'm not that dim-witted!” He slammed the book shut and grabbed a handful of cookies.

“I never said you were--” Bucky shook his head. “I'm sorry. Hey, I'm sorry, all right?”

Steve shrugged and looked away.

“C'mon,” Bucky said, and took him by the arm, leading him away from the table. They crossed the garden, coming up near the tennis court and settling beneath the big oak tree there. Steve stuffed a cookie in his mouth. He'd certainly put on weight since staying with them, but somehow never stopped looking pale and ill.

“Better?” Bucky asked.

Steve shrugged again and kept eating.

“Your birthday will be over soon,” Bucky said.
Steve snorted. “Not soon enough.”

Not soon enough was right, because with Steve in the mood he was in, the evening seemed to drag on forever, and it felt like Bucky had lived a week in the space between six pm and eleven, when they started setting up the fireworks. Bucky was allowed to do the honours, and burnt his fingers lighting the fuses. He put his fingers in his mouth and ran back over to Steve to watch them go off.

They were pretty great, and Bucky was taken with them, oohing and ahhing with the rest of the guests until he felt a hard thump against his shoulder, followed by a quick bite of fingertips into his forearm. He looked and found Steve clinging to him.

“How’s it going?”

“Steve? Steve! What’s wrong?”

“Just a little...” He swallowed heavily. “Light headed.”

Bucky wound his arm around Steve's waist and quickly walked him back into the house; no one noticed, too wrapped up in the show. He sat him down at the kitchen table and fetched him a glass of water. Steve took it and drank; this wasn't right, him not putting up a front, waving off help. He was breathing heavily, like he'd run a marathon.

“Do you need your nebuliser? Should I get Arnie?” Pre-med was better than no-med.

Steve shook his head, pressed his hand to his chest, and took a few deep breaths. “I'm-- okay, just... heatstroke, probably. Maybe popped a blood vessel gettin' so angry. Think I'm just going to go to bed.”

“Okay... you need help?”

“I'm fine,” he said, but swayed when he got up. Bucky put his arm around Steve's waist again and helped him up the stairs.

“Bathroom?” he said.

“Nah, bed,” Steve said. Bucky could feel him drooping in his arms, his breathing still a little laboured.

When he took Steve in there, Steve just pulled off his shoes and flopped down on the bed.

“Shouldn't you put your brace on first?” Bucky asked.

“Fine for tonight,” Steve mumbled, already half asleep. It still wasn't right, Steve being like this. He went straight to sleep in his nice shirt and pants. His breathing had slowed and didn't sound congested, like it often did at night, so Bucky didn't want to call a doctor and keep Steve awake when he wanted to sleep. Long as he was here with Steve, nothing bad would happen.

-Steve had his final exam that would determine whether he'd be repeating ninth grade, or moving to tenth. Bucky came a half hour early to pick him up and kicked around in the drugstore across the road while he waited. When students started streaming out of the building, he came back to his car and got in. It took ten minutes for Steve to come out, and Bucky was about to go inside and find him again when he saw Steve hurrying to the car, head tilted down. He got in and Bucky leaned over to look at his face.

“Hey, what happened?”
“Nothin’,” Steve muttered, staring out of the window.

Bucky gripped his shoulder and turned Steve to face him. He had a fat lip and the beginnings of a black eye. “Who did that?”

“Doesn’t matter, let's just get out of here.”

“Steve, who did that to you?”

“Just drive the fuckin' car, Buck!” Steve snapped.

Bucky put his foot on the gas in surprise, and pulled away from the curb. Steve crossed his arms over his chest, stewing angrily.

“Was it that ginger kid with the face?” Bucky asked. Steve didn't reply. “Where is he?”

“He went home already.”

“Yeah?” His grip on the wheel tightened. “Where's he live?”

“It doesn't matter. He tried to jump Ian, I got in the way. Don't get weird on me.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “I'm not weird.”

Steve smiled a little. “You kind of are.”

He sighed and shook his head. “How was the exam?”

“I think I passed.”

“Yeah? That's great! We should celebrate.” He glanced at Steve again. “Maybe put some ice on that eye first, though.”

“Is your ma going to be mad at me for fighting?”

He shook his head. “Just disappointed.”

Steve groaned.

In fact, Ma wasn't disappointed at all, just railed against those ‘mean boys in that terrible school’, gently dabbed his wounds with iodine, and found him some cookies to eat.

“I'm her favourite son,” Steve said when she bustled out of the kitchen. His smile slid off his face after a minute.

He passed his math exam with a C, and Ma insisted on taking the two of them out to buy new school clothes. Steve had never owned such fine, well-fitting clothes in his life, he said.

Tennis wasn't Bucky's favourite sport – it didn't really feel like a sport if you didn't make contact – but Becca was a whiz at it and it was better than nothing when there was no football and not enough kids to play baseball. He missed being in the junior league, but he'd dropped it in favour of football and his studies. Steve didn't play tennis, didn't understand tennis, and definitely wasn't interested in it, but he sat out with them anyway. Bucky tried his best to explain the rules and scoring system so that Steve could keep score, but Steve got stuck on how stupid 'love' was as a score.
They were on the third set, one set won each, 40 all at the sixth game, by his estimation. Becca was brutal, her serves hard enough to knock him out if he’d got beaned by one. Sacred Heart didn't fuck around with their tennis lessons.

Bucky was drenched all the way through, probably as red as a cherry, but hell if he wasn't going beat her this time. She served and he returned it straight into the net, then yelled something very ungodly. Eugene came out with a glass of water for Steve and sat on the sidelines with him to watch. Bucky served again and she returned in a volley with ease. He returned it after one bounce and it shot past her, bouncing once and rolling away.

“Out!” she yelled. “Match point!”

“That was not out! That was on the line!” he shouted back.

“It was out, loser,” she said.

He looked at Steve for help, shaking his racket in frustration.

“I don't know much, but that ball definitely went past that line,” he said. Eugene nodded in agreement.

Bucky threw his racket down and collapsed onto the court like a starfish. He heard Becca comment that he always had a tantrum when he lost, and stared up at the deep blue sky until Steve loomed over him, the sun behind his head like a halo. Like this, he looked tall. He had zinc smeared all over his face.

“This is a weird game, Buck,” he said.

“Pour some water on me, will ya?” Bucky replied.

Steve raised his eyebrows but tipped his glass down, pouring water over Bucky's face and a little on his chest. Bucky managed to lift one hand and rub it in to his skin, running his fingers through his hair.

“Help me up?”

Steve stooped and took hold of his hand, giving him a boost. Bucky stumbled up, feeling a little light headed, and squeezed his eyes shut. He threw his arm around Steve's shoulders.

“Jeez, you're soaked through,” Steve said, and wrinkled his nose. “You should have put some zinc on, you're gonna peel like crazy.”

He did, and he peeled it off and ate it in bed that night, while Steve told him he was an idiot from behind his ironwork book.

Chapter End Notes

George Barnes reads The Brooklyn Daily Eagle.
By early August, the heat outside had reached its peak and the house was hot no matter what time of day it was. Suppers were light, cold meat and potato salad, a lot of ice cream and lemonade. By the evenings, they'd all had enough and lay on the floor in the living room, listening to Jack Benny and laughing. Eugene and Florence wanted to join them, but Bucky waved them away – they were too young for Benny.

Becca poured the last of the lemonade from the jug into her glass and prodded Bucky with her foot.

“Go get some more lemonade.”

“Geddit yourself,” he mumbled. He gestured to the radio. “I'm listening.”

“Okay, Steve can get it.”

Steve looked between them with big eyes.

Bucky sighed. “Nah, I'll get it.”

“Nah,” Becca echoed.

He dragged himself up, picked up the jug, and gave her a light kick in the shin, then left the room. He walked down the hallway, past the den, where he heard a hushed voice. He wasn't supposed to listen to hushed conversations in the house, Grandpa would tan his hide if he discovered Bucky eavesdropping on a business conversation.

It wasn't Grandpa, though, it sounded like Ma and she sounded upset. The door was slightly ajar, so he crept up and put his ear to the crack.

“It isn't going to come to that,” she was saying. When there was no reply, he realised that she was on the telephone. “It won't,” she insisted. There was a long pause before she sighed and said, “Of course. I won't let that happen. No, no, that would never happen, we would never let him go to one of those places... Sarah, I already love him, you don't need to worry about that.”

Bucky swallowed and scooted back from the door. He hurried to the kitchen and refilled the jug, then brought it back in.

“You missed a real funny bit,” Steve said.

Bucky smiled quickly and poured himself a glass, which he didn't drink. Benny was just background noise now; Sarah was dying, really, truly dying. This wasn't just a fun extended sleepover with his buddy – this was his best friend's mother dying. He pressed his lips together.

Steve wasn't in a hurry to go to bed, and Bucky didn't know how to introduce the subject, so it wasn't until midnight when Steve came back into their bedroom that Bucky took a deep breath.

“Hey, Steve?” he said, real casual.

Steve was distracted, yanking the hospital corners out from his bed. He hated that. “Uh huh?”
“I was thinking... we should drive to New Jersey tomorrow.”

Steve stilled and looked around at him.

“We should go see your ma,” Bucky continued.

Steve let go of the linens and sat down on the bed. “I'm not allowed to see her.”

“Yeah, well. I can be persuasive.”

Steve looked down at the floor.

“Do you want to go?” Bucky said.

“Yeah, course, but... why now?”

Bucky shrugged. “It's almost the end of the summer, we have the time. I dunno.”

Steve stared at him and Bucky tried his best to stop his face from betraying what he'd heard. He didn't think he managed it, but Steve didn't push.

“Okay,” he said. “Yeah, I'd really like that. We'd better get some sleep then.”

They didn't. At least, Bucky didn't and he was pretty sure Steve didn't either. They both shambled down to breakfast at nine, and Bucky tucked straight into the pancakes Ma set in front of him; sleeping badly always made him hungry. For once, Grandpa was there, carefully peeling an apple. Bucky had hardly seen him all summer.

Dad's newspaper read: Hitler Made Absolute Dictator As Reich Mourns Von Hindenburg.

“You know, I think Hitler has some things right,” Grandpa said. “The Allies really screwed Germany in Versailles; he's rebuilding the country.”

Dad lowered his paper slightly. Steve drew his eyebrows together and Bucky suddenly felt a little short of breath.

“I don't think that's right at all,” Steve said, then, as an afterthought, added, “sir.”

Grandpa's face changed. Hardened. Bucky had never disagreed with his grandfather; he didn't think anyone ever had. “Oh?”

Steve nodded. “The Nazis are runnin' Jewish people out of Germany. They're not allowed to work in civil service any more, they're publicly humiliated by the police, the press is being suppressed. And it isn't just Jews, it's everyone who ain't an Aryan, it's all the gypsies and all those people like me who can't walk right and can't breathe right and can't think right. It's all them biologically inferior folks.”

The table was silent. Dad had lowered his paper almost to the table, just watching Steve. Becca cleared her throat.

“He's right,” she said in a soft voice. “Arnie's got cousins still in Germany; their shops are all being boycotted and they're trying to emigrate, but America doesn't want them either.”

Grandpa looked... Bucky wasn't sure, because he'd never seen Grandpa angry, he'd never had to. He looked pale and tight lipped and Bucky thought he should say something, but he didn't know what and he didn't know how to argue with his grandfather. He wasn't really hungry any more.
“Ah, all sixteen year olds think they know just exactly how the whole world works,” Grandpa said, finally.

“Maybe they do,” Dad said, very quietly.

Bucky choked down a last square of pancake and grabbed Steve's arm. “Uh, can we be excused, we're gonna be... out all day at Coney Island, better get going soon.”

Ma nodded, her eyes wide.

“Can we come?” Eugene asked. Bucky had clean forgot they were even at the table.

“No,” he said, and tugged on Steve's arm. “C'mon.”

They drove all the way to the Brooklyn Bridge before Bucky said something. He didn't know what to say, he didn't know how to bring up Grandpa or how to talk about their oncoming visit.

He settled for, “You ever been to Jersey before?”

“Never been further than Harlem.”

“It's not much to see,” Bucky said.

“I bet,” Steve murmured.

Bucky fell silent again and concentrated on merging into the correct lane on the other end of the bridge. Steve stared out of the window as they passed City Hall.

“Hey, I'm sorry about what Grandpa said,” Bucky burst out.

“It's okay,” Steve replied. “It's not your fault.”

“I don't... think those things...” Bucky said slowly.

Steve smiled. “I know you don't.”

The anxiety in his chest loosened and they talked, shooting the breeze as they passed over the George Washington Bridge. They passed through Jersey City and into Newark, then Cedar Grove, and the conversation dropped off to nothing. It took a little while for them to find the sanatorium, but eventually Steve spotted a sign and they followed the directions to the bottom of the huge drive up to the red brick building.

“Wow,” Steve murmured. “We're never going to get in.”

“We'll get in,” Bucky promised, and got out of the car. “C'mon.”

Steve followed, jogging to catch up. “How?”

“Don't worry, I have a plan.”

“Which is?”

“I'm a doctor, you're my patient.”

“Oh, well, that'll work.”
Bucky waved him off and started walking up the path to the main doors. There were people being brought in and out in wheelchairs; they looked thin and frail and Steve turned away quickly, dropping his attention to his feet. Inside the lobby was a reception desk, a little blonde at the desk. She was an absolute doll, cute as a button. Bucky smiled to himself and strode past, towards the corridor.

“Excuse me,” she called. “Hey! Come back here.”

He turned back and putting on his most winning smile. “Sorry, miss, I don’t know where my head is at today.”

She frowned up at him and pointed her pen at his shirt. “Where's your badge?”

“Oh, jeez, I'm new, I didn't realise I needed one.”

“You're a new what?”

He kept smiling. “Medical intern.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And what's your name?”

“Arnie,” he said, the first thing that came to mind. “Arnold Roth.”

She pulled out a book and started rifling through it. Shit. “University?”

“Yeshiva. Out in Manhattan.”

“I know where it is,” she said sharply. “You're not on the register.”

“I'm not? Oh, jeez, I think maybe someone messed something up. It is the 2nd today, right?”

She sucked on her teeth. “Yes, it is.”

“Well, I'm definitely meant to be starting here today, you can ask the doctor.”

“Which doctor?”

This broad was not buying his crap. “Dr... Jeez, I can't remember, I'm sorry. I've been so nervous about this, my mind's all over the place today.”

She nodded slowly, then leaned over and looked at Steve. She pointed her pen at him. “Who's that?”

Bucky glanced back; Steve looked fit to be tied. He turned back to her and smiled. “That's my patient, I'm going to be checking him in later.” That was probably the most believable lie; Steve looked pretty damn consumptive these days.

“You're an intern and you're bringing a patient in?”

He kept the smile frozen to his face. “Maybe I should work this out with the doctor.”

“If you're not on the register, you're not coming in. You'll need to contact your university and get it straightened out, then come back with a badge.”

“If I could just talk to a doctor--”

“Leave before I call security,” she said.
He cleared his throat. “Right. Okay, thank you.”

Steve was already heading back out the door when Bucky turned around; they hurried out the doors and back down the steps.

“Great plan, Buck! Was that the first time you struck out with a girl?”

“We're not done,” he said, and took Steve's arm. On either side of the building was lawn and poorly fenced in lawn at that.

“What are we doing now?” Steve asked as they crossed onto the grass.

“Looking for an open window or door.”

“So, we're breaking and entering?”

“Just entering, no breaking anything.”

Steve sighed, then shrugged. “Okay.”

There were patients out in the grounds, and Bucky kept scanning their faces to see if Sarah was among them, but all the faces were unfamiliar. After a few minutes walking, Steve spotted an open door and they slipped in while the attendants were busy with patients. Of course, once inside, Bucky realised that they didn't know where to go.

“Did your ma tell you where her room was or anything?”

“Nope,” he said and sighed.

Bucky patted him on the back. “Hey, we got this far, we'll find her.”

“What are you boys doing in here?” a voice called.

Bucky looked up to find a coloured guy in a white uniform coming towards them. Bucky racked his brain for a quick, believable lie, but Steve spoke up first.

“We're looking for a patient.”

Bucky frowned; telling the truth wasn't the plan at all!

“There's no visitors here, kid. You and your buddy might get sick.” He stopped and looked Steve over. “Although you already look pretty sick.”

“It's my mother, I just want to see her before...” It hit Bucky like a cold punch: Steve already knew Sarah was dying. Bucky put his hand to his mouth and looked away.

“Are you Sarah's boy?”

Bucky looked back as Steve nodded and the guy rubbed at his forehead. “She's always talking about you.” He clicked his tongue. “She's upstairs, I'll take you, but then you're on your own.”

“Thank you, sir,” Steve said.

The guy snorted. “Yeah, you are a sweet kid.”

He brought them to an elevator and took them up two floors. Her room was 316, which was right in
a corner. True to his word, the attendant left them there alone and Bucky elected to stay outside and keep watch while Steve went in and talked to Sarah. Bucky wasn't sure he wouldn't get upset if he was in there with them, and that wouldn't help Steve any. Wouldn't help either of them.

All in all, Steve spent forty minutes with her. Thankfully, there wasn't much going on in this corner of the floor and no one paid attention to Bucky loitering outside. When Steve came back out, he was paler than usual and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Uh huh.” Steve rubbed the back of his hand across his nose. “We should get going.”

They made it back down in the elevator and down a hallway before turning a corner and running right into the blonde doll from reception. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, then she hollered for security.

“Run!” Bucky said, and they broke into a run, all the way out of the building, up the drive, and into the car. Bucky started the engine and peeled away before the sounds of Steve's pained breathing filtered in.

“Are you okay? Hey! Come on, breathe.”

Steve made grasping motions at the back seat, his other hand to his throat. His lips looked blue, like that first time Bucky saw him have a really bad attack. He looked at the back and saw Steve's bag lying across the seats. He held the wheel steady with one hand, and grabbed at the bag with the other, digging around until he found the nebuliser. Steve hadn't even brought it into the sanatorium, how dumb was that? Steve snatched it and took several long puffs before dropping it into the well of the car and hunching over in his seat. Bucky put his hand on Steve's back and rubbed circles until he found a good place to pull over.

“How are you feeling?”

Steve took a rattling breath and sat back. He tipped his head back against the headrest, Adam's apple sharp and prominent. “Gettin' there.”

“Maybe we should find somewhere to eat.”

“Sounds good,” Steve said, then opened the car door and hocked a loogie right onto the sidewalk. Bucky never got used to that.

They spent a few hours New Jersey, driving back down to Newark. Steve wanted to go to the museum there, which was as dull as Bucky thought it would be, and then the Cathedral, which was kind of interesting. Steve knew everything about the architecture and told him about it in great detail.

It was after four when they got back in the car and set off home. Steve kept on talking about architecture as they got onto Pulaski and Bucky nodded along as he watched the road. There was this car in the other lane that was drifting to the centre then back over to the side – cars behind it were beeping and drivers were sticking their heads out of their windows and yelling.

“Are you listening?” Steve said.

Bucky glanced at him. “Sorry, that car's just really weaving.”

Steve looked over at it and frowned. “Do you think he's drunk?”
“Probably,” he said. He kept the car slow and steady, keeping an eye on the other lane. Steve started talking again.

“Thanks for doing this,” he said. “Driving out here.”

“No problem,” he replied. The weaving car was racing up to meet them and Bucky leant on the gas to speed up and pass it, but with about twenty feet to go, the car veered sharply into their lane.

“Buck--!” Steve shouted.

“I know!” Bucky replied. He tried to veer away and overtake the car; the only way to turn was left into the oncoming traffic, because to the right was a railing and the Hackensack River below. He made the turn as smoothly as he could, but the other car rammed into the hood, sending them into a spin. He gripped the wheel, trying to control it, but the road was too slippery, and he had a sudden image of Steve's head going through the windshield. He threw out his right hand to hold Steve back against his seat and the car spun around until it sat perpendicular to the traffic, the cacophony of horns deafening. Bucky opened his mouth to ask Steve if he was okay when he heard a very close, very loud blaring of a horn--

He opened his eyes and looked at Steve. His hand was still on Steve's chest and he rubbed a little as Steve stared back at him with huge eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked. There was a persistent ringing in his ears, coupled with a silence beyond it that fell like a blanket. He couldn't hear his own words, but he could feel Steve's heart thundering against his chest. If he wasn't careful, he'd give himself another attack. “Calm down, you're okay.”

Steve moved his mouth, then again more insistently. He gestured towards Bucky's lap, and Bucky slowly looked down. His beige slacks were soaked through with blood, and his lower leg was pointing in a direction it shouldn't, pressed against the crushed in side of the car. Beyond the window was the crumpled hood of a Cadillac.

Steve's hands were on his face, shaking him. His fingers were ice cold. His mouth was moving again, frantically, but Bucky still couldn't hear it. Steve gave him a final shake before the edges of Bucky's vision started to fade. His eyes slid shut before the walls closed in completely.

He drifted in and out for a while, seeing Steve's face, faces of men in white caps moving their fingers back and forth in front of his eyes, his ma and his dad.

When he stopped drifting, he was in a white room with bright lights that hurt his eyes. His throat was the driest he had ever felt and he groaned a little to himself. There was a flurry of activity around him at that, his mother crying and his father leaning into his field of vision, explaining very carefully what was going on, though his voice was shaking. Bucky had been in a car crash, his lower leg below the knee had been snapped in two by the impact of the Cadillac into the side of the car, he was in Jersey City Hospital but would be able to come home in the next couple of days. Dad had deep, dark circles under his eyes.

“Steve?” he mumbled.

Dad stepped back and Steve appeared. He was paler than ever.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked.

Steve pressed his lips together. “I'm fine, Buck, not a scratch on me.”
“Good... The car?”

Steve's solemn expression broke a little. “It's totalled. They said you were lucky not to have had a limb amputated.”

Bucky laughed and kept on laughing, even though it wasn't really that great of a joke. Dad appeared again over Steve's shoulder and smiled.

“They gave you a lot of morphine after the surgery,” he said.

“Oh,” Bucky hiccuped and smothered the last of his laughter. “I had surgery?”

“Last night,” he said and gestured to Bucky's legs. Bucky tipped his chin down and saw that his left leg was elevated and covered in plaster of paris from the knee to the ankle.

“Huh,” he said. “What time's it?”

“Just after two.”

Ma burst into the room with a nurse – Bucky hadn't even noticed that she'd left – and the nurse checked him over while Ma covered him in kisses and rambled in Italian that he was too fuzzy to understand. Once everything settled down, he was exhausted and fell asleep to the promise that they'd all be there when he woke up.

By the time he woke up the next day, he felt much more present. They lowered his dose of morphine, so he felt a little discomfort, but it was worth it not to feel like he didn't know which way was up and if he was on planet Earth or not. He was fairly sure that Steve, along with Ma and Dad, had been sleeping in the hospital. He also realised that the reason he didn't need to piss was because there was a tube up his dick. Grandpa visited in the morning and brought lots of things that the nurses wouldn't let him have, like chocolate and cigarettes. He said the driver of the other car had been 'taken care of'. Steve didn't comment on that, but his mouth got tight.

Becca arrived not long after, stood in the door, and stared at him. He stared back for a minute before she hurried over and hugged him. Steve murmured 'careful', but Bucky waved him off. Becca hung on for a good while before pulling back and kissing his cheek quickly. He didn't think she'd ever kissed him before, or vice versa.

“Well, thanks for finally turnin' up.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. “I was here the whole time you were asleep. I had to go home and look after the kids.”

“Are they okay?”

“Eugene cried a lot.” She shrugged. “He thought you weren't going to come back from the hospital.”

“Is he okay now?”

“Yeah, Arnie explained it to him. He stayed over last night. Don't tell Ma, all right?”

Bucky sighed. As if he would ever rat on her. “Is he here?”

“Yeah, he's in the hallway.”

“Well, then, bring him in, huh?”
The four of them sat around talking until the pain started to make Bucky feel out of breath. Arnie gathered up Becca and tried to convince Steve to go home and sleep in a real bed. Bucky made a token effort to encourage him, but was relieved when Steve stood firm and stayed in the chair next to his bed; the room was too bright and too clinical to stay in alone.

The pain made him squirm and pant, but he didn't want any more morphine just yet, so he grit his teeth against it and Steve took out the latest Ellery Queen book and started reading it aloud. Bucky fell asleep right around the time Queen rumbled the killer.

The next day, Steve looked so lousy that even Bucky knew he needed to go home, and Arnie, who was there again, drove him back while Becca stayed behind. Afterwards, he was taken upstairs for an x-ray and then a nurse with big hands and a stern scowl removed his catheter, which was about the most humiliating experience of his life, and he was glad Steve wasn't there to witness it. He had his first go in a wheelchair and took a piss sitting down.

Ma shooed the nurse away when she tried to wash his hair and took over, clicking her tongue at the knots.

“I am not happy that you lied to me, topolino,” she said as she scrubbed her fingers into his hair; she used to wash his hair when he was little and he was so disappointed when she said he was old enough to do it himself.

“I know, Ma.”

“Jersey! Steve told me all about what you got up to, he was practically crying, poor bambino. There's a reason they don't allow healthy people in those places! And it took me almost an hour just to get to you after Steve called.”

“Scusami,” he said, his Italian fairly good, though he didn't get many chances to use it. “I just-- I heard you on the phone, to Sarah.”

Ma sighed and poured a little water over his head. “It's a sad thing,” she said. “They do not deserve all these bad things that happen to them.”

“So, you'll adopt Steve, if it comes to it?”

“Of course,” she said, and cupped his cheek for a moment as she washed the shampoo out. “If he wants it.”

“He has no one else except me-- us.”

“And we all almost lost you,” she said, and kissed his forehead. She picked up a towel and starting drying his hair. “What would I do without my Jamie?”

“I don't know, Ma,” he said and tipped forward as she rubbed at the back of his head.

There was a knock at the door, and Bucky couldn't see who it was but Ma called him 'doctor' and invited him in. Ma pulled the towel away and Bucky looked up at the doctor; he was an old guy with a bristly white moustache.

“It's nice to see you awake, James,” he said, and immediately looked at Ma. “Mrs Barnes, is your husband here?”

“He's getting something to eat with my daughter.”
The doctor hummed, then pulled out a clipboard. “I wanted to go over this with your husband present, but I'll go ahead now. James, your leg is healing nicely. You suffered a compound fracture of your tibia but we were able to put it back into alignment without much issue and there shouldn't be any nerve damage. It should take three to four months to heal. For a person of your age and health, I don't foresee any complications and you should be able to use crutches as soon as the end of this week.”

Bucky nodded along, not really sure what the doctor meant. He knew the tibia was the long bone in his lower leg, but he didn't know what a compound fracture was and so it didn't explain much about what had happened.

The doctor pursed his lips. “You also tore the anterior cruciate ligament in your knee – we stabilised the area and repaired the damage best as we were able.”

Bucky had no idea what he was talking about now.

The doctor's eyebrows were just as bristly as his moustache and he drew them together as he continued. “Your parents tell me you're a quarterback?”

Bucky nodded.

“Unfortunately,” the doctor said, and Ma took a deep breath, “it's unlikely that you'll be able to play football again, certainly not at a professional level.”

“Oh,” he said, and glanced at Ma; her eyes looked a little red-rimmed. “Will I be able to walk?”

“After your tibia is healed, you shouldn't have any trouble walking. You may also be able to play other sports recreationally, like baseball.”

“Oh, that's... good. When can I leave?”

The doctor smiled slightly. “We'll keep you in tonight to be safe, but you should be discharged tomorrow afternoon.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“If you have any more questions, you can ask one of the nurses,” the doctor said, then wrote something on his clipboard and left.

Ma leaned over and squeezed his shoulder. “Are you okay, tesorino?”

“Uh, I guess so,” he mumbled.

“Do you want me to stay here with you?”

He nodded, pressing his lips together and she wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

Steve didn't come with Ma and Dad when they picked Bucky up the next day – Ma said that there wouldn't be enough room in the car with the front passenger seat folded down to accommodate Bucky's outstretched leg. He guessed that was a good point, but he still would have preferred that Steve came. Dad took the drive nice and slow, but Ma still gripped Bucky's hand tight whenever they went over a bump in the road. Bucky was never so glad to see Brooklyn.
There were five deep steps that led up to the house, and Bucky wondered how he was going to get up them when the front door opened and Grandpa and Becca appeared. Dad got out of the car and helped Bucky shift around to sit on the edge of the seat with his leg sticking out of the door.

“I'll carry him up,” Grandpa said and Bucky grimaced at the thought of it.

“No,” Dad said, firmer than Bucky had ever heard. “You bring the wheelchair up.”

“George,” Grandpa said with reproach. He was much bigger and stronger than Dad, it made sense.

“I can look after my own son, Lucio,” Dad snapped.

Becca widened her eyes at that and Bucky pulled a face at her as Grandpa acquiesced with a huff and came down the steps to fetch the wheelchair. He set it back down to the side of the front door, and Dad wound his arm underneath Bucky’s arms.

“Maybe you should let Grandpa do this,” he said. Bucky had three inches and probably thirty pounds on his father.

Dad shook his head. “I am not so useless.” He leant down, slid his other arm under Bucky’s thighs and lifted him up. Bucky could feel him straining, but he managed to get Bucky up the steps and into the wheelchair without any spills.

“Hi,” Becca said, looking down at him. “All the neighbours are watching.”

“Thanks,” he said, and saw for the first time that Steve was standing just inside the door. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Steve echoed.

Bucky smiled. “You're not gonna have the bedroom to yourself any more.”

“Actually, we brought your bed downstairs,” Becca said. “You're in the living room for a while.”

“Oh,” he said. “False alarm.”

He looked over to the living room door and saw the twins peeking out from behind the frame. They disappeared when they saw him looking, then re-emerged a second later and ran up to him.

“Are you okay now?” Florence asked. They both held themselves back, like they’d hurt him if they touched him.

“I'm fine, I've just got to use this fun chair for a while. C'mere.” They shuffled closer until he could reach them over the arms of the wheelchair and hugged them both in turn. “You want to push me into the kitchen? I swear they starve you at the hospital so that you don't get too comfortable.”

He wasn't joking about being starved – he ate a big lunch, and then a lot of potatoes and chicken for supper. Ma let him and Steve and Becca listen to the radio after but insisted that he not stay up late like normal. That wasn't much of a problem, because by nine he was exhausted, and it looked like Steve was too. Bucky was feeling pretty clammy with pain by the time Dad helped him change and get into bed and Ma tucked him in (he didn't have the heart or the energy to push her away, even though Steve was standing right there), so they gave him some morphine, which made him feel very good.

Steve hung around like a bad smell, loitering awkwardly. Bucky stared at him for a minute, his vision going blurry.
“Hey,” he said, squinting at Steve. “Maybe it's the morphine, but you're tippin' more than usual.”

Steve shrugged his – uneven – shoulders. “I haven't worn my brace in a while, keep forgetting.”

“Well, go put it on, feels like I'm on a tilt-a-whirl.”

Steve smiled a little and left the room, and Bucky drifted a bit until he returned. He had his pyjamas on and shuffled his feet a little.

“You sleepin' here?” Bucky said.

“Do you want to be left alone?”

“Nah,” he said and lay his head down. “'sall right.”

He knew he should talk more, but he was so tired that he couldn't do anything but close his eyes and breathe slowly. He was almost out when he heard Steve say in a small voice, “I'm sorry, Buck.”

“Huh?” he mumbled.

“Oh, I thought you were...” Steve mumbled.

“What've you got to be sorry about?”

Steve exhaled. “Becca told me about you not being able to play football any more... If you hadn't've held me back, maybe you'd have been able to keep the car under control and not get your leg broke like that.”

Bucky waved a hand, or thought he did – he was pretty loopy, so all bets were off. “Don't gotta worry 'bout that.”

“But if...”

“Steve. If you'd've gone through the windshield, you'd be dead right now. It's only football. 's good thing I'm smart too, I'll be fine.”

There was a very long pause before Steve said, “All right. Night, Bucky.”

“Mhm,” he mumbled.

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Getting up was hard; it hadn't been that hard in hospital because he had nurses and Ma to help him and he was on much more morphine, but now at home, he struggled to even push himself up into a sitting position.

Steve struggled to sit up as well, dragging himself up from the couch with a groan, and painstakingly stretched his arms over his head.

Bucky needed to get dressed; Ma had left a neatly folded pile of clothes on a chair nearby but not near enough for him to reach. “Steve, can you pass me those clothes?”

Steve yawned as he nodded, and stumbled up to fetch them. Ma had set aside a shirt, undershirt, and pair of his loosest fitting slacks. He unbuttoned his top and took off his pyjama top as Steve flopped back onto the couch; Bucky threw him a quick glance once he was bare chested, but Steve wasn't paying attention. His sleep shorts would be okay under slacks, so he left them on. He pulled the
undershirt on without any trouble, skipped the shirt, and started trying to get the slacks on. He could get his right leg in no problem and could, after a fashion, work the other side up his left, but when it came to pulling them up to fasten them, he couldn't lift himself up enough.

“D'you want me to get your dad?” Steve asked.

Bucky shook his head. Once was enough. “Gimme those crutches,” he said. Steve brought them over and Bucky wedged them the best he could under his armpits. They'd shown him how to use them at the hospital, but only in a cursory way, and pulling himself upright wasn't much fun. His slacks pooled to the floor.

Steve looked at them for a moment, then at Bucky. “You want any help?”

“Oh... Yeah, thanks.”

Steve knelt down and picked up the slacks, pulling them up Bucky's legs. Bucky's legs – and his chest, incidentally – were covered in dark brown hair where Steve didn't have any. Bucky shaved his face every morning now and he wasn't sure if Steve had ever shaved at all. He felt his cheeks start to heat up as Steve drew the slacks closer to Bucky's groin, his head way too close to it, when the door opened.

Becca stood in the doorway, face blank for a moment. Steve turned and looked at her. She smiled. “Breakfast is ready,” she said, and closed the door again. Steve pulled the slacks up all the way.

“D'you want me to do them up?” Steve asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve did up the buttons while Bucky held himself as still as possible. When he was done, Bucky tugged his shirt out of the waistband and took a tentative first step. Oh, this was fucking awful. Steve hurried to open the door for him and said he'd join them for breakfast after he'd got dressed. Bucky made his slow way to the breakfast room.

“Bucky!” Ma said, and jumped up to help him into a chair. “You should be using your wheelchair, you'll hurt yourself!”

“Ma, I'm fine,” he said, although his arms were shaking and there was a fine sheen of sweat on his skin.

“Yeah, look, he dressed himself and everything,” Becca said, and smiled mischievously at him. He glared back, then tucked into his bacon and eggs. Steve came back down and joined the table, and they all ate in silence for a while. Bucky was still so damn hungry that he didn't notice until the doorbell went and shook them all out of their reverie.

Davis went to the door and greeted the caller, and then a moment later said, “I'm afraid he isn't taking visitors, Miss.”

Bucky looked over his shoulder, towards the door, and a minute later Davis came to it with a pink, heart adorned box in his hands.

“Another young lady asking after Master Barnes,” he said, with a hint of a smile. “I sent her away. She asked me to pass on this box of home made cookies. I will store it in the pantry.”

“Thank you, Davis,” Ma said.
Becca gave Bucky a light shove. “We've had every girl from the neighbourhood under the age of twenty at our door the last few days.”

“Yeah?” Bucky asked, and grinned. “Did they all bring food?”

Recovering from a broken leg was the worst thing in the world. Ma wouldn't hardly let him out of the house, and Steve ran around doing things for him even when Bucky could hear his shortness of breath, and his leg was so damn itchy under the cast, no fork was long enough. He categorically refused to use the wheelchair again after the first day and thought, if nothing else, the crutches were a good workout for his arms, because he wasn't getting any other kind of workout at the moment.

“Your muscle is turning to fat,” Becca informed him, while he was sitting in the library reading a book. He was reading a lot of books now, getting a real jump on the other kids in his English class, teacher would be proud.

“Thank you,” he said, not looking up. “Your curls are wilting.”

He heard her huff. “Me and Arnie and Steve are going to see Cleopatra.”

He looked up. “Aren't I invited?”

“Ma's not going to let you out of the house and anyway, you wouldn't be able to get your leg in the rows of seats. You know how Steve feels about Claudette Colbert, don't get weird.”

“I'm not weird,” he said. “Fine, leave the cripple behind.”

Becca pulled a sad face. “Don't cry, little urchin.”

“Fuck off,” he muttered. He didn't even like Claudette Colbert, what did he care?

Once Becca and Steve had driven off in her car – just gifted to her for her last birthday – the house was nearly silent. Dad and Grandpa were out, the staff had the day off, and Ma was having a rest upstairs. It was just him and the kids downstairs, and after he'd lost interest in Dracula, he levered himself up and went to the kitchen to get a drink. The twins were in the breakfast room, playing chess at the table, since the living room was now a maelstrom of Bucky and Steve's mess, Steve's bed having been moved downstairs as well.

“Hey,” he said, leaning his left side against the door frame. He gripped his glass of water in his right hand, pressing his crutch tight against his side. “Can I come in?”

They looked surprised, but Florence nodded and he limped in, set his glass down, and sat down heavily. “Jesus,” he muttered.

Eugene looked constipated. “You're not supposed to take the Lord's name in vain.”

“Yeah, yeah, three Hail Marys and an Our Father.”

Eugene wrinkled his nose in irritation, but Florence laughed. Bucky smiled back and nudged her leg with his good foot. The kids kept playing for a few minutes and it had been years since Bucky had played, so he couldn't figure out who had the upper hand. After a little while, though, Florence sat back and looked at him.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.
“My leg? Nah, it aches more than anything. And itches.”

“How did it get broken?” Eugene asked quietly. Their parents hadn’t told them much, Ma thought the kids had too sensitive souls to hear all the details – she didn’t even like to hear it herself when Bucky mentioned it. Bucky was hearing and getting up to the lot worse when he was their age, though, so he didn't think it would traumatise them forever.

“We got hit by a couple of cars. One hit the front and spun us round, then the other crashed into the driver’s side. It snapped my lower leg in half.” He’d looked up what a ‘compound fracture’ was in an encyclopedia – it meant the bone had broken through his skin, which accounted for all the blood he remembered seeing before he passed out. “Messed up my knee, too.”

“Were you scared?”

He thought about it; he felt a lot of adrenaline, and he was scared that Steve was going to get thrown through the windshield, but he didn't really have time to be scared for himself. He shook his head. “Not really.”

“You're really brave,” Florence said.

Bucky shrugged. “I dunno, probably just stupid.” Becca said it often enough, it must be true.

“Ma says you can't play football any more,” Eugene said.

“Uh huh.”

“You said you'd teach me how to play,” he continued, pouting slightly.

“Did I?” Bucky didn't remember anything about that, he’d probably just said it to make Eugene go away. “Well, Dad can probably...”

Eugene pulled a face.

“Okay, Grandpa, then. And look, I'm not going to be a cripple forever, I'll still be able to play a bit.”

“I guess...” Eugene said, but he sounded sceptical.

- Three weeks stuck on the ground floor of the house was turning Bucky half crazy. Ma had 'helpfully' talked to his school and they’d sent over a bundle of work for him to get a head start on before the semester began. He did it simply because there was nothing else to do. Steve was his usual loyal self and, except for a couple of trips out with Becca, stayed inside with him, and began drawing intricate illustrations of scenes from their favourite movies on Bucky's cast.

Bucky was writing an essay on the battle of Little Bighorn when his fuse finally snapped. He threw his pencil down and braced his arms against the bed.

“Come on,” he said, and pushed himself up far enough to reach his crutches.

Steve capped his pen and looked up. “Where're we going?”

“Out. I'm gonna go stir fuckin' crazy if I don't get out of this house.”

“Your ma's not going to like that,” Steve said.
He pulled himself up and set off. “She can like it or not, I'm going.”

Steve hurried after him out to the front door; Bucky had got pretty good on his crutches and Steve's little legs couldn't propel him fast enough. Bucky got as far as shoving his good foot into a shoe and opening the front door when Davis appeared.

“Are you going out, Master Barnes?”

Damn. He gripped the door handle and looked up. “Uh... yes. Can you just... give me a ten minute head start before telling Ma?”

Davis tipped his head to one side. “I can do my best.”

That was a no. Bucky pushed the door open and gestured for Steve to step out. He turned to follow, and just as he was about to close the door, his mother's voice rang out.

“Bucky? Where are you going?”

He cringed and looked back. She was standing out the top of the stairs, eyes narrowed. “I'm just going out for a little while, Ma.”

“You are in no fit state to go out, James Buchanan.”

“Ma, I'm gonna lose my fu--., lose my mind if I don't get out of here.”

She pursed her lips. “One hour,” she said, “just around the neighbourhood. Steve?”

Steve popped his head around the door. “Yes, ma'am?”

“Make sure you keep an eye on this one.”

Bucky suppressed an eyeroll.

“I will, don't worry,” Steve answered, with his most winning smile.

“I know you will, sweetheart.”

“All right, all right, come on,” Bucky said, pushing Steve back and closing the door.

Getting down the steps was a bit hairy, and going three blocks on crutches was hard on his arms and his good leg, but they made it to the drugstore and Bucky leant himself against the counter while they ordered chocolate malts. He couldn't sit on one of the stools because he couldn't drag himself up high enough, so Steve took their drinks over to a booth and Bucky arranged himself with his leg extended without sticking it out too far into the aisle.

“This is the best damn malt I've ever tasted,” Bucky said. “It tastes like freedom.”

Steve laughed and started blowing bubbles in his, and Bucky took it as the challenge it was. Bucky always blew better bubbles than Steve, and Steve kicked him under the table in retaliation. Bucky kicked him back, hard, and they ramped up their bubble blowing until malt spilled down their glasses and onto the table.

Someone cleared their throat beside them, and they both started. Steve burst into a coughing fit and Bucky wiped his mouth and looked up.

“You broke your leg in that accident everyone was talkin' about, didn't ya?” the girl asked. She had a
heart-shaped face and a cloud of blonde hair around her head, Clara Bow style.

“Yeah,” he said.

She smiled. “Everyone thinks you're real brave.” She gestured to the cast. “I like all the drawings.”

“He did them,” Bucky said, nodding to Steve, who had quelled his coughing and now looked like a cornered animal.

The girl looked at Steve like she'd just noticed him for the first time. “You're a real good artist.”

“Oh, uh, uh...” Steve clasped his hands around his glass and blinked rapidly.

“He means 'thank you','” Bucky supplied.

“Don't he speak English?” she asked, totally sincere. Steve started to blush.

“Apparently not,” Bucky said.

She smiled. “Well, maybe I'll see you around.”

He smiled back. “Maybe you will.”

He watched her as she walked away, then looked back at Steve. “That was like watching an animal drown,” he said.

Steve put his hands over his face.

“You really need to start talking to more girls,” Bucky continued, “then maybe you wouldn't embarrass me like that.”

“I talk to Becca!” Steve insisted.

Bucky waved him off. “She isn't a girl.”

“She ain't?” Steve said.

“Nah, not like that. I mean a real girl, with a nice set of jugs, who ain't my sister.”

“Buck!”

“Or some goggle-eyed number like Bette Davis, whatever you like, but you gotta figure something out.”

Steve shook his head. “You're awful.”

“Awfully good with girls, you mean.”

“You haven't had one girl this whole summer,” Steve said.

Bucky shrugged. “But I could've, if I'd wanted to.”

“Right,” Steve said.

In all, they spent an hour and a half out, and Bucky knew he was going to get it from Ma when they returned home, so he went extra slow to delay the inevitable. Going up the steps wasn't as bad as going down them, but it was still a strain and he was panting by the time Steve opened the door for
“Steve?” Ma called when they got inside. The house was alive with noise and Bucky cringed at the thought of the telling off he was about to get. She shouted Steve's name again and then said to someone, “get them back on the phone.”

Becca ran out into the hall and grabbed Steve's hand, dragging him away without so much as a hello to Bucky. He followed them, though the trip out had depleted his energy some. Becca led them to the den, where Ma, the kids, and Dad were congregated, Dad on the telephone, speaking softly. When he saw Steve, he waved him over and handed it to him. Steve clutched it in both hands.

“Sarah's being released from the sanatorium,” Becca told Bucky quietly as Steve seemed to get the same news and 'but' three times in a row.

“She is?” Bucky said. He was so sure she was done for.

Steve had started crying, all restrained and embarrassed, and Ma wrapped her arm around him as he kept talking to the person on the telephone.

“Called while you two were out. They're saying end of the week.”

“That's amazing,” Bucky said. It was, TB wasn't something so many people came back from, certainly not people in the kind of shape Sarah had been in. He guessed that they'd move back into the tenement, Bucky would have his room to himself again – or the living room, as the case may be. That was good, it was difficult to jack off with Steve in bed across from him (difficult, but not impossible).

He'd have all that space for himself again, and if he wanted to talk about his thoughts on spacecrafts in the middle of the night, well, that wasn't so important, was it? It could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Fortuitously, the Pulaski Skyway really was known for its crashes, although I wrote this car crash long before I found that out.
Chapter Notes

Content: homophobia, anti-Semitic slurs, sexist language, somewhat dubcon sex scene, Bucky generally being a mean son of a bitch. This chapter is double the usual length because it's transitional to the rest of the story and I couldn't find anywhere to split it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sarah was released the week before school started and stayed with them for a few days. She looked different – her cheeks were fuller, she wasn't so pale, her hair looked nicer. She came out of the sanatorium healthier than he'd ever seen her.

She fussed over him when she saw him on his crutches and he blithely told her that the crash wasn't even that bad, glancing over at Steve, whose eyes grew wide. He hadn't told her, that became quickly clear. Becca told him later that Steve didn't want to lay it on her when they all thought she was dying, and amazingly Ma had agreed to it.

Steve and Sarah moved into a new tenement a few streets away from the old one. This one had a courtyard of sorts, walkways lining the outside of the building so that every tenant had a private entrance. Sarah thought it'd be better because the increased airflow would be good for both of them, and Dad had looked it over and deemed it to be fairly well insulated. The walkways looked like they were at risk of collapse, but it was something. Steve had never really needed to keep a key on him before and he forgot it more often than not. Sarah took to keeping one under a brick by the door.

Of course, it would be months before Bucky would see anything but the ground floor with him on his crutches. It was Becca's turn to do all the driving, and she began taking him to school and picking him up afterwards. His team mates – former team mates – said it was too bad that he couldn't play any more. Sure it was, now Timothy would be the new quarterback, he was real cut up about that.

The guidance counsellor said that he'd needed to pick up a different extracurricular; the drama department was putting on A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Mr LaFlamme wanted Bucky as his Puck. Bucky wasn't all that enthused, but his other option was debate club, and he was better fighting with his hands than his words.

Becca almost busted a gut laughing. “Oh my God,” she screeched as they drove away from Trinity. “You'll be awful! Do you even know the play?”

“Yeah, I know it, I read it. Fairies and shit.”

She looked at him for a moment and her mouth dropped open. “Oh my God. Pucky.” She cackled, throwing her head back. Yeah, that was going to stick.

“Watch the road,” he snapped, “I don't need to get into another fuckin' accident.”

The fairies weren't just characters – the kid playing Titania, Queen of the Fairies, lived up to the title. He was an effeminate looking kid with dark brown hair and a pointy chin. Bucky knew the guys on the football team gave him a hard time, although he'd told them to cut it out. Matthew was an okay guy, though Bucky wasn't sure he'd ever spoken to him directly. They had English together and
Matthew always seemed to know the answer.

Bucky was glad he didn't have to play a girl.

He also had to start writing his college applications – Harvard, Yale, and Stanford were his top three. He was sure he didn't want to go to Stanford, it was too far from home, but Ma said he should apply anyway. Becca's top three were Radcliffe, Wellesley, and Barnard, and he wouldn't have minded if they both went to college in Cambridge. They had to sit the SAT, even though that was supposed to be for scholarship students; Harvard and Radcliffe would never have admitted children of nightclub owners alongside the children of New England elites. Predictably, Becca did much better on the exam than Bucky. Bucky got it into his head that Steve should take it too, but Steve said he couldn't justify the $5 fee when he wasn't going to be going to college anyhow. Bucky said he'd pay it, but Steve refused.

They removed the cast in early November – Bucky asked that they be careful cracking it because of Steve's drawings, but they still messed up some of the illustrations. Beneath the cast, his leg was covered in dry skin that sloughed off endlessly as he gave in to the months long desire to scratch while the doctor droned on about how walking would be difficult for a while. Bucky wasn't listening, he was too far into a haze of itchy pleasure.

It was harder to walk, though. His left leg was noticeably less muscular than the right and felt weak when he put pressure on it; he fell over the first time he stood up and Dad had to grab him and hold him up. So, the crutches weren't totally out yet, and the doctor recommended gentle exercise like swimming and regular stretches, which was fine, Bucky relished the thought of doing something, anything active.

There was an indoor swimming pool just over the Williamsburg bridge and on a frigid Saturday in late November Becca drove him and Steve over. Steve didn't have any trunks, so he'd had to borrow a pair from Eugene, a fact he didn't want to dwell on.

It was mostly kids and their parents there and in the changing room boys stared at Bucky's crutch. He decided to put it aside, figuring it would be better to limp than to have his crutch skid on the wet floor. When he stumbled out of the cubicle and found Steve, Steve's gaze zeroed in on his leg and his eyes widened. Bucky's scar ran from just below his knee to his ankle, a straight line except at the top where Bucky assumed that the bone had broken through; that part was a little gnarly looking. Steve's attention only shifted when Becca came out of the girls' changing room in her bathing suit. She had on a red striped number fastened at the neck and ending at the mid thigh. There was no way around it: Steve gawked, then blushed and looked away. Bucky guessed Becca was growing up to be all right looking – she was tall and slim and she wore her hair in short, tight finger waves. She had the same blue eyes as Bucky, and the same jawline; she was quite a hit with guys, though she had no time for them. She and Arnie were as tight as ever. Bucky figured she'd lose interest once they went to college.

She smiled and strode past them, jumping into the pool from the edge. Bucky followed at his limping pace and lowered himself in by the ladder. He took it slow for a few minutes, but found that swimming came easy as ever and his leg felt fine in the water. He did a couple of laps, racing Becca from end to end; she won, but only by a little bit.

Steve was still wading in the shallow end when Bucky took a break and he swam up to Steve.

“I promise to go easy on ya,” he said and grinned.

Steve smiled a little. “I'm good.”
“You're just gonna stay in the shallow end?”

Steve nodded. “Uh huh. No matter how slow you go, I won’t be able to keep up.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Can... you swim, Steve?”

Steve sighed and looked away. “You got me.”

Bucky grabbed his hand and tugged him. “No problem, I'll teach you!”

Steve was very resistant to being taught- Bucky thought a little thing like him would float easy, but that didn't turn out to be the case. Steve cried uncle about half an hour later and sat on the edge of the pool the rest of the afternoon. Bucky felt good and tired when he got out, his limbs buzzing with exhaustion like after a game. It was good and his leg felt better for it. Steve, on the other hand, got an ear infection and, in his words, felt 'like fuckin' shit, Buck'. His balance was shot for a week and he fell over at the slightest provocation.

The best part of having the cast removed, though, was rediscovering the upstairs of the house. He played with the kids in their room just because he could, and harassed Becca when she was trying to read in bed for the hell of it. They both got reprimanded by Ma when Becca yelled that she was going to kill him.

He underestimated how hard being in a play would be – once his walking got better, they spent a lot of time in the drama room learning their marks, to say nothing of learning the lines. Bucky had thought writing about Shakespeare was bad enough, but actually having to remember all the lines was impossible. No one could do it!

He was repeating those damn lines in his head all the time, fucking them up more often than not.

Steve helped him practice, although he was the world's worst actor.

“That those-- those that Hobgoblin call you, uh, and sweet Puck, you do their work and they shall have good luck. Are you not he?” Steve said flatly, staring intently at the book.

Bucky cleared his throat and waved off Steve's offer of the book. “Thou speak right-- speakst right, I am a merry wanderer of the night, I jest that-- to Oberon and make him smile, when I, a fat and bean-fed horse beguile, neighing in likeness that-- of a, of a-- fucking horse, shit. Jesus Christ.”

“That's not the line, Buck,” Steve said. He might not have been an actor, but he sure thought he was a comedian.

Bucky threw himself down onto the couch and groaned.

“You two are hopeless,” Becca said by the door. “Filly foal, the line is filly foal. And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl, in very likeness of a roasted crab, and when she drinks, against her lips I bob--”

She walked into the room and grabbed hold of Steve's chin, giving it a gentle shake. “And on her withered dewlap pour the ale. The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale, sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me; then slip I from her bum, down topples she, and tailor cries and falls into a cough, and then the quire hold their hips and laugh, and waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear: a merrier hour was never wasted there. But, room, fairy! here comes Oberon. That's your whole character introduction, if you mess it up, you're going to look like an idiot.”

Bucky blinked. “Jesus. Do you think if we cut your hair, you could pass as me for the night?” It wasn't even really a joke; they looked similar, maybe she could do it and save his ass in front of the whole school.
“I wouldn't cut my hair for you,” she said. “But I can help you practice better than Steve. No
offence, Steve.”

Steve smiled and handed over the book. “None taken.”

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In January, he and Becca mailed in all their college applications. Bucky hadn't made much effort
with his essays, but his interviews had gone well. Steve thought college interviews sounded like the
worst thing in the world, but Bucky had never had any trouble being charming, and the interviewers
thought he was brave for surviving the crash – as if he had another choice – and showed initiative
getting involved in the play and other crap like that.

He started to spend more time than he'd like in the drama room, going over lines and his steps.
Matthew was there more often than not, fluttering around the stage, in his element.

“You really like this stuff, don't you?” Bucky asked. He was sitting on the edge of the stage, leafing
through the book, while Matthew was moving around the stage, muttering to himself. They were the
only ones in there, since they both had a free period.

“Yeah, I want to be an actor. I just applied to Juilliard.” He had a slight Southern accent that made
him sound like something out of Coquette, and made Bucky think about plantations. His daddy was
a Texas oil man, his mama a stage actress.

“Hey, good luck.”

“Thanks,” Matthew said from behind him, then paused for a beat. “You don't enjoy it, huh?”

Bucky tipped his head back and smiled at him. “How'd you tell?”

Matthew smiled back and came to stand beside him. “I'm sorry you had to stop playing football.
Everyone said you were really good at it.”

“Well, I was better at it than this, that's for sure. These lines are gonna kill me.”

“Maybe it would help if you got into character some. Puck's a trickster, he's always moving around,
always looking to cause trouble somewhere.”

“I guess it couldn't hurt,” Bucky said and started to pull himself up. Problem was, his leg didn't quite
want to cooperate and he struggled for a minute before Matthew gripped his hand and pulled him up.
Bucky had a couple of inches on him and when he stumbled forward, Matthew backed up a step and
cleared his throat.

“You think you can move around a little?”

“I guess I'll have to.” His leg wasn't bad at all any more, he only started limping at the end of the day.

“I'll read the other parts,” Matthew said, and cleared his throat again. “Let's start on act III, scene II.”

Bucky struggled, which was doubly embarrassing in front of Matthew, since he could play all the
parts well, and probably would have made a much better Puck too. He stumbled over both words
and whole lines.

“Let's try that bit again, from 'Captain of our fairy band',” Matthew said, once Bucky had struggled
to pronounce the word 'preposterously' without fucking up.
Bucky sighed. “Okay. Uh... Captain of our fairy band, Helena is here at hand; and the youth, mistook by me, pleading for a lover's fee. Shall we their fond pageant see? Lord, what fools these mortals be!” He tried to loosen himself up, moving around and speaking with his hands, lacing his hands together at 'pleading'. Matthew was smiling, so he guessed he was doing something right.

Matthew put his hand on Bucky's chest and pushed him back. “Stand aside: the noise they make will cause Demetrius to awake.”

Bucky glanced down at his book. “Then will two at once woo one; that must needs be sport alone; and those things do best please me, that befal preposterously.” That was the cue for Lysander and Helena to enter, so they drew back to the corner of the stages.

“That was a lot better,” Matthew said. His cheeks were turning pink.

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh. I think you'll do great.”

Bucky grinned. “Thanks!”

Matthew smiled, then cleared his throat and looked towards the door. “I better get going to my next class. See you later, okay?”

“All right,” Bucky said, and Matthew grabbed his bag and hurried out the door.

Steve's joints swelled up in the first week of February and didn't go down until the third. He fell behind on his schoolwork and Bucky helped him out with math and a couple of essays; dictated, of course, although Bucky edited a few sentences to his liking without letting Steve know.

For Bucky's birthday, him and Steve were going to Coney Island. Ma had allowed it without a complaint about not spending the day with him, so he knew it was a ploy to get him out of the house long enough for them to set up some kind of fancy party. Everyone was very secretive in the week leading up to it, and he did his best to pretend that they weren't all incredibly bad at acting normal. He did his homework and practised his lines and was generally very good and didn't pry or check the loose floorboard in his parents' closet or the old free standing cupboard in the basement.

On the Saturday afternoon before his birthday, he stood in his bedroom, going through his steps and repeating his lines under his breath. Grandpa had caught him at it a couple of times over the last few weeks, and he always pulled a face like he smelt something bad. Bucky kept his voice down now.

There was a knock at the door and he tossed the book onto the bed before opening it. Davis stood on the other side, the same half smile he always had on his face, and handed an envelope to Bucky.

“This just arrived with the late delivery,” he said.

Bucky turned it over in his hands and looked at the name printed in the top left hand corner. Harvard University.

“Oh,” he said. “Thanks.”

Davis smiled a little more. “Good luck.”

Bucky nodded and closed the door over again. He stared at the envelope, turned it over in his hands
a couple of times, then walked over to his bed and stuffed it under his pillow. He picked up the book again.

He got up early on Sunday morning, went through the obligatory showering of affection (and scorn, from Becca) at the breakfast table, and ran out the door at nine thirty to meet Steve at Coney Island. Not having a car any more meant he was getting reacquainted with the subway, its odour and its odd inhabitants. Two guys were having a fight on the other end of the carriage. Bucky looked the other way.

It was a cool, bright day and Bucky found Steve standing at the lip of the station exit, his back to him. The light was hitting just right to make Steve's hair kind of glow – his hair had got progressively darker since they were kids, but today it looked as blond as ever.

“Hey,” he called.

Steve turned around and grinned. “Hey, happy birthday, old man.”

“We're riding that Cyclone,” Bucky replied, pointing at him.

Steve grimaced. “Do we have to?”

“Nope, we don't have to, but we are.”

Steve groaned and trailed after him down the steps towards the seafront.

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Steve's downfall was the cotton candy, which didn't look much different coming up then it did going down.

“Better?” Bucky asked, and handed Steve some napkins he'd swiped off a concession stand. Steve had managed to get to a trash can, at least. He took the napkins with a reproachful glare. “Want to go again?”

“I'll puke on you next,” he snapped.

Bucky grinned and threw his arm around Steve's shoulders. “Let's go look at the freak show.”

Since it was still the morning, the freak show wasn't in full swing like it would be in the evening and like it was in the height of summer. Bucky had actually never been to the freak show because the one time Ma and Dad had tried to take him and Becca before the twins were born he cried inconsolably at the sight of a pinhead. Maybe it wasn't a surprise that he didn't like *Freaks*.

Inside the Dreamland Circus, there was a lethargic looking bearded lady and deformed fetuses in tubes suspended in liquid – Bucky was fairly sure that they weren't real, but the thought that they could be made his skin crawl. There was a woman with no limbs who could light a cigarette with her mouth, but Bucky couldn't look at her and stared at his feet instead.

“Let's get outta here,” Steve said and Bucky nodded gratefully.

He didn't realise how shallowly he was breathing until they stepped back into the light and he drew in a deep breath.

“It's not right that they have to do things like that for money,” Steve said, wrapping his arms around himself.
“Yeah. You liked that film though.”

“I liked that they got revenge,” Steve said.

Bucky nodded, then swallowed. “Let's play some of the games.”

Steve's hand-eye coordination was abysmal – from the ear infection, Steve insisted – so he was shit at all the games. Bucky was ace at the water gun game and won a hideous Kewpie doll with finger waves that he was going to give to Becca. The resemblance was uncanny. He won the milk bottle game and the ring toss and got a baby doll with a rabbit's face which was creepy beyond belief but he knew Florence would love it, and a goldfish for Eugene.

“You're the one who's supposed to be getting the presents, Buck,” Steve said.

Bucky shrugged. “I'm just that giving. Are we good to go back yet?”

Steve kept his face very still. “What do you mean?” he said, saying every word very carefully.

“C'mon, how long did Ma tell you to keep me out for?”

Steve screwed up his face. “Till three,” he admitted.

“Well, it's--” He checked his watch. “Two fifteen now, so we can just go back and fuck around for a while.”

Steve looked disappointed that he'd been found out, but he agreed and they started making their way back to the station.

“So, what've they got planned for me?”

Steve held up a hand. “Oh no, you're not getting that out of me.”

Bucky laughed and started climbing the stairs up to the station, clutching the bagged goldfish in one hand, the toys under his arm.

“Hey, what do you do with a goldfish?”

They bought a bowl and some fish food from the drugstore, and Bucky very carefully poured the fish in and hugged the bowl to his chest as they walked back over to the house. The fish swam around in circles, seemingly happy, but Bucky wondered if the bowl wasn't too small.

“Do you think the fish is happy, Steve?”

“He looks fine,” Steve said, a slight smile on his face.

“You think it's a boy?”

Steve shrugged.

Bucky wondered what it was like, being a goldfish, if they were frightened by all these giant, ugly faces on the other side of the glass, or if they wanted to go back to the ocean. Did goldfish live in the ocean? Bucky had seen a salmon run upstate once, but he didn't know much else about fish.

“What're you gonna call him?”

“I'll let Eugene decide, I'm not good with names.” When he was five, he named their cat – now
thirteen years old and rarely seen outside the conservatory – Kitty. Becca always liked to remind him how he wasn’t a great wit. He clutched the bowl tighter. “Is everyone gonna jump out and try to scare me when we get inside?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“I’ll put the bowl down first,” he decided.

They did, yelling happy birthday as soon as he got his foot in the door, all sorts of people: Arnie, guys from the club, some cousins he never saw, most of the pretty girls from the neighbourhood, and even a couple of guys from the team. They’d gone nuts with streamers and balloons and banners, and Ma enveloped him in a hug before he could get any words out. Once he extricated himself, he gave the baby doll to Florence, tossed the Kewpie at Becca, who groaned and shoved it into Arnie’s hands, and went back outside and picked up the fish bowl.

“I got this for you from the fair,” he said and held it out to Eugene. Eugene grinned and took it very gently.

Ma smiled at him, kind of funny, and squeezed his shoulder. “Now it's time for you to open your own presents.”

Opening presents with other people watching – with Steve watching – was always embarrassing and Bucky tried to blow through it as fast as was polite. He got books and clothes and model tanks, which were all nice and not too over the top, but Grandpa had a gleam in his eye.

“Now that you're a man,” he said, and picked up a box. “This is yours.”

A man. Bucky didn't feel like a man, but he opened the box anyway and pulled back the tissue paper.

It was a gun. He blinked and picked it up, and there was a kind of silence in the room. Steve's face got tight and he shifted away.

“Don't worry, everyone, it's not loaded,” Grandpa said. “It was mine when I was young.”

“Don't I need... licences and stuff for it?”

“I have all that taken care of. If you don't want it...” Grandpa's face started to harden and Bucky shook his head quickly.

“No, it's great, Grandpa, thank you. I'll go to the gun range soon and try it out.”

“It goes in the safe until then,” Dad said sharply, and held his hand out for it. Bucky glanced at Steve, who still looked tense, then handed it over.

He also got a new car, but that didn't get as weird.

Ma moved the get together outside for an impromptu picnic while the light was still good, and people milled around the garden. This party wasn’t just for Bucky; Bucky saw a lot of Grandpa’s associates and Ma had all her friends. Dad stayed apart; Bucky wasn’t sure if he even had any friends. Steve had never really met Bucky’s former team mates, outside of at the end of a game. They were all big guys, five ten to six foot, and they all looked down on Steve, literally and, Bucky felt, figuratively.

“This is the little kid you hang around with, huh?” Tim asked. Steve’s eyes narrowed.
“He’s almost seventeen, shut the fuck up.”

Tim laughed. “No way. No offence, Sam, you look like a kid.”

“Steve,” Steve said. “I guess I wasn’t lucky enough to grow up to be a meathead like you.”

Bucky laughed and threw his arm around Steve.

“Your friend’s a meathead too, you know, kid,” Tim said. Then he grinned. “Or, I guess, he’s a fairy now.”

Bucky stiffened and pulled his arm away from Steve. It was just a joke, Tim had already switched his focus elsewhere. “Your sister’s a pretty thing,” he said. “What’s she doing with that kike?”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve muttered, then turned around and walked away. He joined Becca and Arnie and said something which caused Becca to look over and shake her head.

“Don’t call him that,” Bucky murmured.

“What, a kike? You’ve said it.”

Had he? Shit. “Yeah, well.” He shrugged. “Ma runs a tight ship, no bad language in the house.”

Steve kept his distance after that, avoiding Tim and the others, and maybe Bucky too. Bucky didn’t know how to resolve that and every time he tried, a cousin he barely remembered accosted him. They weren’t real cousins; Ma didn’t have any siblings and who knew about Dad, he had no other family in America, at least. They were Grandpa’s brother’s grandkids who had names like Gino and Alessandro and Paolo; they hadn’t assimilated like Bucky’s family had, a few of the kids even had slight accents. He was fairly sure that one of his female cousins was trying to flirt with him, which was alarming.

It was only around seven that people started leaving, though they weren’t quick about it. He couldn’t find Steve but he didn’t think he’d have left without saying goodbye. He hoped not, anyway. He searched around the house until he heard voices, Eugene talking about everything he knew about goldfish and Steve answering. Bucky smiled and stepped into the room.

“What’re you gonna call him?” he asked from the door.

“It’s a girl,” Eugene said. “Boys have ridges on their undersides and firmer abdomens.”

“Oh yeah, how do you know so much about goldfish?”

“I read it in an encyclopedia.”

Bucky nodded. “Right, so what’s her name?”

“Zipporah, like in the Bible.”

Christ, this kid. Bucky smiled. “That’s nice.”

“We’re going to have to get her a bigger bowl,” he said seriously.

“All right, I’ll buy one tomorrow. Can you give me and Steve a minute?”

Eugene frowned, then sighed and left the room. Bucky looked at Steve and grinned.
“Wife of Moses,” Steve said, gesturing to the bowl.

“So long as she doesn't part the water,” Bucky said, and Steve smiled a little. “Hey, are you okay?”

Steve shrugged. “I've heard worse, it's okay. I don't appreciate that shit about Arnie but I wasn't gonna fight a kid at your birthday party, I'm not that much of a savage.”

“You're not... I don't agree with that stuff, you know? I don't say that stuff.” Except that he did, apparently. “They aren't my friends, they're just people I used to spend time with at school. I don't even do that any more.”

“It's all right, you don't have to justify it.”

“Yeah, but I really--” Bucky didn't know what he wanted to say. That he really wasn't a bad guy or a bigot and Steve should still like him even though his friends were anti-Semites and his grandfather thought Hitler was an okay guy?

“Buck, come on, I've known you a long time, okay? I know.”

Bucky wrapped his arms around himself. “All right.” He paused, then took a deep breath. “I think one of my cousins wants to fuck me.”

“What?” Steve said.

They talked for a while about Bucky's weird cousins, until Becca came in and told him that Ma wanted to speak to him. He racked his brains trying to remember if he'd done anything wrong – he didn't think he had, he hadn't had much opportunity with the leg and he was doing fine in school, hadn't got in any fights.

The whole family was assembled in the kitchen, Arnie included. Ma had a serious, but not angry look on her face.

“I wanted to do this earlier,” she started, “but your father said I should wait until the guests were gone home. I found this in your room today...” She picked up an envelope from the kitchen table and handed it to him. It was crumpled and bent... from where it had been under his pillow last night. Shit.

“I... didn't want to find out I'd been rejected right before my birthday,” he muttered.

“It's from a college?” Steve asked, peering over his arm.

“Yeah. Harvard.”

“Wow,” Steve murmured, while Ma insisted that he open it. He slid his finger under the flap and slowly tore it open. He wasn't going to get in, there was just no way, that essay he wrote was shit...

He pulled the letter out and tentatively unfolded the letter. He could feel the tension in the room and it made him start to feel short of breath. The crest was at the top of the page and then it read:

Dear Mr. Barnes,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been admitted to the Class of 1939...

“You did it!” Steve said, reading over his shoulder. There was a burst of talking and the letter was tugged out of his hands by Ma and read out loud to them all. Everyone was so happy about it, so proud and excited; even Arnie congratulated him with a wide smile and a pat on the back. Bucky
smiled along with them and said he'd wait to hear from the other universities before deciding. He didn't have to decide yet.

In the following week, he got accepted into Yale as well as NYU, one of his safety schools. He didn't get into Stanford, which was a relief; he wasn't interested in the West Coast at all. If Steve went out there, he'd probably stalk Bette Davis, but New York was Bucky's town, he didn't want to leave it.

In the last week of March, Becca got a letter from Radcliffe. It was a rejection. Bucky thought that was bullshit, everyone knew Becca was smarter than he was, Radcliffe should be honoured.

Without Becca going to Cambridge with him, he really wasn't all that interested in it, despite Ma and Grandpa's vigorous ‘encouragement’ – Dad didn't have much to say about the whole thing. NYU was starting to look better and better to Bucky, but Ma said there was no way that school was good enough for her little genius.

He had till May 1st to decide, so he put it to the back of his mind and buckled down with the play. Matthew was in charge of costuming and make up as well, and insisted that Bucky had to wear make up on the night, even though he wasn't a damn girl or playing one neither.

“It's not just girls who wear make up. All the movie actors do,” Matthew said, smearing some kind of shit on Bucky's face. “Stay still.”

Bucky sighed as dramatically as he could but didn't move. It felt fucking weird, especially when Matthew rubbed his fingers over Bucky's cheekbones.

“I'm going for an angular look for the fairies,” Matthew said. “Although, you're already pretty angular looking, so I won't have to do so much.”

“Thanks,” he said.

Matthew picked up another pot and cleared his throat. “Close your eyes, I'm going to put this on your eyelids.”

Bucky did as he was told, but sighed again. “I'm gonna look real pretty, huh?”

Matthew didn't respond. Bucky was very glad that they were the only people in the drama room for this. After a minute, Matthew let him open his eyes but wouldn't let him have a mirror. He had fake pointy ears and curled over horns like a ram's to put on Bucky first, 'for that Norse mythology look'. Bucky shrugged his agreement. The horns, which weighed almost nothing, were fixed to his head with a thin band that Matthew arranged his hair over to hide. Bucky suppressed an instinctive shudder at the sensation. When Matthew put the ears on, though, Bucky couldn't help but squirm.

“Jesus, that's ticklish,” he said.

Matthew laughed. “I'm finished. Take a look.” He held up a mirror for Bucky.

Bucky looked very unlike himself, but not like a girl at all. He had green and blue and pink streaks of colour stretching from around his eyes and cheekbones all the way back to his unpainted pointy ears. Somehow, it made sense.

“How did you get so good at this stuff?” he said.

Matthew beamed. “I spend a lot of time with Mama in her dressing room. She's even had her make up done by the Westmores before.”
Bucky nodded like he knew why that was important. “Well, it looks good, you're a real all round talent.”

Matthew's grin threatened to split his face. “I got into Juilliard!”

“Yeah?” He slapped Matthew on the arm. “That's great, good for you!”

“Thanks! Have you heard back from anywhere?”

Bucky shrugged. “Uh, Harvard, Yale, and NYU accepted me. Got rejected from Stanford.”

“Wow,” Matthew said. “Congratulations! I have to be honest, I kinda... used to think you were sort of a dumb athlete.” He cringed a little. “Sorry, I shouldn't have--”

Bucky waved him off. “Believe me, I thought so too.”

He had class in the afternoon, History with Tim, who always sat next to Bucky and fucked around the whole hour. Bucky thought he'd got all the make up off, but Tim zeroed in on a smudge of pink in the corner of Bucky's eye and leant over while Mr Dodd droned on about the New York campaign of the Revolutionary War.

“Hey, Puck, you're looking a little queer there.”


“Fairy dust in your eye,” Tim whispered back, with a sneer on his face.

Bucky rubbed his eye quickly and came away with pink smears on his fingers. His face started to feel hot. Tim sneered again and said he’d got it. Bucky burned with shame for the rest of the lesson.

In early April, Becca was accepted into Barnard and Wellesley and Ma redoubled the pressure on him to accept the Harvard offer. Yale was closer, which he preferred, but according to Ma, Harvard was the gold standard and she didn't want anything less for him. Becca was seriously considering Wellesley and Bucky thought that if she was in Massachusetts as well, it might not be so bad at Harvard.

In mid April, Arnie got mugged. He was working in his family's store, according to Becca, when a couple of thugs came in, stole some cigarettes, and beat him up. He got a broken nose (Bucky held his tongue and didn't make any jokes), two black eyes, and a split lip. Becca and Steve seemed very preoccupied with the whole thing, and Bucky caught whispered conversations between them more than once.

“What's the big secret?” he asked, breaking up a pow-wow on the front porch just before supper.

“We were talking about you,” Becca said. “Not nice things.”

“Haha,” he said, and sat down beside Steve. “Really, though, what's up?”

“Your face,” Steve said, and smiled when Bucky swatted him. Becca got up and said she was going to help Ma lay the table.

Bucky nudged Steve. “C’mon, tell me.”

“She's just worried about Arnie.”

“He's all right, isn't he? His beak's just gonna be more crooked than before.”
Steve stared at him for moment and Bucky lifted his hands. “I didn't mean it bad!”

Steve hummed and looked away. “Well, she's still worried. She doesn't want him working there any more.”

“I guess...” Bucky murmured.

On April 20th, he caved to pressure and called Harvard to accept their offer. Ma was so happy, she put on a special party and invited Steve and Sarah. Sarah had lost some of the weight she'd gained at Essex Mountain – she didn't look as bad as before, but her clothes were worn thin and she had blueish circles under her eyes.

She congratulated him and said she always knew he was smart enough. She still sounded so Irish, even after all these years. Steve had lost a lot of his accent, enunciating his words better than he used to. Bucky kind of missed it.

It wasn't until a week later, on a Saturday, that he saw Arnie for himself. The worst of it was over, the bruising had started to fade, but his left eye was red, the white of his eye coloured with blood, and he moved stiffly. That was a hell of a beating he got. He was skittish when he came inside, smiling quickly when Bucky said hello. Jeez, he was actually trying to be nice to this guy now, and that's what he got for his trouble. Eugene wanted to show Arnie Zip, so he awkwardly nodded to Bucky and followed.

Becca looked tense, and took off to find Ma and Dad. Florence wanted Bucky to play dolls with her, so he went into the playroom, sat down on the floor and did as he was told. Him and Becca played dolls when they were little, her with her Flossie Flirt doll that could move its eyes from side to side and him with his jointed Felix the cat; he knew the drill.

Rabbit Face Baby, Dog on Wheels, and Betty Boop were having a picnic; Bucky was the dog and he wasn't allowed to look at Betty for too long because Becca always said all he did was break girls' hearts.

They played for half an hour, Betty driving them all around town in one of Bucky's old tin cars, until there was a yell from somewhere in the house that sounded an awful lot like Ma. Bucky scrambled up and followed the now full blown shouting fit, Florence holding onto the waistband of his slacks.

They found her in the kitchen, along with Dad and Becca and Arnie. Arnie looked white as a sheet, while Ma was red as a tomato.

“You're going to throw away all your education--”

“Ma, I'm not--” Becca said.

“Haven't I always taught you, your education! For this boy! To get yourself in a state--!”

“Ma--!”

“You had all the opportunities we never had! Non ci credo, come fai a essere cosi stupido?”

Florence was clutching at Bucky's pant leg now. “What's going on?” he said.

Dad removed his glasses and pinched his nose. “Your sister is engaged, apparently.”

“What?” He looked at Becca. Arnie squirmed uncomfortably beside her. “What the fuck, Becca?”
“You will ruin your life,” Ma said. She didn't even comment on the swear.

“I'm not going to ruin my life,” Becca said firmly. “And I'm not pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” Bucky said.

“Not pregnant,” she repeated. “And I've talked to someone at Barnard and they don't have a problem with me being married and I can get special dispensation to live out of residence.”

Bucky frowned. “Barnard? I thought you were going to Wellesley.”

“Not any more,” she said. “I accepted their offer this morning.”

“Then why are you doing this, if not a baby?” Ma interjected.

Becca shifted from foot to foot. “Because we love each other, Ma. You and Dad married at eighteen.”

“But we didn't have brains,” she said. Dad pursed his lips slightly. “We didn't have opportunities as immigrants that you do with an American education, stellina. And where will you live?”

“With Arnie,” Becca said, wrapping arms loosely around herself. “After the wedding.”

“Above that awful grocery store?” Ma asked. Arnie cleared his throat.

“No, Ma, we'll find somewhere for ourselves. We've thought about all of this.”

“Oh, you've thought of everything, but he forget to ask your father for his blessing?” Ma said, gesturing at Arnie.

The look on Becca's face told Bucky that it wasn't an oversight. Just like it wasn't an oversight that she didn't clue Bucky in on these forthcoming nuptials. That's why she was being so squirrelly with Steve; that fucking punk knew about this.

The ensuing argument went on all afternoon and included Arnie's parents turning up and bursting into spontaneous German; there was not a lot of English to be heard in the house. Grandpa absolutely blew his top when he came home; Becca told him that the decision was already made and he got so red in the face that Bucky actually thought he might raise his hand. There were many, many accusations of pregnancy, and a hysterical discussion about Becca converting. She said she wouldn't, at least not before the wedding, there wasn't enough time. Mother Roth was furious. Everyone was furious, and became even angrier when Ma pulled out her ace card and said she simply wouldn't let Becca get married, since she was under eighteen and needed permission. When the evening finally rolled around, Becca took her supper to her room and wouldn't let Bucky come in.

Sunday morning, Becca went out before anyone else woke up, and Ma refused to come out of her bedroom. Bucky made Eugene and Florence their breakfast, and they ate in the kitchen, the kids sitting on the counter eating overcooked fried eggs with ketchup.

“Is Becca going to leave?” Eugene asked, brow furrowed.

“After the wedding, yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you think she'll make me a bridesmaid?” Florence said. One of friends had been a bridesmaid in her cousin's wedding last year and Florence was green with jealousy.
Bucky shrugged and ate his nasty eggs. “Maybe, I guess it depends on if they have a Jewish wedding, I dunno if Jews have bridesmaids.”

Florence wrinkled up her nose. “That's dumb.”

When Dad came downstairs, he looked tired and stressed.

“Does Ma want breakfast?” Bucky asked.

Dad sighed. “She says she is too sick with sadness to eat. She will come down when she's ready. I think we should go out to the pictures and let her rest.”

Florence and Eugene campaigned to see The Little Colonel with that godawful Temple kid, and Dad caved, even after the case Bucky made for Mark of the Vampire. Watching the movie felt like dying and Dad didn't look much better off. They went to a park afterwards, and the kids ran around the playground acting out scenes from the movie while he and Dad ate hotdogs on a bench.

“Your leg is all right now?” Dad asked. “I don't see you limping any more.”

“Yeah, it feels fine.” He took a deep breath. “Dad, what are you gonna do about Becca?”

Dad sighed. “Your mother is very upset,” he said. “She wants better for you all.”

“She didn't have it so bad herself, you know,” Bucky said, and Dad tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Are you not gonna give Becca permission?”

“I don't think that will work,” he said. “She will be eighteen so soon... He's a good man, I think. What do you think?”

Bucky shrugged. “Steve's pretty tight with him, he's all right. Becca's gonna be pissed if you fight her on it.”

“Yes, she is a stubborn one,” Dad said, and laid his hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “You both are, ox-headed.”

Bucky frowned for a moment, then shook his head. “Bullheaded, Dad.” Bucky wasn't so sure that he was, sometimes it felt like he bent every which way people wanted him to.

Dad smiled and tapped his head with a roll of his eyes.

After three days of icy tension, Ma broke and gave Becca permission. The wedding would be in late July, in their church because Arnie's rabbi didn't approve, and Ma and Dad would pay for the first three months' rent on a place so long as it wasn't too far from the house. Steve swore up, down, and sideways that he didn't know about the engagement – although maybe he had a suspicion – but Bucky still wasn't sure he believed him.

The play, and graduation, were coming up on him quick now, the play only a few days away, graduation at the end of the month. He had his lines memorised pretty good now, though nerves made his mind go blank. Everything was going so crazy that Bucky could hardly concentrate on anything any more.

“You'll be fine,” Matthew said, the day before the play. Bucky was definitely not fine, because he'd just had a meltdown in rehearsal and had to come outside for a cigarette.

“You reckon?” Bucky said, and offered his cigarette.
Matthew looked at it with some trepidation. "I've never smoked one of them before, Mama says it ages you."

"I think you can take the hit," Bucky said, the kid had such a baby face, and Matthew took it. He coughed more than he inhaled and handed it back with a shake of the head. Bucky laughed and patted Matthew on the back.

"We should get back inside," Matthew said, voice high-pitched from the coughing.

The next evening, he was caked in make up and dressed in a Peter Pan looking outfit. Matthew wore a long blonde wig and a shiny purple dress, and didn't look... halfway bad. It was mayhem backstage, and Bucky didn't have time to be nervous until precisely three seconds before his entrance. Someone shoved him out on stage after his cue had passed and he looked out at the audience, his family in the front row, and clean forgot his line.

"How now, spirit!" Matthew hissed from the side of the stage.

Bucky blinked and looked down at the front row; Steve gave him the thumbs up.

"How now, spirit! Whither wander you?" he said, far too loudly, but he was off.

Things went smoother after that, he managed to loosen up his body, and the audience actually laughed. Having the final lines in the play was pretty daunting, but when he asked the other people on stage to give him their hands, 'if they be friends', and took Matthew's sweaty hand, the applause was pretty amazing. He felt almost as exhilarated as after a game.

When they got backstage, a kid from the yearbook committee wanted to take their pictures, so Bucky didn't bother to take his make up off, only changing into his regular clothes once the pictures were done. He practically fucking skipped out of the changing room and out to find his family, Mr LaFlamme calling out that he was great as he passed.

Ma was so proud and showered him with praise and even Becca allowed that he wasn't awful. Dad looked pleased and Steve blithely said probably no one else heard Matthew's prompting except the front row.

"Thanks," Bucky said, and grabbed him in a headlock.

"You've still got that muck on your face," Grandpa said. Bucky felt his heart sink and he let go of Steve.

Ma clicked her tongue. "He looks cute. Anyway, I can take it off for him much better than he can."

She could, which made him feel even worse, sitting in his parents' bedroom, having this cream rubbed all over his face. Becca passed by the door and smirked.

"Takes away some of the mystery, huh?" she said and high tailed it out of there before he could throw anything at her.

Graduation went well, though he felt pretty sick back up on stage. He didn't fall over his feet, though, and the headmaster wished him 'every success in his future endeavours'. Bucky didn't feel like he was going to have 'every success', but he nodded anyway. In his yearbook, he was voted 'most likely to marry a movie star'.

All the wedding shit was a nightmare. Ma wanted Becca to wear her wedding dress, interred in a garment bag in 1917 and never again opened until June of 1935, when Ma made her pitch to Becca.
– and by extension Bucky, who was trying to listen to Crosby in the living room. It was yellowed with age, a real frou-frou thing with several layers of lace and tulle. God, he knew all the terms and everything. It didn't fit Becca anyway, because she was five inches taller than Ma, and had much wider shoulders. Becca wanted a dress like Ginger Roger's in *The Gay Divorcee*, with the black on the bottom. Ma absolutely vetoed the idea.

Then there were the arguments about the ceremony. Would the Seven Blessing be recited? Would there be a Chuppah? Becca had to walk around Arnie seven times to signify something or other, Frau Roth insisted. Would there be a mass after? Herr Roth wouldn't attend that. Arnie had to promise the priest that he would raise their children in the Catholic faith; could he wear his kippah? It went on and on, and unfortunately, Bucky was there to hear a lot of it. Eventually, Grandpa decided to take him to the gun range to give him something manly to do.

Bucky was an excellent shot; he had good eyesight and steady hands, and he enjoyed it. He got enormous satisfaction from the sound of the shot and smell of gunpowder it left behind. Grandpa was very proud.

Steve got a new job, selling newspapers; old Abraham wasn't doing too good these days, and he needed someone to work the stand when he couldn't. It didn't pay much money, but it was better than nothing – the other kids in the neighbourhood were working manual jobs that Steve could never hope to do. Bucky did his usual summer work at the club. The club was pretty sad these days, drab and only sparsely filled even on Saturday nights. Eva had been promoted to a regular singing gig as other singers moved on.

Becca and Ma came to a compromise on the dress. It wasn't Ma's, but it also wasn't the devilish Ginger Rogers dress; it was a long, sleek white dress with big shoulders and ruffles around the neck. Bucky was fairly sure that was Becca's plan all along.

Steve had another flare up of rheumatic fever around his birthday and had to stay home. They sat out on the walkway outside his door in the blazing heat on the 4th, playing with old tin cars and talking shit.

Becca and Arnie found a place to live in Brooklyn Heights, a tiny three room postage stamp of an apartment. The bathroom was shared with the other people on the floor; Bucky could scarcely imagine how Becca would be able to handle that, but she pointed out that he'd be doing the same soon, up at Harvard.

He tried not to think about that.

Her wedding was set for the morning of July 27th, the last Saturday of the month. Steve was hell bent on being well enough to go, partly because he was the de facto best man ('Shomer', apparently), but mostly just because they were his friends. Bucky still wondered what would have happened if Steve and Becca had got together. Then they could have been brothers, or as near as.

Steve was recovered enough by the day before the wedding to come to the family dinner in honour of Becca. Arnie was barred from coming by Ma because of tradition, so it was just immediate family, Steve, and Sarah. They set up for dinner in the dining room, which they rarely did these days, with the special china they only used at Christmas. Ma started to reminisce about her great love story, which Bucky knew off by heart, and their wedding, in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Dad smiled fondly.

“What about you, Sarah?” Ma asked.

“Oh...” Sarah shook her head. She was dressed in her finest dropped waist brown suit; it was old, even Bucky could tell that, but it was nice. She'd pinned her thin hair back in a simple style and wore
more make up than Bucky had ever seen on her. “It wasn't anything as fine as that.”

“Were you married here or in Ireland?”

“In Ireland. Kiltimagh. It's a tiny rural town, I don't think this one would be able to stand it there,” she said, nodding to Steve, who smiled. “We got married as soon as Pa would allow, when I was sixteen. Joe was eighteen. I wanted a better life for us, so we managed to get on a ship a few months later and come to America. Joe spoke mainly Gaelic, he found it hard to settle in. Then he decided to enlist at twenty.” She smiled sadly. “We didn't know I was pregnant.”

Bucky had heard the story before, it wasn't new to him, but it struck him now that Sarah was about the same age as Ma and Dad, maybe even a little younger; they, he vaguely knew, were in their mid thirties. Sarah looked at least ten years older. He just couldn't imagine it, being the age he was, married, away from home, baby on the way, then off the die in a war.

Grandpa started to tell them about his wedding to Grandma Felisa in Sicily when he was still dirt poor. Felisa had died when Ma was young, so Bucky had only seen pictures; she was very beautiful and looked an awful lot like Becca.

Grandpa was in full flow about the Old Country when there was a knock at the door. Not so much a knock as an insistent pounding.

Ma laid down her knife and fork and frowned. “Were we expecting anyone?” she said. Dad shook his head.

“Maybe it's Arnie, come to tell you the whole thing's off,” Bucky said, and Becca smacked him with her napkin. No, it couldn't be Arnie, he would never knock that loud.

“Lucio Barnes!” a voice yelled from outside the door. “We have a warrant for your arrest, open up!”

“Jesus,” Bucky said, and started to stand.

“Sit down, Bucky,” Dad said sharply, and looked at Grandpa. “What is this about, Lucio?”

He frowned as the cops hammered on the door again. “It's nothing.”

“Bucky, take everyone into the drawing room,” Ma said.

The thumping continued. “Ma...” he said.

“Listen to your mother,” Dad snapped.

Bucky bit his lip and nodded, pushing his chair back. Everyone hurried up, and Bucky opened the adjoining door to the drawing room. Sarah looked worried, Steve tense, and Becca plain pissed off. The kids started fussing and he gathered them up as they all listened to Grandpa angrily say that his granddaughter was getting married the next day. Bucky distinctly heard one of the cops say, 'easy way or the hard way'. He guessed that Grandpa took the easy way, because everything went quiet after a moment, and then Ma came in and said they could resume dinner. Dad didn't join them, he was 'making calls'.

Everything wrapped up quick after that. Bucky wasn't in the mood for celebrating any more, and neither was anyone else. Ma seemed crushingly embarrassed that Sarah had witnessed such an awful scene, and loaded her down with leftovers. Steve gave Becca a hug and said he'd see her in the morning.
“Sorry, Buck,” he murmured.

Buck shrugged. “’sall right.”

Steve pursed his lips, but didn’t say anything more.

Eugene got very upset after that, crying about Grandpa going away, and Dad had to carry him upstairs to bed. It was only early, nine o’clock, but Becca didn’t want to listen to the radio with him, and Bucky didn’t know what he was supposed to say, so he went up to his bedroom and read *Brave New World*, trying not to think about Grandpa or what was coming the next day. He dozed off with the lamp still on, the book open on his chest.

He was woken by the soft creaking of his bedroom door, and rubbed at his face as he squinted over at it. Florence appeared around the edge.

“Bucky?” she whispered.

“Uh huh?”

“Can we sleep in here with you?” *We.* Bucky could count on one hand the amount of times the twins were apart.

“Come on in. What time is it?”

They shuffled in, Florence holding Rabbit Face Baby in one hand, and clutching her bear to her chest with her other arm. Eugene trailed after her. “Eleven thirty.”

He pushed himself up and pulled the covers back. Florence handed him her bear and climbed in, clambering across him to make room for Eugene. “It’s late,” he said, and yawned. “Why aren’t you two asleep already?”

“Eugene was upset,” Florence said.

Bucky wrapped his arm around Eugene’s shoulders. “That true?”

Eugene nodded. “Everyone’s going away.”

“Not everyone,” he said.

“You and Becca and Grandpa,” Florence said.

“Grandpa’s gonna be back soon and Becca’s not gonna be far and I’m--” He won’t even be in the state. “I’ll be back for Christmas and spring break and summer vacations. And you’ve still got Ma and Dad.”

“It won’t be the same,” Florence said. Bucky didn’t disagree. “Can’t Becca just live here with Arnie? And you could go to Brooklyn College.”

“I think she probably wants to have her own home. And I’ve already accepted Harvard’s offer.” Applying to Brooklyn was *never* on the cards with Ma.

Florence sighed and shook her head. “Will you read us a story?”

“Sure, which one d’you want?”

Eugene got up and returned with *Winnie-the-Pooh*, burrowing under the covers. Bucky read aloud
for fifteen minutes, until his voice started to get hoarse from tiredness and the kids had gone to sleep. He leant over carefully and turned the light out, then tried to scoot down a little. He was still holding Florence's bear, and he kept it against his chest as he closed his eyes.

Ten minutes later, the door started to creak again. He cracked an eye and watched as Becca peered her head in.

“Buck? Are you awake?”

“Yeah.”

She stepped into the room and closed the door softly, then came over to his bed. “Oh,” she murmured, when she saw the kids. “Were they upset?”

He nodded and her eyes fell on the Winnie-the-Pooh book. She smiled. “That's more your speed,” she said, almost fondly.

He clicked his tongue. “You want somethin’?”

“Nothing, I guess,” she said, shrugging.

He sighed and pulled back the covers by Florence. “You wanna in?”

She stood by the bed for a moment, looking like she was thinking about it, then caved and got in. Florence mumbled in her sleep, and Becca smiled and rested her hand on Florence's head.

“You wanna talk about it?” Bucky said. When she didn't respond, he continued, “You having second thoughts?”

“No,” she said, but he wasn't sure he believed it. “Jesus, this wedding is going to be awful.”

“Grandpa'll be released soon.” He'd been arrested a couple of times before; it never stuck.

She hummed irritably.

“Are you all packed?” Becca and Arnie were cruising to California for their honeymoon and Dad was going to take all the rest of her stuff to the new apartment and set it up while they were gone, though they didn't know that part.

“Yeah,” she said. “What about you?”

He hadn't even started thinking about the move up to Harvard, let alone packing for it. “Nah, not yet.”

Becca tutted and shook her head. “You'll be packing everything the night before and I won't be here to help you.”

His chest felt kind of tight as he nodded. “Yeah, I know. Let's get some sleep, all right?”

The next day was absolute mayhem. The reception was being held in the garden, so there were people running all over the house, setting things up. Dad was either on the telephone to Grandpa's lawyer or helping with floral arrangements, and Ma had whisks Becca and Florence to her room to get them ready. Florence had got her coveted bridesmaid position and, even better, was the maid of honour; in name only, though, since Ma had arranged everything. Becca had a couple of friends as her other bridesmaids, girls that Bucky hardly knew because Becca was firm that he wasn't allowed to date any of her friends. They didn't look too pleased to be there; Bucky thought all girls liked
When she came back out of Ma's bedroom, she looked beautiful, he couldn't deny it. Dad drove them to the church, where Arnie and Steve were waiting. Steve was wearing a nice suit, the nicest articles of clothing Bucky had ever seen on him; he wondered how much that cost him. Arnie didn't wear his kippah.

The ceremony went fine. Ma cried and Dad looked like he might too. Arnie's brother had a mean look on his face the entire time, while his other siblings had to be shushed more than once. Steve looked anxious. When Arnie lifted her veil and they kissed, it looked so awkward that Bucky had to swallow down laughter.

The house and garden was filled with lilies, and the white, five-tiered cake was heavy and sickly. Steve stuck close to Arnie and Becca, even when Bucky grew painfully bored with listening to discussion of marital home décor and how it was best to have babies early on. Eventually, he retreated alone and spent an hour in Kitty's disdainful company.

Becca and Arnie left for their cruise at six. Bucky was struck with the sudden urge to cry, but he didn't, and he ignored Becca's red-rimmed eyes as they hugged goodbye.

“I'll see you in a couple of weeks,” she said softly, as she pulled away. She brushed her fingertips across her cheek and sniffed.

“Yeah, have fun. Get a lock of Bette's hair for Steve.” Steve groaned beside him and Becca smiled a little.

With the stars of the show gone, Bucky didn't figure there was any reason to stay in the monkey suit. He went upstairs and changed into a shirt and slacks, ruffling his hair where he'd slicked it down for the wedding.

There was a knock at the door, followed by a clearing of the throat.

“Hey, Steve,” he said, without looking round.

“How'd you know it was me?”

“'cause only you sound like you're smuggling marbles in your chest.”

Steve huffed a laugh, then lapsed into silence for moment before taking a breath, “What's going on with your grandfather?”

He turned around and sighed. “Dunno. He's got good lawyers, though, he won't be in for long.”

Steve's face went tight, mouth pursed.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothin’.”

“There's something, judging by your face.”

“Doesn't matter,” Steve said, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Bucky frowned. “Hey, spit it out.”

Steve glanced at him, mouth still tight. “I just think, maybe... it wouldn't be such a bad thing if he did
stay there. In jail.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

He shook his head quickly. “Nothin’, it doesn't matter. You ain't gonna want to hear what I've got to say.”

“How about I judge that?”

Steve pressed his hand to his face and rubbed. “You know what your grandpa does these days? He sells drugs to people in the gutter. Morphine and Benzedrine and Heroin, real bad stuff. Stuff that really messes you up more than you already are.”

“How d’you know?”

“’cause I live with them. I see them out on the street. You don't see ’em, Buck. You don't see them.”

Bucky started to feel hot all over. “Well... you don't know it's Grandpa.”

“Everyone knows,” Steve said. “They're all doing it these days, since Prohibition ended.”

Bucky clenched his jaw. “My grandfather's always been good to you,” he said, in a low tone. “My whole goddamn family has. I lost--” He drummed his fingers against his left leg, the broken one, the one that still ached late at night, pains that couldn't be massaged away, had to fade on their own. He stopped himself from finishing the sentence.

Steve flinched, eyes going round like he was startled, but he straightened his shoulders and looked Bucky in the eye. That was Steve Rogers: never met an argument he didn't enjoy. “You're right, but that doesn't change the truth.”

Bucky didn't know what to say; he was speechless. Steve had never... they'd never had a fight before, not about anything that mattered. “Maybe you should go home,” he found the wherewithal to say.

Steve blinked, eyebrows twitching slightly. “Yeah, maybe I should. See ya later, Buck.”

Bucky didn't get a wink of sleep that night. He was sullen at breakfast the next morning, but his parents didn't comment. They seemed pretty sullen too. It was Sunday, so nothing doing about Grandpa's arrest. The kids were sad and fussy, and Bucky was short with them when they wanted to play.

Grandpa came home on Monday, and Bucky went to the club with him. The guys cheered when they came in.

“Fuckin' cops, came here an' everything, tryin' scare the girls into spilling,” one of the guys said from behind the bar, where he was cleaning glasses. “Making you miss the wedding and everything.”

Grandpa smiled. “It's fine, the lawyer sent on a goose chase.” He gestured to the bar. “Bucky, help set up, I've business to do in the back.”

Bucky did as he was told; he always did, didn't he? Grandpa went into the back as promised, and the guy on the bar, Tom, pushed over a crate of glasses for Bucky to polish and hang.

“The wedding go good?” Tom asked.
“Yeah. Well, they got married, anyway,” Bucky replied. “Gotta see if it'll stick.”

Tom laughed. “Kike don't seem like enough man for a broad like your sister.”

Bucky blinked and looked away. Grandpa would probably lay Tom out if he heard him disrespecting Becca like that. He took a breath. “So, the cops were shaking the girls down?”

“Tryin', anyhow. Eva told them where to go in none too fine terms. Her ass, Buck, it keeps me up at night, if you know what I mean.”

Bucky smiled quickly. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

He worked everyday that week, afternoons and nights. Ma was worried, he could see that on her face, but she didn't comment. He was A Man now, after all. Wednesday and Thursday morning, Grandpa took him to the range, and it felt good. He was good at it, a natural talent; eyesight, balance, steady hands. Yeah, nothing like Steve.

At the ends of the nights, right when dawn was about to break, the boys would swipe some booze and drink it with a few cigarettes in the alleyway behind the club. Bucky had never really participated before; Ma and Becca and Steve wouldn't have approved. Now he did, drinking until his vision wasn't its 20/20 any more and his legs felt shaky. He broke a few glasses that way, tidying up, but no one cared. Boss's grandson, and all.

He felt more hungover than ever on the following Sunday morning, sluggishly eating breakfast, Eugene talking about God and Jesus and the goddamn fucking Apostles next to him.

“You shouldn't work tonight, Bucky,” Ma said. “Why don't you go out with Steve?”

Bucky shrugged and his parents shared a look. He hadn't told them anything about the argument, but Steve showed his face five, six days out of the week, so it couldn't have failed to pass them by. He worked through his food laboriously, then got up and went outside for a smoke. The hot, bright morning sun shone down on him cheerily, enhancing his headache.

He worked all of the next week. The people who came into the club now, they were a sad fucking sight. Eva and the other girls would stand on stage and sing their screechy best, scantily clad in little dresses or sometimes just their underwear, while fat, lonely men would touch themselves without hardly covering it up. One guy, a real greaseball with more bald spot than hair, got real damn handsy with himself, and Bucky got him by the back of his collar and tossed him out the door.

“You shouldn't do that,” Tom said wisely from behind the bar. “Guy's a paying customer. All these creeps are, Lucio says.”

Tom made a gagging sound and laughed.

They didn't see many women in the club that weren't on stage, but the ones they did see were the saddest dames Bucky had ever laid eyes on. Drinking heavy, desperate for their beau's attention; they weren't going to get it, not with tits on stage. More than a few tried to crowd Bucky into a corner and feel him up while he was serving. These women were Ma's age.

Monday night, the boys were having a celebration; Lester's girl was knocked up and he was happy as a clam about it. It was dead, so they all started drinking earlier, just after eight.

“They married?” he asked Tom.
Tom shook his head. “Nah. She's a whore, you know? He wouldn't marry a girl like that.”

“So, how does he know the kid's his?”

Tom grimaced. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Bucky drank steadily through the night. There wasn't much food to be had, just whatever bread he could dig up in the back, so it was fair to say that his stomach was nearly empty. Cigarettes kept the dizziness at bay, though, so he kept one hanging out of his mouth as he traversed the club as steady as he could. By midnight, though, carrying barrels up from the cellar was an absolute no-go, his leg couldn't take it, and neither could he. He dropped the barrel with a thud to the cellar floor and stumbled up the stairs; one of the other guys would have to do it.

The corridor at the back of building was narrow, only just large enough for two people to pass by, so when he ran into Eva coming off the stage, there weren't many places for him to go. She was wearing a glittery, boned basque that pushed her tits upwards to her chin. She frowned and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Bucky,” she said, in a motherly tone. Fuck that, she wasn't his mother, wasn't anybody's mother. “Maybe you should lie down.”

“In your room?” he said, leering a little.

She sighed. “Sure,” she said, and took him by the arm to lead him to the dressing room. It wasn't really her room since she shared it with all the other girls, but there were only a few girls on tonight, so the place was empty. She pushed him down easily onto a couch and slipped behind the partition to change. He thought about all the guys who touched themselves while watching her murder a tune. He thought about all the guys that she let touch her for the money. Him and Steve, they always thought there was something glamorous about prostitutes, back before they knew what it really meant.

Eva came back out from behind the partition, wrapped in a thin robe. Her heavy breasts had sagged with time, her hips widened. She must have been thirty two now, getting old and saggy. He wondered if men liked that sort of thing.

Eva cleared her throat when she caught him staring, but he didn't stop. She crossed her arms underneath her bosom.

“You should go home to your mother,” she said. “You shouldn't hang around here.”

“You think so, huh?” he said, and pulled out his packet of cigarettes. He lit one and took a drag, then offered it to her. Eva accepted and took a few puffs, cocking her hip to the side. He stood up and grinned.

“So, how much, huh?”

Her painted on eyebrows drew together. “How much what?”

“How much d'you charge for a fuck?”

She shoved the cigarette back at him. “You're a nice kid, don't talk like that.”

He stuck the cigarette back in his mouth and grimaced. “I ain't a kid.”

She pursed her lips. “You're a drunk kid.”
He wrenched his wallet thick with bills from his back pocket. “Whatever it is, I can afford it.”

She looked at him like he'd made a bad smell or something. “I've known you since you were a kid, I ain't fuckin' you, it'd be like diddling my little brother.”

He sneered. “You a whore with standards?”

She took a step back. “Get outta here before I hit you, Bucky. If you're that desperate for a fuck, there're plenty of girls that'll oblige ya. You're a good-looking boy.”

He curled his lip and threw the cigarette on the floor. “Fucking bitch,” he muttered and wrenched the door open, body filled with intense, irrational fury. Fucking whore, who did she think she was? He needed another Goddamn drink. He was practically blind to what was in front of him, so consumed with anger, and nearly mowed down a dancer on her way to the dressing room.

She was a little thing, tight body, platinum blonde hair. He could see patches where the bleach had made it fall out, but that wasn't visible on stage. She lay her hands flat on his chest.

“Hey, tiger, slow down.”

“You wanna get out of here?” he said. He didn't know her name, but he figured she'd tell it to him.

Her answering smile was slyer than a fox's. “Just let me get changed, lover boy,” she said.

He waited for her out in the bar, drinking as much of a glass of beer as he could without drawing breath. She slunk out a few minutes later in a low cut red number that got the patrons whistling, and he followed her out into the cool night air. The difference between the stuffy, humid club and the night outside was so great that it made his head feel even lighter than before, and the blonde – he still didn't know her name – latched onto his arm and led him back to her boarding house. Her room mate was gone for the week, she said, so they had the room to themselves.

Her name was Delilah; or, at least, her stage name was. She admitted, as she was unbuttoning his shirt, that really she was Mildred from Pennsylvania, in New York to hit the big time just like every other girl with a half pretty face and a nice set.

“How long you been here?” he asked, though his head felt so thick that the words didn't really come out right. Still, she got the picture.

“Five years.” She undid his belt, which was a relief after all the beer he'd drunk. Her hands felt cool against his overheated skin.

“Made it yet?”

“Better off than I was,” she said and he thought, Christ, how bad is Pennsylvania?

She told him to lie down on her narrow bed once she'd got his slacks off. They hadn't really kissed, just a little when they got in the room, but she went to town on him downstairs. He'd had handjobs from girls before, but never had a girl dirty enough to blow him. It felt... strange, kinda wet and ticklish, the sensation of his half hard dick pressing against the back of her mouth oddly disconcerting. He stared up at the water stained ceiling until she stopped and got a rubber out of her night stand drawer. He tipped his head down and watched as she rolled it on, then got on top of him like he was a horse.

“You're real cute,” she said as she rode him. He felt intermittent jolts of pleasure, but nothing to write home about. “Not like the rest of them at the club.”
“Thanks. You're not too bad yourself.”

She grinned, flashing her yellowed teeth, then tipped her head back. Her tits bounced in rhythm with her thrusts, and after another few minutes, she brought herself off with her fingers. He didn't come, but he'd gone soft anyway, so he told her he did, and struggled to remove the condom.

There was no chance of him being able to get home, so he tucked his dick back into his pants and lay down again, Delilah curling in against his side. It was too damn hot for cuddling, but he was too out of it to argue and fell asleep anyhow.

He felt like he'd been hit by another Cadillac when he woke up again, immeasurably worse than his first time waking up at the hospital. Delilah wasn't in bed any more and in the cold, sober light of day, her room looked even worse. He wasn't so sure that the ceiling wouldn't cave in over his head from the damp, so he painstakingly sat up and coughed almost to the point of puking.

“There you are!” Delilah said, too damn loud.

He squinted at her; she was wearing a very conservative blouse and skirt, a jaunty hat covering her hair. “What're you doin' dressed like that?”

“Going to work, silly,” she said. “Gotta be respectful, ain't I? Won't get a husband any other way.”

Bucky didn't think she needed to worry about that.

“You can't stay here,” she continued, putting on her earrings. “Matron don't like it. I can show you the way out.”

“All right,” he said, and slowly began to get dressed. It wasn't even seven am yet, and his head was already going like a jackhammer. She helped him get himself halfway straight, then pulled out a little pillbox from her bag and picked up a small white pill. He thought maybe it was a mint, but the way she swallowed it down whole said otherwise. She held out the box.

“Want one?”

“What are they?”

She laughed. “Perk of the job.”

He stared at the box and she rolled her eyes.

“Bennies, stupid. It'll help kick your hangover.”

He shook his head. “No, I don't-- no. I gotta get out of here.”

She shrugged. “I'll show you--”

“I'll figure it out,” he said, over the top of her, and took off. He ran out the building as quick as he could and probably got yelled at by some old broad, but he was too stuck in his head to listen. Even though it was early, it was already hot out and that, coupled with the hangover, got him puking in the nearest gutter, all hot bile and rancid booze.

“Better out than in,” a bum nearby called and Bucky waved without looking.

He couldn't go home looking like this, he knew that for certain; Ma would douse him in holy water and start saying a novena. He got on the subway, surrounded by kids on their way to school and other bums like himself. The kids kept their distance.
He got off at the only place he knew to go: Red Hook. Steve would be working the news stand today, was probably there at five am to get things ready. He was a real hard worker, even though he could have used those extra hours of sleep. The news stand was on the corner of Richards and Wolcott, and Bucky made his slow way over there, turning over in his mind what he was going to say. He’d behaved like a real asshole, so maybe he should open with that.

Steve was selling a newspaper to a mook in a suit when Bucky came over; he kept his head down, and Steve glanced at him twice before widening his eyes. Bucky waved.

Steve took the coins from the suit and wished him a nice day, then turned to Bucky. “Jesus, Buck, you look like...”

“Something the cat hacked up?”

“I was gonna say like you’d been turned inside out and back round again, but sure.”

Bucky laughed, even though it made the band around his head tighten. “That’s incredibly specific.”

Steve shrugged and opened the door at the side of his booth. “Come on in.”

Bucky shuffled in and gratefully collapsed into a chair. Steve sat back down and picked up a thermos that was sitting on a low table, pouring what smelt like stale coffee into a mug. It made Bucky want to hurl all over again, but he still took it and drank. Steve retrieved a tub from the bag at his feet and slid it over as well.

The lukewarm coffee stung his cigarette sore throat, but he could already feel his headache loosening its grip. The tub contained a slice of apple pie.

“I can't take this,” he said.

Steve handed him a fork. “I was keeping as a snack, it's two days old and going bad, it ain't a tea party.”

“All right, all right,” Bucky said, and started eating. It was pretty congealed, but it tasted like heaven right now.

“So, you gonna tell me what happened?”

“Drank too much, went home with a girl.” He sighed and rubbed his face. “Steve...”

“Hey,” Steve said, and nudged him with his foot. “I shouldn't have said what I did, about your grandfather, that wasn't fair.”

“A little old lady was browsing the ladies' magazines section. Steve glanced at her, then back. “It's okay, you'd be a saint not to feel like you'd lost somethin'.”

Bucky shook his head firmly. “No, Steve. I was just bein' a mean son of a bitch, it wasn't true.” The woman looked up, scandalised, and he smiled quickly. “Sorry, ma'am.”

Steve laughed. “Don't talk about your ma that way.” The lady moved off, probably so offended that
she'd never patronise this stand again. Steve didn't seem that concerned. “So... I was right?”

“Yeah... This girl I went with, this morning she popped a bennie, said it was a perk of the job. It isn't like it was, the club, it's a dive. Guys there are real perverts.” He sighed and shook his head. Shit, he was an asshole to Eva last night, not much better than the other perverts.

Steve patted his knee. “I'm sorry, it's no way to find out.” He served another customer and dropped the coins into the tin. “So, you gonna see her again?”

Bucky shook his head. “Hopefully not. We, you know, did the...” He glanced at the milling customers and dropped his voice. “The thing.”

“Yeah, I figured. Thanks,” he said as a customer handed over some money.

“It was...” He rubbed his face and grimaced. “My first time.”

Steve's expression would have been priceless if it weren't so embarrassing. “Really?”

Bucky squirmed. “Yeah, you thought I already had?”

“Well, yeah, I figured you just hadn't told me about it.”

Bucky clicked his tongue; he told Steve everything. “Have you?”

Steve laughed and shook his head. “Nah. So, how was it?”

“It was okay.”

“Just okay?”

Bucky shrugged, feeling his face grow hot. “Well, I couldn't... you know. I was too drunk.”

Steve looked sympathetic. “Sorry, Buck.”

“It's fine, there'll be more.”

Steve sighed like he always did. “Becca sent me a postcard. She's back tomorrow, right?”

Bucky blinked, then groaned. “Yeah. Shit.”

Steve patted him on the back. “You'd better clean up, don't want to look like cat vomit when you see her. She'll never let you live it down.”

“She never lets me live anything down.” He poured out some more coffee and gulped it down in two swallows. Christ, it was real swill that Steve drank. Steve started chatting with a customer about the news of the day. There'd been some big robbery on Bedford, and the Democrats were starting up their campaign in Brooklyn for the primaries. It struck Bucky, as he listened to Steve speak, that in two weeks he'd be up in Massachusetts and the two of them wouldn't be able to sit around and talk whenever the mood took them. His chest tightened.

“Hey, Steve?” he said, when the customer walked away with his newspaper under his arm. “Are we okay?”

Steve blinked, then frowned. “Course we are.”

“You sure?” He didn't like the faint tremulous quality to his voice, but there it was.
Steve pressed his hand to Bucky's knee again. “Sure I'm sure.”

Chapter End Notes

- Why yes, *Dead Poets Society* did make me cry when I was a teenager.

- *Rabbit Face Baby, scroll down, second from the left*. Disregard the fact that the seller figured they're from the 70s or 80s, haha.

- *Ginger Rogers's devilish dress*.

- I can be found [here on Tumblr](http://www.example.com).
Dad and Ma drove him up to Harvard on a bright Sunday morning; Steve came along for the ride. The four hours in the car only served to grow Bucky's anxiety to a completely unmanageable size, and he gnawed on his thumbnail until it bled.

The campus was crawling with students lugging suitcases around, a banner hung across the library that welcomed the class of 1939, and there were older students everywhere milling around, handing out flyers. Bucky's dormitory was in Stoughton Hall, one big room with a bed on either side. He'd read that other halls had private rooms with common areas, but he wasn't so lucky. The room was pretty nice, though.

"Nicer than where I live," Steve said, and he wasn't wrong.

Bucky's room mate was already there, neatly unpacking his things. He was fairly short, falling somewhere between Steve and Bucky in height, with dirty blonde hair, and a slightly dumb look on his face. He introduced himself as Charles Philip Butterworth III, and he wasn't kidding. Steve made a noise that could have been a sneeze, but Bucky knew was a laugh.

"James Buchanan Barnes, the one and only," he said, accepting the offer of a handshake.

"Wonderful, how presidential," Charles said. He had one of those voices like in the movies, where they wanted to sound like pretend Brits. Bucky already knew he wasn't going to like this guy.

"Well, we'll get out of your hair, it's a long drive back," Ma said, her voice getting kind of thick. Bucky didn't want them to leave so soon, but it *was* a long drive, and Steve had school in the morning. Bucky worried that his grades would suffer without him around to help.

Ma gave him a big hug, and so did Dad, surprisingly. Steve patted him on the back and told him not to get expelled, but the joke fell flat between them and Bucky waved them off with a weight deep in his chest.

"Nice family," Charles said from the door.

Bucky rubbed at his face and came back into the room to unpack. "Uh huh. Where's Charles Butterworth II?"

"Oh, Daddy's talking with President Conant, they were chums in their own Harvard days."

Bucky stared at him, then blinked. Christ, this was going to be a long semester.

Dinner was held in Annenberg Hall, a real fancy place with high, vaulted ceilings. Steve would have burst a blood vessel at the architecture. They served risotto with new potatoes and chicken, and Charles about creamed himself over how good the food was.
“It's okay,” Bucky allowed.

Charles smiled. “I guess you'd prefer a hotdog, wouldn't you?”

Bucky blinked. “Is that supposed to sound like me?”

Charles laughed, high and reedy. “Well, you do have a rather Edward G. Robinson lilt to your voice.”

“A lilt?”

The tips of Charles's ears went red. “A tone, you know?”

“I know what 'lilt' means,” he said, and returned to his food. Charles didn't try to speak to him for the rest of dinner.

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Classes didn't start until Tuesday, so Bucky had to endure a whole day with Butternut. Charles had a full day planned, from socialising at breakfast to 'rushing' fraternities to joining some club that was, in all seriousness, called the 'Hasty Pudding Club'.

“My father was a member,” Charles said proudly, once they were back in their room. “Three presidents were too, so I'm sure you would fit right in. Would you like to come with me to tonight's cocktail party?”

“I absolutely would not, Charles,” Bucky said very precisely, lying down on his bed.

Charles deflated some and shook his head. “Are you going to join a fraternity?”

“Nope,” he said, and closed his eyes. Charles sighed.

Bucky was enrolled in a few History and English classes, along with the mandatory writing class and third year Italian. In his first Italian class, he had to read out a passage of *Divina Commedia*. He was pretty sure the professor did it just to make him stumble over fourteenth century Italian, but Bucky did just fine. He heard a couple of sniggers as he spoke, which he figured was because of his accent; the same thing had happened in his Russian Literature class. He was just too much of an Edward G. Robinson type to speak intelligently about Dostoyevsky.

There was one telephone in the hall, at the reception desk on the ground floor, overlooked by a proctor. Curfew was ten pm, so between classes and the other guys, there wasn't too much opportunity to use the phone. When he got his chance on Saturday morning, he called Steve, but the tenant who answered said he wasn't there. He quickly hung up and redialed before the proctor on duty noticed and yelled at him for making more than one call. He tried Becca this time, at her new number, and after four rings, Arnie answered.

“Hey, Arnie, is Becca there?”

“Bucky,” Arnie said, sounding vaguely pleased to hear from him. Bucky didn't believe it for a second. “Hold on, she's coming. How's your first week going?”

“Yeah, it's okay,” he said. Arnie made noises about that being good, then handed the phone over to Becca. “Hey, sis.”

They talked for a few minutes about their first week at college; Becca loved Barnard already and –
she lowered her voice a little – was getting used to living with Arnie now. He was very neat, she said. Bucky could imagine. Steve was working the news stand all day today.

“You sure everything's going okay up there?” Becca asked, after Bucky was through saying everything was just fine.

“Yeah. Well... Some of the guys are giving me a hard time about my accent. Y’know, ’cause I sound like a gangster, or something.”

Becca laughed. “Aw, Buck, are the big kids being mean to you?”

“Shut up,” he said, without much force. “Do they do that to you at college?”

“No, but most of the girls there are New Yorkers too. I bet you're having fun with those Radcliffe girls, huh?”

“Yeah. I'm not a married seventeen year old,” he shot back. In all honesty, although he'd seen some Radcliffe girls around the Yard, he hadn't spoken to a one of them.

“I'm so glad I don't have to hear that shit from you everyday,” she said, and he started to chew on his lip. “I better go, I'm meeting up with some friends soon.”

“Oh,” he said. “Okay. I got a couple of girls to show a good time, anyway.”

She sighed and said goodbye; as soon as he put the phone done, a kid behind him pounced on it and waved him away. He went back upstairs and lay down on his bed. He had a stack of books to read, including a few Russian doorstops, like *Crime and Punishment*, so he picked one up and started reading.

Charles didn't come back from his pudding soirée until the early evening. Bucky had gone across to the Annenberg to have some lunch, but otherwise hadn't left the room.

“You really should socialise more, Buchanan,” Charles said. “It's just as important to your future success as studying is.”

Bucky lowered his book and stared at Charles until he squirmed a little under the attention. “You ever fucked a girl, Chuck?”

Charles made an indignant spluttering sound that was immensely satisfying. “Yes, of course, I have.”

Bucky smiled with his teeth. “I mean someone other than your second cousin.”

“I have not slept with any of my cousins, Buchanan,” Charles insisted.

“Hey, you don't have to prove anything to me, Chuck.”

Charles stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. “I'm going to have dinner. If all you're going to do is cast aspersions on my character, then I'd prefer it if you didn't come.”

“I'm heartbroken, Chuck, just heartbroken, but I'll respect your cousin-lovin' ways.”

Charles glared at him, then flounced out of the room. Bucky laughed himself silly as he ploughed through Dostoevsky.
It didn't take Bucky long to figure out that Chuck was a little scared of him; for one, he let Bucky call him 'Chuck', despite his obvious distaste for the name, and for another, he never made another crack about how Bucky spoke. Bucky had recently taken up boxing in the school gym to stay in shape; Chuck looked upon Bucky's gloves hanging from his desk chair with some trepidation.

Chuck was from Connecticut, son of a senator and a good little housewife. He had an older brother, who was studying at Harvard Law, and he planned to follow in his big brother's footsteps. He was astounded by the fact that Bucky had not, in fact, raised himself heroically out of poverty.

“My family's probably got more money than yours does,” Bucky said, smoking a cigarette as he wrote a paper about Russian existentialism.

“May--be, may--be,” Chuck said, drawing the word out each time in his ridiculous knock-off Cary Grant accent.

It was late Friday afternoon and Bucky had only had class in the morning, so he'd spent the rest of the day reading and writing in his undershirt and slacks, getting sweaty in the humid room. The volume of stuff he had to read was unlike anything he'd encountered in high school.

“I've never been to a nightclub,” Chuck added after a minute. “What are they like?”

“Like an armpit filled with prostitutes and old perverts,” he said, and roughly crossed out a whole paragraph.

“That's... descriptive,” Chuck said. “I am not so sure I would want to go to a place like that.”

“I'll let them know,” Bucky murmured, and scribbled down some more notes.

Chuck sighed. “Hasty Pudding is having a party tonight; I'm allowed to bring a non-member, you should come.”

“Nah.”

“They'll have girls there.”

“Real girls or Radcliffe girls?”

“Radcliffe girls, though I don't see the difference.”

Bucky glanced over his shoulder. “You wouldn't.”

“You could at least try to make friends, Buchanan,” Chuck said, quite forcefully. Bucky stubbed his cigarette out and turned around to stare at him. Chuck wilted.

“You got something to say to me, Chuck?”

Chuck cleared his throat. “No. I only thought it might be nice to spend a Friday night with some girls.”

A Friday night with some girls. Bucky mulled it over for a second, then shrugged. “I guess that might not be so bad.”

Chuck perked up. “Really? Fantastic! Now, the club has something of a dress code...”

“Are you saying I don't dress nice enough for pudding eaters?”
“No, no, I only meant--”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Chuck, I'm fucking with you, okay?” Guy was no Steve, that was for sure.

Chuck did mean it, though, and Bucky dressed in his Sunday best to go to his damn club. It was on the other side of the Yard from their halls, in a fairly nondescript red brick building. Chuck seemed to know everyone there, and introduced Bucky as 'James' to all the other rich snobs. The girls there were very buttoned up, librarian types, who looked at Bucky out of the corner of their eyes with some trepidation, but wouldn't speak to him.

The head of the club, Richard something or other, regaled them all with tales of his water polo tournaments. Chuck was something of a tennis pro, apparently, and many of the other boys had played rugby at boarding schools in England.


Bucky knocked back a glass of whiskey. The club had provided some booze, and Bucky was drinking it at a much faster rate than everyone else. “I was a quarterback in high school.”

Some of the other guys laughed. “A quarterback, you mean?” Richard said, putting stress of quar.

“I'm not sure what a 'quarterback' is.”

Bucky smiled tightly. “Uh huh. Then I snapped my leg in half on the Pulaski Skyway and had to stop playing.” He yanked up his pant leg to reveal his still pink scar, and the other recoiled a little.

One girl, though, she leant forward and looked at it.

“That's very impressive,” she said, “how long ago did that happen?”

“About a year,” he said, and she smiled and entreated him to tell her all about it.

The evening was slightly more tolerable with Marjorie, a Radcliffe freshman from Boston, who didn't have any wisecracks about his accent. She pronounced Harvard, Harvahd and park pahk, but he knew he couldn't tease her about it. She sat like Katherine Hepburn, straight-backed with a cigarette held loosely in her right hand, her long dark hair falling in soft curls down her shoulders. She had a loud laugh that she wasn't afraid to let loose, and a dirty kind of humour that matched his own.

As the night wore on, Richard handed out cigars with a glint of challenge in his eye, and Bucky took one and lit it with a grin. The first inhale made his eyes water.

“Have you smoked a cigar before?” she asked.

“I have not, no,” he said, and tried to swallow down a gag.

Her eyes glittered as she watched him struggle. “Well, it'll be our secret, if you can keep your dinner in you.”

He pressed his hand to his mouth and nodded.

Whiskey and cigars were a terrible combination, and by the time him and Chuck went back to their room, he felt almost as sick as he had after his night with Delilah. Chuck seemed pleased about how they'd fared.

The next morning, Bucky could barely croak out 'hey' but he had a phone call arranged with Steve that he wasn't going to miss. He drank as much water as he could stand and choked down a muffin
before going to the front desk. One of the other tenants answered and went to fetch Steve. Bucky cleared his throat in preparation, but that only made it worse.

“Hey, Steve,” he whispered, when Steve came on the line.


“Liquor and cigars,” he replied. “It's fucking terrible, don't do it, Steve.”

Steve laughed. “Don't think you're gonna have to worry about that. What were you doing smoking cigars?”

“Rich kid party, won't be repeating that. What've you been doing?”

“Not that, for sure. Failing math, mostly.”

Bucky sighed and shook his head; this was what he was afraid of. “You got any math homework at the moment?”

“Yeah, may as well be in Ancient Greek, the sense it makes to me.”

“Go get it, I'll talk you through it.”

“Nah, it's fine.”

“Steve,” he said, and Steve sighed, but left the phone for a few minutes before returning with his homework in hand. Bucky grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil from the front desk and started roughing out the questions Steve was facing.

He spent ten minutes helping Steve, while people huffed behind him, but were too nervous to tell him to get off the telephone. When he finally did, he realised that he'd clean forgot to tell Steve about Marjorie.

September turned into October turned into November. He did the five hour train ride from Union Station back home a few times, but everyone was busy and he had so much homework to do that it didn't really make sense to do it that often. The kids had grown a lot even in a couple of months and weren't nearly as emotional about everything as they had been in August. Steve was working every hour God sent, it seemed like, and he just didn't have much time to spend with Bucky.

Anyhow, Marge liked to go into town on the weekends, and more often than not he came along. She liked to walk around in the snow and browse clothing stores but never buy anything. She'd lived in Boston (Bawston) her whole life, so she knew all the places to go, and since she was local, she had a car to drive them around in. She especially liked to go over the Longfellow Bridge, visit a pizzeria, and match him slice for slice.

“You want to say somethin'?” she asked as he watched her eat.

He shook his head and smiled. “Not a damn thing.”

She laughed and wiped a napkin over her mouth. “So, how's Russian lit going? Is the Ruskie still being condescending?”

He groaned and ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah,” he said. Professor Nikolaev never had any time for Bucky when he answered questions in class; he always stared down his nose and made a dismissive noise when Bucky was finished talking, then moved on to someone else. Sometimes
Bucky thought it was more to do with language differences, but most of the time he just hated him. “Fuckin' Commie. What about you?”

“My room mate still cries every night, it's really getting me down. Biology is fun, though, I love dissecting things.”

Bucky grimaced. He still couldn't stand that kind of stuff, Steve always told him not to look if they passed a dead rat or bird in the street. Marge just laughed and shook her head: she thought it was funny, a big guy like him scared of a little blood and guts. He wasn't scared, he always insisted, he just... didn't like it.

“It's sweet, you're sensitive,” she said, “Maybe let's see how sensitive you really are.”

He opened his mouth to ask her what she meant, but it became obvious when he felt her foot on the inseam of his slacks. She dragged it up, her big toe tracing his thigh, then pressed the sole of her foot against his dick.

“Je--!” He shifted around, but she followed, pressing in again, a wicked smile on her face. He started to get hard despite being in a half full pizzeria, and felt a shudder pass through him. “Hey, c’mon! Maybe we should, uh... not do this here?”

“Maybe you should eat up, then,” she said, and winked.

They got back into her car in record time, and she pulled around onto a secluded side of a road before dragging him into the back seat. They dry humped for a few minutes, Bucky getting her dress off her shoulders far enough to press his face into her tits. She twisted her fingers into his hair and arched up into him, her leg crooked firmly between his.

He came right there, in his pants, before he could even get a hand on his belt. She trailed her fingernails across his scalp and laughed her dirty laugh.

“Are you going to return the favour?”

“Huh?” he mumbled into the skin between her breasts.

She pushed him back and reached under her dress, dragging her stockings and underwear down her legs, then gestured south. “Do your best.”

“My best?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Haven't you ever...?”

“Oh... Um, not... so much.”

“That's okay,” she said, with a smile. “First time for everything.”

He had a concept of what he was supposed to do, from talk between the boys at school, though they always pulled faces and made gagging noises about it. It was strange, to be in her cunt like that, but it didn't smell bad like they said in school, and there was something satisfying about the feeling of strong thighs bracketing his head. He didn't really know where to put his tongue, the diagrams he'd looked at in biology textbooks were very clinical in their explanation, but they got there in the end, and she came with her fingers clenched in his hair.

“You'll get better with time,” she said, and he laughed, pressing his face to her thigh.
His December exams were the worst two weeks of his whole life; he seriously considered strangling Chuck with his tie every time he interrupted Bucky's studying.

On the 21st, it was all over, and he got on the train, heading back to New York. His father picked him up at Grand Central Station at ten pm, and it was snowing something awful, worse than Massachusetts; the traffic had almost ground to a halt.

“How's school?” Dad said.

“It's all right, it's good.”

“Have you made friends?”

Bucky lifted a shoulder. “A few.” The real answer was not really. There was Chuck, who he didn't even like, and there was Marge, who was something else altogether.

Dad pressed his lips together and nodded.

“How's Steve, have you seen him?” Bucky asked.

“A few times, Becca has seen him more, I think. He has the flu at the moment.”

“Really? He didn't say last weekend.” He sounded congested, but not so far out of the normal range. At least, Bucky thought not; maybe he wasn't paying enough attention.

“I'm sure he'll recover soon,” Dad said placidly.

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Bucky went to Steve's the next day. Sarah was at work, and Steve was a bona fide invalid, red cheeked and wrapped in a blanket, shivering and sweating at the same time.

“Jesus,” Bucky said, and closed the door behind him before the bitter wind could reach too far into the room. “Lie down.”

Steve groaned and shuffled back into the bedroom. “How you doin', Buck?” he mumbled under layers and layers of mucus and congestion.

“How am I doing?” Bucky repeated. “I don't look like I layered rouge all over my damn face. How are you doing?”

Steve made a huck huck huck sound that Bucky belatedly identified as a laugh, then started coughing. When he came back up for air, he shook his head. “I'm okay. Better 'an I look, anyhow.”

“Oh, I bet,” Bucky said. “I'm gonna make you some soup.”

“Buck,” Steve complained.

“I'm making you soup!” Bucky said, and stomped out to the kitchen.

By the time Steve had choked down the soup, he was practically unconscious and all Bucky needed to do was give him a gentle push to tip him sideways onto the bed and off to sleep. Bucky spent the rest of the day reading Steve's meagre collection of books and cleaning the little apartment until Sarah came home and took over.
Christmas was okay. Becca brought Arnie, which Bucky guessed was to be expected. Arnie seemed vaguely bewildered by it all. Steve was still too sick to come over, and Bucky wanted to go over there and spend Christmas with him, but Ma said she hadn’t seen him in weeks, and it was Becca’s birthday to boot; the pressure of Catholic guilt kept him at home.

He had two weeks off, and the days flew by way too fast. The kids were both four foot seven now, but Bucky was still six foot. He guessed he was done with that part of being a kid.

Steve had recovered by the time Bucky left for Cambridge, but he’d been sick for so much of the two weeks that they’d barely been able to see each other at all. Bucky wondered if he could delay returning for a few days, nothing too important would happen in first days back, but that never would have flown with Ma.

Chuck was overflowing with stories about his holiday spent in Old Greenwich, despite the fact that it was almost midnight when Bucky got back and he couldn’t feel his face from the cold. He didn’t stop talking until Bucky got under the covers and put a pillow over his head.

Him and Marge fucked for the first time in the back of her car on a cold February evening, both a little drunk from a trip out to a tavern. It was better than the time with Delilah, at least he’d had an orgasm this time, but it still wasn’t all that impressive.

His Russian literature class had moved onto *The Brothers Karamazov*, a book about a son of a bitch of a father and his fucked up kids, the eldest son a womaniser, the youngest with a religiosity that reminded him of Eugene. The kid was the hero of the story.

He had an essay to write for each of his classes, a skit to prepare in Italian, and midterms to study for; his spring break was the week after his birthday and there was no way he’d be able to leave. Ma sniffled a little on the phone when he called on his birthday, which got his eyes warming in sympathy. He wasn’t able to ring Steve until the next day because some asshole behind him gave him a hard time about staying on the phone.

Chuck left for Paris the Friday before spring break, and Marge went back home for the week. In fact, most of Stoughton was gone by Saturday afternoon, leaving Bucky alone on his floor. He planned out his entire week in blocks of reading and writing, but by Tuesday morning it had all gone to shit.

His averagely attractive cursive had degraded into a smudged scrawl as he scribbled down every stray thought that came into his head, each less coherent than the last, and when the nib of his fountain pen snapped under the pressure, so did he.

“God fucking damn it!” he yelled, and threw his book across the room, where it hit Chuck's alarm clock and knocked it to the floor. “Piece of shit,” he muttered, and stomped out of the room.

He went down to the front desk and rang Steve. One of the other tenants picked up and said Steve was out, and when he called home, Davis said the same of his parents. Becca's phone just rang unanswered.

Bucky leant against the desk and squeezed his eyes shut. If he stayed here any longer, he was going to rip the telephone right out of the wall.

He went back upstairs and grabbed his cigarettes, then out across the Yard to the Memorial Church. There were normally a lot of students hanging around outside it, but now it was empty, and he plopped himself down on the steps near the bell tower and lit his first cigarette. It was cold but bright, which made the smoke bite a little more. He smoked the cigarette until it dwindled away to almost nothing, then lit a second one and watched the clouds roll by. Steve always liked to watch clouds inch across the sky, it made him feel like they were all little guys compared to the whole universe.
Bucky had never paid it much attention before Steve pointed it out.

When he finished his second cigarette, he went inside the church. He'd been in a couple of times before, for a service or two. There was no crucifix in the sanctuary, it being Protestant and all, which was a nice change from his church at home: he hated looking at that thing. Still, it was a holy place, and he crossed himself as he stood before the pulpit, thinking up a quick prayer in his head before moving on: *Dear God, please don't let me be a failure. All the best, James Buchanan Barnes.* Beyond it was the Memorial Room. He'd been skittish to go in there before, to read the names of Harvard students who died in the Great War inscribed on the wall.

He wondered if Joseph Rogers's name was inscribed somewhere, maybe carved on a wall in Kiltimagh. He wondered if there was anyone out there who still remembered Joe and Sarah. According to Sarah, Joe's parents had died before they married, along with her mother, and her father, old Pat Kelly, wasn't the greatest guy on Earth, which accounted for why she left behind everything she knew at sixteen to make a whole new life for herself. They both had a mess of siblings, but those relationships petered out as well. Bucky found the idea that the Rogers family might be forgotten unbearably sad. The Barnes family wouldn't be forgotten any time soon, not least in the pages of police logbooks.

He pulled out another cigarette and stuck it in his mouth, but it felt disrespectful to smoke in a church, so he made his way back out.

His prayer didn't work. By Friday, he was still no closer to having the three completed essays he needed for his classes, and he knew that what he did have would make Professor Nikolaev look even further down his nose. Every time Bucky left his room and came back, he could really smell how much the place stank of cigarettes, so he endeavoured not to leave that often.

Early Saturday morning, he woke up in a cold sweat. It was the usual thing, going to class buck naked, his teeth falling out, Steve dying... He fought with his blanket for a minute, knocking off papers and books he'd left strewn across the bed when he passed out, before he realised that no one was fighting him. He collapsed back onto the mattress and groaned. God Jesus, he was drenched and disgusting.

He tried again, shoving his blanket away and getting up. He hadn't washed as much as he could have this week, so three am was as good a time as any. He collected up his towel and his bar of soap and headed down to the floor below, where the showers were. He took a long piss and drank some water from the basin, then went into the shower room. There was a shower already running, steaming rolling out above the stalls.

He frowned and walked further into the room. Who else was still in Stoughton, let alone having a shower at this time of night?

“*Uh uh... yeah...*”

Bucky stopped for a second; that sounded like... He started walking again. There was only one light on in the room, a dim one at the other end of the stalls. Bucky could just make out two pairs of feet in one of the stalls. Had someone snuck a girl in here? What kind of self-respecting girl would agree to a fuck in a disgusting place like this?

“*Like that?*” a voice asked.

“*Yeah... Uhn... yeah, yeah...*” the other answered, but they both sounded like...
Bucky took a few steps closer and squinted at the feet. Two sets of big feet, both pointed towards the back wall.

Fuck. Bucky turned around and high-tailed it out of the room and back upstairs. He didn't slow down until he was on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

So, those were two...

Those were two men. Fucking.

He kind of knew about that, like he kind of knew about eating a girl out, but the guys at school only brought it up when talking about a few choice classmates, like Matthew. Matthew the sodomite. Matthew, who must have always been the girl, they speculated. Bucky had never thought Matthew wanted to be a girl, but what they meant was that Matthew was the one who took it, not the one gave it, like a man. So, one of those guys in the shower room, one was giving it, pushing the other into the wall of the shower, holding him there like that...

He was starting to get hard and looked down at himself, horrified. No. No no no. He squeezed his eyes shut, but the image still came into his mind unbidden, the water sluicing down... He got harder, and smacked his forehead with his hand. He thought of something else, he thought about... what was her name? Marge? Fuck. What did he think about when he jacked off normally? That summer, he thought about not getting caught by Steve in the bed across the room, but that wasn't... Otherwise, he thought about, about...

He shoved his hand down his pants, hiccupsing something like a sob as he got his hand on himself. He jerked himself as fast as he could, bending one leg and pushing it into the mattress, giving himself some leverage. It was too dry, wasn't going quick enough; he pulled his hand out and spat on it, then went back and redoubled his efforts until he came with another hiccup, harder than he ever had before, his ears ringing. He was suddenly sated and could hardly move himself enough to clean up. He fell into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, he told himself that maybe the whole thing had been a dream, even though his towel and bar of soap were sitting on the floor at the end of his bed.

- 

When Chuck returned on Sunday evening, he found Bucky furiously writing his Russian literature essay. Bucky looked up when the door clicked closed, at Chuck's carefully blank expression.

“I know,” he said. It smelt like stale sweat and old cigarettes in the room.

“Can I open a window?”

Bucky was in a vest and slacks and it was cold outside, but he shrugged his agreement anyway. It was getting a little overwhelming. Chuck opened the window and a cold breeze swept through the place, ruffling Bucky's papers while Chuck looked over the room. He bent down by his night stand and retrieved his fallen alarm clock – the face of it was broken. Bucky looked away as he sighed.

“Would you like me to take your linens down to the laundry?” he asked.

Bucky shook his head. “Don't have any other sheets,” he said. Chuck got a pinched expression on his face. “I'll do it tomorrow, all right?”

“All right,” he said, and cleared his throat. “How is the study going?”
Bucky barked with laughter.

- 

He got a C- on his lit essay and flubbed the skit through anxiety. Steve had got a B- on a math test and Becca was getting all As at Barnard. Arnie was, of course, doing fabulously at Yeshiva. Bucky was so pleased.

Nikolaev had even more reason than usual to look down on Bucky, after that fucking nonsensical essay, but the thing was, he actually liked most of the books they read. He might have spelt Dostoevsky a different way each time, but once he got stuck into *Karamazov*, he actually enjoyed it. Alyosha, the youngest son reminded him so much of Eugene, and his love for his eldest brother, Dmitri, made Bucky feel horribly lonely holed up in his room or the library, chain smoking.

*You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home,* Alyosha told a group of children.

Bucky certainly hoped that was true.

Still, none of that changed the fact that Nikolaev thought he was an idiot.

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On Easter Sunday, there was a service at the church. Bucky decided to go, despite needing the time to study. Him and Chuck went together – he had now resigned himself to the fact that Chuck considered the two of them to be friends. They were late, because Bucky couldn't find his nice clothes in the mess he'd created on his side of the room, so they sat in the back row.

Marge had come with her family, he noticed after a while, but he couldn't manage to catch her eye at all during the service. When it was over, he hurried over before they could leave, and smiled his most charming smile.

"Hey, Marge," he said.

Marge's face froze a little. "Hello, James."

He grinned. "Well, how do you do too, Miss Marjorie."

Her father, who was at least six five, looked down on the two of them. "Marjorie, we have a reservation."

"Yes, Dad," she said, and spared a strained smile for Bucky. "Maybe I'll see you again, James."

He frowned. "Uh, yeah, maybe."

Her father hustled the family away before they could speak any further, and Chuck came up beside him, clearing his throat carefully.

"Weren't you courting her?"

Bucky narrowed his eyes. "Apparently not."

A few days later, Marge tracked him down in the Yard and tried to pass it off as nothing, but fuck it, if he was too embarrassing to be introduced to some goddamn Bostonian, then both she and her father could go fuck themselves.
And then it was time for finals. Bucky had hardly spoken to Steve or his family in weeks, either they were busy, or he was, and he certainly needed every available moment to study. Chuck did his laundry more than once, out of what appeared to be sheer desperation.

His first exam was Russian, a seven pm exam that left him to stew in anxiety. His feet hit the floor at six am, and he only stopped cramming to piss and eat food that Chuck had brought back from Annenberg.

At four pm, he was surrounded by scraps of paper and open books, and Chuck was remaining completely silent as he did his own studying. There was a knock at the door.

“What the fuck do you want?” Bucky yelled.

The door opened and the proctor glared at him. “You have a phone call.”

“Do I look like I can take a fuckin' phone call?”

“Do I look like your fucking secretary, Barnes?” the proctor responded. “It was a girl, she said it was about 'Steve'.

He rocketed off the bed and out the door, Chuck calling out behind him. He took the stairs two at the time, thinking about all the things that could be wrong. He hadn't spoken to Steve in three weeks. Three weeks. Steve was about to graduate, and they still hadn't found the time, and now what if...

He grabbed the phone. “Becca?” he said breathlessly. “What's wrong-- what's wrong with Steve?”

“Hey, Buck,” she said. She sounded tired; no, exhausted. “He's uh... Well, I'm at the hospital at the moment, he was admitted last night.”


Becca sighed. “Yeah, kind of. Look... a lot's been happening, Steve didn't want--”

“What is going on?”

“It's his heart,” she said softly. “He has heart-- a problem with his heart.”

Bucky went cold all over. “What? How? How did that-- how does-- how...”

“They think it's from the rheumatic fever,” she said softly. “It's been pretty bad since he was sick in December. He passed out yesterday evening while he was over at our place, we brought him to the hospital...”

“You've known about this since December?” he asked, and dug his fingernails into the counter top of the front desk.

After a pause, she replied. “Yeah.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” he said, very quiet and very slow.

“Well, he didn't-- he didn't want to worry you, he asked us not to say.”

Bucky blinked, realisation crystallising in his mind. “He's been hiding this from me for months. He's
been--"

“Bucky.”

“He's been pretending to be fine on the phone--”

“Buck.”

“He was cheerful--”

“Buck!” she repeated, and he hushed up. “Steve's known a lot longer than since December.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Well, you know, Sarah's a nurse and... I don't know how long he's known, but probably a couple of years... And that's another thing...”

Bucky covered his eyes with his hand. “What?” he mumbled. Years.

“Sarah's sick again. She's, um, she's probably not going to make it. She didn't want to go back to the sanatorium, so, uh, Arnie's been helping take care of her. The doctor said the stress probably wasn't helping Steve's heart.”

Bucky bowed his head and took a few shallow breaths.

“I'm sorry,” Becca says softly.

He nodded to himself, then straightened up. “Okay. I'm gonna take the five o'clock train, I'll be there around eleven. Are you at Brooklyn City?”

“Yeah, but don't you have exams?”

“Don't worry about that, they're all, uh, done already.” He spoken to them all so sparingly, he'd never given them his schedule. “I better get off the phone, I've gotta pack.”

“Okay. Well, me and Arnie will be here.” She took a deep breath. “I'm sorry, Buck,” she repeated.

“It's fine, see you soon,” he said, and hung up.

He ran back up the stairs, yanked his only half emptied suitcase from his closet, and began shovelling clothes in.

“What's going on?” Chuck said. “What are you doing?”

“I have to go,” he said. “Family emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?”

Bucky looked around the room. He was definitely going to forget a lot of things, but as long as he had his wallet and most of his clothes, he'd be okay. He shoved some of his books in too. “The urgent kind.”

“You have an exam in three hours, Buchanan!”

Bucky shrugged, gave the room one more pass over, than forced the case closed and picked it up. “I'll figure it out. Good luck with your exams, though. See you around.”
Buchanan!” Chuck called as he hurried out the door.

The train ride was the longest five hours of his life and, with delays, it was closer to midnight when he stepped out of a cab at Brooklyn City Hospital. He went up to the reception desk, lugging his suitcase behind him, and the hard-faced nurse on duty stared him down.

“Visiting hours are over,” she said without preamble.

“My friend is really sick,” he said.

“Visiting hours are still over.”

He dropped the suitcase hard onto the linoleum. “I came all the way from Boston to--”

She pursed her lips. “You can see your friend in the morning.”

But what if Steve wasn't alive in the morning? He set his jaw and squared his shoulders for a real fight when he heard footsteps coming towards him. He looked around and saw Arnie.

“Sister,” Arnie said, “this is my friend, can he come through?”

The sister pursed up her face some more, but nodded. “All right. Do not excite any of the patients.”

“We won't, sister, thank you,” Arnie said, then gestured for Bucky to follow him. Bucky snatched up the suitcase, cast one last look at the nurse, and left. “I could hear you shouting all the way down the hall,” he added when they were out of earshot.

“I wasn't shouting,” Bucky said. “How's Steve?”

“He's sleeping.”

Bucky nodded. “What the fuck has been going on?”

Arnie took a deep breath and shook his head. “I'm sorry, Buck.”

“Yeah, you're fucking sorry now,” he said, “what about when--”

They turned a corner and found Becca sitting on a chair, and the words died in his mouth. She got up and hugged him; he pressed his face into her shoulder and sighed. She patted the back of his head and pulled away to look at him.

“God, you look terrible,” she said.

He felt terrible. “Which room is he in?”

She sighed. “He's through there,” she said, gesturing to a door, “but don't wake him up. I didn't tell him you were coming.”

He nodded. “I'll be quiet.” He put his suitcase down carefully, went to the door, and slowly turned the handle, opening the door just enough to slip in, then closed it over again. Steve was in a room with at least seven other patients, and Bucky tiptoed around looking at each guy before he came upon Steve.

It was mostly dark in the room, but as he stood over Steve, he could still see how pale he was, how sunken in his eyes were. He hadn't looked much better in December, but Bucky had just thought it was the flu doing it. He just hadn't been paying enough attention all these months; he was too
wrapped up in all those damned essays.

Steve took a sharp breath and opened his eyes.

“Shit,” Bucky muttered.

“Huh?” Steve mumbled, and rubbed his eyes. “Buck? What're you--” He cleared his throat. “What are you doing here?”

“Becca called me.”

“Ugh,” Steve muttered and tried to pull himself up. Bucky put a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back down. Steve sighed and rolled his head to look at him. “I told her not to. You've got school and everything.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn't always do what she's told.” Then again, sometimes she did, for months on end. “School's over, don't worry. How are you feeling?”

“I'm okay. Tired. A little achy.”

“A little like you had a heart attack?”

Steve shook his head. “I didn't have a heart attack. I just passed out for a while.”

“Because of your heart. Becca thinks you've known for years.” Bucky swallowed down heavily; he shouldn't have said that, he didn't want to start a fight here tonight.

Steve nodded. “Yeah. I'm sorry, Buck, I just didn't know how to tell you. There isn't much to say, they can't do much about it.”

Bucky bit his lip and took a breath. It sounded like Steve had just resigned himself to-- to dying at seventeen. He was glad it was dark, because his eyes were starting to heat up.

“I'll be okay, Buck,” Steve reassured him. “I'm not a complete invalid yet.”

Bucky blew out a deep breath. “Just halfway there.”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, just halfway.”

-

Steve was released the next day; there wasn't anything they could do for him that he couldn't do at home. The one thing he had to change was his nebuliser, which made his heart palpitations worse; instead, the doctor gave him asthma cigarettes.

“You know what are in those, right?” Bucky asked, sitting in the back of Becca's car as she drove them from the hospital.

Steve raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Yeah, reefer.”

“Yeah, and you know what the say about that: it'll lead you into all sorts of sin and sex parties.”

Steve laughed and rubbed his forehead. He still looked exhausted, the blue circles under his eyes looked deeper than they ever had before. “That doesn't sound so bad to me.”

Sarah was in bed when they returned to Steve's place, and it quickly transpired that no one had told
her he was in the hospital – he'd just 'stayed over' at Becca and Arnie's for some reason or other. Bucky could see why Becca had said Sarah wasn't going to pull through this time, she was the worst he'd ever seen. Her eyes looked larger than ever, in contrast to her gaunt face. They looked too much like Steve's.

Ma had a fit of happiness when Becca dropped him off home – she hadn't expected him until the end of May; that was when Becca's exams were over, after all. Bucky shrugged and said Harvard had a different schedule, and she didn't question it, she was so pleased to see him. The kids were happy too, though they were kind of distant, and Dad smiled when he returned home from work.

Grandpa insisted that he work in the club for the summer, so a few days later, he went back for an evening shift.

“Hey, it's the valedictorian,” Tom called from the bar when he walked in. He actually hadn't been, or salutatorian or anything like that. “You're back down here with the lowlifes, huh?’

Eva was on stage, and he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye before smiling. “I guess I am.”

“You want a drink?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I'm good.”

“You too refined to drink with us now?”

“I was always too refined for you guys.”

Delilah wasn't around any more, she'd run off with a busboy from a nearby diner; true love, apparently. Eva got off the stage at ten and went into the back while Bucky was serving. Once he was done with the customer, he followed her through and knocked on the dressing room door.

“Eva? Can I come in?”

There was a long pause before she came to the door and peered out. “I'm getting changed.”

“Oh,” he said, and glanced away. “Okay. Um, I just wanted to, uh, apologise about...”

She smiled and shook her head. “It's okay.”

“It's not, though, I shouldn't have called you a, a—” He cleared his throat. “Or been like that with you. You were right, I was being a kid.”

“You're better than most men, normally they never apologise.” That seemed like faint praise indeed to Bucky. “I heard about Steve, how are you doing with that?”

Bucky frowned. “How am I doing? I'm okay, it's Steve that's sick.”

“It's hard for everyone when a loved one's sick,” she said. She reached one arm out around the door and patted him on the shoulder.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

-

Steve, it turned out, had a sort of girlfriend. She'd been his date to prom, since George Washington High was co-ed, but he'd been too sick to attend. He'd also been too sick to attend his graduation ceremony, but he'd managed to graduate despite all the time off he'd needed.
Ethel was five foot nothing, eyes too small and close together, thin, mousy brown hair, and a permanently pinched expression on her face.

“Don't be so mean about her,” Becca said, when he commented on how incredibly boring she was. They were sitting on the couch in her cramped little apartment, listening to the radio. Listening to the radio alone at home just wasn't the same. “She's a nice girl.”

“He deserves better than just some 'nice' girl.”

Becca sighed. “He likes her. How about you tell me about all your Radcliffe girls?”

He shrugged.

“Can't remember them all?”

He leant back against the couch and looked at the mantelpiece of the fireplace. They had that kewpie doll and a framed drawing of Steve's up there. Bucky had never seen the picture before; it was a storybook looking illustration of Becca in a cap and gown with the words *When Becca Went to College* over the top, like in that book. Bucky had missed all of that. “There was one girl. Real firecracker.”

“Oh yeah, what was her name?”

“Marge. We, uh, you know, we fooled around a lot.”

Becca tipped her head to one side. “Of course. Is it love?”

He snorted. “Not for her. She was too embarrassed of me to introduce me to her parents.”

“Well, you are pretty embarrassing.”

He rolled his head to the side and smiled. “Thanks, you're a swell lady, Mrs Roth.”

She pinched the skin on his arm really hard.

-  

He got his first phone call from Harvard in June; Davis passed alone the message that they'd like to speak with him and he said he'd call them right back, but of course he didn't. He knew what they were going to say: he'd lost his scholarship because he'd failed his first year due to not turning up for the fucking exams. There was no way to couch a thing like that.

Him, Becca and Arnie, and Steve and Ethel went out a few times. He'd never been a fifth wheel before and he didn't much care for it. They went to see this British H. G. Wells movie *Things to Come*, about a pointless thirty year war of killing people with gas and flying to the moon in the future of 2046. It sure wasn't fun like *War of the Worlds*, there weren't nearly enough aliens for him. Steve and Ethel loved it though, and chattered away about the politics of the movie while they walked to the diner. Bucky didn't even get a look in.

Becca got her exam results back at the end of the month – all As. They had a family dinner to celebrate, and Ma started badgering him about when he'd get his results; he promised he'd follow up with them, and a few days later he, too, had got As in all his exams. Ma was thrilled.

-  

The first time Steve tried his asthma cigarettes was on the hottest day of the year so far, just after his
birthday. The newspapers were saying that it was the hottest summer since 1918 and that they were facing a low level drought. It was 104 degrees Fahrenheit and like hell on Earth. Sarah was struggling with it, and the two of them had opened all the windows and tried to keep her cool with wet rags, but it was so humid inside, Bucky could hardly stand it. After a while, Sarah shooed them out and said she'd be fine, and they found the most shaded spot on the sidewalk to sit on. Steve had a very red and painful looking sunburn all over his face and forearms - “Irish,” he said with a shrug – and Bucky had the darkest tan he'd ever got.

In the street, there was a whole gang of kids waling on a fire hydrant with a wrench, trying to get it open. Bucky watched a few minutes before getting up and approaching them.

“Hey,” he said, and they began to disperse guiltily. “Gimme that.”

The biggest kid, probably thirteen or fourteen, handed it over with a scowl, and Bucky looked at the hydrant for a moment; those kids had just been hitting the thing fruitlessly. He fit the wrench around the cap, and really put his back into the twisting it. The kids cheered, and Bucky told the biggest ones to give him a hand. After a few minutes, they managed to get it open and Bucky was soaked from head to foot. It felt good.

“How you doing?”

Steve smiled. “Okay, I think. It doesn't taste so bad, it's just hot, really.”

“How's your chest?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, better.”

He certainly was feeling better, because five minutes later, while they were talking about some of the weird characters Bucky saw at the club, Steve burst into a helpless fit of giggling. Bucky watched, smiling, until Steve composed himself and cleared his throat.

“So, that works, then,” Bucky said.

Steve widened his eyes for a moment, then snorted with laughter and ducked his head. Bucky wanted to ruffle his hair, but he resisted the urge. “Uh huh, yeah,” he hiccuped. He looked back up again and ran his fingers through his hair. “Wanna try it?”

Bucky frowned. “It's your medicine.”

“It's also a sex party drug,” Steve said. “You ever done it before?”

“Had a sex party?” Bucky asked, and suddenly thought of those two guys in the showers. He
blinking away the thought as Steve grinned.

“Nah, smoked this stuff!”

“Oh. Uh, no.” Steve held it out, and he took it with a sigh. “All right, but you should stub it out after and save the rest.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve said, saluting him. Bucky had never seen him so relaxed, so reefer must have been pretty good stuff. He inhaled deeply and held it, much longer than Steve was able to, then blew it out and handed the cigarette back. Steve dutifully stubbed it out and returned the remaining half to the packet.

The cigarette didn't have the same effect on Bucky as it did on Steve, which he guessed was to be expected, but he definitely felt looser, much less concerned with how terrible this heat was. They lay down on the sidewalk, which Steve would normally never have done, and stared up at the clouds. The water from the open hydrant had lapped to the curb, so they pulled off their shoes and dipped their feet in.

“It's nice having you around all the time,” Steve said. “Like old days.”

The old days were only last summer, but it did seem like a long time ago. “Yeah.”

“It's a shame Harvard's so far away.”

Bucky turned his head and looked at Steve, but Steve had his eyes closed. “Yeah, it is.”

Bucky got more and more phone calls from Harvard, all thankfully fielded by Davis, who looked faintly judgemental about Bucky's repeated assertions that he really was going to call them back. Then at the beginning of August, a letter arrived that Bucky quickly snatched away, telling Ma it was just next year's course list. He opened the letter in his room and read with trepidation.

_Dear Mr Barnes,_

_We regret to inform you that your scholarship has been rescinded due to not meeting the requirements to move into your Sophomore year. After repeated attempts to contact you by telephone and with great deliberation, we have decided to begin proceedings to expel you from our university. If you would like to appeal this decision, please return the enclosed form to the address above by August 15th._

He sat down on the bed and read it over again. Ma would be so ashamed of him. This was her most fervent dream for him. He took a breath and let it out.

It didn't feel so bad; in fact, it was kind of a relief. Ma was going to be so mad, though.

He folded up the letter and form into a small square and hid it underneath the back leg of his desk.

Ma insisted that Becca and Arnie come for dinner every Sunday and so they did, for the whole summer. Arnie planned to finish his degree in three years and have his upcoming year at Yeshiva be his last, then he was off to Columbia. Becca was fairly settled on majoring in Math, and was considering going to graduate school afterwards. Despite Ma's previous fears about Becca ruining
her life with a baby, now she seemed excited about the idea of being a nonna, and eyed Becca's belly every time she came over.

“I'm just getting fat, Ma,” Becca said, and widened her eyes at Bucky, “it's all me.”

On the 15th, Becca invited him and Steve over to her apartment; she had some decorating to do and needed the help. Steve wasn't much help, but he could paint all the fiddly parts. Becca wanted the kitchen to be yellow and the details to be done in pink, so they turned on the radio and got to work. If it weren't so close to September, she said, she would have got Bucky to work wallpapering the living room, but as it was, there wouldn't be time. Bucky held his tongue. The form was still under his desk.

After a few hours, Bucky went out to buy some more cigarettes, and when he returned, Becca and Steve were talking softly in the kitchen.

“...keeps asking me about babies,” Becca was saying. Bucky closed the front door quietly. The radio was still on, so they didn't here him come in. Poor old Becca, Ma was going to give her an even harder time once she graduated.

“So, what're you gonna do?” Steve asked.

“I dunno. I guess in a few years' time, I'll tell her I'm barren or something.”

Bucky frowned and headed towards the kitchen.

“Won't she just make you go to her doctor?” Steve said.

She sighed, as Bucky rounded the doorway. “Probably,” she said to Steve, then looked around at Bucky. “Oh, uh, you were quick.”

“Yeah,” he said, still frowning. “Why're you lying to Ma about a thing like that?”

Becca glanced at Steve, who looked like he'd just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, then smiled. “Oh, you know what she's like, I just want to get her off my back.”

“That's a really harsh way to do it. What about when you do want kids?”

Becca shrugged and looked away. “I don't know if I do.”

“Really?” That was news to him; didn't look like it was news to Steve, though. “You played with dolls all the time when you were a kid.”

“A doll's not a kid, Buck,” she said, and walked into the living room. “Anyway, you're the oldest, when are you going to produce an heir?”

He followed her out. “I dunno, I'm not the married one. What about when Arnie wants kids?”

“I don't know if he wants them either.”

“You don't know? That sounds like something you should know.”

“Buck, let it go,” Steve said, and Bucky glanced back and frowned at him.

“What's going on?” he asked, looking back to Becca. “Is he stopping you? Doesn't want to have Catholic kids?”
She wheeled round and glared at him. “Christ, Bucky, leave it alone, it isn't happening!”

“No, I wanna know! You married a guy who wouldn't even give you *kids*?”

“Bucky,” Steve murmured, but he waved him off.

“You know, it's bad enough that you married the guy, which none of us could understand, but now he's making you--”

“He's not making me do anything!”

“He made you go to a college you didn't want to go to, move into this dump at seventeen, and now you're not gonna have kids because of him?”

“It's not because of--”

“Is he making you convert too?”

She set her jaw. “Bucky--”

“Goddamnit, are you gonna start covering up your hair like Frau Roth and fucking through a sheet?”

“Bucky!” Steve snapped, just as Becca burst out with, “He's *queer*!”

The room went silent. Becca's eyes went round, then she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “Fuck,” she muttered.

“He's what?” Bucky said.

Becca looked at Steve imploringly. Bucky turned and glared at him. “You knew about this?”

Steve looked at him for a second, then sighed and screwed up his face. “Yeah. He's queer, Buck.”

Bucky stared at him for what felt like a full minute, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. He shook his head and looked back at Becca.

“He married you knowing he was a fucking fairy?” he hissed.

She flinched. “It wasn't like that.”

“He used you as a goddamn cover for being a fag! You could've had anyone, any guy!”

“I knew!” she said. “I knew. I've known for years.”

Bucky stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “What do you mean you knew? You knew he was a fag and you married him? You dated him for years?”

Becca rubbed a hand over her face. “Leo – his brother – he found out about Arnie. He caught him and a, a guy, fooling around, beat him almost to death. There was never any mugging. We got married because Leo was going to tell their parents, he was going to tell everyone. It was my idea.”

Bucky looked at Steve. “You knew about all of this, didn't you?” Steve nodded. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“It wasn't my thing to tell.”

“She's my sister and you're my best friend!”
“I know that,” Steve said evenly. “I'm sorry.”

Bucky didn't know what else to say to Steve, so he turned his attention back to Becca. “You've thrown your whole life away to save Arnie some embarrassment, I thought you smarter than that.”

“I haven't **thrown my life away**, don't be so dramatic. It was a good deal for both of us. He's my best friend and there wasn't anyone else I wanted to marry.”

“You didn't need to marry anyone! You're in college!”

“Ma would have got on at me soon enough,” she said. “You know that, she's already talking about kids.”

Bucky couldn't believe it; that was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard. “Ma wouldn't have forced you to marry someone you didn't like, you know how proud she is of her and Dad being a love story.”

“I didn't want to marry anyone! I didn't want to be held back by some man tellin' me what I could and couldn't do. Christ, I probably would've married Steve if it'd come to it!”

Steve's eyebrows went high on his forehead.

“Well, Steve ain't a fag!” Bucky shouted.

“Maybe I'm a fag too!” she shouted back.

Bucky took a step away out of surprise. “What?” he said, very quietly.

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Maybe I'm one too, maybe I'm a **fag...** Maybe I'm a, a lesbian.”

His mouth dropped open as he looked at her. Steve was still standing there, but Bucky paid him no attention. Becca held his gaze for a minute before looking down and wiping at her cheek. It was so quiet in the room that a pin dropping could probably be heard, but Bucky wouldn't have heard it because he was so focused on Becca. She'd never really been that interested in guys, he guessed, but he just thought that was because she was smart, unlike all the girls he messed around with – who, according to Becca, must have been pretty moronic to run around the city with a boy like him. And there was Arnie, who he thought Becca must have seen something in that he didn't. He guessed now that was right; she saw someone like her.

She started crying. He never could stand it when she cried. He wrapped his arms around her and told her it was okay. Steve smiled.

“I wish you'd told me,” he said into her hair.

“You wouldn't have understood,” she murmured.

He took a breath – he wasn't so sure about that, these days. When she pulled away, her make up was all smudged, and wiping her face only made it worse. She took a deep breath and smiled a little.

“Do you want to talk--”

“No,” she said quickly. “I'm gonna wash up.”

He nodded and let her go, then looked at Steve. “I need a cigarette.”

He went outside and sat down on the curb. It was still hot as hell, but not quite as bad as July. After a
few minutes, Steve came out and joined him. Bucky made to stub out the cigarette, but Steve told him it was fine. Bucky nodded and took another pull.

“You knew about Becca, then?”

“Not... really,” Steve said slowly. Bucky eyed him. “I mean, she never told me, but I figured it out.”

“How long ago?”

“A few years now.”

“You didn't think to clue me in?”

Steve shrugged. “She obviously didn't want anyone to know, weren't my place to change that.”

“And Arnie?”

“He's my friend too, you know.”

“He's not your best friend, though,” Bucky said, and blew smoke rings. Steve made an affirmative noise. “You should've told me.”

“I'm sorry.”

He nodded and squinted against the sun. “There's something I should tell you too,” he said.

“Yeah?”

He closed his eyes and sighed. “I didn't take my exams.”

“What? What do you mean you didn't take them?”

“I mean...” He stubbed the cigarette out and scooted to face him. “I didn't sit my exams and they've expelled me.”

“Are you serious? Jesus, Bucky, you been hiding this all summer?”

“Uh huh.” He felt like he should apologise, like he'd let everyone down who wanted to see a Brooklyn boy in Harvard.

“Shit,” Steve said, and shook his head. “This is 'cause of me.”

“What? No, it's not.”

“You skipped out on your exams when you came back here, didn't you?” he asked, and stared at Bucky until he nodded. “And you came back 'cause of me.”

“That was my decision, no one forced me. And to be honest?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I wasn't doing so good. Wrote some terrible essays, fucked up assignments. I really tried, just stayed in my room and studied, but it didn't work. All them people up there, they thought I was stupid 'cause of the way I talk. I couldn't stand it.”

Steve was frowning deeply. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“Why didn't you tell me about your heart disease?”

Steve twisted his mouth. “Point,” he said.
Bucky snorted. “I could really use a drink, you think Becca has any booze in the place?”

When they went back up, Becca looked as good as new with freshly applied make up. She glanced at the two of them and cleared her throat. Steve nudged him with a bony elbow.

Bucky took a breath. “Uh. I'm dropping out of Harvard,” he said.

“Jesus Christ,” Becca said and shook her head. “I think we could all use a drink.”
Ma took to her bed for three days after Bucky broke the news about dropping out of Harvard. It would have been longer if he'd admitted the real reason, but he only told Steve the whole truth; to everybody else, he just said he wasn't for him. It wasn't a lie.

The tension in the house was suffocating. Grandpa was angry, and Dad just shrugged his shoulders in defeat. The kids seemed anxious again, communicating in meaningful looks between the two of them and Bucky decided on the second day of Ma's self-imposed exile that he'd take them out to Coney Island. He bought them all the ice cream they wanted, which he was sure would come back to haunt him, and took them down to the beach. Eugene wasn't much for swimming – he still wore water wings – but Florence was a champion, and they raced out to the closest buoy and back several times. Eugene worked on the beginnings of a sandcastle empire.

“Can we help?” Bucky asked, when they were done.

Eugene nodded solemnly and handed them a collection of buckets. He was very strict about the placements of the turrets, and Florence and Bucky did as they were told.

“Are you staying now?” Florence said eventually. She didn't look at Bucky as she spoke, so it took him a second for respond. He tipped up the bucket he was holding and gave it a thump. The castle came out perfect.

“At home? Yeah, I think so. If I move out, I won't go far.”

“Grandpa said you'd go to Yale instead,” Eugene said.

That was news to Bucky. “Well, he's wrong. I'm staying in New York.”

“What if he makes you?” Florence said. “He makes me go to ballet even though I hate it.”

He shrugged. “I'm nineteen, he can't make me do anything.” He'd never thought of it that way before, but yeah, they couldn't make him. “And you should tell Ma you don't like ballet, she wouldn't make you keep going.”

Florence brightened. “You think?”

Ma returned to the dinner table a day later, ashen and devastated. All she needed was the black mourning veil to finish off the look. They ate their dinner in near silence and Ma went back to her chambers afterwards.

“She will come around,” Dad said, and tipped his head to the side. “I hope.”

They were clearing away plates. His parents had reduced the maid's hours while Bucky was away, so she only came a few days a week now. Bucky scraped food into the trashcan. “Are you mad at me?”

“It's not up to me to be mad, Bucky. It is not my decision.”

“It's not the decision you would have made, though, huh?”
Dad sighed. “That's like asking a fish if it wanted to quit flying. No one would ever have given me the opportunity in the first place.”

“Oh,” Bucky said. “Sorry.”

“Don't apologise,” Dad said. “Perhaps apologise to your mother, though. I think we have some peach pie leftover in the fridge.”

Bucky took the hint and cut a big slice of pie, adding cream and a fork to the plate. He took it upstairs and knocked quietly on the door.

“Ma?”

There was a long pause before she said he could come in. She was sitting on the bed, removing her make up slowly. The lights were dim. He held out the plate in offering.

“I brought you some pie,” he said.

She pursed her lips for a moment, then patted the quilt beside her. He sat down and handed her the plate.

“Thank you,” she said, and settled the plate between them. She took the fork and cut the slice in half, pushing one half towards him.

“I brought it for you, Ma,” he said.

She clicked her tongue. “You're still my growing boy.”

“All right, all right,” he said, and broke off a piece with his fingers to eat. “I'm sorry, Ma.”

Ma sighed and took up the fork, cutting a piece for herself. “You know, you are my baby boy.” He smiled, knowing where she was going to go with this. She took a bite and hummed happily. “And before you say, I know you are the oldest, but you will always be my first baby. When they laid you in my arms – oh, the labour was awful – I knew that you would be the best of us. You and your siblings,” she added as an afterthought. Bucky smiled again. “You would have your father's looks and his compassion and intelligence, and you would have my... ah, my high spirit.”

Bucky laughed.

“You have always made me proud,” she continued firmly. “You were such a sweet-tempered child, a kind brother. You were the first person to feel Becca kick in my belly. You always shared your toys.”

Ma certainly had rose-tinted memories of Bucky's childhood, though he didn't feel the need to dissuade her. Bucky did resist sharing his toys, especially his horse on wheels, but they didn't ever rat on each other, not about the important things, and at four, toys were very important. Ma remembered all the idyllic parts because she'd never seen Bucky make Becca cry over Horsie.

“You always took care of her. And the twins.” Now, that just wasn't true. “And your friends... You always take care of everyone. I want everything for you, Jamie. Everything in the world.”

God, she was always so dramatic. It still made his eyes heat up a little. “I know, Ma.”

“I want for you to be more than us, more than a criminal. For everyone to know how smart you are, like I do.”
Bucky looked down at his lap. “They didn't know that at Harvard,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

He twisted his mouth. “They thought I was dumb, 'cause of the way I sound.”

Ma was silent for a moment; when he looked at her, her eyes flashed with determination. “Well then,” she said. “They can go fuck themselves.”

“Ma!” he said, bursting into laughter. Grandpa swore like it was going out of style, but Ma had always thought it wasn't becoming of a lady to swear a blue streak.

She smiled and ate another piece of the pie. “We will find something for you, Bucky,” she said. “Somewhere you're appreciated.”

He was appreciated right there, he thought.

Ma took a breath. “Now, what is this about you telling Florence she could quit ballet?”

A few days later, Florence presented him with a prospectus from Brooklyn College, annotating the photos of sporting events with encouraging comments about how he could join the swim team or play baseball again. It was too late to enrol for the 1936-1937 year, but he kept it in his drawer for next September.

- 

In the short term, though, he still needed a job, and the club was it unless he could find something better. He tried not to drink with the guys, but it was hard to resist sometimes, and Bucky always had a habit of drinking too much.

Steve kept on working the news stand, and Bucky joined him as much as he could, even though it was awful being up that early. A four am start did nothing for his mood.

“How do you stand this?” he complained, as he cut the strings on piles of newspapers that the delivery man had tossed carelessly onto the sidewalk for them. It was five am, and the sun wouldn't even be up until six thirty. Steve did the majority of his work in twilight.

“Stand it better with company,” Steve said. “Thanks for helping out.”

“No problem,” Bucky said.

“It's not bad, really,” Steve continued. He pushed his hair back from his face and smiled. His sunburn had finally faded into a thorough speckling of freckles all over his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. Steve hated it, but Bucky thought it suited him. “The city's quiet this time of morning, no one around. It's cooler, too. I think it's kinda beautiful, you know?”

“I guess,” Bucky said. Steve saw the beauty in everything. He carried a stack of papers over to the stand and started arranging them.

“You're doing that wrong,” Steve said behind him.

He also began wallpapering Becca's living room with greyish wallpaper full of geometric shapes – it was going to look like the inside of the Empire State Building in there once he was done. He'd been at it for hours, singing along to the radio. It was sweaty, back-breaking work, but he kind of enjoyed that.
“And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we're out together dancing cheek to cheek,” he sang as he sat on the top of the ladder, smoothing paste on the wall.

Someone cleared their throat behind him. He looked over his shoulder and found Arnie standing there in his pressed white shirt, with his briefcase in hand. He went to college every day like that.

“Hey,” Bucky said.

Arnie tipped his head. “Hi.”

“Uh, do you want me to turn the radio off?”

“It's fine, I'm going to change.” He glanced away for a second, then smiled. “You're a good singer.”

“Thanks...” Bucky murmured as Arnie moved off to the bedroom. Bucky hadn't really talked to Arnie since Becca's revelation, though Steve had told him that Arnie knew what had been said. Bucky had reflected on it once he'd left that day – maybe that was why Arnie was always so friendly with Steve, maybe he... liked him. Steve was handsome, even if he didn't believe it, and Arnie had always seemed a little too interested in him. He wondered if Steve knew. He seemed awful relaxed about the whole thing, would he really be so calm about some big queer having a crush on him?

Maybe he would.

“Do you want a Coke?” Arnie said, from the door. He'd changed into sweater, while Bucky had drenched through his undershirt, a vee of sweat from his shoulders to his belly button.

“Uh, sure,” he said.

Arnie disappeared for a moment, then returned with two glass bottles and a bottle opener. Bucky reached down and took one, pressing it to his forehead and neck before taking the offered bottle opener and popping the cap off. He drained half the bottle in one go and wiped the back of his wrist across his mouth. Let's Misbehave was playing on the radio.

“Thanks for doing this,” Arnie said, and took a very small sip from his bottle. “I... tried.”

Bucky looked over at the far wall with its crooked, half torn off wallpaper that he hadn't got to scraping off yet. “Uh huh.”

Arnie chuckled a little. “Yeah.”

Bucky took another long drink, staring down at Arnie. Arnie squirmed.

“I have some work to do,” he said, running a quick hand over his hair. “I'll be in the bedroom.” He cleared his throat.

“Okay,” Bucky said slowly. “I'll be here a while yet. Becca promised me dinner after.”

Arnie bobbed his head. “Yeah, yeah, she said. Don't mind me.”

“Okay, I won't.”

Arnie shook his head slightly. “See you later, Buck.”

“Yep,” Bucky said, and turned back to the wall. Damn, the paste had dried already.
At the end of September, a package arrived for him, addressed in pedantically neat handwriting. He took it up to his room and opened it. Inside was the remainder of his possessions from Harvard: his maroon Harvard sweater with the big goddamn H on it, a few pairs of slacks, his boxing gloves, his alarm clock, and a packet of smokes. Tucked into the corner was a letter written on manilla paper.

Buchanan,

Please find your things all present and accounted for in this box. The proctor of Stoughton Hall was keeping them at the front desk; I convinced him to let me take them and send them on. I found your address in the Harvard address directory. I am now in Eliot House, sharing a suite with three other chaps who I am certain you would absolutely loathe. Marjorie asked me last week if you were returning and I told her that I did not believe that to be the case. She said she was sorry if you had been upset by the incident in the church.

I am doing very well in my classes this year; I hope you are doing equally well in your endeavours.

Best Regards, Chuck (!)

Bucky smiled to himself. God, what an asshole.

-  

He restarted boxing, now that he had his gloves back, joining a local gym and sparring with the bigger, older guys. They were all huge, wide in the shoulders, a lot of heft to them, and Bucky was far, far leaner, and shorter too, often times. They all had mashed in faces and cauliflower ears, while he was labelled a pretty boy. So, they underestimated him, and wound up on the mat. Pete, the owner, said Bucky could do it for money, make a lot of dough for the both of them.

“I don't need the money,” Bucky said, hanging over the ropes.

Pete lit up a smoke and scowled. “Well shit, I do.”

Bucky shrugged. “Sorry.”

It didn't go unnoticed, his fighting abilities, not least by Grandpa. He roused Bucky from his bed early in the morning on a frigid November day – waking early showed dedication and maturity, he said – and took him out to Tiro A Segno, the most exclusive gunclub in New York. On balance, Bucky preferred the bar and restaurant upstairs to the shooting range in the cellar.

He spent most of the ride over there spacing out against the passenger seat window and shuffled after Grandpa into the building. They weren't technically open, but technicalities had never been an issue for Grandpa. In the cellar, he handed Bucky a pump action rifle and a set of ear protectors, and Bucky hit every target dead centre.

When he was done, Grandpa tapped him on the shoulder. Bucky pulled the protectors off. “I've been thinking,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” Bucky said.

“I have some work I would like for you to do, more tailored to your skills than the bar.”
He frowned. “Okay...”

“I think you know I extend loans from time to time. I need someone I trust to... keep repayments on
time. The others, they skim off the top and blame the shortfall on the borrower.”

“Oh...”

“I only need this occasionally, you will not have to do it everyday. If you are firm on not going to
Harvard, you can help me very much with this.”

Bucky still had the rifle in his hands – he unloaded it and put it down.

“If you would rather not, you are free to work somewhere else.”

“No, no, um...” He nodded. “Yeah, I can do that, I guess.”

Grandpa clapped him on the shoulder. “Good! At least with you I am sure you can count.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can do that too...”

It was a hard winter. The summer's heatwave had left behind some warmth, but by mid November it
was chilly most days, and Steve and Sarah's apartment got the worst of it. Bucky bought heavy black
fabric and nailed it over the windows, while Steve kept a coal fire going. The cold had hit Sarah hard
– Bucky could here her breathing from the door of her room. Arnie came over several times a week
and helped make sure Sarah was comfortable. There wasn't much that could be done, just get her to
eat as much protein as she could and keep her warm.

“Is this bothering you?” he asked as he hammered another nail in.

Sarah took a deep, rattling breath. “Ah, no, it's fine.”

Bucky nodded and kept working. “I'm sorry it's gonna be so dark, I couldn't figure out a better way.”

“It's okay, Bucky. Maybe it'll get Steve to rest more.”

Bucky laughed. “I don't think anything will get him to do that.”

He heard her wheezing laughter from the bed and smiled. When he was done, he picked up the chair
he'd been standing on and quietly took it back out to the kitchen. Steve was out there, curled over on
the other chair, Arnie crouched next to him, one hand on his chest and the other on his back.

“Steve?” Bucky said, frowning. Arnie looked... really comfortable there.

Steve lifted his hand in a quick wave.

“Do you need your cigarettes?”

Arnie answered for him. “It's not his asthma, it's just some heart palpitations, he'll be fine.”

Bucky put the chair down and walked over. Arnie was still touching Steve, rubbing his hand in
circles on Steve's back. Bucky had never touched Steve like that. Steve took a deep breath and
tipped his head back, his Adam's apple standing out prominently.

“I'm okay,” he said. “You done with the bedroom?”
“Yeah, I'm done... I'll make Sarah her chicken.”

Steve smiled, and Arnie finally stopped touching him. “Thanks, Buck.”

- 

Christmas came and went, Becca was a year older and a year uglier (she wasn’t, but he said it anyway). Bucky did his first job for Grandpa, taking along a couple of thugs with him. He looked the part with newly slicked back hair. The guy ran a jewellery store that was a front for gun smuggling, and he'd borrowed a grand from Grandpa last year; his last two repayments were late. The guy invited them into the back and as soon as they got past the doors, he slammed Bucky's head into the wall and took off. Bucky chased him down in the alleyway and dragged him back inside. He got the money.

He told Steve about his new responsibilities in vague terms, and Steve just nodded and didn't pass comment. He looked exhausted.

Sarah's birthday was in February. Bucky always stopped himself thinking that it was her last, because she’d come back from the brink before. Ma said she would bake a cake and they'd go over and make it a good one.

Steve had a cough; a pang shook Bucky's stomach at the sound of it, so similar to Sarah's laboured breathing but Arnie deemed it to a regular cough and cold. Bucky had had a cold in January, and Steve had caught it. He felt like an ass for that.

Arnie did all of Steve and Sarah's doctoring now, despite the fact that he wasn't even a med student yet. If a real doctor caught wind of Sarah's TB, she'd be hauled back to the sanatorium.

Sarah was in okay shape on her birthday. Bucky pulled some of the nails out of the bedroom window frame to give her a little light while she had her sliver of cake. Ma sat with her and they talked while Bucky stayed in the kitchen as Steve furiously scrubbed the stove, turning his face into the crook of his arm every time a coughing fit came over him. Bucky let him be for ten minutes before getting up and standing behind him. He put his hands on Steve's shoulders.

“This is goddamn painful to watch, sit down.”

Steve shook his head. “I spilt chip beef all over the burners last night, it burnt in, I gotta get it off.”

“All right, well, I'll clean it.”

“Bucky--”

Bucky turned him around and frowned down at him. “Steve, I ain't so much of a rich kid that I can't clean a fuckin' stove.”

Steve started coughing before he could reply, but he sat down in a chair at Bucky's urging.

He wasn't kidding that it was burnt in, Bucky really had to put his back into it to get it all shiny. Steve ate some cake and stared off into the distance, only giving two or three word replies to Bucky's attempts at conversation. When Ma came back out of the bedroom, she looked at Steve and sighed.

“Steve, get your coat, I'm taking you to the drug store, see what the pharmacist can do about that cough.”

“Huh?” Steve cleared his throat. “Uh, that's okay, Mrs Barnes.”
Ma clicked her tongue and Bucky made a face at Steve. They both knew Steve had already lost this one. Steve wrapped himself up and followed Ma out as Bucky kept on cleaning.

“Bucky?” Sarah called weakly, once the door was firmly closed.

Bucky dropped the rag and hurried in. “Sarah? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, then laughed a little. “Well. Will you sit with me for a minute?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” he said, and went back to the kitchen to grab a chair. He brought it in and sat down beside her bed.

“Thank you for everything, dear,” she said.

He shook his head. “Ma baked the cake.”

She smiled gently. “That’s not what I meant.” She reached out and took his hand, and he lay his other hand on top. “You’ve always looked after Steve.”

“Ain’t like it's a chore. He does the same for me.”

“I know,” she said. “When I’m gone--”

“Sarah, you’re not gonna--”

She cut him off with a squeeze of her hand. “We both know that I am.”

“You recovered last time,” he argued, and his voice was beginning to sound thick. He lifted one hand and wiped it across his eyes, then replaced it on top of hers.

“This isn’t like last time. Bucky,” she added, when he opened his mouth. “Steven is stubborn like me and his father, you’re the only person he’ll ever allow to help him, and maybe not even then. Please look after him. His heart...”

For a moment, Bucky thought she meant in a romantic sense, but then he realised. “You know about that?”

She turned her head and coughed into a handkerchief, then turned back. “Of course, I’m his mother. He won’t let it stop him from doing anything, but one day...”

Bucky was crying, there was no two ways about it. Sarah let go of his hand and wiped her fingers across his face, then cupped his cheek. “Oh Bucky, he is so lucky to have you.”

He shook his head wordlessly. No, he was the lucky one.

The front door creaked open. Bucky sat back quickly and scrubbed at his face.

“Buck?” Steve called.

“In--” His voice didn't come out quite right; he cleared his throat and tried again. “In here.”

Steve came to the door and squinted at them. His eyesight wasn't so great, and it was half dark in the room, so Bucky knew he couldn’t quite make out his red face.

“What's going on?” Steve asked.
Bucky grinned as wide as he could. “Nothin', just talking about that awful haircut you got.” Sarah tutted a little.

The excuse didn't fly at all, but Steve let it go with just a scowl.

-  

When the telephone rang in the early hours of the morning on March 5th, Bucky knew what was coming. He threw the covers back and ran downstairs, grabbing the telephone on its fourth ring.

“Hello?” he said breathlessly. “Steve?”

There was silence on the other end, save for some laboured breathing. Finally: “She's gone.”

Bucky's eyes started to well up. He pressed the heel of his hand against his cheek. “I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay,” Steve said flatly. “I have to... do something. Um. I have to call the funeral guy. And the priest.”

“Steve...”

“It's okay,” he repeated. “I have it all written down. They said I could call any time.”

He sounded so... far away from Bucky. “I'll be there soon,” he said.

“All right,” Steve said, without argument. “I have to call them now.”

“Okay. I'll... I'll see you soon.”

Steve breathed out. “Thanks.”

Bucky went back up the stairs two at a time, pausing at the top to steady himself. He wasn't able to stop himself from crying and wiped his face dry with his pyjama sleeve.

“Bucky?” Florence said softly, peering around her door as he passed it. “What's wrong?”

He shook his head. “It's okay, it's early, go back to bed.”

“Is it Steve's ma?”

“Yeah, yeah, it is. Go back to bed, okay?”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. He went into his bedroom and changed as quick as he could. He was buttoning up his shirt when there was a knock at the door. A moment later it creaked open, and Ma stepped in, wearing a dress, her hair tucked into a hat.

“Florence told me about Sarah.”

He nodded. “I'm gonna go over there.”

“I'll come with you, if you want.”

He sniffed. “Yeah, if that's okay.”

Ma came in and gave him a hug.

They drove over in silence and got out of the car onto a silent road. It was just past three am, and
there wasn't a soul around. The door to Steve's place was open when they got to his floor, the cold wind whistling through the kitchen. Anxiety pooled in Bucky's stomach as they walked towards the bedroom. From the door, he could see the outline of Sarah's body in the bed, and he almost stopped in his tracks; he'd never seen a dead body before. Ma lay a hand on his back and guided him in.

Steve was kneeling on the floor, praying quietly. Ma gestured to Bucky with a tip of her head and they knelt down beside him.

“Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,” Ma said. Bucky didn't know the words, but he lowered his head and put his hands together. “And let perpetual light shine upon them. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”

“Amen,” Bucky said.

“Amen,” Steve whispered.

- 

The priest and the funeral director came not long after, and the rites were performed before Sarah was taken to the funeral home. Steve came home with Bucky and Ma and ate the breakfast she laid out for him at five am, and slept a little while in Bucky's bed. The funeral director came to the house with paperwork to fill out and Steve filled in every last part.

He wouldn't stay, no matter how much Bucky tried to talk him into it, and Bucky tried to insist he'd stay there instead, but Steve refused that too. He was there all alone, sleeping in the room next to where his mother died, and Bucky couldn't sleep at all.

He sat in the living room, smoking and listening to the radio past midnight. Every time he closed his eyes, he just thought about the director loading Sarah in his car, he thought about Steve's blank, distant stare and the way he ate his cereal like it wasn't even there. He hadn't cried at all, all day. Bucky had cried four separate times, and now he was exhausted but he couldn't sleep.

“Cucciolo?” Ma called, and he looked up to find both his parents at the door.

He stubbed out the cigarette. “I'm okay.”

His parents exchanged a look, then came in. They sat down on either side of him and Ma would put her arm around him and kissed the top of his head.

“When's the funeral gonna be?” he asked. He hadn't paid any attention to that stuff, he didn't want to hear it. He'd never been to a funeral before.

“In a few days, probably,” Ma said. “There'll be time for viewing first. When my mother passed, we kept her body in our home for visitors. It is better this way.”

Bucky couldn't imagine it, living with a dead body in the house. He wouldn't be able to stand it.

“He hasn't cried at all,” he said, and felt his eyes well up again. God, he was getting so much mileage out of this and Steve was the one holding it all together.

“He probably feels shock. Numb,” Ma said. Dad nodded. “When Mamma died, I did not cry for a week, it took that long for me to realise that she wasn't coming back.”

Dad took a breath. “I never cried for my parents,” he said, “I just felt terrible sadness for a long time.”
Bucky wiped at his face. “What made it go away?”

“You mother and you children,” he said, and patted Bucky’s knee.

Ma smiled. “It is a kindness, though, that she passed first. She was terribly afraid of outliving Steve.”

“It is not right, to survive your children,” Dad agreed. He was thinking of Bucky's mysterious asthmatic uncle, Bucky figured.

He looked down at his lap for a moment, twisting his fingers together, before lifting his head again. “God, it's my birthday in a few days.” Would the funeral be then, on Bucky's twentieth birthday? He didn't think he could bear that. “I don't, I don't want anything this year, all right?”

“All right,” Ma agreed, and kissed the top of his head again. “Come on, I'll give you something to make you sleep, like when you were little.”

Bucky let himself be jostled between the two of them back upstairs without argument. It didn't seem like such an imposition tonight.

The funeral went as well as could be expected. It was held on the 9th, maybe for Bucky's benefit, but he didn't ask. A lot of people came: Eva and Dot and faces Bucky recognised from the old tenement, Billy in a shabby suit, Sister Mary Catherine and a whole gaggle of nuns, Ethel, and all sorts of other people Bucky didn't know. Ethel held Steve's hand through the whole service, while Bucky felt itchy and irritable about it. When Steve gave his eulogy, he delivered it in a flat voice, only stumbling a couple of times; Bucky was ready to go up there and take over, but he made it through. The actual burial part, Steve wanted to do alone. Ma told Bucky to let him be.

He wouldn't come back home with Bucky, no matter how hard Bucky tried to convince him. His parents and the kids were waiting downstairs in the car and when he came back down alone, Ma reached back and squeezed his hand.

Steve still came by the next day to give Bucky a present, though.

Bucky did more jobs for Grandpa. Some people folded like a deck of cards, while others turned it into a brawl. Bucky had to pull his gun on more than one occasion, though he'd never taken a shot. He was good at it and they were all bad guys anyhow, he didn't feel bad about cracking some of them over the head with the nearest available object. He always got the cash.

Steve started to come back to himself by late April. He was quieter and didn't react to Bucky's dumb jokes quite as fast, but he wasn't so distant and he went out with Bucky, Becca, and Arnie a few days out of the week. Bucky and him even went on a double date with Ethel and some girl Bucky had met at the drug store. Ethel talked almost exclusively about her dog; Bucky liked dogs, but he didn't really think there was enough there to sustain a three hour long trip to Coney Island. Nevertheless, Ethel found a way.

Ethel wanted to go home by six, and Steve left with her to see her back. Bucky stayed out most of the night with drug store girl and fucked her in an alleyway.

With Sarah gone, Steve couldn't afford the rent – he'd drained years of savings to stay afloat as long as he had – and had to move out. Bucky didn't think that was such a bad thing, Sarah dying in the bedroom and all, but he wished Steve would have accepted his offer of one of the rooms at the
house; Ma and Dad were fine with the idea, but Steve still turned it down with earnest thanks.

Steve had found a family in Flatbush who had a room for rent in their little apartment; the Burnsides, Edith, Frank, and little seven year old Willy. They had three rooms, kitchen, bedroom, and living room. Steve would have a cot in the living room. Bucky wasn't thrilled about the whole thing, but fighting Steve was always a loser's game.

He helped Steve clean up the old place, take down the last of the black fabric and pull out the nails, then pack up his things and take them out to Bucky's car. Steve only had enough things to fill one box, including a piece of paper that floated to the floor when Bucky picked up his sketchbook. He bent down and retrieved it as Steve packed up the silverware.

“Hey, Steve, what's this?” he asked as he read the words, Auburndale Art School. Bucky's heart clenched; this was an acceptance letter. “You got into art school?”

“Oh... Yeah,” Steve said, and brought over a bunch of cutlery wrapped in a tea towel to drop in the box. “Mam made me apply in November. I forgot all about it until I got the letter in March, then there was just... too much going on.”

“So, are you gonna be... going away then?” Bucky thought the Burnsides was going to be for the long term.

Steve looked at him funny. “Takin' the trolley to Queens everyday, Buck. Auburndale's in Flushing.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, then grinned. “Oh right, course it is. That's great! I mean the school, that's great, they're lucky to have you.”

Steve still looked a little funny, but he smiled and shook his head. “Brooklyn College would be lucky to have you too.”

“Nah,” Bucky said, and shrugged. “I'm one of them 'topped out in high school' fellas.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “You're one of them 'full of shit' fellas.”

“Ah well, I think my brain atrophied after Harvard. I'll stick to using my brawn.”

“Atrophied,” Steve repeated.

“Yeah, you know, like wasted away from lack of use.”

Steve just shook his head.

“You're gonna go, right?” Bucky asked.

Steve turned away and started busying himself with the plates. “I dunno. Dunno if I can afford it with all my savings gone. Tuition's $200 a year.”

“Shit, I'll pay for that, Steve, you've gotta go.”

Steve looked over his shoulder. “You ain't paying for me. I'll see what happens.”

Bucky glared back but let it go for the time being. They finished up and closed the door on the place for the last time. Bucky didn't know if Steve had ever cried over Sarah's death, he certainly hadn't in front of Bucky, but he looked close to crying as they pulled away from the curb. Bucky rested his hand on the back of Steve's neck as they drove away.
The Burnsides were fine; the kid was kind of a brat, he wouldn't leave Steve alone for five minutes, but it could have been worse. It could have been better too, but hey, far be it from Bucky to tell Steve that he didn't need to don his hair shirt at every available opportunity.

They lay low on his birthday, just wandered around Prospect Park Zoo like when they were kids. Steve was harried and stressed from living with an energetic seven year old who could and did name all the US presidents, in order, every morning. Bucky gave him a card with two one hundred dollar bills in it.

“IT's from all of us,” Bucky said, “Me and Ma, Dad and Grandpa, Arnie, Becca, and the kids. So don't expect any presents, all right?” It wasn't, really, it was Bucky's money, but they all thought it was a good idea.

Steve screwed up his face for a moment before sighing. “All right.”

This one job didn't go so good. The guy, Murphy, ran a liquor store on the Lower East Side, and he'd borrowed five big ones from Grandpa. He hadn't paid up in four months.

Bucky and two of Grandpa's boys came into the store while the guy was ringing up a customer – as soon as he locked eyes on them, he pulled a gun from under the counter and shot in their direction. Bucky dropped to the ground behind a rack of booze and peered out.

“Just pay us the money you owe!” he yelled and another shot came back in reply. The customer had his hands up, terrified. “Get outta here!” Bucky shouted to him, as Murphy backed out of the store. The customer grabbed his unpaid for bottle of whiskey and ran.

Bucky took off after Murphy, gun out and pointed at the ground. The boys followed and they chased Murphy out into the alleyway. Murphy knew the area much better than they did, and took lots of twists and turns, leading back out onto the packed streets. He barreled past everyone, crashing into a fruit cart and sending apples rolling off the sidewalk and into the road, cars leaning on their horns angrily. The fruit seller yelled something in what sounded like Yiddish.

“Sorry!” Bucky shouted as he wound his way through the chaos.

Eventually, Murphy fucked up, leading them into a dead end. He swung around and faced them, back to the brick wall, and started shooting. Bucky got down behind a trash can, completely unsure of what to do next. The boys had fallen behind or got lost somewhere – they weren't in the best of shape, not like he was. A bullet binged off the side of the trash can and his heart crawled up into his throat. He gripped his gun harder and returned fire; no bullets came back at him. Had he...

He stood up, trying to ignore his shaking knees and brought his gun up. Murphy was still holding his gun, pulling on the trigger uselessly; either it was out of bullets or it had jammed. He threw the gun at Bucky, distracting him for a second long enough for Murphy to come barreling at him. Bucky took a shot without thinking. The bullet just missed, catching Murphy's earlobe, and he cried out in pain. Bucky took the opportunity to punch him in the face and he went down hard. Blood was pounding hard in Bucky's ears when he put his foot on Murphy's chest.

“Stay down,” he said, though his voice sounded muffled to his own ears.

After that, Murphy paid up; overpaid, even. Bucky lit a cigarette with shaking hands and waited outside for the boys to come back with the money. He wasn't supposed to do that, them skimming
and all, but he couldn't face going back inside. They came back out with a bag of cash and threw it in the back seat of the car.

“Hey, boss,” one of guys, Lloyd, said. “First time, huh?”

Bucky nodded.

Lloyd smiled. “Yeah, it's rough at first. Here, you want somethin' to calm you down?”

He pulled out a tin of something from his pocket, but Bucky shook his head. “I don't do that stuff,” he said.

Lloyd raised his eyebrows, but replaced the tin in his pocket. “All right. You wanna go back to the club and have a drink?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said. Christ, he'd almost shot that guy in the head. He needed more than just a drink. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

Grandpa was pleased as punch at Bucky's success, but Bucky was three drinks deep before his hands stopped shaking.

Chapter End Notes

~*foreshadowing*~
Steve fit right in at Auburndale. Bucky swung round and picked him up at the end of his first week, and watched Steve standing on the front steps, clutching a portfolio case to his chest while he talked to a girl in a floral dress. She was a few inches taller than him in her heels, probably an inch taller out of them, and her hair was styled in a very symmetrical middle parting, curls on either side. She had a wide, painted red mouth, and arched eyebrows. Steve looked faintly terrified to be speaking to her.

Not bad, Steve. Not bad.

Bucky put his feet up on the dashboard and lit a smoke to watch. Steve must have felt it, because after a few more minutes, he turned and looked at him. Bucky waved back. Steve bid the girl goodbye and hurried to the car. Bucky flicked the cigarette away and put his feet down.

“Who’s the dish?” he asked as he started the car.

Steve clicked his tongue. “Her name's Gail, she's in my watercolour class.”

“You got girls in there, too?” Bucky whistled. “What happened to Ethel?”

“Nothing happened to her,” Steve said. “Why would anything have happened to her?”

“Well, ain’t she...?” Bucky waved back in the direction of Auburndale as they headed towards Brooklyn.

“I was just talkin’ to her,” Steve said, slumping down in his seat a little. “Can't seduce girls with a waggle of my eyebrows like you, y’know.”

Bucky turned and wagged his eyebrows at him. Steve laughed. “Old Ethel put out yet, then?”

“Bucky!” Steve screwed his face up like an old woman. “She ain't like that!”

“What's she like?” Bucky asked, then paused a moment. “She like Becca?”

Steve pressed his lips together. “No. I don't think so, anyhow.”

“Well... you kinda attract them, you know.”

“Just two,” Steve said.

Bucky looked sidelong at him. “Yeah...” he murmured, then took a turn, merging with the traffic. He was careful now, driving, always took his time with it.

Steve watched the houses pass by for a minute. “Ethel just likes dogs.”

Bucky laughed. “She does like dogs, that's for sure.”
“She says I'm like a Labrador. Sweet-natured and stubborn.”

Bucky looked over at him as he grinned. Yeah, he could see that. “And blond,” he added. “What about me, what am I?”

“A miniature poodle. Athletic and highly strung.”

“Highly strung!” Bucky said. “Jeez, she doesn't like me much, huh?”

Steve tipped his head to one side. “Not so much.”

- The Sunday dinners with Becca and Arnie continued. Bucky watched them from across the table as he ate – they seemed... kind of happy. If he didn't already know, he wouldn't have suspected that something was wrong with the picture. Becca said that Arnie was her best friend, and he guessed that was the truth. They seemed comfortable with each other in a way that Bucky had never been with any of his girlfriends, even the ones he liked.

Becca had started to change though, just a little. Sometimes she wore wide, billowy slacks that Ma just couldn't stand, sometimes she wore them with a blazer which, coupled with her small chest, made her look almost masculine. Still, she wore dresses a lot too, and looked pretty as a picture. She said he couldn't criticise any style choice of hers while he continued to grease his hair back like James Cagney.

She had a new friend, too, a girl with silky blonde hair who he met going up to her place a few times. The girl was always on her way out, and never spared Bucky a second glance.

“Who's that?” Bucky asked, when he got to the door.

“Lily,” Becca said, and handed him a trowel – today he was re-tiling the kitchen. “Nobody you need to worry about.”

- Steve started another class in late October, an eight week 'life drawing' class. Bucky didn't catch on at first what that was, but when they climbed out onto the roof of the Burnsides's building so that Steve could draw the rooftops covered in newly fallen snow, it suddenly occurred to him. Steve was sitting cross-legged on the edge of the roof, which Bucky didn't like so much; he stayed a bit further back.

“So, this life drawing thing...” he started, and saw a smile grow on Steve's down turned face. He grinned in response. “It's nudie drawing, isn't it?”

“The models are nude, yeah,” Steve said.

“Jeez,” Bucky said. “How do you cope with that, sittin' and looking at a pretty girl with her tits out? Must give you more palpitations than normal.”

Steve lay his charcoal down and looked at him. “They ain't all movie star looking. And they ain't all women.”

“You draw guys too?”

“Uh huh, it's easier than the women, most of the time. At least I have some familiarity.”
“Jeez,” Bucky repeated. He didn't know how he felt about that, thinking about Steve sitting there, lovingly drawing some pervert's dick and balls. What kind of person would even volunteer for a thing like that? “Can I see?”

Steve pressed his lips together.

“I ain't gonna whack off to them on a rooftop!” Bucky insisted.

“All right, all right,” Steve muttered, and flipped back a few pages. “Don't laugh.”

Bucky wasn't laughing. The drawings looked like something he'd see in a gallery, something real detailed and delicate – Steve didn't shy away from all the unattractive parts: folds and wrinkles and hair and fat, but the models still looked good. Dignified. “Jeez,” he murmured, and cleared his throat. “You'll be drawing them eight pagers next.”

Steve laughed and flipped back to the snowy rooftop scene. “I wish. Those actually make money.”

In January, Ethel called it quits with Steve. She wanted to move to farmland out in Suffolk County and breed dogs; Steve didn't. They'd never got past a kiss on the cheek, Steve admitted eventually.

Bucky kept on working for Grandpa; people knew his face now, and generally they paid up when he strolled in. Arnie had started at Columbia the previous September, and was doing very well, apparently. Ma was quite taken by the idea of a doctor in the family. Florence had given up ballet and taken up swimming competitively; she was much happier with that. Eugene was as Catholic as ever, and spewed goldfish facts at every turn.

Steve had a final project he was already working on: a big mural he was going to paint all by himself on the side of a nearby factory. The owner was willing because he figured a newspaper might do a piece on it, and the girls who worked inside sewing rich ladies' underwear thought it was a swell idea to brighten the place up. He had reams and reams of sketches that he kept in a box in his little corner of the Burnside's living room.

Bucky hated going round there, not least because Willy hung on every word they said, no matter how many times he shooed the kid away. Mrs Burnside didn't do much to discourage it. They couldn't get a moment's privacy in that place.

“He's all right,” Steve murmured, when the kid finally ambled away at the promise of cookies from his ma. “I just... spend a lot of time at the library. Hey, you think tomorrow you can come help me measure up for the mural?”

“Sure, should I bring a ladder?”

Steve nodded. “Thanks. Uh, Gail's gonna help too,” he added, voice getting quieter, but Bucky's hearing was top notch.

“Oh, is she now?”

“Uh huh,” Steve mumbled, and started fussing with his stack of papers. “Don't-- she just wanted to do something nice for me.”

He grinned. “I didn't say anything.”

They set out bright and early the next day, a Sunday when the factory girls had a day of rest. The
two of them were early, and Gail arrived at exactly ten am, in a pair of cotton overalls, looking like Little Annie Rooney. She was even prettier up close.

“Gail, this is Bucky,” Steve mumbled, and turned back to the wall.

Bucky held out his hand and raised his chin a little, all class. “Good morning, Miss...”

She laughed and shook his hand. “Richards, my fine gentleman.”

He already liked her a hundred times more than Ethel. “Mr Barnes, here to serve. It sure is nice of you to come out here and help Steve out like this.”

“Well, I'm a very nice lady,” she replied, with a sparkle in her eye. Steve muttered something about getting started, and Bucky threw her his most rakish grin before hefting the ladder.

They spent all morning and some of the afternoon at it, measuring up while Steve roughed out sketches onto the wall. Bucky was fairly certain that some asshole would wash the sketches away before Steve had a chance to paint it, but that didn't seem to bother him. When they were done, Gail invited them back to her place for lunch, and Bucky said yes for the both of them because anything else would have been impolite.

Gail lived in a small Dutch Colonial in Queens that backed onto the old Corona Ash Dumps, where work was going on to build the World's Fair.

“They're out there day and night,” she said as she let them in. “Dad says it's gonna bring up the neighbourhood.”

“Dunno if people are going to want to live around here with all that noise, though,” Bucky said.

Steve gave him a smack on the chest for that, but Gail laughed and agreed. The house was cluttered and homey; she lived with her widowed father and little sister, along with her older brother, sister in law, and their three kids, one of whom had colic something awful and never stopped crying.

“Dad lets me have the attic for my painting,” she said once she fixed them some corned beef sandwiches. “You wanna see?”

“We definitely do,” Bucky said, and leaned over to Steve when she turned away. “Etchings, Steve.”

Steve smacked him again.

There weren't any etchings up there, but there were a lot of easels with painting and sparsely drawn sketches, black line work and white space.

“What do you think of my work, Mr Barnes?” she asked.

“I think it looks real nice, not that I know much about all this stuff.”

“Oh, thanks a lot,” Gail said. Steve rolled his eyes.

“I didn't mean it like that,” he said, and flicked through a stack of papers leant up on a easel. One picture stood out – the back of a guy, all bones and hard edges, a back brace around his torso and left shoulder. “Is this...” He pulled away the other pictures and looked at Steve. “This is you. Right?”

“Uh...” Two pink spots began to grow on Steve's cheeks.

“Yeah, he sat for me,” Gail said blithely.
“Uh huh. Life drawing?”

“Nah, I just... I just pulled up my shirt,” Steve muttered.

Bucky looked back at him, then at Gail. She looked amused. “Yeah, I've done that too. You only wear the brace at night, though.”

“Well, I... told Gail about the scoliosis...”

“I asked him to wear it, I thought it would be an interesting thing to draw,” Gail said with a shrug. She seemed unrepentant.

“Well, Steve sure is interesting,” Bucky said, eyeing him. Steve looked embarrassed, but maybe a little bit pleased too. “Full of surprises.”

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Steve did great on the mural, got an A and everything. He started spending more time with Gail in the summer, they liked to watch all the buildings going up for the World's Fair, allegedly. Bucky wasn't so sure, but Steve had drawn some pictures of it. He'd also drawn a fair few of Gail.

The months kept rolling by. Bucky's life was pretty dull – work, home, date, Steve, smoke in Becca's apartment and listen to the radio, help the kids with their schoolwork and take them out when they got too annoying for Ma to bear. The guys at the club, they thought Bucky must be living the dream, all that money and no responsibilities; he shrugged it off.

Steve didn't go back to Auburndale in the fall – it took too much time away from working and he wouldn't hear of Bucky paying for another year. As always, he could 'get by on his own'. It drove Bucky crazy, all that wasted potential. Steve kept on working at the news stand and did some illustrating on the side.

In the new year, Steve finally screwed up the courage to ask Gail out on a date, and she said yes. Steve came right over to the house after and demanded that Bucky scrounge up a date by the weekend and go with them.

“Do you really need me there?” Bucky said.

“Yes,” Steve said. He was smoking one of his cigarettes, having wound himself up into an attack over this Gail situation. Yeah, it was a situation, all right. “You've gotta stop me from lookin' like too much of a prudish asshole.”

Bucky laughed and lay down on his bed. “Don't think prudes use that many swears.”

“Shit hellfire, Bucky, what am I gonna wear?”

Steve bought a new shirt, just for the occasion. They got a table at a new place that had opened up, Brennan and Carr; the place was pricier than Steve's blue plate special budget, but he'd saved up all his little pennies, he said, to afford it. Bucky figured it would make Steve look like a jackass if he fronted up for the whole bill.

Steve didn't need Bucky there, not really. It got off to a rough start, but nothing really out of the ordinary, and Steve had far more to say to Gail than Bucky did to Pam, a girl that had lived a few doors down from him for years. They'd fooled around a bit in the past, not much to base a conversation on. Still, she'd wanted to try the restaurant, so she'd agreed. Steve and Gail chattered on as the night progressed, while Bucky and Pam traded uncomfortable looks in awkward silence.
The night was a resounding success for Steve – the next day he confided in Bucky that they'd shared a kiss, right on the mouth. Bucky resisted the urge to smile indulgently.

In February, Ma and Dad let Davis go. Ma insisted that they just didn’t really need a butler any more, with Becca gone and Bucky out of the house so much, but Bucky could see the writing on the wall. The maid came on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The gardener only came once a month now; the garden looked yellowed and overgrown.

On April 30th, the New York World’s Fair opened; over two hundred thousand people went, including Bucky, Steve, Gail, and the whole family, Arnie and all. Steve had planned out everything he wanted to see. The kids wanted to go to the Amusement Area, Arnie split off to the Jewish Palestine Pavilion, and Becca and Gail said they were going to go grab some food, but Steve zeroed in on the RCA demonstration of their new televisions. They were tiny little things, transparent with all these wires and cogs on the inside.

“Jeez,” Bucky said, as Steve peered at it. “Why’d anyone want to watch a thing like that when they could see movies on a big screen?”

Steve clicked his tongue. “cause it could be right there in your living room. I bet one day the screens are gonna be as big as the movie theatre.”

Bucky snorted and shook his head, then tapped Steve on the arm. “Hey, if you go stand over there, you can see yourself on one of the screens.”

Steve's head shot up like a dog that'd caught a scent, and ambled over to the camera rig. “Oh wow,” Steve said, gawping at himself on the screen. He sounded the happiest Bucky had heard him in two years.

“Lemme get in on that,” Bucky said, and jostled Steve to side a little. He had to admit, it was something to see yourself on screen. He threw his arm around Steve. “Oh yeah, I should get us one of those Hollywood agents; we could be the next Laurel and Hardy.”

Becca and Gail found their way back to Bucky and Steve ten minutes later, carrying paper-wrapped hotdogs.

“I got one for you,” Gail said to Steve, holding it out. “Extra mustard the way you like it.”

“Thanks,” he said, ducking his head a little.

“I didn't get you anything,” Becca said, when Bucky looked at her. “You're big enough as it is.”

“I wanted to get you a hotdog too, but I didn't have enough money,” Gail said, colour rising to her cheeks.

“That's okay,” he said. “Not like you're my sister or anything. It's called muscle, Becca.”

She sniffed. “It's still ridiculous.”

“The RCA exhibit is great, do you want to go see?” Steve asked Gail, and she agreed. They started to head back in the direction him and Bucky had just left.

“I thought we were going to look at the cars,” Bucky called after them, to which Steve responded, 'later'. He sighed.

“You can go and see them on your own, you know,” Becca said. “You don't have to stick to Steve’s
side like glue all the time.”

She had a smug expression on her face when he looked at her. He frowned. “I won't be able to find him again in this crowd.”

“Uh huh,” she said, and gestured to the exhibit. “Come on, then.”

He got to see his cars eventually, and got his hotdog before they all headed to the Perisphere, a big, perfectly round building with a big old exhibit inside that everyone was dying to see: Democracy, a diorama of the perfect future utopia. The narrator, a CBS radio guy, introduced the scene as, 'a brave new world built by united hands and hearts. Here brain and brawn, faith and courage, are linked in high endeavour as men march on toward unity and peace!'

Bucky laughed a little to himself. Wasn't anything men wanted less than unity and peace, the club made that clear as day.

“Be nice, though,” Steve said, “if we could figure it.”

“Yeah, maybe in a thousand years' time,” Bucky replied.

They spent all day at the fair, doing all sorts of things; everything that Steve wanted, mostly, even after the heavens opened and everyone got a soaking. He was like a kid in a candy store, it was nice, and they stayed into the evening to hear Einstein give a speech about science and how it had to be mean more than superficial toys, or at least that's what Bucky figured he meant. It was really something, to see the guy up on the stage, Bucky would have gone for that alone.

The fair was all Steve talked about for weeks afterwards – other people, they had complaints about the cost or the exhibits that weren't done or not being allowed to get near the President when he made his grand opening speech, but Steve had loved it without reservation.

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In May, Becca graduated summa cum laude to much fanfare, and if things had gone as planned, Bucky would have been graduating Harvard too, but he wasn't, so Ma and Grandpa poured all their efforts in Becca's celebration. He didn't think Grandpa would be quite as interested in the ceremony if there was a better one on offer. He wondered if Becca thought the same, but kept his mouth shut. She was going to do a Masters in Mathematics at Vassar in the fall, and was planning to get a job too. He thought she was aiming kind of low; with her grades she could have pushed for admission at one of the big universities, and he said as much.

“Well,” she said, and flicked ash from her cigarette into the ash tray Bucky had brought out to the back porch. All the celebrating was getting a little bit suffocating. “I like it at women's colleges.”

“Yeah, but don't you want to show them what you're made of?”

“Oh, I'll do that, all right, don't worry, but I have... preferences.”

She held his gaze until it sunk in and he looked away. He took a draw of his own cigarette. “Right. How's Lily?”

“Lily's fine,” Becca said with a laugh in her voice. Bucky felt like a real dumbo.

-  

At the end of June, Grandpa gave him another job to do. It was an easy one, he said, Bucky didn't
need the boys with him for it. He had an address in the Bronx, and waited until six in the evening to head over. It was a tenement – he’d never had a borrower live in a tenement before, they normally lived beyond their means in houses bought with someone else’s money.

He made his way up the two flights of stairs that looked so much like Steve's old place. He found the door of the borrower, one Roy Henning, and gave the wood three short, sharp raps with his knuckles. After a minute, the door opened slowly and a sallow-skinned, balding man looked back at him.

“Mr Henning?”

The man nodded slowly. “Yes, I am--” He cleared his throat. “That's me.”

“You've defaulted on your loan, Mr Henning,” Bucky said.

Henning's eyes went round. “I-- I--”

“You're late a month,” Bucky continued. “I'm gonna need payment now or I'll be taking something as collateral.”

“I don't... I don't have anything,” Henning said, swallowing down hard.

“Well, you should have thought about that before you borrowed a hundred dollars.”

“I know,” he said, bowing his head a little. “I know, I just didn't--”

“Roy?” a weak voice called behind them. “Who's at the door?”

Henning turned and looked around, letting the door swing open wide enough for Bucky to see a woman standing a few feet away. She had on a tatty robe, her skin even more sallow than Henning's, dark bags under her eyes, a gaunt face, and stringy blonde hair. For a moment, it felt like the world had tilted on its side and Sarah was standing there in front of him, a ghost of the past. He squeezed his eyes shut and pinched at his nose as Henning told her go and lie down again.

Henning turned back to him. “I can get-- I can get you something by tomorrow, I know I can, just please--”

Bucky shook his head, shook away the after image of Sarah at her most ill, that afternoon in her bedroom, holding his hand, telling him she knew she was going to die. “I, I'm sorry, uh, I'm, I'm sorry I bothered you,” he stammered out, rubbing hard at his mouth. Henning's eyes went round again. “I, uh, I won't come back, I won't bother you any more, I'm sorry.”

He turned tail and hurried away without waiting for Henning's reply and ran back to his car. He started driving, not thinking about where he was headed, but he knew where he was going to go, once his head cleared enough for him to focus on the road. It was a thirty minute drive, and he chain smoked the entire trip, flicking his last cigarette out the window when he approached the corner of Richards and Wolcott. He took a look at himself in the rear view mirror, at his stupid Cagney hair and his dumb tie; he pulled it off, along with his jacket, then got out and walked over to the news stand. Steve was sitting on the sidewalk in front of it with a bucket of water and a sponge, cleaning the outside.

Bucky made a beeline for him and sat down. “Can I use that for a minute?” he asked without preamble, pointing at the bucket.

Steve started and looked at him. “Hey! Uh, it's all soapy and dirty...”
“Don’t matter,” Bucky said, and dunked his head in for a couple of minutes, scrubbing at his greasy, Pomade thick hair with his fingernails until he felt it loosen a bit. He knew he’d have to have a go at it with some of Ma’s dish detergent to get it all off, but it was a start. When he sat back, Steve was staring at him.

“Better?” Steve said.

“A little. You want some help?”

Steve peered into the bucket. “The water’s all oily now.”

“I’ll get you some more,” Bucky said, and started to stand. “Val’s drugstore, right?”

Steve looked up at him, frowning a little. “Uh huh. Thanks.”

Bucky filled the bucket up again and got another rag from Val. Steve was still watching him closely when he came back and started scrubbing the side of the stand. He asked Steve how his day had gone, and Steve told him about some of the choice characters that visited the stand. Bucky nodded along, working hard to get off all the dirt and soot from the cars – the stand didn’t get cleaned nearly enough, it needed a lot of work. Steve finished up telling him about a kid who camped out in front of the stand every Wednesday morning to get his issue of *Action Comics* and then recount Superman’s adventures that week to him. He never got to read them for himself first, he said with a laugh.

“Steve,” Bucky said, when he was done. “Do you think I’m a bad guy?”

“What?”

Bucky shrugged and looked down at Steve, who was still sitting on the sidewalk. “Doing the work I do for Grandpa, knowing the stuff he does... I shouldn’t do that, I should? Support it like that?”

“Well, he’s your grandfather,” Steve said, “it’s probably not that easy, is it?”

“It would be for you, though.”

“I dunno. Anyway, we can’t all be Steve Rogers.”

Bucky laughed a little. “World would be a better place if they could. “I did a job for him today...” Shaking people down for money, that’s what it was. “Collecting a debt. They were real poor, though. Destitute. Not like the scumbags I usually find. It felt like...” Like he was at Steve and Sarah’s door, shaking them down. “It felt wrong.”

“Did you get the money?”

He shook his head. “I apologised and left.”

“Well, there you go,” Steve said, and started to stand, gripping the counter to pull himself up. Bucky took hold of his arm and kept him steady. “Thanks. So you did the right thing.”

“I guess...”

“Can’t ask much more than that.” He stood back and looked at the stand. “Shit, I can practically see my face in it. Help me close up.”

Bucky went back home after he helped Steve close. Grandpa’s car was in the garage when he pulled in, which was unusual for this time of day. Bucky was supposed to have come back to the club after Henning and drop off the money. He got out of the car and went into the house nervously.
The twins were in the living room, listening to the radio, and they laughed when they saw him – his hair had dried strange, sticking every which way.

"Is Grandpa in his office?"

"Yeah," Florence said.

"How'd he seem? Was he... pissed?"

Florence looked thoughtful. "Not really. Why, you in trouble?"

"Yeah, probably."

She pulled a sympathetic face. "Good luck," she said, and Eugene shushed her.

It wouldn't do him any good to delay the inevitable, so Bucky climbed the stairs to the top of the house and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Grandpa called.

He opened the door and sidled in. Grandpa looked up from his desk and lifted his eyebrows. "I was wondering where you were, James. Do you have my money?"

Bucky shook his head.

"No?" Grandpa said. "I didn't think Henning would give you any trouble."

Bucky took a few steps closer. "He didn't. I, I just didn't collect. They're sick, him and his wife. It didn't seem right."

"So, what do you suggest I do about it?"

Bucky pressed his lips together. "Well, it was only a hundred bucks... Couldn't you just let it go? I mean, I could give you the money for it."

"I don't want your money," Grandpa said. He didn't look so angry, more thoughtful than anything. "You want me to forgive the debt? You think they deserve that?"

"Yeah, I, I think they do..." Bucky said.

Grandpa looked at him for a long moment before nodding. "Okay, I'll forgive it."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said, and paused a moment. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Bucky hooked his thumbs into his belt loops and looked at the floor. "Um. Yeah, I... I don't think I can do this any more. Collect debts, I mean..."

Grandpa nodded again.

"Are you mad?" Bucky said, trying to keep his voice steady. He wasn't sure he'd ever told Grandpa 'no' before.

Grandpa sighed and stood up. They were about equal in height, but Grandpa was wider and carried himself with a presence Bucky didn't think he'd ever have. He told himself he wasn't nervous as
Grandpa approached him; this was his grandfather after all, who'd loved him and looked after him his whole life. “I'm not angry,” he said, and Bucky let out a breath; okay, so maybe he was nervous. “You've always had a sensitive heart, like your mother. You know I wanted you to go to college and make something of yourself, I didn't want you in the club every night.”

“Sorry,” Bucky murmured.

Grandpa lay a hand on his shoulder. “Don't apologise. I will get one of the boys to take over, one of them must be halfway trustworthy. You should find a job doing something you like.”

“I'll try,” Bucky said.

“Good, now go wash your hair,” Grandpa said, and ruffled his big hand through it. “It looks like a nest.”

He didn't get a job he particularly liked, but Becca worked part time in accounting at Martin's department store and she said she'd see about getting him a job on the absolute promise that he wouldn't embarrass her. He promised absolutely, despite not having much confidence in the assertion, and she got him a clerk position in Men's Sportwear, where he could give his personal opinion about which boxing gloves were the best. He didn't love it, especially not when people got that look on their face and said that retail was women's work, but it paid okay, and he charmed one of the food court ladies into giving him free lunches sometimes.

It was a good thing he had got a real job, too, because Ma had cut the maid's hours down to two afternoons a week and Dad started doing the gardening himself. They still wouldn't admit a thing to Bucky, but he knew nonetheless.

Across the floor from him was the Cosmetics counter, where a bunch of girls made eyes at him while waiting for old ladies to finish trying on lipstick. His first day on the job, one of them came over – she had shoulder length dark hair, red lips, and a slightly upturned little nose – and asked him for some change from of his cash register. He didn't know how to do that and the corners of her perfect bow-shaped lips turned up as she brushed past him and stabbed at some buttons until the drawer popped open. She collected up some coins and pushed it shut again.

“Much obliged,” she said, and walked back across the floor without telling him her name, or how she did that.

He got it a few days later: Connie Wronski from Greenpoint.

“Connie Wronski?” he repeated when they were in the breakroom, having lunch. It practically rhymed.

“I know, I know,” she said. “And I've heard all them jokes about being 'wrong-ski', so can it.”

“All right,” he said, smiling down at her while she scowled at her cup of coffee.

“I'm gonna change it one day to something less Pollak, like movie actors do, but I gotta wait until my babcia is gone; it'd break her heart.”

“My grandfather changed our surname before I was born,” Bucky said, and layered a little butter on his bread. Butter and spam sandwiches, yum.

“Oh yeah? What were you before?”

“Barone.”
She raised her eyebrows. “Italian, huh?”

“Sicilian.”

“There's a difference?”

He shrugged. “Apparently.”

She patted him on the shoulder and picked up her cup of coffee. “Well, I still think you're all right.”

So, it wasn't the best job, but the rest of the summer went by quick enough, and then it was September and he woke up on the third to his parents sitting at the radio, listening to a live broadcast of Neville Chamberlain tepidly delivering the news that Great Britain was at war with Germany. It was a strange day, half the city quiet and subdued. Not many people came into the store, and Connie chewed on her painted nails as they clustered around the radio and listened to the news about the invasion of Poland. He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze.

“You okay?”

She shrugged. “I just got family out there, you know?”

“Yeah, my brother-in-law's got cousins in Germany.” God knows, he probably had relatives out there in Europe too, in Italy and Romania and maybe other parts, but he didn't know any specifics.

She pulled her thumbnail from between her teeth. “We sure are lucky to be out here.”

The whole thing wound Steve up tight as a spring, and he was madder than a cat in heat that America wasn't getting involved.

“Canada declared war yesterday!” Steve said, while he was working the news stand. Bucky was standing outside it, having a cigarette, nodding along. Steve didn't really need replies, so long as Bucky was there as a sounding board. “How can we leave 'em all to put their lives on the line and not do the same?”

“Young man, the Neutrality Act has served us very well,” a customer said, adjusting his hat. “We have no place getting involved in the affairs of Europe and no money to spare on it.” He picked up a copy of the *The New York Times*. Bucky watched Steve out of the corner of his eye. His face was frozen in something approaching a pleasant expression.

“Three cents, please,” he said through a tense jaw.

The guy handed him the coins, and Steve dropped them in the tin with more force than necessary. The guy wasn't even out of hearing range before Steve burst with fury again.

“Neutrality! What a load of bull! How can you be neutral when people are getting invaded? When they're dying? That's a load of fucking shit.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said. He'd heard the air raid sirens on the broadcasts from the BBC, it was a horrible sound. He couldn't imagine living like that. Still, he couldn't build up the same level of outrage that Steve had. “It ain't right. Hopefully FDR'll convince Congress otherwise.”

“He better,” Steve said, and slapped his palm on the counter.

- By early 1940, he was promoted to assistant manager. Becca couldn't believe it, and credited it to his
ability to charm middle-aged mothers into buying all kinds of crap for their sons.

“Hey, one day soon, I'm gonna be your boss.”

She shook her head in disgust. “I'll quit.”

Things only got worse in Europe, and then in June, Italy sided with Germany and entered the war. That was a hell of a thing, hearing about how they were trying to invade France. People looked at him a bit different, the ones who knew what family he came from, which was most everyone in Brooklyn. No one said anything direct to his face, because he was still Lucio Barnes's grandson, and he was still six foot tall, but he heard it anyway.

In September, Roosevelt signed conscription back into law. Steve was pleased about that, though it didn't go far enough for his liking. For Bucky, it meant he had to register for the draft and then wait with the threat of the lottery picking him hanging over his head like an anvil. His number was 204. Arnie and Steve registered too, and Steve spouted some crap about trying to enlist in the army anyway, but Bucky had mostly talked him out of that.

His parents listened to the news everyday, and every time Murrow said, 'This is London', Bucky's breath caught a little in his throat. He was probably as American as they came, but his parents, they were still Europeans. This wasn't just unfortunate stories from another country for them.

Steve gave him a blow by blow account of anything new in the papers most days; Bucky couldn't tell him that he didn't want to hear it, but he didn't. Every time, all he thought of was getting that Order to Report for Induction letter. Maybe his leg would be enough to get him out of it, but he didn't think so. Steve would never get drafted, though, and that was something, at least. Steve was furious at the idea.

“Christ, you'd have a heart attack the moment the shooting started,” Bucky said, when Steve argued the point.

“Thanks,” Steve replied, screwing up his face like an angry terrier. “You ain't wrong though. I need more stamina. You need to train me.”

“Train you?”

“Yeah, you know, boxing and stuff.”

“No amount of training's gonna get rid of a bad heart.”

Steve shrugged. “Yeah well, it can't hurt.”

Bucky thought it certainly could hurt, but he agreed anyway. Steve would just seek out some other asshole to train him, and at least Bucky knew what Steve's limits were – probably better than Steve did himself.

Selling newspapers, day in day out, with all the stories about how hard the Allies were fighting, that made Steve feel worthless, he said.

“Don't it feel that way to you too?” he said, when Bucky was trying to teach him the basics of boxing. Steve was covered in sweat and they'd barely even started. “Working some job, when people are dying?”

“I guess. C'mon, you've gotta focus on this.”
He didn't know what he felt; he certainly didn't feel the kind of single-minded fury that Steve did about the whole thing. Martin's didn't make him feel worthless, but it didn't make him feel much of anything else, either. He mostly dealt with arranging orders and deliveries and keeping an eye on everything in the store, so he just wandered around the place and flirted with some of the girls, which was nice enough.

He wasn't the only one who flirted though, and some customers' advances were less welcome.

There was a sleazy looking guy leaning over the Cosmetics counter on a Thursday afternoon in mid October, getting as close to Connie's face as the barrier between them would allow. “Sir, if you'd like--”

“What time do you finish work?” he said.

“Oh,” she said, and laughed nervously, her eye catching Bucky's. He started walking over. “A long time yet.”

“I know a nice quiet restaurant--”

“Good afternoon, sir, can I help you with something,” Bucky cut in, leaning across the counter to meet the guy's eyes. God, he hated calling assholes like this 'sir'.

“I'm just talkin' to the lady, none of your business. We're having a nice little chat, aren't we, honey?”

Connie's eyes widened and her smile looked pained and frozen on her face.

“Unfortunately, sir,” Bucky began, and thought about how Chuck talked, all clipped and fancy, “it is my business. I have to insist that you let my staff member continue to perform her duties.”

The guy straightened up a little, looking at Bucky properly. “I know who you are.”

“Yes, I'm the assistant manager, sir.”

“You're one of those wops that run that whorehouse.”

Bucky smiled with a hint of teeth. “I'm going to have to ask you to leave.”

The guy's face got even nastier, if that was possible. “I ain't gonna have a fuckin' wop tell me what I can do in my own country,” he spat. “They're gonna exterminate the fucking lot of you in your country.”

Bucky reacted without thinking, though he'd have done the same thing if he had been thinking. He grabbed the guy's arm, twisted it behind his back, and slammed him into the counter. Connie jumped back and pressed herself against the wall.

“You gonna call me a fucking wop in my own fuckin' store?” he said quietly. The guy flailed his other arm, trying to strike Bucky, but Bucky wrangled that one too. “You must be a real fuckin' idiot. Apologise to the lady.”

“You gonna call me a fucking wop in my own fuckin' store?” the guy shouted. There were a few people in the store, stopped in their browsing to watch the scene. Maybe most of them had seen the guy acting like a sleazy asshole, though, because no one made a move. Bucky held both his wrists with one hand and grabbed his hair with the other, pressing his face into the countertop. He'd have slammed him down, but the counter was glass and he didn't want to damage the store. He leant in close and got his mouth right up to the guy's ear.
“You need to apologise to the lady before I break both your arms and if you think that the cops are gonna help you, then you don't know who I am.” He pulled back and dragged the guy's head up by his hair. “Apologise.”

“I'm sorry,” he ground out.

“Ma'am,” Bucky said.

“Ma'am,” he repeated.

“And she ain't gonna ever have to see your slimy face again, is she?”

“No,” he muttered.

“What?”

“No,” he said, louder.

“Good. Now, I'm going to let go of you and you're going to be leave, and if you try to take a swing at me, I swear to God, I will kill you.” He let go and took a step back. The guy stood still for a moment. “Get out,” Bucky added.

He got out.

The adrenaline pumping through him felt pretty good, felt like old times. He swallowed and took a look at the saliva smeared counter. “Christ, I'll get something to clean that up.” He looked up at Connie and cleared his throat. Her eyes were still wide as saucers and she had two pink spots on her cheeks. “Sorry I scared you.”

“You didn't scare me,” she breathed, her eyes jumping up and down his body for a second.

Huh. “All right. Well... I'll take you home this evening, just in case.”

“I'd like that,” she said.

Her shift finished at six and he was off at five, so he waited nearby and caught her looking a few times. She'd never been in a car before, she admitted when she got in the passenger seat.

“Never?”

“Nah, been using the subway my whole life,” she said. “You're really rich, huh?”

“I guess so,” he said, pulling out onto the road.

“Some of the girls, they said that your family is kinda...”

He glanced at her. “Criminal?”

She pressed her lips together. “Mm-hm. Sorry.”

“sall right, it's the truth. Used to be into bootlegging, when that was a thing, now... there's other stuff.”

“And there's a whor--” Her face started to pink a little. “A club?”

“Uh huh, in Vinegar Hill.”
She shook her head. “The clubs in Greenpoint are terrible.”

“Ours ain't much better, unfortunately.”

She nodded and looked out the window, tucking her hands between her knees. He smiled; that wasn't lady-like at all. Ma would be appalled.

“You want a cigarette?”

She started a little and looked back at him. “Oh,” she said, “yeah, thanks.”

He handed her a cigarette and flicked the lighter on, holding it out with one hand. She looked at him through her lashes for a second before bending forward and taking the flame, and he lit a cigarette for himself before flipping the lighter closed.

“You like working in the store?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said, and laughed a little. “I probably shouldn't tell you that, you being my boss and all.”

He shrugged. “Don't like it much myself.”

“What did you do before?”

“Stuff for my family.”

She raised her eyebrows and nodded. “I was a waitress. I hated it, always smelled like cooking fat.”

“Are you planning on staying at Martin's forever?”

“Forever!” she said, and laughed. “Jeez, I hope not. Nah, I guess I'll move on sometime, get one of those long term wife gigs. I tried college, didn't work out.”

Bucky smiled. “Yeah, me too.”

She smiled back and touched the cigarette to her lips. “I hope that guy didn't make you too mad, guys like that look for any reason to run their mouths. My brothers get all sorts of shit about being Polish, and hey, we're the ones being invaded.”

“I'm okay, it takes a lot more than that to get me really mad.”

“Maybe I'll find out one day,” she said, and flashed a smile at him before looking back out the window.

When he dropped her off home, she leaned in and kissed his cheek before hurrying out of her car and up the steps to her building. If it wasn't obvious before the car ride, it sure was obvious afterwards that she wanted him to take her out, but he didn't think that was such a great idea. After all, you didn't shit where you ate, advice he hadn't always followed, and he wasn't sure he was up for marriage, which seemed like a more pressing issue for the girls he fooled around with now. And he liked Connie, she wasn't just some girl he'd met at the drugstore. It was clear that she was disappointed, but she didn't make a thing of it, which made him like her more.

The World's Fair was closing on October 27th, and of course Steve had to go. Becca and Arnie couldn't make it, so it was just the three of them: Bucky, Steve, and Gail. Steve and Gail had been
pretty tight for a while – they hadn't made time, but they always held hands with when Bucky was with them. Gail didn't have too much to say to him these days, though she was still friendly with him, and shot him quick glances every now and then.

The closing day promised a parade and one dollar cocktails – the parade was cancelled due to overcrowding, but the booze was a hit. Too much, maybe, because it was eight pm and near freezing, and half of New York was stumbling drunk.

One of the rides had caused a fair wide power failure, and the place was plunged into near darkness save for a few lights that had stayed on. Nevertheless, Bucky had had a few of those drinks and needed a piss. When he fought his way in the men's bathroom and into a stall, he ran straight into a couple of guys necking. He watched them for a long moment before snapping back to reality.

“Christ,” he said, and the two of them sprang apart, red-faced and breathing hard. He'd seen the look before, that look of frenzied arousal, on the faces on girls he was fucking; that must have been what those guys at college, the ones in the bathroom...

“Are you gonna--?” one of the guys said, his eyes wide with fear.

“Christ,” Bucky repeated, then turned around and pushed his way back out, full bladder forgotten.

The night ended with the crowd singing Auld Lang Syne, searchlights crossing back and forth in the sky, then pointed down at all the different nations' pavilions in the Government Zone, all those countries embroiled in the war across the Atlantic. It was a hell of an image, or it would have been if he could have got his mind off those two guys. If he acted weird, Steve didn't notice it, if only because he seemed to be tearing up a little. Bucky at least had the wherewithal to pat him on the back quickly.

When he got home at nearly midnight, he didn't think any more about the men in the bathroom, he didn't put his hand down his pants, he just curled up on his side, put a pillow over his head, and went to sleep.

The winter was cold and there wasn't much good about it. The kids begged to see Fantasia, so he took them, and he heard the usual stuff on the radio and saw it in the reels, invasions and bombings in England; God, he was sick of it.

In January, Becca's kitchen sink broke, so of course Bucky, free labour that he was, was called in to fix it. He didn't know anything about plumbing, but a thing like that didn't matter to Becca. She summoned him to come round on Sunday afternoon, then promptly left him and Arnie alone to go 'study' with Lily.

Fixing the sink was harder than he thought it would be, and he predictably got soaked a couple of times. Arnie hovered nearby, dispensing towels and awkward suggestions. This fucking guy had been awkwardly standing around in the periphery of Bucky's vision for almost a decade now, and he just... couldn't stand it any more.

“Arnie!” he yelled, while he was wedged into the cabinet under the sink. He could see Arnie shuffle his feet a little. “Just... fuck off, okay?”

“Oh, uh, sorry,” Arnie muttered, and shuffled away.

He finally finished up at seven, and Becca still wasn't home, so Arnie insisted on making him something to eat. Bucky was absolutely starving, so he agreed. Leftover meatload wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but he ate it anyway.
“So,” Arnie murmured, shifting on the couch – there wasn't room for a dining table, so Arnie and Becca took their dinners on the couch, which Ma despaired of. “How's work?”

“Fine, it's work.”

“Becca was very proud of you being promoted.”


“It's good, I've been studying a lot about the heart – I think I might specialise in cardiology.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes a little. “You still treat Steve?”

Arnie blinked. “Sometimes I give my opinion about his condition but I'm not a doctor yet, so I've never really 'treated' him. I only gave Sarah palliative care and some medication from the pharmacy – I don't dispense medication to Steve. Didn't he explain that to you?”

“Well, Steve doesn't tell me everything. Now he wants to enlist in the army and go off and fight the Jerrys on the beaches and in the fucking fields and hills – do you think that's a good idea? Do you think his condition can take that, Dr Roth?” He dropped the plate onto the coffee table with a clatter.

A frown crossed over Arnie's face. “No... of course I don't think it's a good idea.” He stood up and retrieved Bucky's plate. “I'll wash the dishes...”

Arnie left him in the living room, staring at the geometric wallpaper he put up. No matter how much work Bucky did to the place, it was always going to be a dump. He got up and went to the kitchen door.

“How long are you going to make Becca live here?”

Arnie looked at him, wrist deep in suds. “What?”

“This fucking dump,” Bucky said, waving his hands around. “You know, Becca was really going places before she had to marry you.”

“She still is,” Arnie said evenly. “She does what she wants to do, you know that our relationship isn't...”

“She could have done a whole lot better if you hadn't got your hooks in her, you just used her to cover your own ass! I always knew there was something weird about how you hung around Steve when he was just a kid.”

Arnie rolled his eyes and shut the water off. “Okay, Bucky,” he said with a sigh.

“What the fuck do you mean, 'okay, Bucky'?”

“Nothing,” he replied, still with that sighing tone. “Maybe you should head home now.”

“No, you fucking tell me what you're sighing at!”

“I just wonder if, maybe, you'd be a little happier if you weren't constantly thinking about Steve.”

“What? I don't constantly think about Steve.”

Arnie sighed and wiped his hands on his pants. “Okay, you don't.”
What a condescending, fucking asshole – he always spoke to Bucky like those fucking assholes at Harvard, like Bucky was goddamn slow and a fucking clown. “You're the one who's always sniffing around Steve – you always have been. What is it, you wanna fucking pork Steve? You think he's girlish enough that it's not like you're a real fag?”

“Jesus Christ, Bucky,” Arnie said, rubbing a hand across his forehead. “Christ. It's not me who likes Steve like that.”

Bucky took three long strides to stand nose to nose with Arnie. They were about equal in height, but Bucky was practically double for the width of this fucking beanpole. “What the hell does that mean?” he said, pressing in close. Arnie pushed back against the counter, his face paling. “You goddamn kike,” Bucky added viciously.

“Okay,” Arnie said, his bottom lip shaking slightly. Bucky stared at it. “Get out of my apartment.”

Bucky glanced up at his eyes, then back at his mouth, and then... those guys at the Fair restroom flashed through his mind; those guys at college, fucking up against tiled bathroom wall, the noises... He pressed forward and pushed his closed mouth against Arnie's dry lips, feeling fucked up like a drunk even though he was sober.

Arnie pushed him away and he stumbled back, the small of his back hitting the handle of the stove.

“Go home,” Arnie repeated.

Bucky started breathing hard, his ears buzzing, and nodded quickly. He went back to the living room and fumbled to get his coat and shoes on, the buzzing blotting out the sound of Arnie's footsteps. He saw his feet out of the corner of his eye as he was bent down to lace his shoes, but Arnie didn't make a move towards him.

He stood up and looked at Arnie. “Are you gonna tell Becca?” he asked.

“No,” Arnie said.

“Are you gonna tell Steve?”

Arnie sighed again and ran a hand over his mouth. “No.”

“Okay. I don't know why...”

Arnie shook his head and gestured for Bucky to go to the front door. “I know. You need a whole team of psychiatrists to figure out your head, Buck. Just go out and get loaded, all right?”

“Is that doctor's orders?”

“Sure,” Arnie said, and opened the door. Bucky shuffled out and stood on the other side, feeling like a chastened schoolboy.

“Sorry I... called you a kike,” he muttered.

“It's okay, I've called you worse names when you're not around to hear it,” Arnie said. “Good night, Bucky.”

“Night,” Bucky said, and Arnie closed the door on him.
Bucky followed orders and got well and truly fried that night, stumbling home at three and leaving for work at seven. He wasn't even fully sober when he rolled in – emphasis on roll - and Connie took him into the back and made him a cup of thick, black coffee.

“Special occasion?” she asked.

“Just being me,” he said, and drank as much of the tar as he could in one go, then spluttered and shook his head. “Celebrating the new year, maybe?”

“Maybe,” Connie echoed with a smile.

Bucky looked at her. She was a real sweet thing, cute as a button with wide eyes like a Kewpie doll, and silky looking hair.

“I should take you out,” he said.

“You should?”

She was a real nice girl. She'd be a nice girl to marry, Ma wouldn't have any argument with it.

“Yeah. Say, dinner, after work?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Can your liver take it?”

He grinned. “Probably not. I'll abstain. Restart that temperance movement.”

She folded her arms in front of herself and smiled a happy little smile, the corners of her eyes crinkling up. Yeah, this would be good for him. “Okay, I'd love to.”

Chapter End Notes

- Gail Richards was the former fiancée of Steve in the Ults verse and a supporting character in the 1944 Captain America serial. Her appearance in the fic based on her actress's, Lorna Gray.

- Eight pagers are an earlier term for Tijuana Bibles, aka pornographic comics.

- In case you didn't catch her name in the first movie, Connie was Bucky's date to Stark Expo, played by a pre-Clara Oswald Jenna Coleman.

- I am oddly fascinated by world fairs, so most of the information about the New York World's Fair is directly from James Mauro's book, Twilight at the World of Tomorrow.

- I am tentatively setting this fic at thirteen chapters.

- Oh, Bucky.
Bucky and Connie's first date was at a restaurant across the road from work. Bucky's head pounded like a jackhammer all day and he could barely string a sentence together for her, but she didn't seem to mind. He drove her home again, and she gave him a soft kiss on the mouth before getting out. For their second date they went ice skating – which Connie was a pro at while Bucky made a fool of himself – and on their third, he fingered her in the back seat of his car while she sucked bruises onto his neck.

“God, my brothers would kill you if they caught us like this,” she said as they lazily kissed, his fingers scrunched in her hair – she had really nice, soft hair. He'd parked in an alleyway and it was almost midnight, so it was pitch black. She had told her parents that she was staying over with a friend in need so that her and Bucky could go out dancing all night. Her father and brothers sounded like real overbearing bores.

He rolled onto his side between her and the back of the seat. “Oh yeah, you don't think I could take them?”

She reached up and brushed hair from his face. “You could take them.”

He grinned. “You think they'll like me? Assuming they don't catch us in the back of this car.”

“Hm,” she murmured, and pressed the palm of her hand to his cheek. “I don't think so. I'm the baby, you know? Mama'll love you, though, she's always a sucker for a pretty face. Tata likes to feel like he's in charge, so as long as you're very polite, he should be okay. My babcia will want to know all about your heritage, she's mad for that. Will your family like me?”

“Oh yeah, they're easy.” He trailed his fingertips up and down the space between her breasts. “Flatter Ma, don't ask Dad too many questions, say something mean about me to Becca, talk about sports with Flo, pray with Eugene or something. Grandpa'll be in his office, so he won't matter. And then there's Steve.”

“Steve?”

Bucky stilled for a moment. “My best friend.”

“Oh,” she said, and smiled. “A heavy weight like you, huh?”

Bucky laughed. “Not exactly.”

“I've got one of them too,” she continued.

“A Steve?”

“Yeah, a best friend. Bonnie.”
He lifted his head. “Bonnie?”

“I know.”

“Connie and Bonnie?” he asked, laughing.

“I know,” she repeated, then added, “My youngest brother's called Donnie.”

“Oh my God,” he said, bursting into peals of laughter. He pressed his face to her shoulder and she stroked at his hair.

“Bonnie and Donnie dated for a while,” she said. “If they'd got married, we'd've been Bonnie, Connie, and Donnie Wronski.”

“Stop,” he squeaked, breathless with laughter.

She scratched at his scalp for a moment, then kissed the stop of his head. “Do you think you might wanna come over for dinner sometime soon?”

He lifted his head again, took a deep breath, and wiped at his face. He'd never met a girl's parents before. “Sure.”

She beamed at him and pulled him back down for a kiss.

'Sometime soon' became sometime the following week, and Bucky found himself feeling more than a little nervous at the prospect. Steve laughed himself sick over the predicament.

“Well, have you met Gail's parents?”

Steve scribbled at his sketchbook. He'd had more illustration work coming in recently, and was always at it, no matter where he was, even in Bucky's bedroom when Bucky was trying to talk to him. “Uh huh.”

“Really? How'd it go?”

“Good. I didn't say much, so that helped. You definitely shouldn't talk too much.”

“Why, what d'you think I'm gonna say?”

Steve shrugged. “Something dumb and cocky, probably.”

Bucky poked his leg. “Hey, fuck you.”

“Fuck you too,” Steve replied distantly, absorbed in his drawing.

Connie's family lived above a bakery they ran, and the reason she didn't work there too was because she 'can't bake for shit, never could'.

“But I sure can put on lipstick,” she said, smacking her lips together. He driving the both of them from work over to this 'meet the family' dinner. He'd dressed up really nice, combed his hair neater than the usual, and got himself ready to be polite, which was something that didn't come natural to him.
“You sure can.” He parked outside the building, and got out. It was a run down area, backing onto the factories running along the edge of the Newtown Creek. On the street outside, though, it smelt of freshly baked bread that made Bucky's stomach growl. “Christ,” he said, “I'd get so fat if I lived above a bakery.”

She laughed and hurried around the car to put her arm around him. She led him to a door around the side of the building and let him in. There was a staircase up to another door, and he climbed the steps nervously.

“Mama?” she called when she opened the door. There was a brief commotion beyond the little hallway they were standing in. Connie took his hand and led him into the living room, where two women, one pregnant, and five men stood around in varying states of forced casualness.

“Bucky, this is my mother, Sophia, my father, Stanley, my sister-in-law, Kate, and my brothers, Frank, Andrew, Albert, and Donald. Everyone, this is Bucky!”

He did the rounds of hellos; her mother was, as advertised, a little taken with him and smiled sweetly, while Stanley gave him a firm handshake and the stink eye for a few minutes. Connie had clearly got the best out of their genetics, because lined up, her brothers looked like four stages of early evolution. Frank was married to Kate, who was pretty enough, in a plain way, and they already had three kids who in short order charged into the living room screaming. Her grandmother was upstairs, somehow sleeping through the racket.

“Dinner's almost done,” Sophia said. “Donnie, go wake your grandma.”

Connie pinched Bucky's side before he could laugh and Donnie went on his grumbling way to fetch Grandma.

Sophia served beef tripe soup followed by chicken livers – it was much better than it sounded. Stanley briefly grilled Connie about her day before turning his attention to Bucky.

“So, what are your long term plans, James?” he asked.

“Oh,” he said, “well, I've been at Martin's for a couple of years now and... I'm working my way up the management ladder and... I'm saving up for a down payment on a house...” What a load of shit, he hoped he died before becoming manager of Martin's. Although, since word of his assault of a customer finally trickled down to the bigwigs, maybe he'd get canned instead. And he'd never even thought in passing about buying a house. The concept felt so unfamiliar to him.

Stanley seemed reasonably mollified by the answer and then Connie's grandma, Josephine, took over the inquisition, focusing on his family as expected. She wanted to know all about his relatives out in Europe, and he had to admit that he didn't know much about Italy or Romania. Josephine looked disappointed that he couldn't speak Romanian. Connie spoke fluent Polish, she said proudly.

“What do you think of what old Mussolini is doing?” Frank asked. “Getting into bed with Hitler and all?”

“Frankie!” Connie said. “That's not really dinner talk, is it?”

“I just wonder what your guy thinks, us being on the losing side, him being on the winning.”

“I don't think they're gonna win,” Bucky said. “I think the Brits are going to kill them all, just like they should. They killed and captured twenty five thousand Italian troops already in North Africa this January, so that's a start, huh?”
Frank narrowed his eyes but didn't reply – for once, Bucky was glad that Steve told him every little detail, it sure shut this asshole up.

“Let's not talk about killing at the table,” Kate said. “It makes the baby unhappy.”

The rest of the dinner went all right – Sophia's donuts were delicious, at least – and Connie seemed pretty happy when she walked with him back to his car. “Sorry about Frankie,” she said, swinging their interlocked hands. “He's just protective and an asshole about it.”

He smiled and kissed her forehead. “It's okay. I've... probably been that protective asshole before.”

She rested her free hand on his side. “Thanks for coming tonight, it really... meant a lot to me.”

“I enjoyed it.” Well, he didn't hate it, and that was something. “Hey, um... I'm turning twenty four next month and my family's going to have a dinner... D'you think you might wanna come?”

It was fully dark outside by now, but he could still make out her eyes widening. “You want me to come?” she asked.

“Yeah, course I do.” His family had never met any of his girlfriends, but maybe it was time to stop behaving like such a Casanova.

“I'd love that, Bucky,” she said, and she sounded so damn sincere.

February and March were always a tough time for Steve since Sarah passed, and Bucky always let him lay low for those months. For Bucky's birthday, Ma wanted it to be on Sunday, the day before his actual birthday, because that was the only day that worked for everyone. It also happened to be the anniversary of Sarah's funeral. Ma said they could have it the following weekend if that was better for Steve, but when Bucky broached the topic with him, Steve waved it off.

“Course I'll come on the 9th,” he said as he rearranged the newspapers. “It's dumb to have to wait until the weekend after.”

“Are you sure?”

“It's no problem, really. It's just a day, three years ago. It's not like it's the day she died, or nothin'.”

“Still...”

“Really, it's okay.”

Bucky nodded. “All right. Well, Connie's coming, so you'll get to meet her.”

Steve stopped fussing with the papers and looked at him. “You should have led with that, Buck. Are you two getting serious?”

“I... I dunno,” Bucky said, shrugging. “Maybe?”

Steve whistled off-key and shook his head. “Never thought I'd live to see the day, Bucky Barnes, serious about a girl.”

“I'm not that bad, am I?”

“Oh, you kinda are.”
He frowned to himself. ‘Maybe he was that bad. ‘Well, you know, she's a really nice girl, she deserves to be treated good.’”

Steve raised his eyebrows and laughed. ‘Why, we'll make a real boy of you yet, Pinocchio.’”

Bucky rolled up a newspaper and pointed it at him. ‘You've got a real big mouth for such a little guy, you know.’”

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Ma was thrilled at the prospect of meeting Bucky's girl and peppered him with questions about what she liked to eat and what her interests were and where she was from.

“Is she pretty?” she asked. He was in the kitchen, helping her bake a cake. Ma was insisting on making his birthday cake herself this year, and she needed all the practice – she had baked as a girl, before Grandpa became rich, but had only used her skills sparingly since then.

“She's very pretty,” he said, as he cracked eggs. Ma was all thumbs with that.

She shook flour through the sieve, a good quarter of it sprinkling the counter. ‘I'll have to dress especially nice, then.’”

“You always look nice, Ma,” he said.

She shook her head. “How did I have such a charmer for a son?”

“Just luck, I guess.”

She laughed and switched to the sugar. “Is Steve bringing Gail? Don't you think she looks just like Hedy Lamarr?”

He shrugged. Gail was not as pretty as Hedy Lamarr. “I dunno.”

“You should invite her, you're friendly with her too, aren't you?”

“She's all right.” He held out the bowl of eggs. “You've gotta mix this into there.”

They forgot all about the butter until they poured the mix into the cake tin. He scraped the contents back into the bowl and the batter came out terribly lumpy with the addition of the butter.

“I think it should have been more melted first,” he speculated.

“Maybe if we leave it for a few minutes, it'll be less lumpy,” Ma said, and moved over to the sink to wash her hands. Bucky picked up the whisk and tried to squish the lumps away. From the front of the house, a door slammed and then heavy, thumping footsteps came towards the kitchen. Florence appeared at the door, red faced and grinning.

“Are you baking? Can I try some, Cook always let me eat some of the batter,” she said in a rush, reaching out with dirt-encrusted fingernails. He smacked her hand away. “Sorry, Grandma,” she said, pulling a silly face. “Hey, should that be lumpy like that?”

“No. Why are you so dirty?”

She grinned at him. She was coming on fifteen now and had grown like a weed; she looked like a more muscled version of Becca, with a wider nose and freckles across it and her cheeks. She had freckles mainly because she spent so much time outside – Eugene was deathly pale.
“I was playing baseball in the park.”

“It's pretty cold to be playing baseball,” he said, and she shrugged. “Were you playing against the neighbourhood boys?”

“Uh huh. Beat them, too.”

“Of course,” he said, and looked down at the batter. There was no way he was going to get the lumps out. “I'm gonna to put this on, you can be Ma's guinea pig once it's baked. Go wash up before she flips.”

“All right,” she replied and kissed him on the cheek.

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On the 9th, Bucky took the car out and did the rounds, picking everyone up. After much badgering from Ma, Bucky had mentioned to Steve that he could bring Gail, which he did, and Bucky said he'd pick Connie up and bring her home, too. He picked Steve up first, then headed up to Greenpoint.

“Nervous?” Steve said.

“Why would I be nervous?”

“I dunno, you bringing her home to meet the family, that's something. And your fingernails are bitten down – you always do that when you're nervous.”

Bucky glanced at his jagged nails against the steering wheel. “No, I don't.”

Steve laughed. “You'll eat your fingers off if you ever marry her, you know.”

Bucky looked at him out of the corner of his eye. Marry? Christ, that'd be something. He guessed they might be on track though. Connie was nearly twenty one, an old maid by her family's standards. Frank and Kate had married at nineteen and seventeen respectively, and they were working on baby number five now eight years on.

“I'll glue my mouth shut,” he said. “What about you, you gonna marry Gail?”

“Oh,” Steve said, deflating a little. “I don't... I'd like to, but I'm not sure she'd want to.”

“She's a fool, then.”

“No, she's not.” Steve pressed his lips together and frowned. “I dunno that it's fair, to marry someone and maybe have kids when... I maybe won't always be around.”

Bucky swallowed convulsively and gripped the steering wheel. “Don't say that,” he whispered.

Steve smiled sadly, and lifted a shoulder. “Anyhow, I'm still so nervous around her, it's a moot point, really.”

Bucky had trouble keeping the conversation going after that, and when he pulled up outside Connie's, he was still preoccupied with it, the idea of Steve... dying. Christ, he couldn't even say it in his head without his whole body going clammy.

Connie was waiting outside already, in a light blue woollen coat, red pumps, and a red hat, holding a box tied with string.
“I'll get in the back,” Steve said, and opened his door. Bucky snapped back to the present.

Bucky could see that Connie gave Steve a slightly quizzical look as he nodded to her and got in the back. Connie slipped into the passenger seat and Bucky had the wherewithal to lean over and give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Connie, this is Steve, my best friend.”

Steve leant forward and held out his hand awkwardly between the front seats. “It's nice to meet you,” he said.

“It's nice to meet you too,” she said, shaking it for a moment. “How long you two been friends?”

Steve looked thoughtful for a second, but Bucky answered for him. “Fourteen years.”

“Wow, that's a long time.”

“More than half our lives,” Bucky said, and put the car into gear again. “We gotta go over to Queens and pick up Steve's girl.”

She smiled, glancing over at Steve, who had fallen into his usual nervous silence, then held out the tied box. “I should've started with 'happy birthday'. Ma baked you something. I was gonna say I did, but I figured you wouldn't believe me.”

“Let's see,” he said, and she undid the bow and flipped the lid open. Inside lay a pile of glazed donuts that smelt delicious. “Jesus, stick one of those in my mouth, will ya?”

He heard a snort from the back seat and he laughed as Connie picked one up and held it out for him to bite into.

“Do you want one too, Steve?” she asked.

“Yeah, I'd love one, thank you,” he said, and she held the box out to him.

Bucky took one hand off the wheel to eat the donut. Jesus, these things were good. “I would've eaten that whole box in one sitting when I was a kid,” he said.

Steve laughed a little. “You still would, given half a chance.”

They made it to Gail's and picked her up, and her and Connie made easy conversation as Bucky headed back. Neither of the girls had seen his house, and his stomach clenched a little at the thought of it. Becca's car was parked outside the house, so he pulled up a little further away, and Connie and Gail had been absorbed enough in their conversation that they hadn't been paying attention to the road.

“Okay, this is us,” he said, and turned off the engine. He picked up the box and got out, then went around to open the door for Connie, who blushed a little.

They walked the twenty feet or so to the house, and Connie looked up at it with wide eyes. “You live in an apartment here?”

“Uh...” He cleared his throat. “The whole house is ours.”

Her eyes got even wider, and wider still when they got into the lobby. The place had faded a lot since that first time Bucky brought Steve home, wallpaper now out of style and a little sun damaged where the windows let in the light, but it was still something, more than most people had. He heard
Gail say something quietly to Steve and Steve laugh in return.

“Can I take your coat?” Bucky asked Connie.

“Oh!” she said, and tore her eyes away. She unbuttoned her coat and slipped it off. Underneath, she wore a navy blue dress with a wide collar that stretched across the tops of her shoulders, leaving her collar bone exposed. “Thanks,” she said, handing him the coat.

He hung it up and turned back to admire her dress. “Jeez, you look like Rita Hayworth in that dress.”

“I do?” She smoothed her palms down the front and frowned. “Oh God, your mother's going to think I'm a floozy!”

He laughed and put his arm around her. “Nah, she won't. Ma's the flooziest of them all, truth be told.”

As if on cue, Ma hurried out into the hall, herself dressed up in a velvet dress with her best pearls on, Becca trailing behind her. She said a quick hello to Steve and Gail, then opened her arms wide when she turned to Bucky and Connie.

He steeled himself. “Ma, this is Connie.”

“Connie!” Ma said, and air kissed both her cheeks without preamble, then stepped back and looked at her. Connie clasped her hands in front of her stomach. “Oh, you're so pretty! Becca, isn't Connie pretty?”

Bucky wondered if that was supposed to be a pointed comment; Becca was dressed in a thin knit sweater and the billowy slacks that Ma hated so much.

“Yeah, Ma, but I think you're making her feel uncomfortable.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Ma said, and patted Connie on the shoulder. “It's just that Bucky has never brought a girl home before, I'm a little overcome. Would you like to come through? Dinner is almost ready, and we have smoked salmon canapés to start – do you like salmon, Connie?”

“Yes, Mrs Barnes,” she said, and Bucky smiled and put his arm around her.

“Oh God,” Ma said, “that makes me sound so old. Call me Tina. You know, I was only nineteen when I had Jamie. His father and I, we were only babies then. This is all to tell you that I am only forty three.”

Connie was nodding along with her, eyes wide again as they walked into the dining room. Florence hopped up and came over to say hello. She was wearing one of her nicer plain cotton dresses, but when she moved Bucky could see her scabby knees.

“Connie, this is Florence and Eugene, the twins, Becca's husband, Arnie, and my dad, George. Ma, where's Grandpa?”

“He's still at work,” Ma said, drawing her eyebrows together apologetically. “He said he'll get here when he can. I'll bring the hors d'oeuvres out.”

Bucky always hated when Ma served 'canapés' because he ate them too fast and then was left waiting for everyone else to finish so that he could eat the real food. Finally, Ma brought out the main dish, his favourite roast chicken with everything. It didn't taste quite so good as when Cook was still around, but he appreciated the effort.
“So, um...” Connie cleared her throat. She was really struggling with the conversation so far and he tried to keep it flowing as much as possible, but it wasn't like he was great at talking, either. Not when he was more concerned with eating, anyhow. Arnie was unfortunately seated directly across from him, and every time he looked up to say something, he made eye contact with him. They had hardly spoken since January. “How long have you two been married, Becca?”

“Six years this coming July,” Becca said.

“Oh! Do you have any kids?”

Becca smiled tightly and Ma took a swift drink of her wine. That was still a sore subject between the two of them. Becca had recently told Ma that the doctor felt she was probably unable to bear children, which had gone down very badly. Bucky didn't think it was right to lie to her about a thing like that, but Steve counselled him to mind his own business, and Becca did too, in more colourful terms.

“No,” she said simply.

Connie looked down at her plate. “Oh...”

“Becca's an accountant at Martin's, remember?” Bucky said, trying to move the conversation along. “She's shut away up there in the office all the time, though, that's why you never see her around.”

“At least I'm using my brain,” Becca said airily. Okay, that was more like it. “You know, Connie, Bucky could have been an accountant too, he was just as good at Math as I was when we were kids. Well, almost.”

“That's true, I've failed out of high school without Bucky tutoring me,” Steve said.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Right, because I really wanted to be an accountant, I really cry myself to sleep every night about that.”

“Children,” Ma murmured.

“And did you know, Connie,” Becca continued unperturbed, “that Bucky went to Harvard for a year and then quit.”

“No...” Connie said. “Wow, that's something.”

Bucky shrugged. “Nah, they were all assholes up there anyway.”

Ma sighed. “Children. Can you please go one meal without shaming me in front of guests?”

“Sorry, Ma,” Bucky and Becca said together. Steve laughed behind his hand and even Dad smiled a little.

Connie cleared her throat and took a little bite of her chicken. “That's really something though, being good at math. I'm terrible at all that.”

Bucky frowned. “That's not true, you're a whiz at the cash register. I could never get the hang of those things. That's probably why that promoted me, just to get me off the shop floor.”

She shrugged. “That's nothing, just adding up and pushing buttons. I don't understand any of that stuff.” She turned her attention back to her chicken, keeping her eyes downcast. This whole thing must have been making her very nervous, because she never acted like this when they were alone.
He was glad Grandpa wasn't there.

He nudged Connie's arm. “Arnie's a doctor,” he said, gesturing to him.

“Well, I'm starting my residency in the summer.”

Bucky sighed. “That's a same thing, isn't it?”

“Well... no. I'll technically be a doctor once I graduate in the spring, but I can't practice until I complete my residency.”

Bucky stared at him. For fuck's sake... “Right.”

“So, um, what do you do, Mr Barnes?” Connie asked.

Dad smiled. “Oh, I just make shoes.”

Connie smiled. “Bucky always has really nice shoes.”

“Do I?”

She nodded. “Uh huh, I always thought that.”

“Well, thank you very much, Connie,” Dad said.

She smiled a little. Bucky thought Dad should do more talking, no one ever felt nervous around him. “What about you, Steve?”

“I run a newspaper stand and I do some commercial illustrating on the side.”

“That's great, would I have seen any of it?”

Steve shook his head. “Nothing you'd remember, probably, just catalogue work, but it's okay money.”

Connie looked at Gail, who smiled. “I just work in the typing pool for the New York Bulletin, it's not very exciting compared to this family of geniuses.” She caught Bucky's eye for half a second, then looked away.

“We're the dumbest groups of geniuses you'll ever meet, then,” Bucky said.

Becca snorted. “You can speak for yourself, brother of mine.”

“I'm going to be an Olympic swimmer,” Florence announced. “And then when I'm too old for that, I'm going to be chemist, like Marie Curie, and cure something important.”

“Preferably without irradiating yourself,” Bucky added.


Eugene nodded solemnly. “I'm going to join the seminary when I'm eighteen, Father Joseph said he'd sponsor me.”

“Father Joseph hates me,” Bucky said, laughing. “He wasn't impressed with my skills as an altar boy.”

Ma clicked her tongue. “Father Joseph doesn't hate anyone, that's not Christian. He just thinks you're
a terrible, lazy good for nothing.”

Steve burst out laughing and half choked on his food until Dad leaned over and thumped him on the back.

“Thank you, Ma.”

The cake that Ma created for him looked okay on the surface, lovingly iced with chocolate icing, but when he cut into it, he could see that the actual cake part had been reassembled underneath like a jigsaw puzzle. It was quite dry and tasteless, but he told her he loved it, and he did. He got a few presents, nothing extravagant, thankfully, and in the late evening he drove Connie home. Becca said they’d drop Steve and Gail off home so Bucky and Connie could have some alone time. Arnie wished him a nice evening, his eyebrows slightly creased.

Connie didn’t talk much on the ride home, fussing with the fabric of her dress instead. When he parked outside her building, she took a breath and looked at him.

“Your friends and family are really smart,” she said.

“They’re all right.”

She shook her head. “And your sister’s so chic. I felt so silly in this stupid dress.”

“He,” he said, and took her hand. “You look beautiful.”

She shrugged. “But I’m not smart, you know? I’m just good at looking pretty, and normally that’s enough for fellas, but I don’t think that’s gonna be enough for you. God, Bucky, you went to Harvard.”

He bet this was her asshole father and brothers telling her she was only a pretty face. “Look, here’s the thing about me: when I was a kid, school was easy. I was a little prince at home and everyone loved me, and everyone thought I’d really go places. But I was lazy and I couldn't keep up at Harvard and I fucked it up and I came home to my mother.” And Steve; that was it, really, wasn't it? He didn't want to spend four years away from Steve. Connie's lips parted slightly, but she didn't speak, just squeezed his hand. “I slicked my hair back like an idiot and shook people down for money and called it a job, and when I couldn't stand that any more, my younger sister got me a real job at Martin's. I drink too much and I get into too many fights, and I've never been serious about a girl—” He paused half a second. “—before. So, don't ever think that I'm better than you, 'cause I'm not.”

Connie leaned across and kissed him, wrapping her palm around the back of his neck. “Let's go see a movie tomorrow after work.”

“Sure,” he said.

“Bonnie's room mate is away next week, we might be able to go back there after.”

He dipped his head and kissed her neck. “Love to.”

-

Sex with Connie was a lot nicer than with the other girls he'd slept with. It was sweet, it wasn't dirty or liquored up like Delilah, or a constant war of one-upmanship like Marge, or like any of the other girls between then and now. Connie was sweet, and shy, and he was her first, which was something. She kissed softly and ran her hands all over him gently; she made him feel good.
Arnie graduated from Columbia in May and with his new residency salary, him and Becca could afford to move to a nicer apartment, leaving the old one behind in a much better state than they'd found it because of Bucky. He hoped the landlord was grateful.

They moved to a two bedroom apartment a few blocks south of their old one, and offered the second room to Steve. He insisted on paying exactly half the rent, which they agreed to, although Becca confided in Bucky that she'd fudged the total amount just a little. Bucky was very glad that Steve was out of the Burnside's living room and sleeping in a real bed again.

“Is Gail gonna come over and warm the house up for you?” Bucky asked as he put together Steve's new bed. It was an old one from home, a double, but it was nicer than anything Steve would be able to afford. He expected Steve to admonish him at the innuendo, but Steve just sighed and shook his head.

“You two had a fight?”

Steve shrugged. He was filling up the dresser that the last tenants had left behind. Bucky was sure the thing was infested with bugs, but Steve wouldn't let him burn it. “No, we just, um, we've stopped seeing each other.”


Steve pursed his mouth.

“Did she step out on you?” When Steve didn't answer immediately, Bucky stood up. “She did!”

“No, no, it wasn't--”

“That fucking bitch!”

“Hey,” Steve said sharply. “Don't call her that. She didn't, she was just... starting to have feelings for someone else. She wasn't gonna do anything about it, but she didn't want to lie to me.”

“Who is he? I'll kill him,” Bucky said.

Steve laughed and shook his head. “No, you won't.”

“I fucking will. Some guy's been turning your girl's head?”

“He didn't mean to, he doesn't know anything about it.”

“How the fuck do you know? Why are you being so nice about this?”

Steve smiled and rolled his eyes. “Because it's you.”

“It's me what?”

“You're the guy who 'turned her head'. She told me a few weeks ago that she was crushing on you real hard and it wasn't fair on me.”

Bucky opened his mouth, then closed it again. “Aren't you mad?”

“If it was anyone other than you, believe me, I'd be furious.”

Bucky didn't know what to say; he'd sure turned a few girls' heads over the years, but he'd never broke up a couple before, he didn't think, and he'd never want to do that to Steve. Up until now, he'd
thought Gail was okay – better than Ethel, anyhow, and interested in the same things as Steve. He thought Steve would have been happy like that. “I haven't led her on, you know, or anything like that. Barely talked to her, I swear.”

Steve waved him off. “Come on, I know that. You're practically married to Connie, anyhow.”

“Yeah...” Bucky wrapped his arms around himself. “Jesus, I'm sorry.”

Steve turned back to the dresser. “Buy me some pizza to make up for it.”

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He kept on training Steve and competing in boxing matches. He took some money for them now, though most of it went to Pete. He was the local reigning champion for the third year running. Didn't help Steve much though, he was still weak as a kitten in the ring.

By the summer, the draft registration had been extended up to forty five, which meant, at forty three, that Dad had to register and got a number just like Bucky. Ma cried about it. Bucky thought that if Dad did get an induction letter, he'd have a pretty good chance of not being drafted because he still had dependants at home, but that didn't console Ma much. Bucky didn't know what else to say about it all, so he avoided the subject.

In mid-June, Kate had her baby, a little boy with an angry potato face like his father. Connie invited Bucky over to meet it, and Ma told him to bring something for the baby so he bought a rattle from the toy store and gave it to Kate with a big smile and a 'congratulations'.

Connie, Kate, and all the other women in the place clustered around the cradle and clucked and cooed over the red-faced little thing. Bucky didn't really want to look at it, but his other option was Larry, Moe, Curly Joe and company, so he stayed with Connie.

“You'll have a little baby of your own, soon,” Babcia told Connie. “You'll have such cute little ones, your nose and his beautiful eyes.”

Bucky coughed and glanced away. Christ, Babcia already had them in the church and Connie knocked up, with triplets probably. Connie looked embarrassed, but not angry like Becca got.

When they left later to see a movie, she apologised.

“It's okay,” he said. “Ma does the same thing.”

“We would have cute kids, though,” she said.

“Is that something you want soon?” God, an angry potato baby of their own? He'd spend the rest of his life at Martin's and Connie would stay at home with their five Polish-Italian-Romanian-American children.

She shrugged. “According to my family, I've got a foot in the grave already.” She looked up at him and pursed her lips. “I'm not hinting, I just... well, I don't know what else I'd do. I like babies.”

“Yeah,” he said, and thankfully they were coming up to the theatre. He took out his wallet in relief and went up to ticket seller.

They got tickets to Citizen Kane; Steve had seen it the month before and couldn't stop raving about it, but Bucky spent the picture eating popcorn and working on his thumbnail. Would they stay in Park Slope? Ma would want them to, and he guessed he would too, but he bet Stanley would insist
on keeping Connie under the thumb in Greenpoint. God, he'd probably want them to live in the
apartment, like the rest of the family did. Bucky would kill himself, or the rest of them.

He'd have to give up boxing, probably, five kids to look after and all. He'd start losing his sight like
Dad, and probably get kind of fat. He'd probably be permissive like Dad too, he'd feel bad yelling at
kids. Connie would be too nice as well; they'd have awful, unruly brats crashing around the house.
Steve would probably become some big famous artist and come around every once in a while and
not comment on the shit on the walls or the shrieking or how Bucky let himself go. Bucky would
hardly ever threaten to kill people any more, because the kids would hear.

He'd have a normal life and old ladies would say they were a cute family, and when he saw Arnie at
Thanksgiving, he wouldn't even remember that evening; he wouldn't even think about the guys at
Harvard and at the Fair because he'd have a ring on his finger and a loving wife on his arm.

When the movie was over and it was late and dark outside, he crowded her up against the side of the
car and kissed her until her knees went weak.

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In July, he went alone to a jewellery store and bought her ring. The owner wasn't interested until
Bucky pulled out a wad of cash, then he hopped to showing Bucky every ring in the store. He chose
a gold ring that was shaped like a spiral with a pearl on top and a diamond on bottom. The diamond
was one and a half carats, which was a good size, according to the guy. It should have been, it was
almost five hundred dollars. Bucky didn't know Connie's ring size, though she had tiny hands so he
figured it was one of the smaller ones. The jewellers assured him he could bring it back for resizing
as he placed the money snug in the cash register.

Bucky placed the green ring box in the top drawer of his dresser and left it for the day he was brave
enough to need it.

-

Bucky hated working Sundays, it was supposed to be a day of rest, but Martin's didn't care about that
so long as there were customers who wanted jockstraps and Frigidaire. Thing of it was, almost no
one did come into the store because they had better things to do on a Sunday in December. Connie
was on Cosmetics, testing out the new lipsticks Max Factor had sent. She wasn't supposed to do that,
but Bucky always wrote off the pieces as damaged on arrival. Hey, things got damaged all the time.

He sat at one of the stools along the counter and watched her paint her mouth dark red. She turned
from the mirror and pouted her lips at him. “What do you think? It's from their new 'tru-color' range.
This one is for brunettes.”

“It suits you.”

She came over and kissed his cheek. “It's smudge proof, too. What should I try next?”

He looked over the displays of make up and gestured to a little red box. “How about the mascara?”

“Maybelline velvet black,” she said. She knew all the names, and he knew quite a few now as well.
She picked it up and turned back to the mirror. He laughed a little when she opened her mouth as she
applied the mascara and she clicked her tongue. “Have you seen the new jackets they have upstairs?
Their real Kitty Foyle looking, I wanna go try them on after my shift.”

Bucky smiled. She had a thing about Kitty Foyle. “Sure.”
Urgent footsteps hammered into the store. “Have you heard?” the guy yelled. Bucky recognised him as one of the stock room boys.

“Heard what?”

“The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor!”

“What? Connie, turn the radio on!”

She was already ahead of him, flipping through the stations. “God,” she murmured, “it's on every station.”

“...Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor from the air and all naval and military activities on the Island of Oahu, principal American base in the Hawaiian Islands; that was Secretary Early's message...”

The reports went on for hours. Bucky closed up the store and sent everyone home, then took Connie back to the house and listened to the radio all afternoon with the family. By the end of the afternoon, the broadcasts were estimating that over a thousand people had died. For a week after, all Bucky saw and heard was Pearl Harbor, on the front of every newspaper and on the lips of every person he passed on the street. The US declared war on Germany four days later on December 11th, and suddenly it was real. Bucky's registration number had sat in his wallet for over a year, and he'd got to the point where he didn't think really about it, but now it weighed heavy again. Men all over the city were enlisting – faces disappeared everyday, it seemed.

Steve tried to enlist in mid December and was swiftly stamped 4-F. He was beyond furious about it, but Bucky was relieved. At least that was over with.

Arnie got his induction letter at the end of January. He was required to report to the draft office two weeks later on the morning of February 14th. Becca was really cut up about it, almost like a real wife.

“How would you feel if Steve was going off to war?” she asked. They were supposed to be going out to see a movie, but she hadn't felt like it once he was there, so they were just sitting on her couch, smoking.

“Christ,” Bucky said, and shook his head. It didn't bear thinking about. “All right. Does he have any health problems?”

“Just his sight, but glasses fix that.”

Bucky thought about it for a moment. “Well, he's got an important job, right? They'll want to keep him stateside.”

“I hope so.” She glanced at him. “You're not gonna enlist, are you?”

Bucky shook his head. “I should, but...” Steve hadn't said a thing about it, he was careful with his judgements, especially concerning Bucky, but still, Bucky knew that Steve thought in black and white and as far as he was concerned, joining the fight was the right thing to do. “I guess I'm not brave enough.”

Becca pressed her hand over his. “You're plenty brave.”

He smiled. “Thanks. You too.”
On the evening of the 13th, she arranged a maybe going away party that Bucky had no way of getting out of without being a real asshole. Arnie had spent the day with his family, and came back looking wrung out. It was a small gathering, the four of them plus Lily and some dark-haired guy called Darren who looked borderline distraught whenever he looked at Arnie.

Bucky tried not to look.

The night was okay, though; Becca and Steve did most of the talking and Bucky drank beer until he stopped focusing on how hard his heart was beating. He didn't have much to add to the conversation, since Steve clearly knew Lily and Darren and all five of them talked about work and school and politics, and all that sort of stuff. Bucky threw in a dumb comment here and there, but mostly stayed quiet.

At ten, there was a hammering at the door.

“You expecting someone? Might liven this place up,” Bucky muttered.

Becca spared him a quick, irritated glance before going to the door and peering through the peephole. “Shit. Arnie, it's Leo.”

“What?” Arnie got up and went to the door, nudging Becca aside to look.

“I can hear you in there!” came Leo's slurred voice from the other side.

“Shit,” Arnie echoed, and urged Becca back. “I'll deal with him.” He opened the door and immediately stepped out and closed it again, but that didn't stop them all from hearing Leo's obnoxious voice.

“You got both your wifeys in there?” Leo shouted. Darren shifted in his chair and looked at his hands. Arnie said something muffled, which was answered with a cry of, “I'm not good enough for your fancy building?”

For a couple of minutes, their voices disappeared, only to return from outside the building. Bucky put his beer bottle down and went to the window. Leo was yelling like a fucking lunatic, bringing people from the neighbouring buildings to their own windows to listen. Arnie took it with a tense stance and a hushed voice, just like he had with Bucky last year. He took all that shit like he deserved it.

“Isn't anyone gonna do anything?” Steve said.

“It'll only make things worse,” Becca said with a sigh. “The neighbours already look at us funny...”

Bucky looked back at her. She looked resigned to it. Darren looked like he was hardly breathing at all, and Lily's mouth was pursed, her eyes hard. Steve looked like he was going to climb the walls.

Bucky walked back across the room, picked up his beer bottle, and left the apartment to Becca's calls. He was more than a little drunk at this point and compounded it by draining the bottle as he made his way downstairs. Leo was still screeching like a banshee when he got outside, and Arnie did an almost comical double take when he saw Bucky come out.

“Hey,” Bucky said, then louder. “Hey, asshole, you want to shut up?”

“This has nothin' to do with you,” Leo replied, letting out fumes that knocked Bucky back. Damn, that was toxic. He turned back to Arnie and started laying him again, 'fag' this and 'pervert' that.

“Hey,” Bucky said again, making no effort to be heard over the racket. He swapped his beer bottle to
his left hand, slapped his hand onto Leo’s shoulder, spun him around, and sucker-punched him with his right. Leo stumbled back, tripped, and hit the deck. “Hey. Shut up.”

Blood poured out from between Leo’s fingers where he’d clamped his hand over his nose. He scrabbled his way back up while Bucky stood over him impassively. Arnie was rooted to the spot, staring down at his brother.

“You fucking--” Leo grind out, and Bucky returned the bottle back to his right hand and then smashed it against the side of the building. Leo tried to back off then, ’cause he wasn’t quite as dumb as he looked, but Bucky had never let anyone get away before.

He grabbed Leo by his blood-stained collar and brought the jagged edge of the bottle to his neck. “Leonard,” he said, “I know you think you’re really something. I know you go around town feeling like you own it ’cause you’re bigger than everyone else. I know you think you’re better than your fag brother because you don’t do those perverted things he does and you think you were righteous in kicking him half to death when he was defenceless, but here the thing, Leonard: no one loves you. And no one will ever love you. You are a shameful sack of shit, and if I sliced your throat open right here, no one would care. Your mother wouldn’t care. And if you ever come near Arnie again or if you ever even think a single bad thing about my fucking sister, I will make you eat this bottle.” He released Leo’s collar and looked down. He had a big wet patch on the front of his pants. Bucky smiled. “And you’ve pissed yourself.”

Leo took off running. Bucky rubbed at his nose and sniffed, the cold air was making it run.

“Th-thanks,” Arnie whispered.

“’sall right.” He looked back and found the rest of them by the door, watching. “Hey.”

“Jesus Christ,” Becca said, and came down the steps to give him a hug. He returned it with one arm, holding the broken bottle away from his body. “You fucking psycho.”

He looked over her shoulder at Steve, who broke into a big fucking radiant smile, the most radiant Bucky had ever seen.

The following morning, Arnie was inducted into the US Navy.

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By March, Bucky was expecting it, but when he picked up the mail on Monday morning and flicked through the letters, his heart still sank. He could tell right away, without hardly looking at the envelope. He left the rest of the letters on the hall table and went upstairs to open it.

To James Buchanan Barnes

You will report to the local board named above at Prospect Branch Library at 7am on the 23rd day of March, 1942

He folded the letter back up and tucked it in his dresser drawer next to Connie’s ring box. Tomorrow was his birthday. He’d think about it again after that.

His birthday dinner went off. In the year since Connie had first met the family, she’d relaxed a lot about the whole thing, and Bucky could tell that Ma was planning the wedding already. Bucky had had an idea to propose to Connie in the summer, somewhere nice like the beach or the park. Now if he was going to do it, he’d have to do it in the next two weeks and love her and leave her.
It was hard to stay happy through the dinner and Connie kissed him and asked him if he was okay in the car after. She thought he was going to break up with her, she always did when he was unhappy. He nodded wordlessly.

He was quiet throughout dinner on Wednesday as the kids talked about upcoming tests and As in Math. Ma cleared the dishes afterwards and took them into the kitchen, and he smiled a little. When he was the kids' age, Ma would wait like a queen for the maid to clear the table – he didn't think she'd ever seen a box of soap flakes until a few years ago.

He got up and followed her into the kitchen. “Ma...”

“Mmhm?”

He took a breath. “I'll wash, you dry.” She hated getting her hands all soapy, she said it made her nails split.

Ma told him about the gossip on the street while they worked. The woman across the road, the one with the hair, her husband had stepped out on her with the nanny. The Lipshitz at the end of the street were going bankrupt. Pam had got pregnant out of wedlock and rushed into a quick marriage. Ma didn't think the husband was also the father.

“Ma,” he said, after he handed her the last plate. He looked down at the empty sink.

“She seemed like a nice girl. You took her out once, didn't you?”

“Ma.”

She paused. “What?”

He clenched his jaw and didn't look up. There was a long silence before Ma whispered, 'no'.

“No,” she repeated. “When? I won't have it. Your grandfather, he can stop this, he knows people down there, he can-- You're not even fit to serve, your leg, I have all the paperwork, the doctors will back us up, I'll see to that--”

“Ma,” he said, ragged as his eyes started to get warm. She went quiet, then wrapped her arms around him.

“I'm sorry, cucciolo, it'll be okay.”

By Thursday, everyone knew. Connie cried in the car and Becca hugged him without a mean word and Steve looked sort of jealous but sad at the same time. Guys in the store slapped him on the back and said he was doing his duty, and his boss said his job would be open when he came back. Bucky knew it wouldn't be but that was the least of his worries.

Ma had a new idea everyday for a week on how to get Bucky out of service, and he had a few of his own. He didn't have any physical, mental, educational, career, or family reasons that would prevent him from fighting, but he supposed he could try the conscientious objector angle. He was pretty sure that only worked with Quakers, though, and he didn't think he'd ever be able to look Steve in the eye again if he managed it. He'd never be able to face Steve again if he didn't do his duty.

By the 18th, Ma stopped coming up with ideas. The waiting was like being on death row and he took the rest of his time off work to spend at home. The kids skipped school and Ma didn't mind; they went out and saw a film everyday and he spent every morning with Steve at the stand.
On the 21st, he went over to Becca’s and got drunk. He couldn't do it at home and he didn't want to waste his precious hours at the club. It had become a point of contention between Becca and Ma, Becca, a wife without her husband, living with an unattached and unrelated young man in her apartment; Ma wanted her to move home. Becca refused, and Bucky was glad of it now, he had a place to go when the house was too suffocating.

Steve didn't drink, he never could handle it – shit, Bucky couldn't handle it either, he just pretended he could – but he sat with them and nursed a glass of water. Bucky drank until the world was in soft focus but it didn't do much for his anxiety; his nails were bitten to nothing around his beer bottle. He couldn't smoke either around Steve, but he didn't want to get up and go outside. After he'd been chewing on his thumbnail for a good ten minutes, Steve went into his bedroom and came back with his asthma cigarettes.

"C'mon, Buck," he said when Bucky waved him off. "You need it more than I do right now."

Bucky sure would like to get out of his head for a while. "We'll share," he said, and Steve agreed.

Steve only needed a little bit to get where he needed to be and Becca only took a couple of drags, so Bucky smoked the rest of it until his limbs loosened all the way and he wasn't worried about getting his head blown off by a Jerry.

Becca put on some Glenn Miller and sang under her breath as she made dinner, potatoes and some Birds Eye frozen fish to soak up the alcohol. He'd feel like hell tomorrow otherwise, she said.

"You're a real gourmet," he said when she brought it in. He was slumped down on the couch and didn't bother to sit up for it. She dropped the plate on his lap with a sigh.

"Arnie did the cooking," she said.

"He makes a mean beef sausage," Steve said, and Bucky burst out laughing, sending one of his potatoes rolling off the plate and onto the floor. Becca retrieved it from under the couch, blew off the dust and fluff, and tossed it to him as Steve blushed.

"I... didn't mean it like that," he mumbled.

"At least the Jerries have got that going for them," Bucky said when he got himself under control. He bit into the dusty potato. It tasted fine.

"I hope he did okay in basic training," she said. Bucky swallowed down a laugh at the thought of Arnie being put through his paces on an assault course. Christ, he probably shit himself the first time he held a gun. If that's even what they did in the Navy, Bucky didn't know a thing about it.

"I'm sure he's doing fine," Bucky said. Steve echoed the sentiment.

They reminisced for a while about being kids, the good old days before the twins were born and Bucky and Becky reigned supreme in the house, and Steve's tenement, Dot yelling at the kids and Eva playing her Helen Kane records with her door open in the middle of the day. Eva's room was a wonderland of furs and fake jewels and she'd regale them with sanitised stories of her adventures whenever she caught them peeking in. Sarah made lemonade in the summer and sometimes they had little parties in the building – Bucky had forgotten all about that until now. He loved that building, despite how disgusting it was; there was so much life in it, back then.

Eventually they rolled round to the subject of Connie, the first girl Bucky had ever loved. That wasn't true, there'd been Hazel years before, but Bucky let it go with a self-deprecating smile.
“I bought her a ring a while back,” he said, the words slipping out easily. From the looks on their faces, it was probably something he should have kept to himself.

“Are you serious?” Becca said.

“Uh huh, it cost five hundred dollars.”

Steve whistled. “Jesus, when were you going to tell us?”

“Well, Joseph,” Bucky started, and Steve smacked him in the arm. He laughed and shook his head. “I dunno, when I got down on one knee? I was thinkin' of doing it in the summer.”

“Bucky!” Becca cried. “Why didn't you tell us about this?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I guess it's not gonna happen now, so what does it matter?”

“You could still...” Steve began, but trailed off before he finished.

Bucky smiled. “I'll figure it out.”

By eleven, Bucky was well and truly sauced and Becca called home to tell Ma he'd be staying over. He drifted off for a while on the couch, slid all the way down with his chin on his chest, until Becca roused him.

“Come on,” she said, and wound an arm around him.

“Huh?”

“I'm putting you in Steve's bed.” She dragged him to his feet and pressed her palm flat against his chest.

“Steve?” he mumbled.

“It's a big bed,” she replied.

Together? He blinked heavily, but by the time he had a reply ready, he was in Steve's room and then being lowered onto his bed. Becca took his socks off and swung his legs into the bed.

“You can do the rest,” she said, and he opened his mouth to reply. “I'm not ready to see what's going on under his clothes.”

He turned his head and found Steve standing by the other side of the bed, smiling slightly. “Night, Becca,” Steve said, and climbed onto the mattress. He was in his pyjamas already. “How much do you want off?”

Bucky opened his mouth. He could undress himself, he wasn't completely gone yet. “Uh. Just the belt.”

Steve leaned over and Bucky felt his bony hands press lightly into his stomach as Steve pulled the buckle back and released the leather belt. Bucky thought about the morning after he came home from the hospital, Steve bending down and doing up his pants for him.

“Okay,” Steve said, and tapped him on the leg. Bucky must have drifted off again. Steve turned off the lamp and pulled the blanket over the both of them. “Night.”

“Night,” Bucky said, turning his head to look at Steve. Steve slept slightly propped, it was better for
his asthma and his heart. Bucky thought his back must have hurt from that. The last time they slept close like this was when they were kids, making a giant bed out of couch cushions in the living room at home. The first time, Bucky stayed up all night, watching Steve take shallow, laboured breaths – he was so sure that Steve would stop breathing if he closed his eyes for a second.

Bucky wasn't so sure that he'd been wrong about that. He fell asleep watching Steve breathe.

The next day, Sunday, Steve didn't have work, which seemed unusual, but Bucky didn't question it. Becca made eggs and sausages with lots of ketchup and grease, and rolled her eyes when he asked if they were Arnie's sausages. They tasted good, a lot better than that frozen crap the night before.

It was chilly out, but Steve still said they should go to Coney Island; Becca cried off it, saying she had work to catch up on, and the two of them set out at ten am. Steve stuffed his hands in his pockets on the walk to the station, pulling them out when they stepped into the subway car. A piece of paper fluttered out, landing outside of the doors, and Bucky hopped out, grabbed it off the platform floor, and jumped back in before the doors closed. It was a little crumpled, and he smoothed it out to look at it as Steve made a grab for it. Bucky lifted it higher, laughing, until he read the words, 'Certificate of Acceptability'.

"You shouldn't keep this in your pocket like that."

"Give it back, Bucky."

Bucky brought it closer and read it. "Since when are you from Hell's Kitchen?" He looked at the date: *March 13th, 1942*. "What..."

Steve snatched it back and shoved it in his pocket.

"You went to Hell's Kitchen and faked your enlistment papers?"

Steve shushed him and took a seat. "I'm still 4-F, didn't get to one thirty even with all the water I drank."

"That's not the fucking point," Bucky said. "You are not healthy enough to join the army."

Steve set his jaw. "I gotta try."

"You tried! You've tried, twice. I'm going go out there and I'm gonna--" His voice gave out for a second. "You've gotta promise you won't try again."

Steve sighed. "Okay."

"You promise?"

"I said, 'okay'. I don't wanna fight."

Bucky took a breath. "Yeah. Neither do I."

The day went like he expected it to. He spent the morning and early afternoon with Steve, then went to Connie's in the late afternoon; she gave him a picture of herself because that's what all the girls did and cried until he left for home. Becca and Steve stayed the night, and all of them, the kids included, stayed up for most of the night. No way Bucky would have slept anyhow.

In the morning, Bucky packed a bag and Ma wept. Grandpa slapped him on the back. The kids cried...
and Becca hugged him for a long time. He didn't know what to say to Steve, so he just gave him a quick hug and a pat on the back. “I'll write when I can,” he promised.

The library was only a few blocks away, but Dad walked him over. Bucky hadn't had a thing to eat because he was too sick, but he hoped the draft officers would give them something to eat, because once the sickness passed, he'd be ravenous. There were lots of other men coming to the library, walking as if to their execution. There was a line out the door, and when they got near it, Dad stopped and began tidying Bucky's shirt.

“I know I am not the type of father you wanted me to be.”

“Dad...”

Dad held up his hand. “I know I haven't told you much about my life before. My father made shoes and my mother ran a kindergarten, we lived in Dorohoi. They died when I was six. I had eight siblings, including your uncle Constantin, who had a spirit and a face just like yours.”

“Is that...?”

“Yes, he died at seventeen. He took care of me for as long as he could.”

“What about your other siblings?”

“The babies were adopted by other families, the rest died, one way or another. It was a hard life, and when I came here, I tried to forget. I kept my voice small and let people walk on me.”

He meant Grandpa, Bucky thought. Dad pressed his palm to Bucky's cheek. “You never let people walk on you, and that makes me proud. You make me very proud. Whenever I look at you, I see Costin.” He cleared his throat. “You better join the line.”

Bucky nodded and shouldered his bag. “I'll write.”

He waited an hour to be seen by a doctor. Standing shirtless in a room full of fellas was an odd experience, like gym class but much more uncomfortable. He looked a lot better than most of these guys, though, so that was something. The doctor conducting the exam eyed the scar on Bucky's leg and made him go through a series of tests to check his range of movement and his reflexes. He did stretches and strength tests and got hit with little hammers. In the back of his head, he hoped that maybe he'd at least be deemed fit for limited service only, but the doctor said he was a fine specimen of a young man and fit to serve. The draft officer filled out his draft card: James Buchanan Barnes, 6', 180lbs, of ruddy complexion (there was some discussion about that – was he light-skinned or ruddy? – the officer eventually settled on ruddy), 1-A.

He was put on the two pm train to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin.

Chapter End Notes

- Connie's floozy dress!

- Fuck off, Leo.
Things weren’t so bad. Six weeks of basic training went easy. Physical stuff, Bucky could do, no problem, and he was so tired at the end of every day that he went straight to sleep, mind blank. At the end of the six weeks, they gave him a rifle, called him a marksman, and sent him to Fort Hamilton to join the 107th Regiment of the New York State Guard. The other guys complained about not going overseas but for Bucky, it meant going home or as close to it. They were warned that they would have to stay at the base unless they put in for leave, but Bucky heard talk that the brass were pretty relaxed about comings and goings when off-duty.

He arrived at the installation in Brooklyn on May 8th and was assigned to barracks along with seven other privates. He received his orientation on his guard duties and his kitchen duties, tried the slop in the mess, and was shining his shoes by nine pm. When he introduced himself to his new roommates, he got christened with the name 'Mr. President'.

Before lights out, he lay out on his cot and started reading Darkness at Noon, which Becca had inexplicably sent him in a care package. It was one hell of a depressing book. Across the bunk, some of the guys were giving a kid a hard time. Bucky guessed the kid was eighteen, at least – he hoped so, anyhow – but he was a skinny thing. Maybe 5’5'', wishy-washy ginger hair, a pigeon chest, and a congested look to him. He reminded Bucky of Steve.

“Christ, look at this looker!” one of them said with a screechy laugh. Bucky lay his book down on his chest and watched them.

“Don’t--!” the kid said, trying to follow the guy as he yanked a photo away from him. Another guy pushed the kid back down with a laugh.

“Now, how did you nab a broad like this, Williams?” the guy said nastily. He passed the picture around, to many hyena laughs from his buddies.

“Please don’t...”

“Don't what?” one of them said and took the picture between his fingers, tearing it a quarter of the way down. “Don't do this? I'd be doing you a favour.”

Williams looked stricken and tried to get up again, but the hyenas wouldn't let him. Bucky put his book aside and swung his legs down to the floor. He took the few steps over to the scene and held out his hand.

“Lemme see,” he said, and Williams looked even more upset. The guy passed it up to him with a laugh and Bucky looked at the girl in the picture. She had a round face, a high forehead with a receding hairline, wide set eyes, and a thin mouth. He flipped it over. On the back, in tiny, delicate handwriting, read, My beloved Johnny, I'll wait for you forever, my love always, Bernice.
He clicked his tongue and stepped across to Johnny's bed. He held out the picture. “She's very pretty,” he said, and Johnny took it slowly, like he thought Bucky was going to pull it away again.

The guys groaned at him ruining their fun.

“Let's see what your girl's like, Pres!” one of them said, and dove for his bunk. One of the other guys blocked Bucky from getting back over, and held up his fists laughingly. Bucky shoved him aside, but the first guy had already rifled through his bag and found the little collection of pictures. He flicked through them, letting pictures of Steve and the family flutter to the floor, ignored.

“Jeez, now look at her,” he said, whistling low. He was holding the picture of Connie in his greasy hands. “She is something else. Oh, that face is gonna be in my dreams tonight.” He made to pass the picture around, but Bucky reached out, grabbing hold of his hair.

“Get offa me!” he yelped, hands flying up to pry Bucky off.

Bucky reached over and plucked the picture from him, then dragged him around and threw him down. “If I find you whacking off to my girl,” he said, giving him a light kick to make sure he had his attention. “I'll chop your dick off and feed it to you.”

One of the other guy laughed. Christ, no loyalty among hyenas. Bucky jerked around to him. “And if you mess with Williams's picture again, I'll chop your dick off and feed it to him, too. Got it?”

The guy blanched and nodded.

“Great,” Bucky said, and sat back down on his bed. He leant down to pick up the discarded pictures, and tucked them into his book. “And keep it down, all right?”

Along with the 107th, some men from the 92nd Infantry were assigned to the base, arriving a week after Bucky. The hyenas talked about them disdainfully and although Bucky wasn't part of the conversations, they weren't quiet about it and he overheard when they were all meant to be sleeping.

He figured out why on the day they arrived. An all-Negro regiment marching across the base. Some of the men muttered under their breath and spat on the ground. The 92nd held their heads up high.

There wasn't enough room in the base for proper segregation, it hadn't been built to hold this many people to begin with, but the 92nd used the head second, ate second, got the worst barracks, got their letters last. Bucky watched them everyday file into the mess after everyone else was seated, left with whatever hadn't already been pillaged. Everyone wanted corned beef hash and mashed potatoes, and no one wanted congealed green peas and spam. The 92nd always got the peas and spam.

Bucky watched as they filed in for lunch. He'd just sat down for a lunch of meatloaf and potatoes boiled within an inch of their life and he knew there was hardly anything left, just some bread, butter, peas, and slightly rancid smelling tuna. They filled their trays up and went to their table, which was set up only a few feet from the 107th's. One guy, Bucky figured him to be about his age, looked down at the slop on his tray with a very slight expression of disgust before sitting down. The guys around Bucky were talking in loud, excitable tones, jostling him every couple of minutes.

He ignored them, watching the back of the disgusted guy's head as he bent over his tray. After a couple of minutes, Bucky stood up with his own tray, to calls of, 'where're ya going?’, and walked between the tables. They hooted and hollered, expecting some kind of show.

Christ.
The guys at the 92nd's table eyed him as he came over with his tray, their conversation hushing up immediately. The guy he was after kept his head down resolutely, his grip going tight on his fork. Bucky knew he was ready to use it, if need be; well, Bucky would do the same, the brass probably shouldn't have given them such sharp objects in a climate like this. He tapped the guy on the shoulder.

The guy turned his head slowly, still mostly facing the front. “Yeah?”

“Hey,” Bucky said, suddenly wondering why he'd come over here and decided to risk a stabbing in the face with a fork. “I noticed you weren't enjoying the look of the chow much.”

“It's fine,” he said shortly.

“Come on, it smells like something died there,” Bucky said, gesturing towards the guy's tray. The guy still hadn't turned to face him, and the others at his table were watching Bucky with narrowed eyes. “So... you wanna switch?”

The guy looked up in surprise. He had dark brown eyes and a reasonably round, small face. Bucky liked the look of him. “Why?”

Bucky shrugged. “I dunno. These guys--” He gestured to his own table with a nod of his head. “We come in here and pick over whatever's good, leave you with stuff not even a mother would force on you. And anyhow, I need the vegetables, I'm still a growing boy.” He held out his tray. “C'mon, I ain't spat in it or anything.”

The guy drew his eyebrows together for a moment, then nodded. “All right,” he said, and passed his tray up. Bucky laid his down on the table.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the other tray in one hand and holding his other hand out. “Bucky.”

The guy looked up at him steadily before taking his hand. His handshake was warm and firm. “Gabe.”

“Nice to meet you, Gabe,” Bucky said, and Gabe cracked a small but genuine smile.

“Back at you.”

“Barnes, sit down!” the sergeant yelled.

Bucky grimaced at Gabe and withdrew his hand, walking back to his table. He sat down and picked up his fork. It didn't look so bad – he'd probably need to hold his nose on the tuna, but it wasn't much worse than some of the dishes Ma had toyed with over the years.

“What the hell'd you do that for?” the guy beside him hissed.

Bucky looked at him. “I wanted some fuckin' peas,” he said, picked up the green, gelatinous substance with his hand and shoved the handful in his mouth. He leaned into the guy and chewed it with an open mouth, much to the guy's disgust, until the sergeant yelled for him to settle down.

He had patrol duty that night. Nothing much to it, just patrolling the perimeter. It was better than being stuck in his barrack and he could take the time to read without being harassed by his bunkmates.
“Hey,” someone called out to him. He looked up and saw Gabe walking towards him.

“Hey.”

“I guess I should thank you for the food.”

Bucky shrugged. “Shouldn't you be in your barracks?”

“I slipped out.” Gabe shook his head. “Sleep doesn't come easy for me.”

“You can patrol with me, if you want,” Bucky said. “If that doesn't put you to sleep, nothin’ will.”

Gabe smiled and fell into step with him. Bucky glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “You were all ready to stab me with that fork,” he said.

Gabe shook his head. “Nah, I just wanted you to think I would. I've never done any violence to anyone.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “Really? Shit, I have. Lots of violence, all the time.”

Gabe laughed. “I bet. You know, some of the guys around here call you Mr President.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, and held his hand out to Gabe for the second time today. “James Buchanan Barnes, pleased to meet you.”

“Gabriel Jones,” Gabe said, returning it for a second time, his hand still warm and firm.

“Like the angel?”

Gabe grinned. “My mama says I was sent straight from heaven.”

“I bet she does,” Bucky said, dropping his hand to his side. Gabe cleared his throat and looked away. “Where you from?”

“Georgia.”

“How's it in Georgia?”

Gabe quirked the corner of his mouth. “ Probably better for a fella looking like you than me. Where are you from?”

“Right here in this fair city,” Bucky said. “Brooklyn, born and raised.”

“Huh. Must be nice, being close to home,” he said, and Bucky nodded. “You got family here? A girl?”

“Yeah. Uh--” Connie sent him flowery love letters regularly, and he wrote her back, though he wasn't so creative. She loved him just as much as ever. “Yeah, a girl too.”

“That's real nice,” Gabe said. “My mama's all alone at home. It was some bad luck of mine to get stationed out East.”

“Yeah...” Bucky said. “I had a Negro girlfriend once, you know.”

As soon as the words came out of his mouth and Gabe's eyebrows went high on his face, he regretted it. Christ, what a dumb thing to say.
“I'll tell all the Negroes,” Gabe said evenly.

Bucky cleared his throat. “Sorry.”

“We have a weekly newsletter, Negro Times.”

Bucky ducked his head and took the ribbing. “All right.”

“The future of miscegenation,” Gabe said with a laugh.

Bucky ran his hand over his face and laughed a little in return. “I ain't great at talking. I'm better at just looking pretty.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” Gabe smiled wide at him and Bucky's chest constricted, just a little. Something about Gabe really reminded him of Steve, despite obvious differences. He liked that.

-

Bucky's sergeant was a big Irish fella with a wide, bristly red moustache and a bowler hat. Bucky couldn't figure how Dugan managed to get permission to wear something like that, but he was almost never without it. He had a foghorn for a voice and stopped anything too rough in its tracks with a single yell, but he never held a grudge. He had more than a few choice words for Bucky but they mostly got along fine.

Bucky got his first three day leave over the Independence Day weekend to celebrate Steve's birthday. Steve was tense and prickly all weekend and Becca told Bucky that he'd tried to enlist again, with a different fake address. He didn't have the heart to argue it out with Steve. He knew, anyhow, that they'd never let Steve in, so if enlisting in different boroughs made him feel better, Bucky guessed that was okay.

On the 4th, he had to report back to the base in order to join the ranks marching in the parade. He'd tried to find any which way out of it, but Dugan told him firmly and absolutely that he would be marching.

Connie was thrilled about it, and so was the family. Bucky Barnes, the hero, marching for all of New York to see. He was a hero at patrolling the perimeter and keeping an eye on the Eastern seaboard, all right. The unit did cut quite a figure in their uniforms, though, and Connie was all over him afterwards. The 92nd were not invited to join.

Steve didn't stick around long after Bucky made it back to the family. He needed to get some sleep for tomorrow's early morning on the news stand, he said, and headed home at seven.

“Let's go dancing,” Connie said. He watched Steve go, then looked down at her. He couldn't force Steve to enjoy his birthday if he didn't want it.

He smiled at Connie and took her hand. “Sure.”

They started walking towards the nearest dance hall he knew. Traffic was heavy and he watched for a break in it to dart across the road and not have to wait at the lights.

“I love you, Bucky,” she said suddenly. He looked at her, then back at the traffic as a space opened up, then back at her.

“Uh, c'mon,” he said, and gripped her hand tight. They ran across, her heels clopping madly, and stumbled onto the sidewalk.
“Sorry,” she said, “I, uh...”

He took a breath. “I love you too.”

Her eyebrows went up. “You do?”

Sure he did. There wasn't anything not to love; she was the sweetest girl he knew, she was beautiful, she treated him like he mattered. He ran his hands over her hair. “Of course I do.”

She smiled and pressed up into him, her small body slotting into his, and kissed him sweetly.

-  

The base had weekly amateur baseball matches against local teams. Their shortstop had been discharged for reasons that the rest of them weren't privy to and, one morning when they were running drills, Dugan looked at him cock-eyed and asked, “you any good at baseball?”

“I was in junior league for a while,” he said with a shrug.

Dugan nodded. “You're on the team. Practice is tonight.”

His first game was on a very sunny Sunday afternoon against some college kids from Brooklyn College. Bucky bet he knew some of them, or at least their families, but he didn't get into it. They played on the Parade Grounds, with off-duty NCOs and officers watching from the stands. It had been years since Bucky had run like, real flat out with no consideration for when he'd draw his next breath. It felt good, like being a kid again.

A few of the 92nd came out to watch, Gabe and a couple of guys Bucky saw him pal around with sometimes. They sat apart from everyone else, whether self-imposed or not, and chatted without too much regard for the game, except for how Gabe watched him run up and down when he made plays.

He felt the lack of practice once the adrenaline of a game well played wore off and his left leg started to ache, though. It'd been the same way in basic, but he didn't have much time to dwell on the pain and his drill sergeant didn't care one bit about anything that wouldn't result in amputation.

At dusk, he sat out on the grass near his barracks and stretched out his leg, enjoying the last of the sun before it went down.

“Hey, Mr President,” Gabe said, suddenly looming over him.


“'sall right,” he said, and pulled a carton of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. “I broke my leg kinda bad when I was a kid, still gets me sometimes. Cigarette?”

Gabe nodded and took the cigarette Bucky held out. Bucky lit Gabe's first, then his own. “Wanna see the scar?”

“Sure,” Gabe said.

Bucky bent his knee and rolled up his pant leg. The scar wasn't so noticeable any more, in recent years it had faded to white, but it was still stretched looking and there was a build up of scar tissue at the top. Gabe reached out for a second before curling his fingers back into his palm and dropping his hand. Bucky smiled and stuck his cigarette in his mouth.
“Bone broke through here,” he said, pressing his fingers to the top. “Tore the ligaments in my knee, too, gave up an illustrious career in high school football.”

“That's pretty rough,” Gabe said.

Bucky shrugged. Maybe it was, he probably could have done something with football, played it at college, maybe professional for a while. He didn't give it much thought. “Nothing doing about it now,” he said. “How's your mama, you heard from her?”

“Yeah, she's all right. She sent me socks with my name sewn in them.”

Bucky laughed and blew out smoke rings. “The perfect gift.”

Gabe snorted. “Y’know, gift means poison in German. Das Gift der Socken.” His accent sounded pretty good to Bucky's untrained ears, pretty close to when Arnie's parents had been screaming about the wedding.

“Yeah? That's convenient. How'd you know that?”

Gabe glanced at him, a slightly guarded look on his face. “I majored in German and French.”

“Huh. Where'd you go?”

“Howard.”


“Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately. I would've done literature or History or something like that.”

Gabe raised his eyebrows. “Why...”

“Did I get expelled? I was a shit student.” He drew in a lungful of smoke as Gabe watched him, probably wondering how a mook like him had got into a place like Harvard, and blew it out again in a thin stream. “I bet you did real well, though.”

Gabe smiled and ducked his chin a little. “Top of my class.”

The siren went for lights out before Bucky could answer. He rolled his eyes and stubbed out the cigarette on the grass. “Christ, I hate having a bedtime again,” he said, and started getting up. His leg had stiffened considerably from the rest and he stumbled as he stood. Gabe caught him, pulling him up the rest of the way with one hand gripping Bucky's arm and the other on his side. They locked eyes for a moment when Bucky got his feet under him again, then pulled apart.

“Hey, uh,” he said. “You taken in many of the sights yet?”

Gabe shook his head quickly. The siren let off another short warning blast.

“Well, get some leave and I'll show you around, all right?”

“All right...” Gabe said carefully.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, and smacked him quickly on the arm. “It'll be fun.”
Gabe never did seem to be able to get leave, though, despite Bucky seeing him coming and going from the base sometimes with his friends. Well, that was fine. Steve was still busy, between the stand and his illustrating contracts. He was prickly as hell most of the time too. Becca quit Martin's in the fall and started working at an accountancy firm in Manhattan – better money, she said – so she was busy as well.

Connie was still interested in him, though. More than, especially once she left home and moved in with Bonnie. That was quite a thing to do, especially in her family, but Kate was pregnant again and she said there just wasn't enough room at home. He thought that maybe she was hoping they'd be making a home together soon, and she'd be the one knocked up, but she didn't bring it up. He had enough to think about, after all.

They saw *Now, Voyager* in October, and all the girls went nuts for Paul Henreid lighting the two cigarettes in his mouth. After the movie was over, all the fellas outside were doing it for their girls. Bucky put his arm around her and took her to a restaurant.

He got promoted to Corporal in November and went straight to the news stand once he was off duty to tell Steve.

“That's great news,” Steve said, while he rearranged newspapers. Today's headline read: *British Brave Liquid Fire To Launch New Offensive*.

“Thanks. I don't know what I did to get it,” he said, and smiled. “It's better than my last promotion, though.”

Steve shook his head, though he didn't look up. “You're serving your country, Bucky, you deserved it.”

Bucky gestured to the newspaper. “I'm not out there though, am I? It's not really the same thing.” He didn't mind it, though, is the thing he couldn't say.

“Well, neither am I,” Steve said, as bitter as anything. No matter what Bucky said, he couldn't make Steve see that that was a good thing. He couldn't make Steve see much, nowadays.

Bucky took a breath. “Did you see *Now, Voyager* yet? Bette Davis was good in that, even I kinda liked her.” At the shake of Steve's head, he continued, “How about we go after you close up?”

Steve smiled slightly, but it didn't reach his eyes. “Maybe some other time.”

He got leave over Christmas and spent the holidays at home. Steve came as well and it was nice Christmas, all in all. Arnie was in Guadalcanal now and Becca was subdued on her birthday, but she put a good face on it.

In the new year, word got around that the base was going to be reorganised and units would be getting shipped out. The guys in his barracks were very excited – that was real war, in the trenches, seeing the world, sticking it to Fritz. Somehow, Bucky knew he'd be going; he could just feel it.

He got his orders April 5th: he was to report to Brooklyn Army Terminal at 0600 hours sharp the next day to board the Queen Mary, headed for England. Dugan told him he could leave for the day, so long as he was at the terminal tomorrow and not too half-cut.

“Thanks, Sarge,” he said, and made to head back to his barracks to grab his pack.

“Oh, that's another thing, I have somethin' for you,” Dugan said, and handed him a folded pile of clothes. “The brass are promoting you to sergeant.”
Bucky looked at him for a moment. “Why?”

“You're less of an asshole than the rest and you're handy with a gun.” Well, that was sure high praise.

“All right,” Bucky said. “Thanks, Sarge.”

“Dum Dum,” Dugan said.

Bucky had heard people calling him that before – he'd assumed it was sly comment on the status of his brains. “You sure about that? I've been called dum dum before, it ain't a compliment.”

Dugan laughed loud, tipping his head back before quelling it. “I got it in the circus.”

“The circus?” Bucky clicked his tongue. “You gotta tell me about that, sometime.”

Dugan laughed again. “Sure, Mr President. See ya on the boat.”

Bucky dressed in his snazzy new uniform and set off into the city to tell everyone. Connie didn't take the news well, Ma even worse. The kids were at school and she was all set to get them back home, but Bucky needed to go out and find Steve, so it wasn't right to bring them home just to worry over him. He promised to be home early.

He headed out to Richards and Wolcott. On the subway, in the station, out on the street, people came up to him and wanted to shake his hands, all because of the uniform. He wanted to tell them to reserve their praise until he'd actually done something worth praise, but he just took it all with a gracious smile.

There was some kid on the stand, his eyes going round when he saw Bucky.

“Where's Steve?”

“I-- I don't know, sir,” the kid stumbled. “He isn't working today.”

Bucky sucked on his teeth. Well, he couldn't expect Steve to still have the same routine after they'd spent months seeing each other only sporadically. “Thanks,” he said, and picked up a newspaper. He put three cents down and started walking away.

“Thank you for your service, sir!” the kid yelled to him as he departed. Bucky sighed and waved to him over his head.

He took the subway to Becca's new work – he wasn't allowed up, but Becca came down and told him that Steve had the day off and had gone to a movie. Then she hugged him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Just in case I don't see you later,” she said.

“Hey, I'm not gonna take off without saying goodbye,” he said, catching her hand and squeezing it.

Bucky headed out to track him down at Borough Hall Theatre, reading his newspaper on the subway ride over. There was an ad for the World Exposition of Tomorrow opening today; Steve had talked about it some when it was first announced, and Bucky hoped it might be as good as the World's Fair was. It would something, to relive an experience like that. Howard Stark was no Albert Einstein, but it could be fun anyhow.

Steve wasn't so enthused about the whole thing. Watching him fend off a meathead with a garbage
can lid made Bucky's heart feel really tight in his chest. The guy was no trouble, but Steve, he looked more beat down than ever, more unhappy. Bucky found a new enlistment form; he let it go.

Connie also wasn't enthused about spending their last night with Steve, but she agreed and said she'd bring Bonnie along for Steve. Bucky had met her a handful of times and she'd always struck him as a little cold. Judging by her attitude, she thought he was a cad, so it evened out.

Bonnie didn't like Steve, obviously. Steve didn't think much to her, neither.

Steve couldn't resist the enlistment office on the fairgrounds, no matter how much Bucky tried to convince him. Sometimes... it felt like Steve was slipping through his fingers, always had been, all the way back to when they were kids. He couldn't stop Steve from going.

He took in a few of the sights with Connie and Bonnie, but Bonnie couldn't help but keep throwing him dirty looks. Once it was properly dark, he pressed his hand to the small of Connie's back and leaned in.

"D'you wanna come home with me?" he asked. Her smile answered for her, and Bonnie scowled at them until they got on the opposite subway train to her.

Ma put on a late dinner and they ate quietly, the whole family, Becca included. Grandpa said that Bucky'd show them what a patriot an Italian could be.

“I'm going to enlist next year,” Eugene said.

Ma went abruptly white.

“No, you're not,” Bucky said sharply.

Eugene shifted in his seat, indignant. “I've gotta do my bit too.”

Bucky slapped his palm on the table top, Connie jumping beside him. Christ, he'd just had all this with Steve, and now his kid brother, the future Catholic priest, was getting in on the act. “No, you don't, not like that.”

“You're doing it...” Eugene muttered.

“Just 'cause it's good enough for me doesn't mean it's good enough for you,” he said. Everyone at the table stared at him. He cracked a slight smile. “Anyhow, if you don't think I can go out there and win this war single-handed, you don't know me very well.”

Becca let out a loud breath. “Your ego'll knock 'em out.”

“Then it'll be good for something,” he said, grinning at her.

After dinner, Ma turned a blind eye to Connie going upstairs with him. He closed his bedroom door firmly and stripped out of his uniform while she sat on his bed and looked around his room. It was really a child's room, filled with old toys, books, and illustrations from storybooks that had been on his walls since he was a baby.

“I like it,” she said.

He laughed and shook his head. “Thanks.”

They took it slow; he covered her body, rolling his hips against hers and rubbing his splayed hand up and down her side. She kept her eyes closed, lips pulled into a slight purse, only making the softest
sounds. He tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't respond and eventually he got to completion, pressing a kiss to her neck as he bowed his head.

He lifted his head again. “Did you...”

She was crying quietly, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes down the sides of her face. He cupped his hand around her cheek and swiped his thumb over the tear tracks. “Hey,” he said, “don't cry.”

“I'm not gonna see you again,” she whispered.

“Yeah, you are,” he said, and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “What, you think I can't take them?”

She smiled shakily. “You can take them.”

“That's right.” He took a breath and smiled at her. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said softly.

He meant what he said, but when he stripped off the condom and turned off the lamp, he didn't go to his dresser drawer and take out the ring box, the thing that probably would have made her the happiest she could be in this moment. Instead, they lay down and slept.

- 

He woke at four am, washed up and packed his bag tight, feeling an odd sort of calm. His nails had gone almost entirely unbitten the past few months. When he went downstairs, Ma was up and making pancakes. Bucky stood in the kitchen with her and wrapped his arm around her while she worked the frying pan.

The first real moment of anxiety he felt was when he called Becca's apartment and no one answered. Becca had stayed the night, but where had Steve gone? Bucky couldn't leave without talking to him. He kept calling right up until he absolutely had to leave, but Becca promised to track him down. He might have started out earlier on the news stand than normal, she figured, but Bucky thought he could have stayed home, knowing Bucky was leaving in the morning.

Both his parents got in the car to take him to the terminal – Connie was a wreck and stayed behind with Becca and the kids to be consoled. Christ, he should have proposed, but now it was too late.

“Can we swing by the news stand?” Bucky said when they started driving.

Dad checked his watch. “There isn't time.”

“Please?”

Ma touched Dad's hand on the gearstick lightly. “Just quickly, George,” she said.

He tipped his head in agreement.

The stand was closed up when they drove past it. Dad didn't stop, and Bucky twisted in his seat as it passed by them. “Fuck, where is he?” What if he was dead in a gutter somewhere? More to the point, what if he'd had more heart trouble and was laid up in a hospital?

“I'm sure, he's fine,” Dad said evenly.

“You don't know that. Fuck, I shouldn't've just let him take off last night. Shit, what if--”
Ma reached back and squeezed his knee. “He'll be fine,” she said, “we'll take good care of him.”

Bucky took a strangled breath. “All right,” he said. “Yeah, okay. Thanks, Ma.”

He was late when they arrived outside the terminal, and didn't have any time at all to say goodbye. Ma squeezed his cheeks between her palms and told him she loved him, then he ran flat out to join the line of men getting ready to board the boat. He passes Dugan, who watched him but didn't say anything about it.

Bucky had an estimated seven days to spend on the ship; he hadn't even passed one night yet and he was sick as a dog. He spent the night with a pillow over his head, his stomach churning and his mind working on all the horrible possibilities of Steve's whereabouts, which did nothing for his sickness. When Ma was pregnant with the twins, he thought she was making it up, being sick all the time; Jesus, now he got it.

The sickness abated when he went topside – when he looked down at the sloshing water, his stomach figured out that it didn't need to slosh as well. The sky was a deep blue, and in the distance he could see mountain ranges, bits and pieces of Canada that he could vaguely remember from the globe in the study. He wished he could draw worth a damn. If Steve was here, he'd spend all day on deck, making masterpieces. He wished he'd brought a camera too, but he hadn't thought of it when he left. This wasn't exactly supposed to be a sight-seeing trip.

He came up as much as he could to settle his stomach – nothing else would do it. He had to do his part, though, now he was a sergeant, he couldn't just be one of the rabble any more. He had to keep the order.

He had a guy in his bunk who just could never stop complaining about a damn thing.

“It says right there in the literature,” the guy, Trevor, whined, “chronic hemorrhoids disqualify you from service. I told them all about it, let them see an' all, and they said they were external, so it didn't count.”

Bucky had been listening to this for three hours, Trevor holding court on the bunk above his. The other guys in the bunk rolled their eyes and continued playing cards. Bucky fucking hated cards, he just wanted to get some shut eye, since his stomach had kept him up all night.

Bucky lifted his leg and kicked the underside of Trevor's mattress to an indignant yelp. “If I hear one more goddamn word about your bleeding asshole, I will make you bleed from somewhere.”

There was a blessed pause before Trevor leaned over the edge of his bed. “If I get seriously injured, they'll have to discharge me.”

“Get out of my goddamn face!” Bucky yelled, and Trevor disappeared. The other guys laughed. On reflection, though, he had a better idea. He got off his bed, reached up, grabbed Trevor by the collar, and dragged him down.

“Hey!” Trevor cried as he hit the floor.

Bucky grabbed his cigarettes and climbed up. “Shut the fuck up and stay down there.”

He managed to escape the chaos going on below decks on the third evening, swiping a bottle of whiskey from Dugan, and setting himself up to watch the dark sea tumble by.
“Aren’t you scared of falling?” came Gabe's voice behind him while Bucky was leaning against the railing. The 92nd had been given their orders too, though Gabe hadn't had much to say to him in the last few months, so they hadn't discussed it.

Bucky wasn't scared of much when he was drunk, and he was certainly getting tipsy now. “Nah, it's beautiful.”

“Yeah, it is,” Gabe said, stepping up beside him. Bucky watched him out of the corner of his eye, as his eyes dropped to the bottle on the ground by Bucky's feet. “How about we sit, though? It'd make me feel better.”

Bucky smiled. “Sure,” he said, and let Gabe lead him to a nearby bench, bottle in hand. The air here was cold at night, wind ruffling his hair.

“So, do I have to call you Sergeant now?” Gabe asked.

“Nah, Mr President is fine.”

Gabe laughed. “Have you been on a ship before?”

“No, and it's making me fucking sick,” he said, and pulled his carton of cigarettes out of his breast pocket. “Want one?”

“Sure.”

Bucky stuck two in his mouth and lit them quickly, then took one out, the paper sticking to his moist top lip for a second, and turned it to Gabe. Gabe stared at him for a long moment before taking it.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

“Uh huh.” He took a pull of the whiskey, then held it out. “Drink?”

Gabe looked at him again, then nodded and took it. He drank a few sips, hardly anything, then handed it back. Bucky drank again, pushing his cigarette to the corner of his mouth as he wedged the bottle between his lips and tipped it up. Gabe watched him do it, and Bucky looked back him.

“What?” he said, when he took the bottle away.

Gabe shrugged. “Not everyone would swap spit with me, is all.”

Bucky’s fingers tingled a little, but he only meant with sharing the bottle. “Well, not in fucking Georgia, huh?”

“You think New York's much better?”

“Guess I never put much thought to it.” He thought for a moment, though it was getting harder to do. “You went into the city without me, then.”

Gabe cleared his throat. “Yeah, sorry.”

“’s all right, only your loss. I know all the places to be.”

“I bet.” The wind blew harder and Gabe shivered in his thin shirt. Bucky scooted a little closer on the bench and held out the bottle again. Gabe took it and drank a little longer this time before handing it back. Bucky let their fingers brush together when he took hold of the neck. “Bucky,” Gabe said.
“Uh huh,” Bucky murmured, looking at him. Gabe had a neat beard and moustache; Bucky grew a moustache once and Steve told him it made him look like Oliver Hardy. Bucky wondered what Gabe's would feel like on his face. He stubbed out his cigarette.

“Bucky,” Gabe repeated, and Bucky nodded vaguely, staring at Gabe's mouth. Gabe took his cigarette between his fingers.

He wondered if he should feel ashamed of himself, like he usually did, but he didn't. He leaned in and pressed his mouth against Gabe's. Gabe was still, though his lips were soft and warm, not dry and thin like Arnie's had been. If Bucky had been sober, he might have worried about getting a smack in the mouth, but he wasn't, so he didn't, and eventually Gabe kissed back.

When he'd thought about it – in the middle of the night when he was half to sleep and could pretend that it all got washed away by morning – he thought that it would be different, kissing a man, that it would feel different from kissing a nice, soft girl. It didn't. Aside from the rasp of Gabe's facial hair, it felt the same; it felt normal.

He sat back and took another drink. Gabe let out a loud breath.

“Have you done that before?” Gabe asked. “Kissed a guy?”


He didn't know why he admitted that, except maybe he needed to tell someone after all this time, but it went down like the Hindenburg. Gabe's eyebrows drew together and his mouth set in a straight line, and Bucky knew what he was thinking – he was thinking how immoral that was, to do that to his own sister, to betray her like that.

“It's not like that,” Bucky said quickly. “He... She knows he's queer. She's queer too... They got married to take the heat off.”

Gabe's eyebrows rose. “And you're queer too?”

“I guess...”

“That's some funny luck.”

Bucky snorted and shook his head. “Yeah. Ma has two other kids to pin her hopes on, at least... Although, my brother wants to be a priest; he just loves Jesus.”

Gabe laughed and Bucky smiled back; good, Gabe believed him. He didn't think he could stand Gabe thinking he was a bad guy. “So, have you...?”

Gabe ducked his head in a nod. “Yeah. Yeah, a few times. None like you, though.”

“Ain't no one else like me,” Bucky said with a rakish grin.

“You're telling me,” Gabe replied, shaking his head slightly. “You've got a girl though, don't you? Don't you love her?”

Bucky looked away again and pressed the bottle between his hands for something to do. “Yeah, I love her. Thought about marrying her, but... I dunno, I don't think it's enough for me, and I don't think it's fair on her. She's a nice girl, she treats me nice, but I can't ever get this kind of thing--” He gestured vaguely between the two of them. “--out of my head.”
“This ain't just because you've got no girls around?” Gabe asked in a soft voice.

Bucky shook his head. “I think I've been like this my whole life.” He thought staying up all night and watching Steve sleep was probably the first sign, or maybe the full feeling he got in his chest whenever Steve came to the house and played with him when they were kids.

“I'm not sure, myself,” Gabe said. “I've liked women too, not that I've had too much success. I don't know what that means.”

“That's okay,” Bucky said, and slid his hand over until their fingers touched. “I guess we'll figure it out.”

Chapter End Notes

- Really huge thanks to molly-bergstrom for helping me puzzle out what Bucky's military experience prior to Steve enlisting was. I threw out most of the chapter on Friday and rewrote over the weekend due to my half-arsed research.

- A couple of links behind some of the history: The 107th Infantry Regiment was a regiment of the New York Army National Guard and the 366th Infantry Regiment of the 92nd Infantry Division (established as Gabe's original unit in the Captain America: First Vengeance comic) was assigned to the Eastern Defense Command in 1942. Military history is not my forte, so don't look too far behind the curtain. :D

- The scene from Now, Voyager.

- I've put the total chapter count back to the mysterious '?' because I realised that I vastly underestimated how wordy I was going to get.

- I'm over here on tumblr if you'd like to peruse my struggles to understand the US military and pictures of my dogs.

- Oh, Bucky, you experienced an actual emotion. <3
Dear Bucky

I'm sorry I wasn't there to see you off. I went out later than I thought and stayed at a friend's. I hope you're not sore about it. Everything is going good here for me – I'm not sure how often I'll be able to write, I have some big stuff coming up, but I'll write whenever I can.

Steve

They were taken to a camp in the grounds of a country estate in a place called Warwickshire. The manor looked like Met, which a lot of the guys had never seen, the ones from towns with one horse and a saloon. It was swell, but the voyage plus a long, bumpy train ride down from Liverpool left Bucky too sick to think about it. The privates were assigned Quonset huts, while the officers and NCOs were given rooms in the manor. It was nice and all, but Bucky was too busy puking in the little sink in the corner of his room to think on it.

"Aw, kid, you'll get your sea legs eventually," Dugan said from the door.

"Fuck off," Bucky groaned, and spat in the sink.

He slept until midday the next day, then met some of the officers of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, who without exception looked inbred and born with a stick lodged deep in their ass.

The nights were strange; he was too exhausted on the first day to pay attention, but the nights here were pitch black. There were heavy black curtains on the windows of the manor that reminded Bucky of nailing that fabric to the window frame to keep Sarah warm and they were sternly told not to go outside at night with torches. Bucky had never been anywhere so dark his whole life.

Aside from that, it wasn't much different than being in Fort Hamilton. The brass still hadn't decided what to do with them, so they were left to pass the time with marches and drills. They marched through little towns, winking at the girls, and across brilliant green pastures. The manor didn't phase him at all, but the countryside amazed him. The closest he'd seen to something like this was New Jersey, and that wasn't much.

The fields were filled with sheep and cows and horses, and Bucky looked at them as he led the privates around in their destination-less journey. His horse had been sold years ago, and he'd never much appreciated it, anyhow, but looking at the animals made him miss it, and home, and sometimes the feeling was so overwhelming that he had to press his tongue to the roof of his mouth to stop from welling up.

Other times, things like a guy falling into the stream they were passing distracted him.

"Sarge!" he yelled, while the others laughed. The stream was deeper than it looked, and Bucky
w asn't convinced this guy knew how to swim. He crouched down on the bank and grabbed the guy's hand, reeling him in. “Thanks, Sarge,” he said pitifully as he crawled out and lay down on the grass.

Bucky had seen his share of bullying to know that men didn't just fall into conveniently placed streams, but he also knew he'd only make relations among the privates worse if he said anything. He didn't have the gravitas of Dugan, he was a 'real nice fella' according to the privates, and they liked him for not giving them a hard time about things. If he came to this guy's defence, he'd just look like someone's little grandma yelling at mean kids from her stoop, and that never helped a kid's position.

He pulled out a cigarette. “Let's take a break.”

The 92nd’s Quonsets were set up on the opposite side of the grounds to Bucky's men and their sergeants, and even their sergeant majors, had to sleep in the cramped metal huts, not allowed rooms in the lonely, empty manor.

Bucky hadn't seen Gabe much in the week and change since they'd arrived, only crossing paths a few times on their separate marches. They'd only caught snatches of time after the kiss since there was almost always some lug standing around catching flies on every corner of the ship. In fact, Gabe might have been avoiding him again, maybe that was more to the point. Bucky had all sorts of free time, though, and little to do but write letters home and ponder on all the events in his life that had led to being in this storybook-looking English countryside.

He still didn't feel ashamed.

It was a Sunday afternoon, a day of rest, and since Bucky couldn't be bothered with marches and drills, he told his unit to take the day off. He loitered around the 92nd's huts, drawing suspicious glances, until Gabe came walking his way. He whistled, and Gabe looked up at him and smiled a little.

“What're you doing in enemy territory?” he said, his smile turning kind of bitter.

“I thought maybe you wanna... go for a walk?” Bucky replied. He'd never asked anyone to 'go for a walk with him'. He had always, even with Connie, put in the absolute minimum amount of effort into his relationships. That was all he ever needed to do.

“Uh.” Gabe shifted a little from foot to foot. “I guess I could. My sergeant gave us the day.”

“A man after my own heart,” he said, and smiled. Gabe smiled back a little.

“All right, give me a minute,” he said. He pointed to a nearby tree. “Go stand over there.”

Bucky dutifully went and stood by the tree, slightly hidden from the view of the huts since he could read between the lines, and waited. Gabe came back out a few minutes later and they started walking. Gabe kept his hands close to his sides and a foot of distance between the two of them, like Bucky had bad intentions. Well, he had intentions, but he didn't think they were so bad.

“This isn't a trick, you know,” he said.

Gabe glanced at him and smiled. “I know.”

“You ever been to Europe before?”

“No. I guess it's strange that I have degrees in French and German but never visited the real places.”

Bucky shrugged. “I can speak Italian 'cause my ma's side is from Italy and I've never been before
either.”

Gabe smiled. “I always wanted to come out here, but this isn't how I saw it going.”

“I don't think it's how any of us saw it going,” Bucky said, though, really, he'd never thought that much about travelling. He liked it in New York, it was his home – he wasn't interested in going all around the world. He'd liked where he was.

“Have you been getting your letters?” Gabe asked.

He nodded. “Uh huh, one from my best friend.” He didn't know how it had managed to get to him so fast, he'd got it the day after he got off the boat. He was still waiting on everyone else's. “I didn't get to see him before I shipped out... so it was good to hear from him.” Not that the letter amounted to much; Bucky was no closer to knowing why Steve had been a no-show, but he was trying not to dwell on it.

It must have shown on his face, though, because Gabe looked at him sidelong and asked, “Are you and him...?”

Bucky sighed. “Nah, he's... he's not like that.”

“Do you wish that he was?”

Bucky closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the sun on his face. “Maybe,” he said. He knew there was no chance with Steve, though. Steve wasn't confused about who he was, he wasn't like Bucky like that. He wasn't like Bucky at all.

He opened his eyes and looked back at Gabe. “Let's go over there,” he said, gesturing to a big oak tree with heavy branches dipping down towards the ground. Between the branches, they wouldn't easily be seen by anyone rambling across the paddocks, which was apparently a thing that English people did.

Gabe followed him over. “So, the ship wasn't just because you were drunk?”

“I wasn't that drunk,” he said, and turned to face Gabe. “Are you, you know...”

Gabe laughed and shook his head. “You look like Heathcliff. I don't think anyone doesn't like that.”

“Laurence Olivier? Shit, I'll take that,” Bucky said, and crowded in towards him. “You have more experience with this, so...”

They kissed for a while, and Bucky leant some of his weight against Gabe, knowing he could take it. Gabe had a slower way of doing it than Bucky, who either wanted it to be done with or wanted a bigger pay off. Gabe put one hand around the back of Bucky's head, curling his fingers into his hair, and Bucky tucked his hands around Gabe's sides. With girls, even with Connie, his attention always wandered to other things, but right now he wasn't thinking of anything else but this moment.

When they finally pulled apart, they were both panting a little, and Bucky could feel that his face had heated up. Gabe didn't comment, just smiled at him and told him they should start heading back. Bucky tidied his hair and agreed.

- He went to Coventry a few times, with all his surplus cash in his pocket. He'd never seen a place like it except in history books – the bombed out cathedral looked like the Roman ruins, and half the city
centre was in rubble from the blitz. It was a hell of a sight to see.

In the pub Dugan took him to, the girls crowded around all the soldiers and peppered them with questions about Hollywood and gangsters, while the men looked on in anger. Dugan particularly held court about the wonders of the New World and gave out the nylons he had with him (Bucky left his in his pack since it seemed strange to him to buy the English’s goodwill with stockings). He was having the time of his life when Bucky headed out.

At the beginning of June, he got his next round of letters, one from Becca and one from Steve. Almost all of Becca's letter censored with only the lines: 'Otherwise, we're fine here, Eugene has stopped talking about enlisting since he made Ma cry. Hope to hear from you soon, love, Becca' left untouched. Bucky couldn't imagine what Becca had written that would require a whole paragraph's worth of heavy black lines. Perhaps the papers were reporting bad things ahead; he'd heard that they'd censor anything that would put troop morale in jeopardy.

His other letter was from Steve, another peculiarly content free message, only this time it also looked Steve had forgotten how to write:

_Bucky,

_Sorry for taking so long to write. Things are OK with me, hopefully they are good with you to. I've been working a lot, hardly have time to sleep at the moment, seems like I but I don't mind it. It feels good to work. I've made a few new friends recently which has made things easier. How are you? I've been reading a lot about England recently, it seems like a real interesting place to be.

_Well, I can't fit to much more onto this piece of paper now, my handwriting's to big – yours is so neat, makes me feel inferior. Anyhow, I'd better end it here. Be careful. I really wish I was there with you.

_Steve

He wasn't kidding about his handwriting being too big. Steve had never had particularly neat handwriting – he'd missed out on the hours of writing As and Bs and Cs in a row that Bucky had in elementary school and as a result his cursive was quite lop-sided – but it had never been this oversized and messy before. Half the words were smudged and Bucky imagined that more ink found its way onto Steve's hand than it did the page. He didn't really know what to make of it, and wrote back a blandly pleasant letter talking about some of the sights and the livestock in the paddocks and how he missed New York and hoped to be home soon.

_-

They celebrated Independence Day loudly in a pub in Coventry, singing *You're a Grand Old Flag* at a shockingly loud volume while waving a flag they'd liberated from the camp. That was probably a court-martial offence, but he couldn't be bothered with it. He set himself up at the corner of the bar and nursed a pint as he watched the bartender run ragged.

“So, how'd you like Americans?” he yelled when the bartender came close.

“As long as you keep paying me, I like you fine!” the bartender yelled back.

Bucky laughed and gave him a tip. He drank steadily throughout the evening, drinking a pint or two for Steve, though not like his unit, who were headed to the drunk tank for the night if they didn't get a handle on themselves. He yelled at them to settle down a few times, and they did, to a point, but
fights still broke out at ten pm, when the pub tossed them out to close up. He waded into one, pulling a guy off a really pissed Brit, who in turn swung around and punched him.

“What the fuck?” he said, and headbutted the guy. The guy fell to the ground, looking more shocked than anything. Bucky had probably done more damage to himself – a headache unfurled across his forehead and temples. The Brit was wise enough to let it go.

They ran across the 92nd on their drunken stumble back to camp. It was almost too dark to see, especially with them not allowed flashlights, and they nearly collided with the other soldiers. There was a rumble of something starting, but Bucky yelled that he'd court-martial the lot of them, and they simmered down again.

When they returned to the grounds, he hung back and let the unit shamble off to their huts.

“Tell us a bedtime story, Sarge!” someone yelled.

“Tomorrow we're up and marching at six am,” he called back. “From here all the way to Birmingham, the end. Sleep well.”

They groaned and muttered about mutiny as Bucky turned away and scanned the 92nd. Drink had made his vision a little fuzzy, but he still picked Gabe out pretty easy and whistled until Gabe looked his way. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stood there, hoping Gabe would come over, which he did after a quick word to his friend.

“Everything okay there?” Bucky asked, nodding to Gabe's departing friend.

“Oh yeah,” Gabe said. “Isaiah'll cover for me.”

“He... knows?”

Gabe shrugged. “He knows enough. Don't worry, he's a good guy.”

Bucky nodded. He felt like he should worry about a thing like that. He gestured to the manor. “I got a room back there, do you wanna...?”

“How drunk are you?” Gabe said.

“Drunk enough,” Bucky said. “You?”

Gabe smiled. “Yeah.”

He snuck Gabe into the manor without issue and Gabe expressed amazement and jealousy the set up Bucky had got. Of course, he only had it because they were the only (white, anyhow) unit on the estate at the moment and none of the brass were there. Otherwise, he'd be out there with the privates as well. He turned on a dim lamp and wedged a chair under the door handle just in case Dugan crashed in in the middle of the night.

“This is your family?” Gabe asked, looking at the collection of photos Bucky had tacked onto the wall.

“Uh huh,” Bucky said, toeing off his shoes and lining them up next to his pack.

“And... this is your girl?” Gabe continued, more quietly. Bucky looked over at the photo that Gabe was pointing to, but he already knew Gabe had it right – he certainly didn't have a studio shot of either of his sisters tacked to the wall.
“Yeah,” he said, and walked over to the bed. “Do you want to...?”

Gabe watched him for a long moment before joining him by the bed and sitting down. They passed an uncomfortable few minutes until Bucky leaned over and kissed him, and gradually the tension faded. Gabe pushed him back against the narrow mattress and leaned over him to continue the kiss, one hand splayed out on Bucky’s chest. Bucky wasn’t sure what to make of it, but he didn’t mind it either, so he wrapped his hand around the back of Gabe’s neck and held him steady.

They graduated to unbuttoning each other’s shirts without much discussion, and Gabe pressed hot kisses to Bucky's neck that made him moan. He hadn't felt anything quite like it before, the level of arousal that warmed his body. He'd jacked off more than he cared to think about over the years, but the pay off was never that great, he never knew what he was supposed to think about, what he was allowed to think about and his best orgasm was under his covers with Steve asleep on the other side of the room. When he had sex he didn't even always get that far.

He was in no doubt about how this was going to go, though, and it felt electrifying. He pulled Gabe back up for another kiss, pressing his tongue into Gabe's mouth, unable to keep from panting, and Gabe ground his hips down. Bucky swore he saw fireworks and scrabbled to keep his grip on Gabe. Gabe lifted his hips a few inches then renewed the pressure, this time with his hand, pushing until he had Bucky's belt undone. Bucky breathed out a 'yeah' without thinking about it, and Gabe undid his own belt, pressing back in. Bucky felt Gabe's fingers around his dick, intermittently working him over, and he rolled his head back against the mattress and enjoyed the ride. The bed creaked terribly, letting everyone in earshot know exactly what activities were going on, but he was too far gone to care.

When he orgasmed, he scrunched his fists in the fabric of Gabe's shirt, squeezed his eyes shut, and felt like this was the very first orgasm he'd ever had. When Gabe was spent as well, he lay half on top of Bucky, nowhere else to go in the small bed, and Bucky lay his arm across Gabe's shoulders.

So, he was definitely queer, then.

Bucky didn't have to do much convincing to get Gabe to stay for the night. He cleaned himself up at the sink with his flannel, and Gabe did the same, then the two of them squeezed back into the bed, Bucky on his side and Gabe on his back.

“How am I going to get out tomorrow?” Gabe mumbled.

Bucky shook his head tiredly and pressed his cheek into the pillow. “I'll figure it out, 'm smart. Almost didn't fail out of college.”

Gabe laughed softly and ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair. Bucky liked that. “All right.”

He was quiet for a few minutes before speaking again, this time in a far less happy tone. “We can't do this again while you've got your girl on the hook. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know that,” Bucky said. He supposed he did. He'd told her once not to think that he was better than her, and this made that very, very plain.

“Ohay,” Gabe said, and left his hand resting on Bucky's head. Bucky found it oddly comforting and went soundly to sleep.

Gabe got out fine the next day, but as Bucky had pondered, a few of the NCOs, Dugan among them, had heard creaking springs and 'girlish moans' coming from his room. They pounded him on the
back in congratulations.

In late August, they got their orders to travel to France this time by plane, and were taken to an RAF base in Birmingham to make the trip. As it turned out, planes made Bucky feel just as sick of ships did, and he spent most of the ride sitting very still. Across from him sat a Brit in a silly red beret, with what appeared to be a red, polka dot cravat fixed around his neck. Bucky stared at it while he tried to keep his lunch down.

“Sick?” the man asked.

Bucky pressed his lips together and nodded.

The man reached into his jacket and pulled out a tin. “Here,” he said, holding it out. “It'll help with the sickness.”

Bucky took it and read the lid: *Royal Scarlet Tropical Brand Ginger Candy*. He flipped the lid open and took one before closing the tin and tossing it back. “Thanks,” he said, and put the candy in his mouth. He hated ginger, but he remembered Ma putting ginger root into tea for him when he was sick, and it always helped.

“Major James Montgomery Falsworth,” the guy said, and leaned over to offer Bucky his hand. Bucky's stomach didn't much enjoy being jostled, but his pride wouldn't let him become a complete invalid.

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes,” he replied, shaking his hand. Falsworth laughed slightly. “My friends call me Bucky.”

“What a coincidence – mine call me Monty,” Falsworth said. Bucky didn’t see how that was a coincidence, but he smiled anyway.

They hit a patch of turbulence and Bucky's stomach rolled again. He ducked his head and set his jaw.

“You'll get used to it,” Monty advised. “It helps to take your mind off it; perhaps write a letter home.”

Bucky glared at him, but the idea wasn't such a bad one. Gabe had kept to his word and they hadn't really done much since that night, only a little bit of groping, and Bucky had put off writing to Connie. He could have lied to Gabe, told him that things with him and Connie were settled and kept her on the hook for when he came back and had to start a normal life. Of course, that would probably be the scummiest thing he'd ever done, and he didn't think he would ever 'come back', not like that – there was no coming back from this place now, and Connie didn't deserve that and she didn't deserve who he would be when he returned.

He pulled out a notepad and pencil from his pack and drew his knees up as much as his stomach would allow to make an impromptu table. He sucked on the candy as he wrote.

_Dear Connie,

I'm sorry to write this letter to you after so much silence; I've been cruel and cowardly to you. I've been delaying this letter because I feared hurting you, but I can't delay any longer: I think it would be best if you moved on with your life. I told you a few years ago that I'm not better than you, and now I'm here in this awful place and I'll do awful things. You deserve a better man than that. I don't know when I'll return home and you deserve not to have your life put on hold, you deserve a husband who can love with his_
whole heart and children for you to dote on.

Please know that you'll always have my enduring love and that I'm sorry.

Bucky

He scribbled his name roughly and blinked away prickling tears. There was no chance she wouldn't hate him for this, but maybe that was for the best.

“We'll be landing soon,” Monty said quietly.

Bucky nodded and wiped at his face quickly. He was practically crying in front of a British soldier, but hey, at least he didn't feel sick any more.

They landed in a field in Calais and were met by members of the French Resistance, who hurried them into trucks to be driven across the country to the former free zone and then through to Italy. It was a risky as hell move, especially for a bunch of soldiers who didn't know the first thing about keeping a low profile. They'd been given civilian clothes to change into before the plane, but looking around the truck, Bucky had never seen a more American groups of assholes, and he worried about how the 92nd would fare.

It would take weeks to wind their way across the country, by the Resistance's estimation, since they would have to stop and start and hide at regular intervals, and while they'd have a little help from Allied spies – Canadian, American, British, even a few defecting Germans – they'd still mostly be on their own. There was something really big on the horizon that Bucky wasn't privy to.

They drove for a few hours down long winding roads in trucks filled with crates of eggs to give them the nominal cover of farmers transporting their goods. It wouldn't hold up to even the most cursory inspection, and Bucky kept his rifle close at hand.

They built their first camp in the forest of Compiègne and set up revolving patrols to guard the perimeter. They had orders to meet up with Colonel Phillips and his men in Troyes within the next day or two, but there was a particularly high concentration of Wehrmacht in Reims, so until the threat passed, they had to stay in the forest. Half the men were sick with various stages of a cold, so they were pleased at the respite.

A lot of the free French couldn't speak English, or could only speak it very slightly, so conversation was slow to start. Bucky made some in-roads with a few of them, but his French was rusty to say the least. Gabe had better luck, but Bucky could see the wariness of the French towards the 92nd. Bucky wanted to start a row about it, but he wasn't Steve, so he let it be

When there was small explosion, everyone in the encampment drew their guns. Bucky was closest to the source of the sound, and ran to a clearing to find one of the free Frenchmen in oversized slacks held up with suspenders standing in the middle of a soot stained circle on the forest floor, his face and hands dusted with the stuff.

"Pardon pardon!" Frenchie called.

“What the fuck?” Bucky yelled, and dropped his gun to the side. “À quoi penses-tu? Ça aurait pu te coûter la vie! Et la nôtre!”

Monty came to stand beside him and looked upon the scene. “Good lord,” he said. “You're better at French than I am, Sergeant.”

“Merci,” Bucky said through gritted teeth.
Frenchie’s eyebrows raised. “Pardon,” he repeated. “But English, please. Your accent is... not good.”

“Fine. Are you okay?”

“Ah, yes, yes, just a little powder.”

Bucky came closer as Monty called back that all was clear. “You know we’ve got Nazis right on our asses, don’t you?”

“I know much better than you, Monsieur GI,” he said.

Bucky cracked a slight smile. “Bucky,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Jacques Dernier,” Frenchie replied, and shook his hand. Christ, another James, this time a French one.

“Good to meet you. Don't blow any more shit up.” Bucky pulled his hand back and came away with soot.

Dernier wiped his palms on his slacks and looked around at the mess. “Oui oui,” he said distractedly. “Perhaps I can salvage something...”

They left the forest the following evening, driving in the dark over bumpy terrain until they reached Troyes at past midnight. There were more troops in the forest there; Bucky estimated a hundred troops gathering in trucks of twenty or so each, and there were more coming every day. Bucky even saw some of the 442nd Regiment, all Japanese-Americans. This operation, whatever it was, was big and bold and probably going to get them all killed. They ate the meagre rations together in mismatched groups, coughing and spitting and yelling despite the risk of being heard.

Things started to go south once they reached Lyon. They were ambushed by the Wehrmacht and the ensuing fire fight was fast but ugly; Bucky thought he got at least one guy in the head, but he couldn't be sure. They abandoned their chicken trucks after that and had to walk, spreading out in groups of four to complete the three day journey. Bucky had a couple of damn kids with him, alternately scared out of their minds and filled with piss and vinegar, and a grim Brit who didn't say a word that wasn't business to them.

They slept in short bursts, never enough to get to dreaming, and Bucky thought it might have been October, but he wasn't sure. It started raining their first day on foot and didn't let up. It was still warm, and he saw more than a few rainbows, but it didn't make up for his soaked clothes. He felt hot, stinging mucus drain down the back of his throat on the second day and thought back to that food being passed around and around. Just what he needed: a cold.

They reached the border wet and aching. Bucky fell about a hundred feet from the rendezvous point, his left leg going weak under him, and bruised it from knee to thigh. He forced himself not to limp the rest of the way.

They got through the border without much trouble with the help of bribed officers, but it was another day’s walk to the Allied base outside of Turin, and Bucky thought he might weep. His cold had progressed to a racking cough and he had to breathe in the wet Italian air with his mouth, but finally they made it and he slept a day and a night in a hastily assembled tent. Neither God nor General Patton could have got him off that cot.

He was woken again in the early hours of the morning, dragged out of sleep by Dugan. He drew breath to give Dugan a hard time about it, but was overcome by a cough which culminated with him
bringing up a little bile.

“Are you all right, kid?” Dugan asked.

Bucky wiped his mouth. “Uh huh, just caught me... by surprise,” he said, and swallowed the rest down.

“Okay. We’ve got our orders, we’re heading on to the next base in Bassano del Grappa, then to Azzano, we move out at 0900.”

“Walking?”

“fraid so,” Dugan said.

Bucky groaned. He could already tell that his leg had stiffened from so long at rest, and it ached all over. “Okay. Let me clean myself up.”

“That’s a good idea,” Dugan said, giving Bucky a quick once over before leaving the tent.

Bucky knew he looked like shit, he didn’t need to be reminded of it. He struggled to change into a marginally cleaner uniform and wash himself with a damp flannel. The bruise on his thigh looked like hell – green and purple and extremely tender to the touch. Bucky fastened his pants and layered on a knitted undershirt, shirt, and jacket. The sun was out and most of the men milling around the camp had their sleeves rolled up, but a chill had got into him and his skin felt cold him under the heavy sunlight.

They started moving a little late, to the express disapproval of Phillips. The brass went ahead in trucks and tanks, but little guys like Bucky and his unit had to walk. Or hop and stumble in Bucky’s case. After a few hours, he got used to it enough to put pressure on his foot and suck up the pain, but his knee continued to complain.

The trip was another four day journey, not accounting for breaks for sleep, from one side of the country to the other, clambering through forests and mountain regions to avoid the Jerries. What a way to see the motherland for the first time.

He threw up more than he kept down, not that there was much to keep down, and was desperate for every moment of rest they got. No matter how hot and muggy it got, he couldn't get warm, but he still sweat like a pig, and his heart hammered in his chest. He didn't think he was scared, though, he felt too sick for that.

They stopped briefly in the Bassano base to eat and drink and catch a few hours rest, then started moving with purpose towards Azzano. Despite the food, which Bucky had managed not to bring back up, he still felt terribly dizzy and had to stop and lean against a tree. He tried to get himself together, but he couldn't draw his breath deep enough to slow his heart down.

“Bucky?” He must have drifted off, because his eyes were closed and there was a cool hand on his forehead. “Jesus, you’re burning up.”

He opened his eyes and looked at Gabe. “Just a cold. You should go back to your unit.”

Gabe shook his head. “I don't think it's a cold any more.” He worried his lip for a moment. “I think it's pneumonia.”

“Nah, I'm healthy as a horse, ask anyone, ask Steve,” he said, trying to stand straight. Gabe flattened his hand against his chest and pushed him back with ease.
“Who’s Steve?”

Bucky frowned. Right, Steve wasn’t here... He hadn't seen him in months, hardly got any letters from him. “He doesn't write any more.”

That was the wrong answer; Gabe drew his eyebrows together and touched his face again. That was okay, his hands were nice and cool. “Okay. You can't keep going.”

“Can't go anywhere else,” he mumbled. He knew that, at least. They were in the heart of enemy territory – he was probably going to die in this fight, but he'd die trying to get back to base, too.

“I can take you back to the base.”

Bucky shook his head and scrubbed his hands over his face. Christ, he felt like he was tanked up. “You'll get yourself killed, both of us will.” He slapped his cheeks and blinked hard. “I'm fine, I'll be fine.”

Gabe's lips went thin. “You can hardly walk.”

“I can walk just fine,” he said, but of course when he pushed himself up to demonstrate this fact, he fell over, Gabe catching him at the last minute. He looped Bucky's arm around his neck and pulled him tight against his side.

“What're you doing?”

“If you won't go back, then I'm sticking with you,” Gabe said, and started walking with him.

Bucky stared for long moment – who knew how long since his sense of time of time was obviously fucked – then smiled. “I wrote my girl,” he said. “I told her-- I did that, what you said...”

Gabe smiled back. “That's good, Bucky,” he said gently.

- It was funny, how fast things turned to shit – or more to shit, anyhow. They were ambushed by Wehrmacht almost as soon as they stepped foot in Azzano. Bucky had enough wherewithal, or maybe just enough adrenaline, to stand on his own two feet and fight fire with fire. Gabe stuck close to him, split from his unit, and they picked Jerries off left and right. The fight wasn't going so bad, there were more Allies than there were Jerries, and they were turning back the tide, until the tanks rolled in.

The tanks fired on the Nazis and for a few brief minutes, Bucky thought, with immense relief, that reinforcements had come, magically, but then the tanks fired on them too, and suddenly they were being rounded up and forced into trucks by soldiers with fucking octopuses on their hats. They didn't get everyone – Bucky saw some of the 107th and 92nd retreat, but then he was hit across the face with a baton and pushed deeper into the truck.

A horrible, traitorous part of his brain was relieved that he didn't have to walk any more.

He passed out for the majority of the journey and had no idea where they were when they were dragged back out. He coughed more than he breathed as they were marched into a bunker of some sort and thrown into cells. He was put into a cell with at least ten other guys, including Gabe, who fussed about his face and listened to his chest. He knew what Gabe heard: every breath he took rattled with mucus, a disgusting, thick sound, just like Steve. He pushed Gabe away and forced himself to cough, pounding on his chest.
“What are you doing?” Gabe said with alarm in his voice.

Bucky waved him off, then stuck his fingers in his mouth and made himself bring up the mucus. He breathed a little easier on inhale.

“Jesus,” Gabe murmured.

“Steve does that,” he said.

“Steve sounds like a fun guy.”

Bucky laughed. “Not especially.” He looked around the dank brick bunker. “This is a hell of a situation we've got ourselves tangled in.”

“That's one way to put it,” Gabe said.

A few hours later, the guards returned and opened the cells, directing them to the work benches twenty feet away. Above them was a ten foot long missile shell suspended from the ceiling. The place, as it turned out, was a weapons factory and they were the new workers.

“Go to hell,” he spat at his guard, and got a smack across the back of the head with the baton again for his trouble.

“You will work for food or die,” the guard said, shoving him towards the conveyor belt. Bucky turned around, his vision blurring, and squinted at him.

“Who are you, anyway, you ain't even fuckin' Nazis.”

“HYDRA,” the guard intoned seriously.

Bucky glanced at his hat. “HYDRA?” he repeated.

The guard snarled at him. “Cut off one head and two shall takes its place.”

“That's a fucking octopus, buddy, it only has one head,” he said and got, what a shock, the baton again. “The Hydra was a fucking snake!” he yelled as the guard walked away. “Your guys were thinking of a snake!”

Unsurprisingly, he didn't endear himself to the guard, who transpired to be one Colonel Lohmer, the guy in charge of the prisoners, and he wouldn't build the bombs they had rolling down the belt. He got beaten more than the other soldiers, although they all got their fair share, and was black and blue across his face and shoulders just a few days later.

“That guard is gonna kill you, kid,” Dugan said in the brief time between standing out the conveyor belt and being thrown back into the cell. Bucky was hunched over, leaning his weight against the worktop.

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head slightly. It hurt to move too much; one of his eyes was swollen shut, his lip was split, and he thought his cheekbone might be broken. “Pneumonia's gonna get me first.”

“Christ,” Dugan muttered.

It went on like that for days, though with no windows, he didn't know when was night or day. They were given bread and watery paste to eat once a day, and had buckets for commodes. Without real food, though, no one needed to shit, which was a blessing.
It was hot in the bunker, they all said so, but he was still so cold, despite constantly dripping with sweat. Bringing up the mucus helped some of the time, but he could still hardly breathe at all. He'd always thought that he was pretty sympathetic to Steve's condition, but if this was what he felt every day, then Bucky had had no fucking idea all these years. He couldn't breathe in hardly at all, his heart fluttered constantly in his chest, his leg throbbed all the time, and the fever made his vision blurry, to say nothing of the mess of his face.

They started working on the bombs under Dernier's expert knowledge on how to sabotage them, which placated the guards for a little while, but Bucky's arms were so weak now that he could hardly lift them and couldn't lift the metal shells of the bombs at all. Most times, Gabe was at his side, carrying his weight, but he couldn't always be there to protect him.

The shell slid out of his hands as Lohmer walked past and he got a rap across the head with a baton.

“Pick it up,” Lohmer ordered.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky muttered, and bent to pick it up. He couldn't get it more than an inch off the ground. Gabe hurried over, reaching out to help, and got a smack in the face.

“Pick it up yourself.”

“Sorry, Fritz,” he said through gritted teeth, “it's this pneumonia. You got a doctor in the house?”

He expected the baton again, but what he got was a kick to the guts. He fell the short distance to the floor and Lohmer kept on kicking, his stomach and his ribs as he squeezed his eyes shut and curled up as much as he could. He could hear chaos around them, Gabe yelling, cracks of gunfire, harsh German voices.

Lohmer kicked and kicked and kicked until Bucky's felt his ribs give away under the attack, and he wondered if one would pierce his lungs – it would be better that way, if Lohmer ended it now. Bucky knew he was going to die one way or another, and quick was better than slow.

Lohmer stopped short of offing him, though, after another few vicious kicks, and walked away. There was another burst of activity around him, and he felt gentle hands on him, pulling him away from the conveyor belt. He was carefully turned onto his back, which sent spikes of pain into his stomach, and constricted his breath like a weight pressing down on his throat.

“I'm sorry, Bucky, this is gonna hurt, but I have to check,” Gabe murmured as he begun to unbutton Bucky's shirt.

Bucky laughed, a horrible wet sound, and groaned. “Go ahead.”

Gabe felt around Bucky's chest and stomach in brief touches, relaying his findings to whoever else was there; Bucky hadn't opened his eyes yet and didn't want to. “Broken ribs,” he said, “He's going to bruise all the way down... He might have damaged his liver. If he gets an abscess... He's not going to survive another beating.”

“He's not going to survive another night,” Dugan said. Good old Dum Dum, always cut to the chase.

“Dugan!” Gabe hissed.

“'sall right, he's right,” Bucky said, or mostly gurgled. He cracked his eyes open and looked up. Gabe looked stricken. “Turn me over,” he added, between gasping breaths.

Gabe buttoned his shirt quickly and put him back onto his side, and Bucky's chest inflated a little
“We’ve gotta do something about Lohmer...” he heard Dugan say, but then he passed out so he didn’t hear the rest.

Lohmer didn’t make him work again, surprisingly, and left him in his cell to die while everyone else toiled away. He lay on his side and watched them between bouts of unconsciousness, coughing intermittently. He could hardly feed himself at all, and Gabe helped him, holding Bucky up against his side and feeding him like a baby while touching him gently when the others weren’t looking. He missed Ma so terribly, he thought his heart might explode. He hadn’t been properly sick in probably a decade, but no matter how big or small the illness, Ma always looked after him, gave him soup, read to him even when he was too old for it, tucked him into bed.

Sometimes when he was drifting, he heard her voice, or he willed himself to, and when he watched the others, he saw Steve in the faces of the smallest men.

So, he survived the night, and the night after, and maybe several nights after that, if he was counting right – he probably wasn’t. Gabe talked about home in Macon, Georgia, his mama’s church singing and his late father the lawyer. He had one sister who had moved hours away to Montgomery, Alabama with her preacher husband – Gabe liked the man fine, but he worried about Mama being all alone now. He’d missed home terribly while he was away at school in DC, and was happy to go back, despite the obvious drawbacks.

Dugan talked about the circus: he was a strong man for years, born to vaudevillians on the road between Boston and Maine, his mother an acrobat, his father a lion tamer.

“You're makin' this up,” Bucky said between coughs.

“It's the God's honest truth,” Dugan said, “don't interrupt.”

He had a wife, too, his sweetheart from childhood, Mary the contortionist. Bucky knew he was making this up now. They had three children and lived most of their time in Boston now, where Dugan had laboured and occasionally performed before the war.

Monty talked quietly about much more sedate stories of his life in Birmingham, though he did let slip that he was, in fact, an Earl and had, according to him, a very tumbled down manor on the outskirts of Birmingham. That caused quite astir among the prisoners, but he pleaded poverty and insisted he had only a title and a nice accent, nothing more.

Dernier told them a fast, excitable story in French, with translation from Gabe. The gist of it went: he was raised in Marseilles and had worked his whole life building diesel engines for trains, which accounted for his expertise in explosives (Bucky begged to differ), had no wife or children as of yet, but did have a beloved basset hound called Etoile who he was anxious to return home to.

“I was a gangster,” Bucky mumbled, to much laughter.

“Sure you were, Mr President,” Dugan said. “Get some sleep.”

The next day, he awoke to absolute mayhem. He managed to push himself up and watched in confusion as guards filled the workshop, beating prisoners with their batons and shouting at the top of their voices in German. He heard a few gunshots and saw a body being dragged away, heavily booted feet disappearing out of sight. The remaining guards threw the prisoners back into their cells and locked them in.
“What's going on?” he asked.

“*Someone* cut the chain of that big missile they were building,” Dugan said. “Unfortunately, your friend Lohmer was stood underneath. Fancy that.”

“They know you did it?”

Dugan grinned. “How dare you suggest such a thing, Mr President.”

Bucky nodded. They did it for him, but it wasn't going to be worth it; whatever the punishment was, it wasn't worth prolonging his miserable life for another few days. And he was right, when the next day the guards announced that no one was getting rations for the foreseeable future. They'd all end up sick like him and no one would make it out alive.

His cough got worse and worse over the next few days, and the lack of even the gruel sapped the last of his strength. He coughed up mucus hourly and spat it out into the bucket where it was more red than anything else. He had internal bleeding, probably; had for, what, five days? He was almost done.

He was woken up a day or so later by a guard. “Finishing the job?” he mumbled.

“You come with me,” the man bit out.

“Where we going? The opera?”

“Jetzt!” he yelled, and dragged Bucky up. The pain was so intense that he screamed uncontrollably and drew everyone's attention his way.

He heard people shouting and being beaten, Gabe yelling *'Lass ihn gehen! Lass ihn in Ruhe!'* to no avail. He was dragged out of the cell, strapped down onto a stretcher, then pushed roughly through the facility and into a harshly lit room. He looked around as much as he could as his throat threatened to close up completely; the place looked like a medieval torture chamber aside from a few very modern looking giant lamps like his dentist had.

He was left there for an indeterminate amount of time, struggling to breathe, until a small man shuffled into the room.

“They say you are quite sick, Sergeant Barnes,” the man said, coming closer. He looked like a frog with tiny round spectacles on. “Would you like me to make you better?”

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, 32557038,” he repeated.

The man smiled tightly and turned away, drawing out a handkerchief to wipe at his face. When he turned back, he had a needle in hand and plunged it without preamble into Bucky's arm. It felt like white hot lava pouring into his veins and he screamed and tried to yank his arm from its restraint, but it held tight and his body locked up into an unforgiving arch.

“*Vielleicht wird der Freund von Kapitän Amerika besser machen,*” the doctor said quietly, turning away again nonchalantly as the pain overwhelmed Bucky and he passed out.
He came and went from consciousness after that, always stuck with a new needle, some other liquid
that felt like his veins were being stripped out of his body one by one. They were always saying,
'Amerika, Amerika'.

“Yeah, I'm an Ameri-kan,” he slurred in one of his more lucid moments. He didn't feel much pain
any more, aside from the injections, which felt like concrete lining his limbs; he guessed his brain
could only handle so much agony at once.

“Indeed you are,” the doctor said, and held up another needle. “Would you like me to sedate you first
this time? I can extend you this kindness as my best patient so far.”

He spat again, though the doctor was expecting it and moved out of the way. “Sergeant James
Buchanan Barnes, 32557038.”

The doctor smiled, revealing his disgusting little teeth. “Very well,” he said, and injected him in the
jugular. At first, it didn't hurt much at all except at the injection site, but then the doctor turned the
overhead light on, pointing it to cover Bucky's whole body, and Bucky was sure he was on fire. He
was lit up like a match to gasoline and he twisted his head, arching up until it felt like his back would
snap in half, and screamed his throat raw. It seemed to go on forever, the harsh light refusing to let
him pass out, stripping him until he was raw and bleeding, until there was nothing left but ashes.

Distantly, he heard a yell and the light was abruptly turned off. He fell back to the table, his head
rolling to the side and he saw the doctor and his guards run away like rats from a sinking ship. He
passed out again.

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He was waking up again. Everything and nothing hurt. His body wasn't his own. Maybe he'd died;
wouldn't that be something?

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, 32557038,” he mumbled. God might want to know a thing like
that.

And then. And then he must have been dead, because Steve was there. No, not dead, because Steve
was alive, Bucky knew he was because he'd feel it if he wasn't, he'd feel that emptiness in the world.
So, Bucky was alive and it was a hallucination, or he was dead and it was just an angel that looked
Steve. Maybe that's what angels were, reflections of the people you loved most. Bucky liked that.

It was a very insistent angel, though, and very big. Steve couldn't possibly have grown almost an
entire foot in the seven months since Bucky had seen him last. Still, he had Steve's face, and Bucky
trusted that. He led Bucky out of the room, and although Bucky was dizzy as hell, he found that he
could walk and breathe just fine now, and when he caught his reflection in a shiny surface, his
mashed up face was completely healed.

He couldn't say the same for whatever that red-faced fucking thing was, though. It must have been
the devil, and he wondered for a moment if Steve was too, but Christ, he couldn't think a thing like
that about Steve. The doctor was with him, like some fucking little bug.

It was certainly the pits of hell below them, though, and if Bucky lived to be a hundred, he'd never
understand now Steve managed to jump across the gap between walkways. They walked out of the
facility together, and joined the assembled prisoners. Steve had spun him some tale about a serum
that had healed all his illnesses and made him grow into an Adonis and he explained it a little more as
they walked through the soldiers. It sounded like magic to Bucky, but Steve smiled and said, “Isn't
that what science is?”
He didn't sound the same, his voice was flatter, missing the old inflections to his words, and the depth of it suited his new body. Bucky had always thought it was funny before, how Steve was such a little guy with such a deep voice. Now he made sense.

They went to the front of the group and started walking. It would be a three day walk back to the base, according to Steve, but Bucky didn't think he'd have any trouble with it this time.

“Bucky!” Gabe called, pushing through to stand behind him. He grasped him by the shoulder. “Jesus, you're okay!”

“Seems that way.”

Gabe was smiling, but started to frown. “How... Your face and... you were almost dead before.”

He shrugged. “Now I'm almost alive.”

Gabe pressed his lips together. “That your friend Steve?” he asked, gesturing with his chin to whatever Steve was. Steve was looking ahead, his face turned proudly to the sky. He looked comfortable and easy in the role of leader.

“I guess so,” he said. “Don't tell him, okay? He gets wound up about things.”

Gabe raised his eyebrows. “What would I be telling him? What did they do to you?”

Bucky shook his head. His leg didn't hurt any more, nor his chest or his ribs or his kidneys or whatever else they'd given a beating to, so he guessed that little fucking doctor had made him better like he said, right?

“I dunno,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

- The spelling and grammar mistakes in Steve's letters are on purpose.

- Laurence Olivier in Wuthering Heights.

- Most of the weapons factory scenes were riffed from the Captain America: First Vengeance tie in comic for CATFA (Bucky and Steve's first meeting in Chapter One). Pretty much the whole thing has been Jossed now, but it had a lot of interesting stuff in it.

- I'll see you all on the other side of Civil War!

Translations (thanks to everyone on my tumblr for hashing it out with me and making me remember some of my GERM110 learning):

French:
À quoi penses-tu? Ça aurait pu te coûter la vie! Et la nôtre! = What are you thinking about? It could have cost you your life! And ours!

German:
Jetzt = Now
Lass ihn gehen! Lass ihn in Ruhe! = Let him go! Leave him in peace!
Vielleicht wird der Freund von Kapitän Amerika besser machen = Perhaps the friend of Captain America will do better.
As soon as he saw Steve's English bit, he knew where Steve's head was at. She was Steve's type to a 
tee, and he was her type too, the way he was now. Steve had told him about her on the march, with 
stars in his eyes, and Bucky knew things would be different, with Steve looking the way he did. 
They only had eyes for each other at the camp, and when Bucky led the cheer for Captain America, 
it was with a bitter taste in his mouth.

*Kapitän Amerika.*

A nurse collared him once the returning soldiers dispersed and insisted he go to the medical tent. 
Bucky was fairly sure that Gabe had put a word in her ear about his condition in the factory because 
she wouldn't take no for an answer. He told Steve he'd be back, who smiled and said he'd be along 
once Phillips had yelled at him, but what he *really* meant was that he wanted to spend some more 
time with his girl. Bucky followed the nurse and caught sight of a poster of good ol' Captain America 
saluting the troops.

“Really, I'm fine,” Bucky said to the nurse, a pretty young thing with soft brown hair.

“I'll be the judge of that, Sergeant,” she said, and held up a thermometer. “Open up.”

“Open what up?” he said with a wink. She narrowed her eyes slightly and placed the thermometer 
between his lips. She left him there with it while she turned away to retrieve something from her tray, 
and his breath caught as she turned back, but she was only holding an armband for blood pressure. 
She pulled the thermometer from his mouth and read it.

“Give it to me straight, doc,” he said, and grinned at her.

“You're temperature is a little elevated,” she said.

“Oh yeah, how much?”

“A hundred degrees,” she said. “Any higher and you'd have a fever.”

He grinned again and winked. “Lots of things could be giving me fevers, nurse.”

She smiled slightly and put the thermometer aside. “Your arm, please,” she said, and slipped the 
band on once he'd rolled his sleeve back. She pumped it up and put her stethoscope to the crook of 
his arm to listen. It was perfect, she said, then moved onto his heart.

“My heart still beating?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” she said with a hint of amusement. “Your heartbeat is a touch slower than most, but 
that's nothing to be concerned about. I'm going to take a listen to your chest now, take a deep breath 
in.”

He took a deep breath and held it for a second, then let it out when directed, repeating the process a 
couple of times.

“Your chest sounds healthy,” she said.”Your friend suggested that you'd developed pneumonia.”

He knew it. “Well, I'm pretty sure I didn't. It was just a cold. Tensions were running pretty high, I 
think it was easy to blow things out of proportion.” The lie came out so smooth, Bucky almost
believed it himself – he'd just had a cold and dreamt the rest of it up. Some horrible fever dream.

She nodded along with him. “That would account for your raised temperature. I'd like to exam you for injuries, please take off your shirt.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her and she shook her head a little as he pulled it off. “Lie down,” she said, and pre-emptively eyed him. He didn't comment. “Tell me if anything hurts,” she said, as she began to palpitate his stomach and feel around his ribs. None of it hurt, not even the exact spot that one of his lower ribs had snapped in half. He didn't have any bruises either, just a minor cut left behind on his cheekbone.

“Everything feels fine...” she murmured. “You were assaulted at the weapons factory, weren't you?”

“Just roughed up a little,” he said. “Like I said, we all got pretty wound up while we were there.”

She smiled. “It looks that way, Sergeant. I'll clean up your cut and then you can be on your way. I'm sure you'd like to get some rest after your journey.”

He agreed, but really, he wasn't tired at all. They'd stopped a couple of times on their march and he'd got a few hours' sleep; he didn't feel like he needed any more. By the time the nurse let him go, Steve was making his way back to the tent.

“Hey, that was quick,” he said, and smiled. His smile was like the sun.

Bucky shrugged. “What can I say? I'm fightin' fit.”

Steve's face looked lit up with happiness. “Come on, you can bunk with me; the accommodations are a little nicer than anything you've had in a while.”

“Hey, I had a private room in an English manor, buddy,” he said.

Steve whistled. “And here I was thinking I was something special.”

“Oh, you're special, all right,” Bucky said, half under his breath, and Steve smiled again and gestured to a tent.

“This is going to be us until we ship back to England.”

“We're going back to England?” Bucky asked, and ducked under the opening. The tent wasn't bad, Steve was right about that, and there were two cots that looked halfway comfortable.

“Tomorrow or the next day, for a little R and R,” Steve said, and opened up his pack. “I've got some clean clothes you can wear.”

“All right,” Bucky said, and reached out to accept them. He couldn't believe that these clothes would fit, despite what his eyes were telling him. They might even be a little too big for him, judging by the width and density of Steve's shoulders, but he'd never really believe it until he had irrefutable proof. A little scrap of something like a postcard fell out of the pack with the clothes. Bucky leant down to pick it up, but Steve grabbed it with lightning fast reflexes.

Bucky blinked and looked up at him. “You got something to hide?”

Thankfully, Steve still had some of his tells: a shifty, irritable cut of his eyes and the beginnings of a blush rising to his cheeks. “It's nothing.”

“Must be something,” Bucky said, and Steve heaved a sigh.
“It’s just a dumb postcard of me,” he said, reluctantly handing it over. Someone had scribbled a moustache and glasses on his face. On the blank side were several attempts at a signature.

Bucky turned over it over to the front again. It claimed that Steve would be touring all across the United States. “Someone’s been vandalising you.”

“That was me,” Steve said, and flashed an embarrassed smile. “I got bored. I was practising my autograph on the back, it's hard writing with these big paws of mine now.”

Bucky nodded. “I bet. So, that letter you sent me...?”

Steve at least had the decency to look a little embarrassed. “Yeah, that was after... the procedure. I wasn't allowed to say, you know, it was top secret. I'm not even supposed to be telling you this now.”

“Uh huh.” He looked back down at the postcard. “So, you went all over the country with this tour thing?”

Steve smiled. “Yep, saw most of America, finally. It was fun while it lasted.”

“California?” he asked, and Steve nodded. “You meet ol' Bette, romance her any with your new muscles?”

Steve blushed some more and sat down on the cot beside Bucky. The cot groaned and dipped down enough to tip Bucky slightly towards him. “Well...”

“Jesus Christ, you did,” Bucky said. Jesus, he’d just been kidding about that.

“No, no, well... not like that. I went to that Hollywood Canteen, that's all,” Steve said, and grinned. “They got me helping out in the kitchens and I got a kiss from Bette.”

So much had happened while Bucky was struggling across Europe; there would have been a time when Steve wouldn't have been able to stop himself from telling Bucky every little thing in excruciating detail. “Wow. So, you played New York?”

“Yeah, Radio City and a couple of smaller places.”

“You ever been recognised?”

Steve pursed his lips, then nodded. “Yeah... We did autographs after the shows, Becca came to one. I tried to pretend, but you know how I am with lying. She said I wasn't fooling anyone and that your ma expected me at dinner that evening.”

Bucky took a breath. “How are they?”

“They're good. Florence has grown even more, she's a whole two inches taller than Eugene.” He smiled. “She's very proud about that. Your dad's turned forty five, so he's safe from the draft, your ma was happy about that. Becca was pretty mad at me for taking off without a word, I left her high and dry. She's got Lily living with her now.”

Bucky laughed and shook his head. This was all working out pretty good for Becca.

“Shit,” Steve said suddenly, and jumped back up. The bed rocked beneath Bucky. “Shit. Phillips was writing condolence letters when I arrived for the show here, if he's sent them...”

Bucky followed him up. “Are you tellin’ me that the fucking army has told my mother I’m dead?”
Steve grimaced. “Maybe?”

One of Phillips lackeys confirmed that the condolence letters had been sent nearly two weeks ago and there was a question mark over whether or not they would have reached people's mailboxes yet. A hell of a lot of people were going to go through the worst kind of pain for nothing soon. Bucky scribbled out a quick letter and Steve impressed upon the lackey the importance that it be sent now and not wait for a full load; Steve was mighty impressive these days.

By the time they got back to Steve's tent, Bucky had nothing left to say, like he'd been hollowed out with an ice cream scoop.

“I'm gonna sleep,” he said, even though he wasn't tired at all. Steve looked pleased by the idea and said he'd leave him in peace.

Bucky didn't mean for Steve to go, but it didn't seem to occur to Steve to stay.

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They set out for England two days later, a day's journey back across Italy and France, and then a four hour boat ride.

“You gonna spew like always, Mr President?” Dugan asked from across the truck.

Steve frowned for a moment. “Mr President? Huh, why didn't I ever think of that?”

“You were too busy calling me names.”

Steve puffed out his considerable chest, like he was affronted. “I never call you names. Becca calls you names, I just don't disagree.”

“You call me a jerk,” Bucky pointed out.

Steve shook his head. “That's just the truth, Buck.”

Bucky glared back at him and Dugan laughed.

“You two are a real double act,” he said with a smile.

“Been this way since 1927,” Bucky said, “he runs his mouth, I suffer through it.”

“Hey!” Steve said, but he was smiling. “You run your mouth plenty too!”

Bucky shrugged a shoulder, and Dugan dug a carton of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and held it out. Bucky started to say no, but then Steve reached out and took one, so after a second's surprise, Bucky did too. Dugan lit their cigarettes, then his own, and Bucky watched Steve carefully as he smoked. He took a deep drag and one of his eyes twitched, then both watered a little before he released it. Bucky hid his smile in the action of bringing the cigarette to his lips, but it didn't escape Steve's attention.

“So, you've been getting seasick, huh?” Steve asked.

“A little,” Bucky said and Dugan burst into laughter.

“More than a little, kid,” he said, “you can't even keep water down on ships or planes.”

Bucky shrugged. “Wasn't used to it, is all.”
Dugan shook his head in disbelief.

A while later they had to abandon their truck and wait in the forest for their new ride; Bucky hadn't really been paying attention to the journey and didn't even know which country they were in.

“So, you're smoking now?” he said, and pulled out his own carton. Steve pulled a face and shook his head when Bucky held it out to him. Bucky smirked.

“Yeah, well... My lungs can take it now, so I thought, you know, I should be more masculine.”

“I think you have the masculinity down,” Bucky said, and allowed himself a moment to cast his eyes up and down Steve's body. Steve really was an Adonis now, his upper body a perfect V, thick muscle covering his arms and legs, and he was handsome beyond belief, like everything good about him had been magnified by a factor of ten. His long eyelashes, that had always been just a touch girlish, complemented his face perfectly, and he radiated a combination of power and gentleness that Bucky didn't think he'd ever seen before; certainly Bucky wasn't capable of such a mixture.

Steve smiled and hunched his shoulders in. “Maybe. I still feel like a little guy, though, it's hard to shake.”

“I can see that,” Bucky said, and took a drag, then blew it out. “You hold the smoke too long, these ain't reefer, they don't make you feel good like that.”

Steve laughed. “I guess you'll have to teach me how to be a man now.”

“Be glad to.” He could teach Steve all about being a man who fucked other men. A real man's man.

They arrived in Liverpool on a Wednesday afternoon. Bucky wasn't the least bit sick on the ship. They disembarked at the port, then got on a train to London and got off a few hours later at Euston Station. They pushed their way across the platform, Bucky just keeping pace with Steve until a bank of telephone booths caught his attention. He stopped to look at them, and so did Steve.

“Oh! You could call your parents,” Steve said, and smiled. Smiles came easy to him now.

“Yeah, you got change for these things?”

Steve frowned. “Damn... Let me ask Peggy.”

He looked around the station, tipping his chin up slightly to look over the heads of all the passing Brits in search of his new lady love. He had a few inches on the surrounding crowd and had no trouble scanning the station floor. He could probably see for miles now, too.

“There she is,” Steve said, and wound his way through the commuters towards her, Bucky following at his heels.

“Steve,” she said warmly when he got in front of her. “This is your first time in London, isn't it?”

“Yeah. I like it so far,” he said, nodding to the store fronts, and Carter smiled warmly at him too. “I don't think I really introduced you to Bucky. Peggy, this is Sergeant James Barnes. Bucky, this is Agent Margaret Carter.” He shuffled out of the way slightly to allow them to shake hands, which Bucky did belatedly.

“It's very nice to meet you, Sergeant,” Peggy said.
“Same to you,” Bucky said, and Steve's eyes flickered a little. He probably should have been politer than that to Steve's new girl.

Steve cleared his throat. “We need some change for the telephone booths,” he said, his voice getting softer at the end.

Carter laughed. “And you're coming to mother for the money? What do you need the telephone for? I hope you're not placing prank calls.”

“Well, see, Phillips sent those condolence letters and...” Steve started, and Carter's face shifted immediately, growing serious.

“Oh Lord,” she said, and opened her handbag to retrieve her coin purse. “Here, use as much as you need.”

“Thanks, Peggy,” Steve said, taking the purse from her. “I'll pay you it back.”

She tutted and shook her head. “I can live without a few pennies, Captain.”

“But I want to feel like a gentleman,” Steve replied, smiling again. “I'm good for it, first time in my whole life I can say that, you know.”

Bucky watched them flirt for another couple minutes, then sighed louder than necessary and held out his hand. “Can I have that?” he said, like a kid. If anyone would be paying Carter back, it'd be him, not his buddy.

“Oh, right, yeah, we'd better get to the phones. Phillips said we'd be doing a full debriefing at the... place,” Steve hedged. Clearly Bucky wasn't supposed to know where the 'place' was.

“Yes, I'll be there,” Carter said, and looked at Bucky. “I hope your telephone call goes well, Sergeant.”

They had to wait ten minutes to get to the booth, and Bucky wedged himself in tight, sitting on the low seat and pressing his feet to the opposite wall. No one was getting him out of there until he was good and ready. He fed the machine a lot of pennies and asked the operator to put him through to New York.

The telephone rang and rang, and the operator cut in after a while to ask if he wanted to wait longer; he did. Eventually, the phone was answered and there was a long moment of silence before his father spoke.

“Hello?” he asked, and his voice sounded raw and far away, although maybe that was quality of the line. “Who is this?” The words came out slowly, like it was struggle to speak.

“It's me, it's Buck--” His voice broke and cleared his throat. “Bucky. Dad, it's me, I'm not-- I'm okay.”

“Bucky?” Dad whispered, a hitch in his voice like he was crying. “Bucky?” he said louder.

“Yeah, Dad. I'm okay, that letter was wrong, I didn't die.” Well, not exactly.

“O doamne,” Dad said, then drew in an audible breath. “Tina! Tina!” There was a brief commotion on the line and Bucky shut his eyes and listened, imagining himself back home, caught up in some minor mayhem in the corridor, his ma shouting in that space between anger and amusement, the kids going helter skelter around the house, Becca to the side watching it all with disapproval.
“Becca, get your mother,” Dad shouted. Bucky heard her voice faintly in the background. “Just get your mother!”

Bucky took a hard breath. “What’s Becca doing there?”

“She wanted to be with family. We only got... we only got the letter a few days ago. Your mother hasn't left our bedroom since. What happened to you?”

“I don't really know. We were captured, I guess the brass gave up on us, but Steve didn't. He rescued me-- us.”

Dad laughed. “Steve? I'd swear you were making up stories again if I hadn't have seen him for myself, Jamie.”

Bucky pressed his hand to his face and willed himself not to cry. When he was real little, before Steve and the kids, when it was just him and Becca, they used to make up all sorts of fanciful stories and tell Dad about them in serious tones once he was home from work. They'd seen monsters in the downstairs toilet, and Becca had danced for the King, and one time Bucky had flown off the top of the house. Dad remained credulous throughout all the stories, nodding along and congratulating them on a day well spent.

He heard his mother's voice in the background and held the phone tighter. There was a brief discussion, Dad's soft urging for Ma to take the phone, and finally she did. Bucky didn't give her a moment to say hello, if she'd been inclined to do so.

“Ma, it's me, it's Bucky. I'm okay, Ma, you can rip up that letter.”

For a beat, there was only silence, then Ma shrieked and burst into rapid fire Italian. Bucky replied every now and then, a 'Sì' here and a 'Ti voglio bene' there.

“You're okay?” Ma asked, once the worst of her excitement had bled off.

“I'm fine, Ma, best shape of my life.” The phone let off a series of beeps and he jammed more coins into it. “I'm sorry you had to read that.”

She took a shaky breath. “It felt like someone had cut my heart out,” she whispered.

“I'm sorry,” he said softly.

“It's not for you to apologise-- oh, your sister wants to talk to you.”

“You asshole!” Becca barked down the phone a second later. “We've been all cut up over here.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint.”

She grew quiet for a moment. “It's good to here from you. Where are you?”

They chatted for a few minutes, the phone getting passed around between the five of them – Grandpa was on a business trip, according to Dad, and hadn't heard the 'news'. Florence had won a regional swimming competition and Eugene was now a lector at the church. Bucky kept feeding coins into the telephone to keep talking, while Steve guarded the booth and redirected angry Londoners who wanted to use the telephone. Eventually, Ma asked to speak to Steve, and he alternated between apologising and telling them that they had nothing to thank him for.

Bucky kept talking as long as he could, about anything he could think to say, but eventually he came
up empty from Carter's coin purse and had to say his goodbyes. Ma started crying, and so did he, turning his face away from the doors so that Steve didn't see.

“I love you, Ma,” he said.

“I love you too, Bu--” she said, and the line went dead. He listened to the tone for a minute, then replaced the receiver on the hook and opened the door.

“I cleared out Carter's coin purse,” he said, handing it over empty to Steve.

Steve closed his big hand around it carefully. “I think she'll forgive you. How you doing?”

Bucky resisted touching his face; he knew he was probably bright red now. “I'd be better with some liquor in me.”

Steve laughed and slapped him on the back. It was hard slap, almost rattling, and didn't make Bucky feel any better at all.

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They were temporarily stationed at Camp Griffiss, in a place called Teddington. It sounded like a place his and Becca's bears would have lived when they were toddlers. He had a tent to himself near his former unit, while Steve's was on the other side of the camp.

Bucky was now in a new, 'elite', squad, hand picked by Steve because something something best friend. He could have put in for a transfer Stateside after escaping the weapons factory, but he knew that Steve would march directly into the jaws of death in his new body without a second thought. Bucky couldn't stop him doing that, but at least he could be there for it.

He hadn't joined his new team at the pub, preferring to stay at the bar and drink, and drink he did, pint after pint when Steve wasn't looking, half a bottle of brandy that he paid over the odds for. He'd been a little bit tipsy in the pub, but it'd passed. Just like Carter's gaze had passed right over him when she strode in looking like a movie star in her red dress, like a drawing from Steve's sketchbook, like Steve had willed her into being. Bucky had briefly wondered if her disinterest in him stemmed from her empty coin purse, but he knew it wasn't that. She just didn't have any time for him, her head was firmly turned in Steve's direction.

Bucky couldn't blame her for that.

The opening of his tent rustled and he reached for his knife.

“I saw the light,” Gabe said as he stepped in. Bucky eased back from his pack. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Gabe smiled. “My Sarge is going to blow a vein over me being transferred without his permission.”

Bucky smiled back as Gabe wandered in. He looked a little merry, his hands stuffed into his pockets as he looked around the tent with a vague eye. “Steve seems like a good guy,” Gabe added.

“The best,” Bucky said, and patted the space next to him on the cot.

Gabe sat and tucked his hands under his legs. “So, is it true, what the guys have been saying about Rogers being some kind of science experiment?”

Bucky sighed and reached for his pack again. His collection of photographs were tucking into a copy
of the newest Chandler book. He pulled one out and handed it to Gabe. “That's me and Steve at the
opening of the World's Fair in '39. He's twenty one there.” It was a nice picture, Steve standing up
very straight with a vague look of surprise on his face while Bucky had his arm around him, grinning
enough for the both of them. Becca had framed the picture perfectly with the Trylon and Perisphere
in the background.

“That's a hell of a growth spurt,” Gabe said. “How do you feel about the whole thing?”
Bucky shrugged. “It's fine, it's what he always wanted anyway.”

“He's taller than you now.”

“I don't know about that...”

Gabe laughed and shook his head. “At least two inches.”

“Maybe,” Bucky allowed, and Gabe kept smiling for a minute before glancing down at his leg.

“How's the leg?”

“It's fine,” he said. It hadn't given him any trouble since the doctor's lab, it felt better than it did when
he was sixteen.

“And your chest?”

“I'm breathing, ain't I?”

“Yeah...” Gabe frowned for a moment. “Don't you think that's strange?”

“It's like you want me to be on my deathbed or something.”

Gabe drew his eyebrows together. “Of course I don't want that. It's just that you were extremely sick,
you know, even if you pretend otherwise now. That's not... how it works.”

That was how it worked for Steve. All his problems, washed away in the time it took Bucky to go to
war, turn queer, and get captured by a guy without a face. Maybe that was how it had worked for
Bucky too, but he didn't think it'd turned out quite right on him.

“Did you come in here to fool around or just to be a nag?” he said, and he could have made it sound
funny, a joke between friends, but it just came out mean, and Gabe didn't fail to notice the edge to his
voice.

“I'll let you get some sleep, sounds like you need it,” Gabe said, and stood up again. He handed the
picture back and Bucky returned it to the book.

“Fine.”

Gabe walked to the edge of the tent, then stopped for a moment. “I won't tell Steve, okay? You can
trust me on that.”

Bucky managed a wan smile. “Thanks,” he said, and snuffed out the lamp as Gabe left. He didn't
expect he'd get any sleep, but he'd try anyhow.

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London in November was mild but rainy, and Bucky spent his days either reading or engaging in
pointless busywork. Steve spent hours consulting with Phillips and Carter, despite the fact that she took a shot at him not so long ago. Steve said it was his fault anyhow, but Bucky didn't feel quite so forgiving.

Steve got the two of them leave from doing nothing to go do nothing some place else, so they took the tube into the centre of the city. Tube trains were a hell of a lot cleaner than the subway, and girls on the seat across from them made eyes in between whispered conversation.

“You got any chocolate?” one of them called eventually, in an accent very unlike Carter's.

Bucky looked back at her. She had light brown hair and minimal make up on, aside from her lipstick, and a drab brown dress and grey coat that would have been terribly unfashionable in New York. She was pretty enough, though, in an English way. “No,” he said, while Steve patted down his pockets and came up empty.

“Sorry,” Steve said with an apologetic smile.

The girl clicked her tongue. “You're supposed to have that stuff on you, chocolate, stockings...”

“Powered coffee,” her friend added.

The girl nodded. “Don't you know that?”

“We're new,” Bucky said flatly. Steve cast him a quick look, then smiled again.

“We are, I'm sorry.”

The girls magnanimously let them be after that, and they got off at Leicester Square to take in a movie. There were two 'cinemas' in the square, both playing almost nothing but war movies. Bucky didn't need to see Humphrey Bogart or Paul Lukas struggle against the Nazis. They chose *Son of Dracula* showing at the Empire Theatre and got popcorn and soda. British soda didn't taste right.

“Wow, this place looks like Radio City,” Steve said, peering over the balcony to the seats below. It was a pretty ritzy looking place.

“I guess,” Bucky said.

Steve grinned. “My big number was holding a motorcycle with a couple of girls on it over my head.”

“Well,” Bucky said, “that's something.”

He watched the movie with disinterest, chewing on his nails and eating popcorn, while Steve watched with rapt attention. A while back, a film like this would have unsettled Bucky, like all horror movies did. Now it barely made any impression at all.

They went to a nearby restaurant after to eat. No more blue plate special for Steve, now he ordered fish and chips and looked disappointed at the small serving.

“You all right, Buck?” he asked as Bucky picked at his meat pie. Nothing tasted right in this damn country. “You’ve been quiet recently.”

Bucky shrugged. “Just missing home.” He smiled and added, “Glad you're here.”

The corners of Steve's eyes crinkled up as he smiled back. “I'm glad too... So, I've been thinking.”

“Uh oh,” Bucky muttered, and Steve kicked him under the table.
“I was thinking,” he repeated, glaring at Bucky for a moment. “Phillips is going to deploy us any day now and I'm so close to Ireland. I'd like to see if I could visit Kiltimagh first.”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

Steve looked pleased. “Will you come with me?”

“Course I will,” he said. It'd be good for Steve, and for him too. Steve nodded happily and inhaled the last of his food.

Steve managed to wrangle four days' leave for the two of them, which Bucky suspected was only possible because with Carter or Stark's interference. It was a day's journey by train, ferry, and bus, and they set off at the crack of dawn on a Thursday to get there. Steve was fidgety for the entire journey, going through his old photographs and doodling on scraps of paper.

“They'll love you,” Bucky said.

Steve smiled a little, a more gentle smile than he had ever been capable of before. “I just hope there's someone left who remembers them.”

They arrived in the town of Kiltimagh at six pm, and stuck out like sore thumbs. They walked for a while in silence, in near total darkness. All the buildings here were two or three storeys high, not a high rise in sight. It was kind of nice, like the quietest evenings he'd ever spent in Brooklyn. After a while, Steve stopped outside a tavern.

“This place says it has rooms,” he said.

“Room and booze sounds pretty good,” Bucky said.

The tavern was fairly full and looked like a real low rent operation on the inside. Bucky dreaded to think what the rooms were like.

“You Yankees aren't bringing the war over here, are you?” the bartender called. He was fat and balding, probably around his mid sixties, and he, along with the rest of the patrons, were staring at them like they'd just goosestepped into the place.

“How did you know we're American?” Steve asked.

The guy scoffed. “You seen anyone else in this town tall and strong like you's two? And you're smart clothes are a dead giveaway.”

Steve looked down at his nice shirt and slacks – he could dress up real nice now, with his army salary and broad shoulders. “Oh,” he said. “Well, we're just looking for a room for the night.”

“We've got one'a them going,” the bartender said. “You like a drink?”

“Sure. Uh, two beers,” Steve said, with a glance to Bucky. Bucky nodded and they approached the bar to take a stool each. Steve looked comically oversized.

“So, what brings you two to a place like this. We hear all sorts of stories about you GIs, sure you could find fun elsewhere's than here.”

“Actually, it's a personal thing,” Steve said. “Do you know the Rogers family? Or the Kellys?”
The bartender snorted and slid their pints over. Tasted like piss. “Oh aye, I know ’em. Buncha criminals, those Kellys. The Rogers are god-fearing, most of them.”

Steve cleared his throat nervously. “You know a couple of their kids, Joe and Sarah?”

The bartender took up a rag to dry some glasses. “Romeo and Juliet, y’mean?”

Steve ducked his head and smiled. “Yeah. I’m their son.”

“You're never!” the bartender said, dropping the rag. “You're like three Irishmen stacked on top of each other!”

Steve laughed and held out his hand. “I wasn't always big. I'm Steve.”

“Conor,” he said, and glanced at Bucky. “Who are you, then?”

“Just along for the ride,” he said, and shook Conor's hand too. “Bucky.”

“That's an American name if ever I heard one.”

Bucky smiled wanly and returned to his beer. Conor was only interested in Steve, though, just like everyone else.

“You're sure you're a Rogers? Sure you didn't get turned around down there in Dublin?”

“I'm sure. Mam and Dad came through Ellis Island March 20th 1916 and settled down in Brooklyn.” He took out the photographs he’d been fussing with before and handed one over. Bucky caught a glimpse as it passed by him; Joe and Sarah's wedding picture. Bucky had seen it so many times, on Sarah's sideboard, and later on Steve's night stand.

“That certainly looks like them,” he said. “I remember hearing from one of your aunts that your pa had died in the war, terrible thing. How's Sarah?”

Steve raised the corner of his mouth. “She passed seven years back.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, and you're just a young lad.”

“I was eighteen. Do you know where any of my aunts or uncles live?”

“I have a fair idea, but they're spread out quite a bit these days. You're in luck, though, 'cause one of your cousins on your pa's side comes in most days with a delivery of beer; he should be here in the hour. Take a seat and I'll point him out to you.”

The strange looks didn't let up when they sat down at a rickety table, their knees brushing every now and then.

“So, how's it feel, being in your ancestral home?” Bucky asked. “Are the pipes calling you from glen to glen?”

Steve threw a pork scratching at him. “Well, how'd it feel being in Italy? Did you want to go sailing around in one of those little boats?”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “It's called a gondola. And I mostly just felt like a prisoner of war.”

Steve's face fell. “Shit, I'm sorry, Buck, I didn't think that through.”
He shrugged and drained his glass, then picked up the scratching and ate it. “It's fine. I'd've liked to see more of the country than some wet forests and back roads. Maybe one day.”

The tavern door opened behind Steve and a kid struggled in rolling a couple of beer barrels through the door. There was no doubt that he was Steve's cousin, he looked exactly like him, the real Steve, except his hair was darker and he might have been a little taller. Bucky gestured to him and Steve turned in his chair. His eyebrows jumped up his face and he hurried out of his seat.

“Let me help you with that,” he said, and picked one barrel clean up off the floor. The kid's eyes went wide. “Bucky, can you get the other one?”

The barrel wasn't heavy at all, as it happened, and he brought it over to rest beside Steve's behind the bar. Conor shook his head in amusement and turned to the kid.

“Liam, I see you've met your cousin, Steve.”

“Yer what?” Liam said, looking Steve up and down. “He's no cousin of mine, he's a Yank!”

Steve cleared his throat and held out his hand. Liam looked at it suspiciously. “I'm your uncle Joseph's son.”

“The one that got gassed in the last war?” Liam said blithely, and Bucky winced for Steve, who took it with a careful, frozen look on his face. Liam might have looked like Steve, but he sure wasn't him.

“Yeah,” Steve said. Liam allowed him to shake his hand briefly, and he smiled. “Joseph and my mother, Sarah, had me once they made it to Brooklyn.”

Liam shook his head. “I don't believe it, there's not been a Rogers in history looks like you.”

“You look exactly the same,” Bucky blurted out, and got a very strange look from Liam. “When he was... younger, I mean.”

“And who are you, my long lost brother?”

“Just a friend.” Not yours, he finished in his head.

“Liam, stop giving these lads a hard time,” Conor said, leaning over the bar. He patted Steve on the arm. “Show 'im your pictures.”

Steve handed them over, the wedding picture and a few others, and after a minute's scrutiny, Liam shook his head and handed them back. “My mam'll be wanting you round for tea, then.”

Steve had a huge extended family at Liam's mother's house, Aunts Niamh, Shannon, Shauna, and Áine; Uncles Shane, Darragh, Oisin, Ciaran, Ross, and Niall; and a bunch of cousins. A whole lot of fucking Irish people. They talked about Joseph, a beloved middle brother who hadn't been forgotten despite their lack of contact.

“Your mam used to send letters from time to time,” Niamh, Joe's eldest sister, said, “but I don't think she could afford the stamps that often, and neither could we.”

Steve nodded. He was tucked onto the end of a tiny sofa, sunk down so that his knees were higher than his ass. “Yeah, I can believe that, money was tight all the time.”

“She did send pictures now and again,” Niamh said, and sent one of her kids to go fetch her box of trinkets. When the kid came charging back with it, she unearthed the pictures from beneath some
scattered jewellery and coins.

Steve looked through them carefully, smiling to himself, then laughed. “Jesus,” he said, and glanced up at all the god-fearing Rogers. “Uh, sorry.” They smiled indulgently and Bucky figured they'd heard and said a lot worse than that. Steve handed him a picture. “Look at this one.”

“Huh,” Bucky said, looking down at a picture of the two of them in Bucky's bedroom. He flipped it over and read Sarah's neat handwriting: 1928, Steve and his best friend, Bucky.

“Becca took that one,” Steve said, and Bucky remembered it. Becca was always a tyrant with her camera, but especially when she was a kid. Steve turned back to Niamh. “That's him in the picture. His sister took it.”

Bucky turned it over again as the assembled women said how sweet that was. It sure was something that a picture of him had made it all the way over here to Ireland and was kept safe all these years in this woman's trinket box. That was real nice.

The Rogers put on a dinner of corned beef and potatoes and regaled them with family history. A distant great-times-something grandfather of Steve had moved from the west country of England to Ireland in the plantation of Ulster and the family had worked their way down from there to Êire. The younger of his uncles and aunts all spoke English fluently, but the older ones spoke mainly Gaelic, mashing up the two languages freely as they talked over dinner. The others understood them perfectly well, but it didn't make a lick of fucking sense to Bucky. Steve could follow it but not reply in kind.

They left near midnight for the tavern, though Niamh unconvincingly offered them a floor to sleep on. Steve shook his head politely and said he'd already paid Conor.

“I suppose you'll be wanting to find the Kellys tomorrow,” she said at the door.

“Yeah...”

She pressed her mouth to a flat line. “Some of them live over Cloonkedagh way, but you'll find most of them in that Callahan's pub on Bog Road.”

“Is my grandfather still alive?”

Niamh snorted. “No, and good riddance to him. I'm sorry, love, but he was an awful brute to your mam.”

He nodded, his mouth set sadly. “Yeah, I got that impression. Thank you for dinner, I'll drop by again before we leave.”

Their room at the tavern was tiny, about ten feet across with two single beds. Bucky used the bathroom first, washing up and changing into his pyjamas, then went back to the room and picked up his Chandler book as Steve took his turn. He came back not long later and opened his pack.

“ Took the wrong clothes,” he said, smiling.

“Your head's too full of all the names of those Irish people,” Bucky replied.

Steve laughed and turned his back to Bucky. “You're not wrong,” he said, and started unbuttoning his shirt. Bucky kept his eyes on his book as long as he could, but he could see Steve's back in his
periphery, as pale as ever but now a mile wide. He rolled his head to one side on the pillow and took in the sight. Steve's shoulder blades moved smoothly beneath his skin as he stretched out his arms, and Bucky thought that his palms would have fit over them perfectly without anything left to waste. Steve undid his belt and let his slacks dropped; the circumference of his thighs were bigger than Bucky's by at least a couple of inches, and when he bent over to remove his socks, his spine pressed against his skin, just as straight and true as he was.

He didn't remove his underwear, which Bucky supposed he was glad for, and redressed quickly in his pyjamas. Bucky rolled his head back to the book before Steve caught him looking. Steve pulled the covers of the bed back and got in with a soft *whomp* and a happy sigh. Then he rolled to the side and dug around in his pack.

“Hey, Steve?” Bucky said carefully. His voice sounded fine.

“Uh huh?”

“So, how tall are you now?”

Steve tugged his book from the pack and lay back down. He grinned to himself, then looked at Bucky. “Six two.”

“Huh,” Bucky said.

Steve laughed. “Your dad measured me and wrote it on the door frame, so it's official.”

“How much do you weigh?”

“Two hundred, two ten.”

Bucky looked back at his book. “Jeez.”

“Twice the man I was,” Steve said, and opened his book.

Bucky nodded, but he didn't think that was right at all.

They set out early the next day, seven am, to take in the sights that Kiltimagh held for them. It had snowed overnight and neither of them had the appropriate layers, but Steve said it didn't really affect him, and it didn't seem so cold to Bucky either. He still accepted Steve's extra sweater to appease him. The thing was loose on him even with a shirt underneath.

Steve said it was too early to go looking for the Kellys, but Bucky thought he was more nervous than anything. Just how bad had Sarah had it here? She was such a fragile little thing, the idea of her father laying a hand on her made his blood boil even with her being dead these seven years. Maybe the Kellys weren't worth meeting.

They walked all over the town, passing a so-called 'fairy fort' (Bucky was home!), a forge, and some old manor, though nothing was open to visit. It was all boring as hell as far as Bucky was concerned, but Steve was happy. They ended up in a graveyard in the late morning, walking the plots until Steve found a 'Patrick Kelly, 1872-1935'.

“Sorry, Steve,” Bucky muttered. Steve had told him once that he'd always wanted a grandfather like Bucky had – when they were young, anyhow, before the scales fell from their eyes.
Steve shook his head. “It's okay.” He nodded towards the church. “Let's go inside.”

Inside, they lit candles for Sarah and Joe and said a prayer. The priest drifted over and made small talk, asking all about what a couple of soldiers were doing in Kiltimagh. Everyone pegged them for military straight off the bat these days; Bucky could see why with Steve, he was straight-backed and proud, but Bucky didn't feel much like a soldier himself.

“Are you brothers?” the kindly priest asked.

Steve smiled widely. “In all but blood, Father.”

Bucky flashed a smile too, but he already had a little brother, he didn't need another one.

In the late afternoon, they finally made their way to this Callahan's place, and Bucky could see why Niamh had pursed her lips about it – it was a real hole. It wasn't like Conor's tavern, which was run down but friendly; this place looked like the club at its worst, it was filthy and nearly empty, and there were some real aggressive looking types loitering around. They went up to the bar to order drinks and got a real stinkeye from all the barflies.

They drank in silence for a few minutes, Steve drawing his eyebrows together pensively. Bucky wondered if he was going to ask the bartender about the Kellys, but the guy didn't exactly look open to conversation. The question answered itself a little while later when a guy crashed into the place and the bartender hollered at the top of his lungs, “You're barred, Kelly, get the fuck out!”

Steve startled and looked around.

“I ain't done nothing wrong!” Kelly shouted back.

“Tell that to yer wife,” the bartender. “Get out of here!”

“Fuck you!” Kelly threw back, and suddenly he was brandishing a knife. There was an angry murmur, and then Bucky was up and out of his seat before even Steve's reflexes could get him there.

He got Kelly by the throat and slammed him against a wall. “Drop it,” he growled.

Kelly started, “Who are you to--” but Bucky pressed his thumb against his windpipe and he choked to a stop, his face turning purple.

“Buck!” Steve called.

Bucky pressed his thumb in harder, and Kelly dropped the knife. He let go and stepped back, staring down at him with a smirk, then retrieved the knife. “If you're smart, you won't try anything while my back's turned,” he said quietly, and turned away.

Steve's eyebrows were practically up to his hairline as he walked back and laid the knife on the bar. Behind him, he heard the pub door open and close. “I guess this is yours now,” he told the bartender.

“Maybe we should go...” Steve murmured.

“You're right,” the bartender said, and placed the knife carefully under the bar. “Take your friend with you, I've got enough problems as it is.”

Steve took out his wallet and paid up, over the odds from what Bucky could see. “Thanks,” he murmured, then herded Bucky out.

Bucky could hear him draw breath to speak as they stepped out the door, but then there was the
Kelly kid again.

“Oi, who do you think you are gettin' involved in my business?” he shouted, and started advancing on them.

“You showed your hand way too fucking soon, don't you know anything about being a scumbag?” Bucky said, to the quiet admonishment of Steve.

Kelly tried to take a swing at them, but Steve blocked it, grabbing his closed fist in his palm, and pushed him back. Kelly tripped and fell on his ass, and Steve stooped to offer his hand; he took it with a glare and Steve helped him get up and straightened out.

“Did you have a grandfather called Patrick?” Steve asked.

“Why d'you want to know?” he spat back.

Steve was quiet for a moment, then shook his head. “No reason,” he said. “Have a nice evening. C'mon, Bucky.”

Bucky didn't spare Kelly a second glance and turned with Steve. Steve was frowning to himself, his hands stuffed in his pockets. This family history tour hadn't gone exactly like he'd hoped, Bucky figured, and who knew when he'd get the chance to come back again. He patted Steve on the back.

“Sorry I choked your cousin out,” he said.

Steve laughed and shook his head. “You did what you had to do.”

“You didn't want to tell him who you were? The whole family can't be scumbags.”

Steve shrugged, and Bucky let his hand slip from Steve's shoulder. “Mam lived in America for twenty years and hardly ever wrote them; there was a reason for that. She never really talked about it, but she used to say that they lived on top of each other and 'tensions grew'. If she was here, she wouldn't want me getting tied up with them, otherwise I would have known them all these years.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said. He believed it; Sarah was a good woman, she wouldn't have lied to Steve or kept relatives worth a damn from him. Everything she did was for Steve. “Sorry it didn't work out the way you hoped.”

“It worked out just fine,” Steve said. “I know more about my dad than ever, and you're here with me.”

Bucky smiled and tipped his chin down a little. “I'm here, choking your relatives.”

“A needed service,” Steve said with a laugh. “We should do this for you one of these days. Go to Romania and find out about your father's family.”

He shook his head. “I don't even know what his real surname is.”

“You could always ask.”

“I dunno.” He kicked at a plain of undisturbed snow, then regretted ruining it. “He doesn't like talking about it. His parents were killed, some of his siblings too. The rest either died from disease or were adopted out. I think he got over it by becoming a different person.”

He lifted his head and looked at Steve, and the look of understanding on Steve's face took his breath away for a moment. Steve had literally become a whole new person to get away from everything he
hated about himself – Bucky didn't think there was much he'd ever liked about himself, despite everything Bucky saw. Steve was perfect in every sense: stronger, smarter, gentler, even talked better, never said 'ain't' or 'was' when he meant 'were' or vice versa. Now he was everything he could ever be and more, but Bucky thought he missed his bite, his sarcastic comments and prickly nature. Steve had nothing left to be prickly about now; he was what he was meant to be.

Maybe if Bucky was too, he wouldn't feel so prickly either.

For a moment he thought Steve might hug him, but the spell passed and Steve bumped shoulders with him instead. “Snow fight?” he suggested, and looked back with a smile.

Bucky shook off the strangeness and smiled back. “I ain't gonna go easy on you any more.”

Steve grinned with his tongue caught between his teeth. He scooped up a ball of snow. “That's big talk from a such a little guy.”
They were ordered to France a few days after returning from Ireland and set out on their first mission, dismantling a HYDRA weapons facility in Dieppe. Steve was a good leader, he commanded their respect but yielded to better knowledge, didn't throw his weight around like some of the COs Bucky had met. Admittedly, he might not have done so well with a regular unit; this new team was pretty easy to work with, no out of control egos or unpleasant characters – other than Bucky, of course.

They returned to England a few days before Christmas, sore and tired – some of them, anyhow.

The men decided to decorate the camp, though they had no real decorations to do it with and had to make their own. Monty took a small group foraging for supplies and crafted garlands made from pine cones and vines of holly. It was a pretty ingenious idea.

“I told you before,” he said when they commented on it, “I've got no money. My father was a gambler, did away with most of our estate by the time I was a boy. We made do.”

Some of the guys started singing carols, *Silent Night* and all the that crap. Steve joined in after a while, butchering *Away in a Manger*.

“You still can't sing worth a goddamn,” Bucky called as he helped Monty hang the garland across the outside of a tent. The holly kept pricking him, but he didn't see any blood.

“Shut up, it's Christmas,” Steve said. Packages from home had arrived before they'd returned from Dieppe, but Steve wanted to wait until the day and they'd all agreed the captain was right.

“It's not Christmas for another seventy two hours.”

“Sixty one,” Steve corrected, and laughed when Bucky raised his eyebrows. “We're eleven hours into the twenty second, and Christmas starts one minute past midnight on the twenty fifth. Sixty one hours.”

Steve never used to be able to do math like that in his head. “All right, well, that still makes it not Christmas yet.”

“Scrooge,” Steve muttered.

The rest of the commandos laughed at them. They did that a lot, laughing at their 'bickering'. He'd heard the phrase 'old married couple' muttered by Morita, but he wouldn't say it to Bucky's face. They got the camp pretty nice and spruced up, and Bucky thought it might be halfway festive on the day, especially if it snowed. It hadn't so far this month, but Bucky could hope.

Monty got leave to visit his mother and kid sister in Devon where they'd been evacuated, so he left on the evening of the twenty third and would return on 'Boxing Day'. The rest of them spent the
evening listening to BBC broadcasts about farming – the contributors were so serious about the ins and outs of cattle-breeding – and a stern informational piece about how to throw a party. Like any of these dirty, hungry, worn down assholes would be throwing a party any time soon.

Bucky still had a tent to himself and once they'd all turned in, he tried to read but nothing held his attention. In a few short hours, New York time, Becca would be turning twenty six and this was the first time he wouldn't be around to celebrate it. He tried to keep his attention focused on the Agatha Christie book that Monty had lent him when he complained about having nothing to read. She sure wasn't any Raymond Chandler, but it was better than nothing.

By two am, though, he couldn't stand it. Camp Griffiss was set up in a leafy park area and when he went outside, the trees were swaying in the cold wind. It was otherwise silent, the grass crunching under his feet with the beginnings of frost. Around him it was black, the stars bright and brilliant without artificial lights to compete with. It was cold enough to see his breath but he didn't mind it. He walked past some of the tents and huts, getting further to the perimeter of the camp, then lay down on the grass.

The frost quickly melted against the back of his shirt, but that was fine. When he was a kid, he'd never really been one for looking up – he looked forward, backward, or down, but not up to the sky. There were always things going on around him, kids that might start something, his ma with a tray of cookies, Steve having one of his episodes, but there was nothing going on in the sky that Bucky didn't already know about. Birds, clouds, stars, same shit everyday.

Becca liked the stars. She'd scramble up this big maple tree in the garden and try to get closer to the sky and Bucky would have to go after her even though he didn't like climbing trees; Ma told him that the branches would break with them on them and Bucky believed it because he'd seen branches fall out of the tree with nothing on them at all. So he'd have to go after her, getting sticky residue on his hands and knees, bugs in his face, and he thought he was probably double her weight and that they'd both break their necks and die at ages five and six, but they never did, but neither did she touch the sky, no matter how high she reached.

He smiled at the memory and watched the stars inch across the sky.

- "Bucky?" someone called. Gabe, he thought it was. It was still dark, but there was a very faint light like from a lamp. Bucky figured he must have drifted for a while.

"You're not supposed to have a light," Bucky replied, mumbling slightly. "Jerries'll get us."

The faint light extinguished with a sigh from Gabe. "Aren't you cold?"

"Not really. What time is it?"

"Four thirty, I just came out for a piss. Have you got any sleep?"

Bucky looked up. Even with no light, he could make out Gabe's outline. "A little. You going back to bed? I doubt Steve'll be rousing anyone early."

Gabe sighed out a cloud of white air and sat down beside him. "I guess I can stay for a little while. What are you doing?"

"Looking at the sky."

Gabe lay down with a grunt, muttering about the cold grass. "The stars, you mean?"
“Uh huh.”

“You know the different constellations?”

“Nah, I don't know any of that astrology stuff.”

“Astronomy,” Gabe corrected, and Bucky shrugged even though he probably couldn't see it. He pointed to the sky. “See those five stars in a zigzag pattern?”

Bucky shifted closer to Gabe and tried to see it. Gabe pointed it out again, and Bucky just about saw what he was getting at, so he nodded.

“That's Cassiopeia. It's supposed to look like the queen of Aethiopia sitting in a chair.”

Bucky didn't see how a zigzag could look like a woman or a chair.

“And see those stars in a square? That's Pegasus, the winged horse.”

Bucky thought he'd heard of Pegasus before. “How's a square a horse?”

“It has some other stars, see them on the right hand side of the square?”

Bucky leant right over until their faces were nearly touching. “No.”

Gabe laughed a little, white puffs appearing and dissipating between them. “The really bright star is Sirius, the dog star.”

“I always kind of wanted a dog,” Bucky said. Ma said it would eat Kitty, but he thought it was more to do with the fact that she didn't think he'd be responsible enough with the dog. She probably wasn't wrong.

“I had a dog, a big Golden Retriever.”

Bucky turned his head and his nose rubbed against Gabe's cheek. Neither of them moved. “What was it called?”

“You're gonna laugh.”

“Nah, all dogs have stupid names, I won't laugh.”

“All right,” Gabe said. “Buck.”

“Yeah?”

“No, that's what he was called.”

Bucky frowned. “Fuck off, your dog wasn't called Buck.”

“From The Call of the Wild?”

He thought about it for a moment. He'd never read that book, but Becca had and then she called him a dog after, but he'd never really thought about it before. “Jeez, I thought my parents named me after the president; maybe they named me after a fucking dog.”

“Well, Buck was a good dog.”

“Well, that's something... How come you never told me that?”
Gabe tipped his head as well, and their noses touched. “I thought you might punch me.”

“I wouldn’t punch you,” Bucky murmured, and pressed in the small distance to kiss. It was stupid, them being outside on full view of anyone who happened by, but he didn't care. Gabe pushed his hand through Bucky’s hair and tugged on it as they kissed, and Bucky swallowed a grunt of pleasure. He dragged his hand down Gabe's side, then slid it back up his shirt and palmed his side.

Gabe pulled back and ruffled his hair a little. “Not outside. Christ, I bet you got handsy with girls.”

“Fingering, mostly,” he said and imagined that Gabe blushed at that. He rolled onto his back again and looked at the dog star.

“So, why are you even out here?” Gabe said softly.

“My sister turns twenty six at twelve minutes past five.”

“You're pretty close to your sister, huh?”

She was his best friend before even Steve was. “I guess I am.”

They stayed out until early morning light started to filter in, then went back to their respective tents and got changed for breakfast. They all lounged around the canteen for most of the day, singing carols and listening to the radio. Gabe sang like an angel, Bucky thought. He’d been a lead singer in his church's choir before he left for college, he said ruefully. Bucky thought he could have made a career of it.

He got a little sleep on Christmas Eve night, but was woken early by Steve.

“Merry Christmas!” he said, grinning, crouching down beside Bucky's cot.

“Uh huh,” Bucky said, and rolled away from him.

“C'mon, Buck, it's Christmas, we can open our presents.”

Bucky sighed and rolled back. “You ever read The Call of the Wild?”

Steve frowned. “No. Why, you want a copy?”

“It doesn't matter. All right, let's see what Santa got us.”

They gathered in the canteen with the rest of the soldiers and started opening the packages that had arrived earlier in the week. Gabe got thick socks from his mama, Dugan got shitty handmade cards that made him clear his throat and swipe at his eyes, Morita got a bottle of whiskey wrapped up tight in a sweater, Dernier received a card with a paw print on it and Steve got a stack of books and some good pencils from Becca and the family.

Bucky got books too, the newest Chandler and Lovecraft, along with new underwear and a box of animal crackers; Bucky expected the latter was Becca's idea.

“Your parents sent you Barnum's? I love those,” Gabe said without shame.

Bucky looked down at the red and yellow packaging, then tossed it to Gabe. “Here, might be stale though.”

Gabe tipped his chin down and smiled, and Steve looked thoughtfully at them for a moment before returning to his books.
He read the letter the family had enclosed, telling him all about their plans for Christmas and Becca's birthday and how well the kids were doing in school. Florence had applied to Radcliffe and it suddenly really hit him that they were going to turn eighteen next year – he wouldn't be able to call them kids for much longer.

There was another letter nestled at the bottom of his package and he recognised the handwriting right away. It was Connie's. In the past few months, he'd managed to put her completely out of his mind, as shitty as that was. He expected that she'd move on, she certainly never had a shortage of admirers; she used to worry that he'd get jealous about it, but he never did. She was a pretty girl, why wouldn't she get attention.

He glanced at Steve, then at Gabe, who had set the crackers aside and was talking in French with Dernier, but neither of them were paying attention. He slid the letter out of its envelope and started reading.

Dear Bucky,

I received your letter a few months ago and I'm only now replying because I was so terribly hurt I thought didn't care one way or the other about you. That was an awfully cruel thing to send a girl. But when Becca came into work and told me you'd passed, I sat beneath the counter and cried; the girl I work with now said I scared the customers. I can't describe the joy I felt when you were rescued, I wish I could have spoken to you too.

I like to tell myself that you ended things for my sake, because you're scared of what the future holds for you on the front, but even if that's not the case, I still love you and no one can take that away from me. You made me the happiest I've ever been and I believe that was real.

Love,

Connie

Along with the letter was a photograph of the two of them, taken in a photo booth. He remembered it, her sitting on his lap, him wrapping himself all around her. He was always all over her. The back told him the picture was taken in September '41. She looked radiantly happy; he looked okay.

“Is that from Connie?” Steve asked. He'd drifted closer while Bucky had been engrossed in the letter. “How's she doing?”

“She's good...” Bucky said, and stuck the letter in his pocket. He let Steve look at the photograph as Gabe looked at him. He had a heavy, sad look in his eyes, and Bucky couldn't meet his gaze for long.

“It's a cute picture,” Steve said, handing it back, all smiles, oblivious to what had just transpired under his nose. “Hey, this'll be all over soon, then you can finally give her that ring.”

Gabe quietly got up and left the canteen, without the box of crackers.

They went with their extra rations to have Christmas lunch with a family living in Teddington who were too bull-headed to evacuate; some of the high street's buildings had been reduced to rubble but that didn't concern the Green family, they'd lived in Teddington for ten generations and wouldn't let a few bombs scare them away. That was fine, but they had little kids, first graders, and Bucky didn't think it was right to keep them there. No one was asking him for his opinion, though.
The Greens were pleased as punch to welcome Captain America into their abode; they were less pleased at the sight of Morita and Gabe, but Steve just pasted on that big smile and said, in his most exaggerated American accent, “Thank you for inviting us all into your home, ma'am,” heavy on the *all.*

There were six members of the Green family, parents Susan and Richard, grandma Elizabeth, and the kids: Doris, sixteen; Ruth, nine; and Charlie, six. Richard was fifty five and too old to serve, which he looked pretty pissed about. They lived in a narrow terraced house with fireplaces for heat and a latrine in the backyard. Bucky didn't see what the appeal of this was over some cute little cottage in the countryside.

The family set out the rations they'd bought, mountains of spam and chocolate and soup, and they sat down to it at a rickety dining table in the living room. The chairs were mismatched and the room was hardly decorated at all, just a sad tree and a few garlands.

Doris sat across from him, batting her eyelashes. “You look like you should be in films,” she said.

“So I've been told,” he said, then belatedly smiled at her. GIs were under strict instructions to charm the Brits. He glanced at Gabe, but he was concentrating on his food. Steve was being kept in a conversation with an iron grip by Granny Liz, and Dugan was asking the two little kids about their schooling. Morita and Dernier were just shovelling food in like they'd never been fed before.

“Where are you from?” Doris asked.


“Brooklyn!” She clapped her hands together and he raised his eyebrows. “Oh, all the best actors are from there: Stanwyck, Hayworth, Lake... Do you know any of them?”

“Nah, unfortunately. You're a big fan of movies, huh?”

She grinned. “I am! I think American films are so romantic!”

“I guess so...”

“What's your favourite film?”

He shrugged. “I dunno, I like horror movies, I guess. You should ask Steve, he's crazy for movies.”

She started to turn crimson. “I couldn't do that, he's been in films,” she whispered across the table to him. Steve was right at the other end of the table, so he shouldn't have been able to hear them, but Bucky couldn't be sure.

“He has?”

“Well, those reels, at least,” Doris said. “Haven't you seen them?”

He shook his head. Steve, in movies. Jesus.

“You should,” she said, “he's great in them.”

“I bet he is...” Bucky said. Doris, he realised, was making crazy eyes at him because between him and Steve, he was the attainable one, the less handsome, the least threatening. He really was turning into Steve.

They left after lunch with some token presents from the Greens, and Bucky got a kiss on the cheek.
from Doris and the suggestion that he take her out if he was still at the camp in the new year. He responded non-committally, knowing that there wasn’t a chance in hell that he was going to step out with a sixteen year old.

They spent the rest of the day like every other day in the camp, smoking and listening to the radio. Steve seemed happy, doodling occasionally and listening to the others talk shit. Bucky sat with him and they played snap.

Bucky lit up a cigarette and offered one to Steve. Steve shook his head. They had a bottle of whiskey between them, but Steve let him have most of it since he apparently couldn’t get drunk any more.

“Good Christmas?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “It was all right. I really missed Ma's roast lamb.”

“God, that was the best,” Steve said, leaning his head back against the canteen wall. “And those bread dumplings? I loved those.”

“You never ate more than a couple.”

Steve shrugged. “Nowhere to fit more in. I'd eat a whole plate of them right about now.”

“You're still hungry?”

Steve bobbed his head and slapped an ace of spades down on top of Bucky's. “Snap!” he said, and grabbed the pile, adding it to his own. “Honestly, I'm hungry most of the time.”

Bucky was too, if he dwelt on it, but he hadn't put much thought to it. “I miss them,” he said softly.

“I know,” Steve said, and patted him on the shoulder. “I do too.”

Bucky nodded. He didn’t think Steve knew quite how he felt, him having been without family for so long now, but it still felt good to have that connection to home, like he hadn't really left it at all if Steve was with him.

A quiet came over the canteen, and he looked up to see Carter walking in like a bombshell, her cheeks red from something other than rouge, her smile coming easier than normal. Steve went still, watching her with a hopeful look, and she tipped her chin up a little higher.

Bucky stubbed his cigarette out. “Go on, your lady awaits.”

“Uh,” Steve murmured, looking down at their card game.

Bucky pulled the deck from his hand and tipped his head towards Carter. “Go on.”

Steve nodded quickly and jumped up. “See you later.”

“Yes,” Bucky said, and watched him go. He got within five feet of her before tripping on the edge of a table and hopping the rest of the way. The Commandos stifled their laughter and Carter lay a gentle hand on Steve’s shoulder. They left together.

Bucky picked up the whiskey bottle and looked around the canteen. Gabe wasn't there, but Bucky hadn't seen him leaving – Steve took up too much of his attention, he guessed. He took a long, eye-watering drink from the bottle and stood up.

“Going to bed so soon?” Dugan called as he walked past.
“Yep,” Bucky said, and smacked him on the shoulder. “Merry Christmas, Dum Dum.”

It was cold out, past nine in the evening, and the whiskey stung even more when it hit the back of his throat. At first, he didn't see Steve and Carter and figured they'd hightailed out of there, but then he heard soft talking from behind a hut. He kept his distance but found a clear view of the hut from behind a tree. Steve and Carter were facing each other and Bucky had no trouble making out the blush high on Steve's cheeks. Carter lifted a manicured hand to his face and touched him gently; he looked like he was going to pass out. When she pressed in to him and his hands came up around her waist, Bucky turned away.

He went back to his tent and got the box of animal crackers, then headed off the find Gabe. By the time he had wound his way to Gabe's tent, the whiskey bottle was mostly empty. He peered inside.

“Can I come in?”

Gabe sat up from the bed. “Sure…” His gaze dropped to the bottle held loosely between Bucky's fingers. “You didn't drink all of that on your own, did you?”

“Steve drank some,” he said, and held it out. Gabe took it and drained the last of it. Bucky watched him for a moment, then held out the crackers. “You should have this too.”

“It's fine, your parents sent it for you.”

“I gave them to you,” Bucky said, and thought he sounded a little childish. “It'll only have been my sister putting them in there to be a bitch to me.”

Gabe drew his eyebrows together, then nodded. “All right,” he said, and took the box. “Thanks, Bucky.”

“'s fine,” he said. Then: “I did break up with my girl.”

“It doesn't matter, Bucky. I get it.”

“No, I did,” he insisted, and dug out the crumpled letter from his pants pocket. “Read it.”

“I don't want to read your letters.”

“I want you to read it.”

“Really, it's okay,” Gabe said, but Bucky just stared at him until he acquiesced with a sigh. “Okay, okay, give it here.”

Gabe was careful with it, opening it gently and smoothing it out before reading it, and Bucky suddenly felt very small standing in front of Gabe, hoping he'd be forgiven. He pushed his hands into his pockets and looked at the ground as Gabe kept reading.

“Okay,” Gabe said after a minute, and refolded the letter.

“You believe me?”

Gabe frowned a little again and patted the cot. “Yeah, I believe you. Cap doesn't know you broke up with her?”

He sat down heavily and sighed. “Didn't know how to explain it.”

“I get that. She loves you a lot, I can tell.”
Bucky laughed and covered his face with his hands. “Don't know why.”

“I know why,” Gabe said softly, and ran his fingers through Bucky's hair. “You're not doing too good, are you?”

Gabe left his hand there, spanning the back of his head to his forehead. “No,” Bucky murmured.

“You wanna sleep in here tonight?”

Bucky dropped his hands and looked at Gabe. “Yeah.”

“Come on,” Gabe said and got him standing up again to pull the blanket back. He got in first and scooted as far to the edge of the cot as he could. Bucky stripped out of his jacket and shirt and undid his belt, then put out the lamp and got in, his back to Gabe's chest. Gabe pulled the blanket over them and Bucky briefly wondered what would happen if someone came in and caught them like this. He figured everyone was getting liquored up though and wouldn't be waking early tomorrow – Steve was certainly otherwise occupied.

Gabe wrapped his arm around Bucky's waist and Bucky put the morning out of his mind.

“What's your mama's name?” he asked quietly. Outside, he could hear people raucously singing carols.

“Candace,” Gabe said.

“That's a nice name. Tell me some more about her?”

In the new year, they trekked out to Poland and spent some time with the resistance fighters there, tracking down hidden HYDRA cells, then moved back across to France to provide ground support for Operation Jericho, liberating French Resistance and political prisoners. Bucky wondered how well they did, because the area was blanketed in innocent bodies, but Phillips said it was a success.

The day after Bucky's twenty seventh birthday, he shot and killed ten German soldiers in Czechoslovakia. They blew up a base in Austria the following month, and took out more tanks than he could count. They were well on their way to racking up more kills than any other units.

In Italy again, him and Steve shared a tent. They'd been walking for days, sleeping under trees, and he was desperate to get clean, so he joined the line for the shower block. Steve fell in behind him and smiled when Bucky turned to look at him.

To this point, Bucky had managed to avoid showering with Steve, but now there was no getting out of it. As they drew closer to the brick building, they were directed to strip and it was bare asses as far as the eye could see ahead of them.

“I'm never going to get used to this,” Steve said with a laugh.

Bucky stripped down quick, better to just get it over with, and tossed his uniform to a private on laundry duty. He shuffled closer to the showers, resisting the edge to turn back and look at Steve. Bucky had seen most of it already in Ireland. It was just a body.

He got to the pathetic stream of water spitting out of the wall and felt Steve beside him – he picked up the soap and looked. What struck him first was that from the side, Steve was almost as slim as before, his chest just a slight swell outwards while his stomach was maybe five inches wide from this
angle. His waist was the same, Bucky could probably have spanned it with his hands. When he turned to face Bucky, though, he was like a brick wall. Bucky started soaping up as he let his eyes wander downwards. Steve's dick was... probably bigger than his, maybe five inches; not that Bucky had measured his own penis in a... couple of years, anyway.

He wondered what it would feel like in his hand, if Steve would make noises, if he'd be like Gabe. Would he let his weight, all two hundred to two ten pounds, press down on Bucky, or would he be polite and hold himself up. Bucky wouldn't mind if he wasn't polite.

He shook his head and finished soaping up. He didn't bother washing his dick and balls because he knew he'd only get hard from it and wouldn't that make for a comfortable evening in the tent. He stuck his head under the shower and started scrubbing at his skin. The water was lukewarm to cold, and he wished it was hot, as hot as he could stand to wash everything away.

Today, he didn't even know how many people he'd killed, either with his own gun or with explosives. A man should know how many people he'd killed. He dug his fingernails into his hair and scrubbed for a straight minute, then scrubbed at his chest and bent to do his legs. The Commandos had killed a man for him, crushed him under a two ton missile casing, and they'd done that without regret. How could you do a thing like that without regret?

He wasn't any better, the things he'd done long before he'd come out here. He'd idolised a man who preyed on the poor, weak, and vulnerable; who shook down the sick and fed drugs to addicts. He'd needed Steve to tell him that was wrong – why didn't he already know?

He lifted his head and rubbed at his face, three day facial hair he was supposed to have shaved but couldn't bring himself to pick up the razor. That frog-like doctor had cut him and poked him and he hadn't regretted a second of it; were they any better, if they did the same thing?

A light touch to his shoulder startled him so much that he lashed out, shoving at the assailant. It was like punching a brick wall.

“Hey, maybe you should, um, slow down,” Steve said, drawing his hand back.

Bucky opened his eyes and only now realised how hard he was breathing. “What?” he gasped.

Steve's mouth got tight, his eyebrows drawn. “You kind of looked like you were going to peel your skin off there.”

“Oh, uh--” He looked around. People were staring, no surprise. “Uh, right, I'm done,” he finished, and hurried from the showers, grabbing a towel and new uniform as he went. He dressed quickly at the entrance of the shower block and ran back to the tent.

His heart was going like a jackhammer, like it had at the weapons factory. He pressed his hand to his chest and stumbled to lie down on his cot. He wished his ma was there; if he squeezed his eyes shut hard enough, he could almost imagine it was true.

“Buck? You doing okay?”

He opened his eyes and looked up at the concerned face of Captain America.

“I'm fine.” He dragged himself back up, resting his elbows on his knees. “I just got overexcited about getting clean.”

Steve didn't look like he believed that, but he nodded. “You really should shave; it's, uh, regulations.”
Bucky bit down on his cheek to stop from snapping. “I know,” he said, cheerful as he could. “I'll do it, don't nag.”

Steve smiled. “I hate having to give bullshit orders like that.”

“It's all part of being in the army,” Bucky said with a bitter taste in his mouth. “Your girl here?”

Steve started to blush and sat down on his side of the tent. “Not yet, she should be coming in tonight. She's been at that Prime Minister's Conference.”

Bucky didn't know what that was, but he nodded anyway. “It's going well, then? You finally got deflowered?”

“Bucky,” Steve reprimanded weakly. God, he had, too. “I'm not going to talk about that.”

Bucky snorted. “Always the gentleman. It's good, you snagged a good one.”

“I don't think she'd like to hear that she'd been 'snagged',” Steve said, his cheeks a rosy red now. He looked embarrassed and pleased at the same time.

“You gonna marry her?”

“Oh, jeez, I don't know. She doesn't seem like the type.”

“The type you marry?” Bucky knew that sort of girl, Carter didn't seem like one of them.

“The type who wants to get married,” Steve said. “She told me that she found herself when she joined the SSR. You know, the person she was supposed to be? I know how that is and I've got no place taking it away from her.”

Yeah, Steve certainly did know how that was, didn't he? To hear him tell it, he was nothing before the serum. Bucky had loved a person who wasn't even there.

Bucky smiled as best he could. “I could really do with some chow.”

That night, he couldn't sleep. His heart, which had never really stopped thumping, was going so hard in his chest he could hardly draw a breath. Steve had fallen into an easy, soundless slumber two hours ago, lying flat on his back, and Bucky wanted nothing more than to crawl into the cot with him and listen to his steady breathing. Of course, he couldn't, and he couldn't do the same with Gabe either because he was bunking with Dernier.

He still didn't feel clean, even though he hadn't really got that dirty at all, just sweat and mud. He didn't have the blood of the German soldiers he killed on his hands, he'd been fifty feet away, safe from the fighting on his perch.

He rolled out of bed and scrabbled for his pack. Steve stirred and Bucky went still for a moment until Steve breathed out again. He could leave now, put his pack on his back and walk to France, get a boat to England, then back to the US; it'd take weeks but he was used to that now. He'd probably run into Nazis on his way and if he was caught by the brass, which he would be, he'd be court-martialed. People got executed for that kind of thing.

Steve would never forgive him.

He dug out a notepad, pencil, and flashlight then crept out of the tent in his bare feet. He walked past
the rows of tents until he was near the canteen and sat down on the grass. He’d been writing letters home for months now, none of them with a lick of truth to them. Army censors would have stripped out all that stuff even if he’d been brave enough to write it.

He touched the pencil to the page.

_Dear Becca_

_I miss you. I hate it here, I wish I'd never gone to the draft office – I wish I'd let Ma find a way to get me out of it. I wish I was home with you guys. It isn't worth it, they've just made me a killer. I wish my leg had got broken so bad that I'd never been able to walk again._

_Did you know I'm queer? I am, I think I always have been. Remember how you called me a dog for sleeping with so many girls? It wasn't because I wanted it. I wish I was brave like you, but I never have been. I kissed Arnie once, did he tell you?_

_I'm scared. I don't want to die out here. I don't want Steve to forget me. I don't want to become_

He had to stop writing, he was crying so hard. He dropped the pencil and covered his face.

“Shit,” he whispered, and rubbed at his face. He could taste the salt on his lips and dragged the back of his hand across his nose and mouth. “Fuck.”

“Hello?” someone called. He knew the voice: Carter, and he scrambled to turn off his flashlight and gather his things. He stumbled up as she rounded the corner of the canteen. “Sergeant--?”

He took off running back to the tent, tearing up the letter as he went, letting little scraps of paper marking his way like breadcrumbs. He skidded to a stop outside the tent and took a couple of deep breaths, not that it would help him much, his chest burned and it felt like his heart was going climb out of his throat.

As soon as he stepped inside, he saw Steve lift his head. “Buck?” he mumbled.

“I was just taking a piss,” he said, and shoved everything back in his pack.

“In the latrine?”

“Nah, I just pissed on the grass,” Bucky said, knowing it would get a reaction.

“Ugh, Bucky,” Steve muttered, on cue. “You're not an animal.”

“We're all animals, Steve.”

Steve sighed and rolled over. “Yeah, yeah.”

Bucky lay back down and wiped at what was left of the dampness on his face. There was no way Carter hadn't seen him, sitting there like a girl crying into her diary. Christ, what was he thinking?

In the morning, though, she debriefed them all about outcome of her Prime Minister's conference – nothing good – and didn't say a word about it or glance his way at all. She stole Steve away for a while afterwards, but he came back all smiles, so Bucky knew they'd just been kissing and whispering sweet nothings to each other. Bucky didn't figure into that.
They spent a week and a half of June hunkered down in a foxhole in Hungary and everyone got sick except for him and Steve. Despite it being the summer, it rained everyday and got frigid at night, the cold water filling up the hole and seeping into their boots.

“We're gonna get trench foot like this,” Morita complained between reloading his rifle. These goddamn HYDRA Nazis never seemed to tire, guarding the strip of land between a weapons factory (really no more than a barn, but Carter's intelligence told them there was a large cache held there) and the Commandos, and not even Dernier's most brutal bombs were doing the trick. They pulled back at night and left the Commandos to rot in their mud hole – even Nazis needed sleep, he guessed.

The temperature plummeted seven days in and didn't go back up, fat, cold raindrops falling on them everywhere the trees didn't shield them. Gabe's teeth were chattering out something akin to Morse code and Bucky took off his jacket and threw it over him.

“Bucky...” Gabe muttered, his voice high and nasally.

“s fine, I'm not cold,” he said truthfully. He was wet and dirty – the thick mixture of water and mud was acting like forest Pomade for his hair – but he wasn't shivering.

“What about the rest of us?” Dugan said.

“You want the fuckin' shirt off my back?” Bucky bit back. Steve jostled his shoulder and told them all to settle down.

On the last day, the guys were lethargic, almost out of food, nearly spent on bullets, and the Jerries were doing their level best to push them back.

“I'm going to go over the top,” Steve whispered to him as dawn broke over them. “Take the last of Dernier's bombs. We've gotta end this now.”

Bucky nodded. It was the only play that made sense at that point. “I'm coming.”

“No, Bucky,” Steve said, “this is--”

“Borderline suicidal?” Bucky finished. “Yeah, I know. I'm a better shot than you are.”

“That's arguable,” Steve replied. The others were stirring now, leaning in to listen.

“Well, I'm not arguing,” Bucky said. “And I'm still a sergeant here.”

“I'm a captain.”

Bucky snorted. “In name only.”

“What're you two bickering 'bout now?” Morita mumbled from beneath his cap.

“Does it really matter?” Monty said. “It's something new every day.”

“Oui,” Dernier muttered while Dugan lit a cigarette and laughed.

Steve glared at him, then at Bucky. “There are too many people in this damn unit called James. Gabe, try to radio Agent Carter, let her know the situation. Me and this one...” He glared at Bucky again, “are going over the top.”

“Cap,” Dugan said, but Steve lifted a hand.
“I'm not arguing about this any more. Dernier, I need your bag.”

They climbed out of the hole as the sun broke through the trees, a wet mist all around them. They got about thirty feet before HYDRA woke up and started shooting. It was incredible to see Steve in action – it wasn't the first time Bucky had seen it, of course, but it really struck him here, just the two of them. Steve seemed to have an almost preternatural sense of spacial awareness, he knew exactly where each Jerry was, he could arc the shield just right and always have it come back, he ran like a fucking cheetah and took hits like a linebacker. Sometimes he didn't even seem human any more.

They stayed at each other's backs, shooting anything that moved. As they drew closer to the factory, the scattered gunfire became focused from ahead of them, and Steve pulled Bucky in against his side, his arm around Bucky's back to keep him covered by the shield. Bucky was dizzy from it for a few crucial seconds, Steve's solid, warm body holding him so firm, and didn't hear Steve's directions to take out the soldiers to the left of them until a few bullets had pinged off the shield.

“You okay?” Steve yelled over the gunfire once each soldier had bullet in them.

“Fine!” Bucky yelled back. “I'm gonna set the grenades!”

He broke off from Steve and ran for the barn, pulling pins and throwing grenades as he went. He hurled them as far as he could, because five seconds wasn't long to get away. Near the outside wall of the barn, there was a can of gasoline, and he grabbed it and forced his way in. The workers inside weren't a problem, his hand gun did the job – for a moment he wondered if they were hostages, forced to build these weapons the same as he'd been, but his finger kept pulling back on the trigger. He doused gasoline all over the floor and surfaces as he went and let himself out the other side. He threw the now empty can back in and sparked his lighter, touching it to the gasoline leaking out of the barn, then turned and ran.

“Halt!” a Jerry yelled. Bucky was about thirty feet from the barn – not far enough – but something made him stop. The Jerry was just a kid, holding a rifle in shaking hands. Bucky had heard that Adolf was recruiting kids of fifteen – how could they know a goddamn thing about the world or what they were prepared to die for? Bucky hadn't even begun most of his crises when he was fifteen.

“Get outta here!” he yelled back.

“Halt,” the kid said again, voice weakening. Bucky had already stopped moving, but he lifted his hands.

“You need to get out of here, this place is gonna blow. Explode?” He gestured back at the burning barn. Weapons like they were building normally didn't do so well being introduced to fire.

The kid crept closer and levelled his rifle at Bucky's face. “You will...” he said in heavily accented English, “come mit me.”

“Kid,” Bucky murmurred. Behind him, he heard the roof of the barn cave in, a moment of eerie silence, then the blast. It threw them both off their feet, carrying them a good twenty feet further from the barn. Bucky hit the ground in a roll, feeling heat all around him; it felt like boiling hot water had been poured down the back of his shirt. It was hard to draw breath, and when he forced his eyes open, all he could see for several long seconds was burning. His ears were ringing. A high pitched, pained noise drew his attention to the left of him, and he found the kid lying on his back. He was making horrible noises like a dying animal and his face was a dark pink with rapidly forming white blisters. He was taking in short, shallow breaths, and lifted his hand to press to his throat. He couldn't breath.
Bucky struggled to his feet. The kid was gasping like a fish, staring at Bucky with watery eyes. Bucky could try and drag him back to the foxhole and load him into a truck to take back to Italy, but really, who was going to care about some Nazi soldier? He'd probably be dead before they got to the foxhole anyway.

He pulled his handgun from his holster. “Sorry,” he said, and aimed for the head. He didn't look.

After he turned away, he slipped his hand up the back of his shirt and felt around. His skin was hot and tacky to the touch and in some places his shirt wouldn't lift away without a firm tug. He could feel wide blisters coming up near his spine.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, just as he heard Steve yelling for him, a note of hysteria in his tone. He yanked his shirt away from his back with a sickening squelch and tug, and ran to meet him.

They commandeered a brawny HYDRA truck and began the nine hour drive back to camp. Steve got in the front with Dugan, who insisted he was the best driver. Steve could drive a fucking motorcycle now, but he still couldn't drive a car.

Gabe sat down beside Bucky, wearing his jacket. Bucky didn't dare lean back in case his shirt got stuck to the burns again and he was permanently melded with the shit brown fabric. They itched something terrible and spanned most of his back, but he hadn't told Steve about it. He was doing better than that German kid, anyhow.

“You want your jacket back?” Gabe asked.

“Nah, it's all right,” he said. Gabe looked shiny eyed with fever and suddenly very young. “How old are you?”

Gabe raised his eyebrows. “Twenty three.”

“Christ,” Bucky said. He'd thought Gabe was at least twenty five, twenty six. Twenty three just seemed too young to be out here.

“It's not that young,” Gabe said. “I've got a college degree, more than you can say.”

Bucky agreed with that. He had nothing but a high school diploma, a scorned ex, and the fear of what being queer would mean beyond the war to show for his adult life. Not much, really.

By the time they got back to Bassano and into the medic tent, the blisters on Bucky's back had gone down and the nurse attributed any redness to a rash from sitting in his wet clothes for ten days.

They spent Independence Day in Normandy, joining the ground campaign for Operation Overlord. They'd been there a week, driving back the Germans, and the men who had landed on the 6th had told stories of horror and slaughter that Bucky was happy he hadn't been there to witness. He'd had his fill of slaughter for the month.

At precisely noon, the troops let off an ear-splitting eleven hundred gun salute at the Germans on the beach.

“Happy birthday!” Bucky yelled in Steve's ear as he reloaded his rifle.

Steve laughed and raised his shield over his head. “Hell of a birthday!”
After night had fallen, they had the privilege to be able to fall back to the encampment in Carpiquet; not everyone was as lucky as them. Over a million troops had arrived in the last month, a significant portion of them left dead on the beach; the rate of arrival had slowed considerably in the last few days, but there were still ships shoring up every evening. The medic tent was spilling out onto the grass, wounded and dying soldiers getting emergency triage laid out on blankets.

They were passing the tent on their way to a precious few hours of sleep when Steve stopped and looked back. Bucky hated to look, all he saw was blood and men with body parts blown off, so he kept his eyes lowered.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I thought I heard someone,” Steve said, and cocked his head like a dog. “Do you hear that?”

“I just hear people screaming,” Bucky said. That's all he ever heard these days.

“No, but...” Steve turned back towards the tent. “I think... Arnie's in there.”

Bucky blinked away the grit in his eyes and turned his head slightly in the direction of the tent. “I think we could both use some sleep.”

“No, I heard him,” Steve insisted and started walking into the tent. Bucky really didn't want to follow – he could just go and flop down on his sleeping bag in the dirt and be done with it, but Steve looked all fired up with purpose, so he shuffled along behind him, keeping his eyes fixed on Steve's back.

Steve turned his head this way and that, casting around to find Arnie. Really, what kind of goddamn coincidence would that be? Steve was on a mission, though, and eventually he stopped at the cot of man screaming in pain; Bucky averted his gaze, but he could the violent red splatters of blood, and a tall, thin man bent over him, a kippah secured firmly to his hair.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky said, and Arnie started to turn towards them.

“Bu--?” Bucky was standing slightly behind Steve, so Arnie's gaze fell on Steve first and his mouth dropped open like in a comedy.

“Hi, Arnie,” Steve said.

“Fuck,” he said, which was a strong reaction for him. “I have to...” He tipped his head towards the patient. “But, uh...”

“We'll be here,” Steve said quickly.

They blessedly left the tent and sat outside. Bucky couldn't believe that they'd found Arnie here, but he hadn't slept in a month, it felt like, and he found himself nodding off against Steve's shoulder where they were sitting. Steve just laughed slightly, a soft breath, and wished him sweet dreams.

He woke again to a gentle shake and rubbed his hands over his face and into his hair, thick as it was with grease. God, he needed a wash.

“How long was I out?” he asked, looking at Steve. It was still dark and the camp was as lively as ever, so it couldn't have been that long.

“Four hours,” Steve said.
Four hours was something of a record these days. “You just sat here for four hours?”

Steve nodded. “You drooled on me.”

Bucky looked at the wet patch on Steve's shoulder. “Shoulda pushed me off the other way.”

“I wouldn't do that to you, Buck,” he said and smiled that bright, happy smile. Even in the middle of all this, smiling came easy to him now and it made Bucky feel warm all through even in the cool night air. “Arnie went to clean up. I don't think he really believes I'm me.”

Bucky got his feet under him and stood up. “Well, he'll remember my ugly mug.” How could he forget, the things Bucky did to him over the years?

They found him by the latrines, washing blood from his face and hands, not that it helped much since it was all down his shirt too.

“I've had some time to ponder the fact that I'm probably hallucinating from lack of sleep,” Arnie said. “I think it's likely.”

Bucky pulled out a carton of cigarettes and held one out to Arnie. He could count on one hand the amount of times he'd seen him smoke, but Arnie accepted it and Bucky lit them both. Steve politely declined. “I know it's fucking crazy,” he said.

“Crazier than us finding each other in the middle of the night in France?” Steve said.

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” Steve said, and grimaced when Bucky blew smoke in his face, “well. I'm not a hallucination.”

“I saw the Captain America posters,” Arnie said, “but I thought it had to be a coincidence, or maybe you'd illustrated them. Becca didn't say anything in her letters.”

“Bet a lot of it was censored though, huh?” Bucky said.

Arnie frowned. “Yeah. Oh...”

“Same thing happened to me.”

“How did you two find each other?”

Bucky glanced at Steve. “He rescued my unit from a weapons factory in Austria. It's a story.”

“Prisoner of war?” Arnie said, and winced sympathetically when Bucky nodded. “Let's get something to eat.”

The chow here sure wasn't kosher, but Arnie shrugged and said he took what he was given. He'd spent the last three years aboard various submarines and ships from Guadalcanal to the Philippines, and had seen a little action in Tunisia. Kasserine Pass was a bloodbath, he said, and he was glad to be out of the Pacific. Normandy was arguably worse, Bucky thought, but he let it go. Arnie had been promoted a few times and now held the position of Petty Officer, First Class as well as being a medic. He'd performed more surgeries than he dared think of, but he hadn't seen too much action because his bosses were more concerned with keeping their medics alive than the rest of the grunts. He just went out there and shot people up with morphine to keep them alive long enough to die, he told them.
“But what about you?” Arnie asked Steve. The sky was starting to turn hazy with the early morning sunrise. “How did this happen?” He gestured to Steve, who ducked his head.

“It was an experiment... I'm not really supposed to talk about it.”

Arnie clinked his spoon against the side of his metal bowl and looked at him thoughtfully. “They must have stimulated your pituitary gland and given you massive amounts of testosterone... How long did the process take?”

“About five minutes,” Steve said blithely and Arnie's mouth dropped open.

“Five--?”

“See, I really can't talk about it,” Steve said with a smile.

Arnie nodded. “I see that.”

“Cap!” someone yelled from across the camp. “Colonel wants you!”

Steve waved and stood up. “I'll be back soon,” he said.

The two of them watched him leave for a few minutes before looking back at each other.

“So, how are you doing with all of this?” Arnie said.

Bucky shrugged. “I try not to think about it any more.”

“I think I'll be taking that tact as well,” Arnie said. “And everything else? How are you? You look a little... I don't know, worn out?”

“How else should I look?” Bucky snapped. “I'm marching around this godforsaken continent on a couple hours sleep a night and this fucking chow.”

“Fair enough... How's Connie?”

Bucky shrugged. “We broke up.”

Arnie raised his eyebrows. “Oh, right,” he said and waited for Bucky to answer, but Bucky didn't so he went back to scraping at his bowl.

Eventually, Bucky took a breath. “You were right about me.”

Arnie looked up without raising his head. “About...?”

“For fuck's sake,” Bucky snapped. Nothing ever changed with Arnie.

“Oh,” Arnie said, and cleared his throat. “Right... How long?”

“Couple years.”

“Does Steve know?”

“No, and he's not gonna know.”

Arnie pressed his mouth to a flat line for a moment. “He'd understand.”

“I don't need him to understand anything,” Bucky growled, squeezing his hands to fists. “He still
thinks that me and Connie are going together. If you say a fucking word about this to him--"

Arnie held up a hand. “You don't need to threaten me, Bucky, it's your business what you tell him.”

Bucky forced his hands to uncurl and relaxed the tense set of his shoulders. “Sorry. Old habits, I guess.”

“I guess so,” Arnie said, and eyed him. “You're still an incredible asshole, you know.”

Bucky lit another cigarette and laughed. “Tell me about it.” He could use a fucking drink right about now. “Steve's got a girl now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, she's a spitfire, just his type. He's serious about her, they've, you know...”

Arnie understood what he was getting at. “That is serious,” he agreed. Steve took the whole saving yourself routine real seriously – maybe not so Catholically as to be married first, but he knew you didn't just play around with anyone. “What do you think of her?”

“She's a great girl, real smart and fancy British, looks like a goddamn wet dream.” He took a draw of his cigarette and Arnie raised his eyebrows again in question. “I fuckin' hate her.”

In the morning, Steve happily introduced Arnie to the unit. 'Our buddy from back home,' he said, 'Bucky's brother-in-law'. Gabe's eyes widened slightly at that, but Steve had his back turned at the time and didn't pick up on it.

The fighting continued on the beach and surrounding areas in the ensuing weeks and both sides laid waste to French towns and cities in the Allied efforts to liberate them. Finally, on August 25th, Paris was free. Bucky honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd slept, his vision blurred fiercely sometimes and his head pounded, but his aim never wavered and his hands never shook.

The atmosphere in Paris was electric on the 25th, revelling and fierce anger; people drank and cheered and screamed at the captured Germans. Everyone was going mad.

They found their way to a pub in the evening, which was deafening with voices and music, and Bucky drank pint after pint just to feel something of what everyone else did; not that it worked. Steve had been lured away by Carter and the rest of the Commandos had joined the party; Arnie was with some other Naval officers and Bucky watched them but didn't join. Despite Steve's delight at finding another piece of home out here, Bucky had never willingly spent time with Arnie and he didn't plan to start now.

Nearby Arnie, though, there were three nasty looking guys watching his every move, and as soon as he said goodnight to his friends and headed out, the goons followed him. Bucky watched them go for a minute, then looked back at Arnie's friends; it didn't look like they'd noticed. Bucky's head was still pounding away when he got up and followed them out of the pub.

It was close and muggy outside, the hot night pressing in around him. There were dozens of people on the street, talking and singing loudly, but he couldn't see Arnie anywhere, or those thugs who were tailing him. He knew they were planning on doing something, though, it wasn't just a coincidence that they left at the same time.

He walked down the street a little, trying to distinguish between all the voices, which was hard to do
with his head going the way it was, but finally he heard the word 'fag!' from the alleyway to the side of the pub, and turned down it to find Arnie and the thugs. One of them had Arnie's kippah in his hand, the others berating him for his faggy ways, and he just stood there and took it, like he always did, like he always had.

“Hey!” Bucky yelled, walking towards them. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

“It's fine,” Arnie said, and got a shove from one of the guys. He set his jaw. “I'm fine.”

“Who are you, Fritz's boyfriend?” Thug #1 said.

Bucky didn't even think about it, he just hauled off and punched the guy square in the face, so hard that he slammed into the brick wall and fell. Arnie quickly retrieved his kippah from where it had fallen from the guy's grip, then skittered away as Bucky advanced on the thug.

“Bucky, leave it,” Arnie said, but it was too late for that.

Bucky bent down, got the guy by the throat, and dragged him up, pushing him against the wall. “Why the hell do you think we're here?” he growled.

Thugs #2 and 3 tried to attack him, one getting an arm around his neck, the other punching him in the side of the head. He elbowed the first guy right in the solar plexus and got the other guy by the hair and smashed his head into the wall.

“Do you think we've liberated these people from being beaten and murdered by fucking Nazis so that we could fight among ourselves and shit all over what they've gone through? Do you think that that isn't a spit in the face to everything they've suffered while you've been having your ass wiped by your goddamn Yankee momma?” He was squeezing the guy's throat so tight that his lips were turning blue, but it didn't seem like enough. His switchblade weighed heavy in his pocket and he pulled it out, thumbing it open.

“Bucky!” Arnie shouted and then Bucky felt cold fingers on his wrist, pulling his arm away. He looked up at Arnie's terrified face and felt like his head was going to split open. “Put the knife away,” Arnie said softly.

Bucky closed the knife with a click and let go of the guy, who tore off with his buddies.

“I see you're as crazy as ever, Buck,” Arnie said, but his voice sounded breathless and weak.

Bucky tried to look at him, but his vision blurred and made the world tilt on its axis, his head feeling like someone had lodged an axe in the back of his skull. “Who were those guys?” he mumbled, hunching his shoulders in.

“Just some friends from the boat.”

“You-- you work with them?” he asked, and tried to straighten up, but just staggered forward and felt his knees go out.

“Shit,” Arnie muttered and grabbed him, pulling him up. He'd always been a stringy guy, especially in comparison to Bucky, but he felt stronger now, more muscled, and didn't have too much trouble holding Bucky up with an arm around his back. “You got really tanked up.”

“'snot the beer,” Bucky mumbled, but it was hard to speak, hard enough to even breathe, and he panted against another spike of pain. “I want Steve.”
“I don't know where he is...” Arnie said.

“Gabe...”

“Which one is that?” Arnie asked, and Bucky groaned, although it was really more of a cry. “Okay!” Arnie added, sounding panicked. “Let's find somewhere for you to lie down.”

They stumbled to a door at the side of the pub that Bucky could just about make out, and Arnie tried to ask if they had a room available, only the woman who answered didn't speak a word of English.

“Une chambre, s'il vous plaît,” Bucky forced out and after some hemming and hawing, she let them upstairs to a room with a hard, narrow bed. Bucky lay down on his side and covered his face with a pillow. He couldn't stop himself from crying.

“Bucky?” Arnie whispered, but that just made him feel worse, because he didn't want Arnie, he just wanted Steve to lie down with him and tell him he was okay. “I'm going to give you a shot of morphine, it'll stop your head from hurting.”

Bucky hardly felt the jab of the needle; the morphine didn't clear his head up, but it did take the edge off enough to let him fall into a dead, dreamless sleep.

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His headache was thankfully gone when he woke up, but Arnie remained, which was almost as bad.

“Ugh,” he groaned, and sat up, rubbing at his mouth. Arnie was sitting in a chair across from him, looking very serious. “What time's it?”

“Three pm.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “Really? Wow.”

“Yeah, you've been asleep for about twelve hours. I found Steve, told him you were sleeping off a hangover.”

Bucky nodded and covered his mouth as he yawned. “I got pretty loaded last night.”

“You said it wasn't the alcohol,” Arnie said flatly.

“Isn't that what drunks always say?” He looked around the dingy room and tiny bed. “You didn't sleep in bed with me, did you?”

“I slept on the floor. Bucky, you were all ready to stab that guy last night.”

Is that what he did? Christ. “Nah, I was just trying to frighten him. I guess it worked, huh?”

“It would have worked without the knife,” Arnie said, his face pinched. “Are you okay, Bucky?”

He wanted some big truth, some sort of reveal – Bucky wished he had one too, he needed some big resolution, but he had none to offer. “Yeah, I'm fine. Like you said, crazy as ever.”

Arnie expression turned briefly pained before he nodded. “Thank you for helping me out last night. You've come a long way since you were fifteen and asking me about 'Jew hell'.”

Bucky smiled a little. “That's all right.” He held Arnie's gaze for a moment, then took a breath. “Does it get easier?”
Arnie shrugged. “If you let it.”

They left Paris a week later on the trail of yet another one of Schmidt's cells, yet more weapons and HYDRA scientists scattering like rats. When they were done, they travelled up to Le Havre in time for Columbus Day. Their camp was called Lucky Strike, after the cigarette brand, one of the many cigarette themed US camps in the area since the liberation of Paris. All the cigarette companies sent crates of the things to Captain America.

“You can have them,” Steve said from his side of the tent. They were mostly two to a tent here, him and Steve, Gabe and Dernier, Monty and Morita, and Dugan on his own owing to his advanced age. He didn't mind the insults so long as he had his space.

“Surely you need them to be manly,” Bucky said, puffing out a series of perfect smoke rings.

Steve pinked and went back to scribbling in his notebook. “All right, so maybe that was a dumb idea.”

“’Maybe’,” Bucky repeated.

“Stop picking on me,” Steve said, a mock whine to his voice.

Things had been better since they left Paris. Steve had called him a lush for getting so liquored up that Arnie had had to take care of him, and Bucky had called him a prude in retaliation. Twelve hours of sleep put Bucky's head back on straight and he put his all into their HYDRA extermination trips; it was even maybe a little fun. Now they were regrouping and waiting for new intel and had a couple minutes to breathe.

Bucky got up and came over to sit down beside Steve, cigarette hanging from between his lips. Steve had a sultry sketch of Carter open on his lap.

“You are so predictable,” Bucky said.

The tips of Steve's ear started to turn pink. “She sat for it,” he mumbled.

Bucky looked back down at the drawing. She was dressed, sure, but Steve had captured something in her eyes and mouth, the look of a woman who wanted a good fuck and knew how to get it.

“She a screamer?”

Steve slapped the book closed. “Bucky! Don't talk about her like that!”

Bucky shrugged. “It was only a question.”

“You wouldn't like it if I talked about Connie like that.”

He'd care a hell of a lot less than Steve thought. “Well, I know you wouldn't say dirty stuff like that.”

Steve glared at him and stood up, turning his back to Bucky as he opened his pack to stuff the book back in. “I really hate the smell of that fucking brand,” he said shortly.

Bucky flicked the cigarette to the ground and stubbed it out quickly; Steve wasn't playing around here, he was really pissed.

“Hey,” he said, “I'm sorry, don't be mad. I'll be more respectful.” God, he sounded like a kid begging
his ma to forgive him.

Steve sighed and straightened up. “You haven't respected a damn thing your whole life,” he said, turning back with a slight smile on his face.

“I respect a punch in the face.”

“I'm not going to punch you in the face; without that face what would you be left with?”

Bucky pulled the ugliest face he could. “A fucking stack of money from my parents.”

“Money can't buy you happiness,” Steve said and strolled out of the tent.

A whole sack full of letters came that afternoon and everyone descended on them with the same desperation as always and spirited them back to their tents. His family's letter was written by Becca this time and she wrote mostly about the kids, Dad's work, and Ma's latest neighbourhood drama. She didn't write much about Grandpa, none of them ever did these days. Florence had won another swimming competition and was set to go to some big national thing in the new year. The twins were eighteen now – and damn it all, he'd forgotten to commemorate their birthday – and Florence was happily enrolled at Radcliffe, while Eugene was enjoying seminary school as much as a person could enjoy seminary school. They sent their love to him and to Steve, who never got any letters of his own.

“Here, there's stuff in it for you too,” Bucky said, handing the two leaves of paper over.

Steve smiled gratefully and took them. “Becca has the fanciest handwriting I've ever seen.”

“You said I had fancy handwriting,” Bucky said.

“You both do, but hers is nicer.”

“Huh!” Bucky grunted and got up. “Hit me where it hurts, Steve. I gotta take a piss.”

He left the tent to Steve's mutterings on the subject of his gentlemanliness.

They spent most nights down at a nearby club where GIs and Frenchmen intermingled happily, the women hanging all over any half decent looking guy. Bucky saw money changing hands a lot, so he knew a lot of these ladies were prostitutes, but everyone was having a good time. The piano was played constantly, boisterous renditions of _Chant des Partisans_ enlivening the club; even Steve sang along, quietly.

“How do you know the words so well?” Bucky yelled over the crowd.

Steve shrugged. “I've been picking up some French.”

“Huh,” Bucky said. Steve was always terrible with languages when they were kids, but he guessed there wasn't really much he wasn't good at now.

“You should play us one of your American songs, Captain,” one of the ladies – a French Algerian called Sabrine – said, draping herself across the bar at them.

Steve started to flush. “Oh, I don't-- I can't play the piano... Bucky can, though,” he said, and threw Bucky a sly smile.

“I haven't touched one in ten years,” he protested. He'd only ever been proficient at it; that's what his teacher always said, like it was a dirty word. Proficient, not talented.
Steve shrugged. “It's like riding a bike, I bet,” he said with a grin. “Come on, you used to play the Charleston all the time.”

“Not well,” he said, but Steve looked all fired up about the idea so he rolled his eyes and got up. “Christ, I'm gonna make such a fool of myself.”

He got off to a slow start, hitting a jarring key every now and then, but he had a sympathetic audience and he got into the swing of it after a while, laughing as people made up words to the tune and danced terrible versions of the Lindy Hop; French people couldn't do the Hop for shit. Sabrine lounged against the piano like they were in the Waldorf-Astoria and leaned all the way over to put a cigarette between his lips and light it. He grinned at the obvious flirtation and looked over at Gabe, who looked flushed and happy. He did a few numbers, his favourite songs to listen to at the club as a kid: *Ain't Misbehavin’, Makin’ Whoopee, April in Paris*. He was a hit.

“I think I know what you can do once this is all over,” Steve said, when there was a lull and Bucky took the opportunity to have a drink with him.

Bucky laughed. “I can do another tour of Europe, fifty percent less guns. You can carry my sheet music.”

“How about you accompany me on my one man Captain America revival tour?”

Bucky leant in and tapped Steve's glass with his fingernail. “Then it wouldn't be one man, would it?”

“Oh yeah...” Steve murmured, and Bucky laughed but before he could reply again, Steve's gaze went distant, focusing somewhere behind Bucky.

He found, of course, that Carter had wandered into the club. Every damn time. He looked at Steve and smiled. “Go on.”

“Nah, I'm good,” he said, and Bucky's heart beat a little faster at the thought of that being true, but he knew that it wasn't.

“C'mon,” he said, and raised his eyebrows.

Steve ducked his head. “Okay, I'll, uh--”

“I won't wait up, don't worry,” Bucky said and Steve got up, bobbing his head shyly. Bucky watched Steve approach her like a nervous puppy and the two of them discreetly leave together. A delicate hand pressed against his arm gently.

“Come and play for us some more, Sergeant?” Sabrine purred in his ear. She was a nice looking girl, big blue eyes and light brown hair, but she was barking up the wrong tree these days.

“Sorry, I'm gonna get some fresh air,” he said and got up. He passed Gabe on the way out and caught his eye. Gabe waited the appropriate amount of time before following him out. Bucky's breath came out in white puffs as thick as smoke and he listened for Gabe's continuing footsteps as he walked down an alleyway and found a nice little alcove.

“You're great on the piano,” Gabe said. He'd been watching Bucky the whole evening, his eyes shiny from the beer, smiling along happily with Dernier and Dugan, although he hardly seemed to join in with their conversations at all.

“Thanks,” Bucky said, and reeled him in, kissing him firmly. Gabe dug his fingers into Bucky's sides and turned him until he pressed against the brick wall of the alcove.
They hadn't had much opportunity to do this recently, with missions and sharing tents with other people; the last time Bucky had stolen away for a quick fuck by the showers, Steve thought he'd been with a girl and was extremely disappointed in him. Bucky couldn't think of a better explanation, so he'd taken the dressing down and said he just got lonely sometimes. That part, at least, wasn't a lie. Steve had finished by saying, tense and snippy, that he hoped Bucky was using rubbers because a lot of fellas were getting venereal diseases and he didn't need Bucky going nuts from syphilis. Bucky had said that he was, but really, he didn't need them because him and Gabe had never got to doing that part. He was a little afraid to and they never got enough time alone for it, anyhow.

They jerked each other off enough though, just like they were doing now. Bucky never could keep quiet when they did this, but they seemed pretty well alone in the alleyway, so he didn't try too hard. He came first, pressing his mouth against Gabe's stubbled chin and moved his hand faster to get Gabe there with him.

Gabe pulled away after they had a few moments to catch their breath and started tucking himself into his pants. He'd caught most of the mess, fortunately for Bucky, and sighed at the stain.

"How am I gonna explain this?" he murmured.

Bucky finished with his own dick and lit a cigarette. "You could tell them you pissed yourself."

Gabe sighed. "What a great idea."

Bucky grinned. "Just tell 'em you fucked a knock out brunette. Cigarette?"

Gabe laughed and shook his head. "I'd better try to clean this up before it sets..."

"Fair enough," Bucky said. He kind of wished Gabe would stay out here with him, but it was cold enough to see your breath, so he figured Gabe wanted to be in the warm. "I'll come back in soon."

Gabe nodded and kissed him on the corner of his mouth his cigarette wasn't occupying before heading back to the club. Bucky smiled to himself as he blew out smoke that mingled with his cold breath.

Somewhere in the distance, a person screamed. A woman, he thought, maybe not so far away. A lot of people screamed out on the streets, especially these days, but this wasn't from happiness, this was fear, he'd heard it enough times back home.

He walked towards the source of the sound, which hadn't let up, and found it a few minutes later around the back of a run down butchers shop. He was always finding people in alleyways, it seemed. It was a man and woman, the woman shouting garbled pleas in French while the man, a corporal judging by his stripes, had his hand up her skirt.

"Hey!" he shouted.

The corporal relented a little on the girl, pulling back as Bucky approached – he still had her boxed in so she couldn't get away, though. "We're just having a little fun, Sarge."

"She's not having fun," he replied.

The corporal rolled his eyes. "She's a screamer, know what I mean?"

"She was screaming for help, let her go."

The guy curled his lip a little. "She's just a hooker."
“Oh, she's a hooker?” Bucky said, and took a drag of his cigarette. The guy nodded, pleased to be understood, and Bucky pressed the cigarette to his neck. He shrieked and reared back, letting go of the girl, who tore away as fast as her legs would carry her.

“What the fuck!” the corporal yelled.

“What's your name?” Bucky said, then smacked him in the head. “What's your fucking name?”

“John! Jesus Christ, I was only having a little fun!”

The world felt very quiet around them, like all noise out there on the street had stopped, but then Bucky realised it was blood in his ears drowning everything else out. “Give me your jacket,” he heard himself say.

John grumbled and groaned but looked fairly afraid of another cigarette stubbing or punch, so he pulled his jacket off and threw it at Bucky. Bucky flicked his cigarette to the ground and looked at the jacket.

“--don't know why you're so fired up about a whore,” John muttered.

Bucky flicked his eyes up. “Stand up straight, back against the wall.”

“What?” John said, but followed the orders when Bucky made a move towards him.

Bucky balled up the jacket in his hands and retrieved his switch blade from his pocket.

“What are you--?” John started to ask, but Bucky flicked the knife open and plunged it into his neck and his last words came out wet and garbled. Bucky would have thought that stabbing someone would be hard, but the knife went in like butter. He held the jacket over the wound to keep from being splattered and wiped his knife off on it before letting it fall to the ground along with John's soon to be lifeless body.

He pushed the knife closed and walked away, all the way back to Lucky Strike, where he lay down on his cot and went to sleep right away.

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The thing of it was, no one found out, life went on as usual. He woke up in a cold sweat the next morning, only to be told by Steve that they were heading out in a couple hours for Austria again, no mention of dead corporals. He listened to people's conversations in the canteen, but no one mentioned anything out of the ordinary and Colonel Philips let him go along with the rest of the Commandos. By nightfall, he started to wonder if he'd made the whole thing up; the night before had been such a nice night, why would he have killed a guy, even a would-be rapist? He must have dreamt it.

“You didn't come back to the club,” Gabe said when they had a second alone.

Bucky lifted his shoulders. “I just got tired from all the singing.” That was all it was; he'd gone straight back to the camp after they fooled around.

Life went on.

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They wound up back in England by November. It rained everyday, leaving an icy frost on the
ground in the mornings, and Steve was in meetings practically every afternoon about new missions. He didn't tell the Commandos about the details until he had it straight in his head, which Bucky had made his peace with, but that wasn't the only thing Steve kept from him.

They got their letters on a Saturday and Steve got one too. He grinned and sat down with it in the canteen.

“It's from Becca!” he said, grinning.

Bucky smiled and read his own letter from Dad. Everything was the same at home, he wrote, and he relayed some of Eugene's seminary school mishaps and Ma's new adventures in the kitchen. Bucky described it all to Steve, who smiled along but didn't offer any stories of his own.

“What's Becca got to say for herself?” Bucky prompted eventually.

“Oh, the usual,” Steve said and shrugged. “Books, movies...” He tucked the letter back into his pocket and smiled but his cheeks were starting to turn red.

“She must have said something more than that,” Bucky said. “Why did she write you in the first place?”

“People can write to me,” Steve said and smiled a little. “I need some food.”

Steve deflected the rest of Bucky's questions throughout the day, with jovial little, “I can get letters, Buck, jeez!” and “Wow, you must be bored if you're this interested.” Bucky knew he was being brushed off and he hated it, it made him feel hot with anger.

In the early evening they sat down in the canteen to a plate of what Brits called food and Bucky watched Steve the entire time, as he laughed and chatted with the rest of them. He seemed so happy, without a care, unconcerned about habitually lying to Bucky. He only glanced over once, as Bucky shovelled food in his mouth with a glare and asked, “Good food, Buck?”

“Gourmet,” Bucky replied with a nasty smile.

They were back in their tent by seven and Steve fussed with his pack for a few minutes before taking a deep breath and looking at Bucky.

“Do you want to have it out? You've been drilling a hole in my head all day.”

Bucky sat down on his cot and lit a cigarette. “You're keeping something from me.”

“Oh Jesus,” Steve muttered and took the letter out of his pocket. “Look, fine, Becca didn't want you to know, but your grandfather's in prison and your family's been having some money trouble.”

Bucky snatched the letter from his hand and read it. Tax evasion, same as Capone, ten year sentence. Some of the family's assets had been seized, though the house was in Dad's name and he'd been cleared of any suspicion. Becca thought that they would have to sell up within the next few years, since Dad's salary was only just able to cover the bills. Ma had taken in some piecework but was inept at it. And the cat was dead.

“You hid this from me,” he said.

“This is the first she's told me about it,” Steve replied, pink-cheeked.

“You still weren't gonna tell me though, were you? You always do this to me, both of you. I
could've been sending money back home for them.” It hadn't occurred to him before to send anything back home, though he'd hardly been spending it either, it was just sitting in his pack doing nothing.

“That's a good idea. You can send mine back too, just don't tell them it's from me,” Steve said. “It'll be a role reversal, huh?”

“God, that's you all over,” Bucky growled and Steve flinched, leaning back.

“That's a good idea. You can send mine back too, just don't tell them it's from me,” Steve said. “It'll be a role reversal, huh?”

“Sorry?”

“Lying, hiding things. You've always done this to me.”

Steve looked hurt but for once Bucky didn't care. “I don't lie to you...”

Bucky stood up and sucked on the cigarette. “Christ, maybe you don't even realise. You and Becca always hide things from me. Can't tell Bucky anything important, he's too stupid, or maybe he's too crazy. I'm such a fucking Neanderthal, I won't understand about my sister being queer.”

“I was just keeping my promises...” Steve murmured.

“But I'm supposed to matter to you more than they do!” Bucky shouted.

Steve looked like he'd been struck. “You do...”

Bucky shook his head – it felt like his face was on fire. “I don't think that I do. You know, I put you before anyone, including myself. I've compromised my morals for you – if I even have any morals, my education, my fucking body, but you're fine. You've got everything you want and I've got nothing.”

“Buck...”

Bucky barrelled on through. “I've got secrets too, you know.”

Steve nodded slowly, his whole face red now. “Yeah, of course you do. That's-- that's normal.”

“You wanna know one of my secrets?” Bucky asked in a low tone.

“If-- if you want to tell me,” Steve said quietly. He looked nervous now, like he was ready to either run and give Bucky a smack. He just might do that in a couple of seconds.

“You wanna know my secret?” he repeated, stepping up really close to Steve, blowing smoke in his face. “Here's my fucking secret: I've been fucking Gabe for two years.”

Steve's eyebrows twitched and he looked at Bucky with wide eyes. “You--?”

“I have been fucking Gabe,” he said, slowly, “like the big goddamn queer I am.”

“You--” Steve stammered again. “What about Connie?”

“I kicked her to the curb years ago. Of course, I only did it because Gabe made me; I'm such a fucking scumbag, I would have left her hanging.” He was almost nose to nose with Steve, his cigarette bobbing between his lips as he talked. He took it out and flicked it to the ground.

“So, you're...?” Steve mumbled.
“I always have been. So, what do you think of that for a secret?”

“That’s-- that’s okay,” Steve said slowly. “You know I don’t... have a problem with that kind of thing.”

“Yeah? You don’t have a problem with it? It’s okay? Is this okay?” He leaned in the couple of inches more to kiss Steve, pressing his mouth against Steve’s dry lips. Steve didn’t hit him, or even shove him away like Arnie had, but he didn’t move, either, like he was frozen to the spot. Bucky pulled away from him and took in Steve’s goggle-eyed stare. “Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he spat, and left the tent as fast as he could without running.

He found himself in some pub within walking distance of the camp – he didn’t think he’d be able to navigate the tube system the way he was feeling. It felt like there was something bubbling up inexorably inside of him, like it was going to vomit out of him and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Steve wasn’t really the problem, not the promises he kept or the ones he broke – Bucky was the problem, like he always had been.

The door jingled as Bucky was halfway through his third glass of whiskey – the bartender looked like he didn’t want to serve him any more but Bucky had money and money talked. There was a tell tale click-clack of heels on the hard floor and when he turned his head, he found Carter’s lovely visage before him.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he muttered and turned away.

“I’ll have whatever my friend’s having,” she called to the bartender. Bucky kept his head resolutely turned away and heard the bartender slide a glass across to her. She took a drink and sighed. “Whiskey was my brother’s favourite, you know.”

Bucky didn’t reply.

“I know you don’t like me very much, Sergeant,” she said.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t think about you enough to have an opinion either way,” he said and knew it sounded laughably false.

Carter allowed him it. “That’s fair,” she said. “Steve has told me all sorts of things about you.”

“Oh yeah?” He lifted his head and looked at her. “What has Steve told you all about?”

She brushed a perfectly curled strand of hair from her face. “Well, he told me about your exploits as children and your family taking care of him when he needed it the most. And how kind you were to his mother.” Bucky looked away at the mention of Sarah and took another drink. “I think the two of you might have had a fight,” she added. “Steve seems quite upset, although you know how he gets, all stiff and distant. Honestly, he puts all the British men I know to shame with his stiff upper lip.”

Bucky didn’t smile at her attempt at levity. “Did he tell you what we fought about?”

“No,” she said, and he believed her, though she was a spy, so maybe she was just good at lying. “I tried to make him tell me, but he wouldn’t.”

He nodded and stared down at his glass. “He’s different now.”

“Well, I’d say so, yes,” Carter said, then cleared her throat. “Oh, but you don’t just mean his body, do
“You made him different.”

“Myself personally?”

He looked back up at her with a glare. “You and the rest of those fucking SSR guys.”

She tipped her head. “All right. What's different about him, aside from the obvious?”

“He's... he isn't angry any more, he's less...” He was more and he was less, at the same time. Bucky shrugged.

“Do you want him to be angry?”

“Of course I don't want him to be angry,” Bucky snapped, which Carter had little reaction to. He grunted and went back to his drink.

“So, what else?” she pushed, but he just shook his head petulantly and wouldn't look up. “Is he any less kind? Or any less intelligent? Does he care about things any less strongly?”

Bucky bit his lips. “I dunno. No.”

“Do you think that he's a worse person for having had the... treatment?”

“No...” he murmured. That was exactly the thing – Steve was better, he was perfect and he didn't have to stick with Bucky any more. And he wasn't, not like they used to stick together. Steve's horizon had broadened but Bucky's had narrowed. He let out a heavy breath.

“You're a troubled soul, aren't you, Sergeant?” Carter said.

He snorted. “I guess that's what you'd call it, yeah. You know he loves you, right?”

“Oh well...” she said and straightened her shoulders, then tipped her chin up. “Yes, I suppose I do know that.”

“He's new to it all,” Bucky continued and she smiled fondly.

“He's definitely a novice to certain things, that's true.” She drank the rest of her glass in one shot and dropped it on the bar with a thump. “That gets the blood flowing. Will you come back to the camp with me?”

Bucky matched her, draining his glass. “You need a chaperone?”

“We can say that if you like,” she said and he couldn't help but laugh.

They talked a little while they walked back. Carter-- Peggy-- told him about all the petty shit she got for being a woman – Bucky could imagine – and complained about Stark's tiresome antics. Bucky hadn't had much to do with Stark outside of a few strategy meetings, but he'd found him pretty hard to take; he reminded Bucky too much of some of the more choice assholes at Harvard to allow them to be on friendly terms. Peggy was clearly fond of him though, despite her complaints.

“You know, if you weren't so pigheaded, I think we could be quite good friends,” she said as they were about to part company. It was nearly ten and he had a faint hope that Steve might be asleep already, but he knew he wouldn't be.
“I've been told that before,” he replied and smiled.

She brushed her hand along his arm and nodded. “I hope you make amends with Steve.”

“Hey, how d'you know I'm the one in the wrong?”

“Well,” she said, “I suppose it might not be the case.”

He shook his head and turned on his heel away from her. “Thanks a lot, Carter, see ya later.”

Steve was lying on his cot reading a book when Bucky ducked into the tent, but he rolled up to a sitting position as soon as he saw him. Bucky looked at the ground.

“Hey,” he said quietly.

“Hey,” Steve echoed just as nervously, “are you gonna sit down?”

“Okay,” Bucky said and shuffled over to his cot to sit. “So…”

“I'm sorry, Bucky,” Steve said and Bucky lifted his eyes in surprise. Steve looked contrite and anxious, rubbing his hands together like he was preparing for prayer. “I've been so wrapped up in everything recently, sometimes I forget that you're not always okay.”

“I am okay,” Bucky said quickly.

Steve gave him a sceptical look. “Even still. I never had to worry about you when we were kids, but we're not kids any more and I shouldn't keep things from you. I always think I know best, but that's not true. Sometimes it feels like there's not enough space in my head for everything now.”

Bucky definitely knew how that was. “It's all right, I was just being a mean son of a bitch again.”

“You're not half as mean as you think you are,” Steve said and stood up. Bucky watched him nervously as he approached and gestured to the cot. “Can I sit?”

“Sure,” Bucky said.

Steve sat, his solid side pressing against Bucky as he settled himself. Bucky could feel the heat coming off him.

“So, I think we need to talk about the other thing…” Steve said carefully.

Bucky groaned and rubbed his hands over his face.

“Hey, it's okay,” Steve said, and closed his hand around Bucky's shoulder. Bucky looked up and smiled a little at him. “I've been getting my head around it. You always used to flirt like crazy with girls.”

Bucky took a deep breath. He could try to brush this off right now, as a joke or a misguided dalliance while there weren't any dames around. “But I was never that interested.”

“No, you weren't,” Steve agreed, brow creased in thought. “There were some girls, though, weren't there? Hazel, Marge… Connie.”

“Yeah, there were some. I liked Hazel and Marge because they were different, didn't fall all over me like other girls did. Connie... She always felt she wasn't good enough for anything. She reminded me of myself.”
“Buck...” Steve murmured, and Bucky shrugged. “Okay. So, Gabe...”

“I shouldn't have told you about that, he doesn't want anyone knowing. Obviously.”

Steve shook his head. “I won't say anything. I think we've established that I can keep promises. I won't let on I know. You and him, you, uh...”

“I'm not discussing that with you,” Bucky said with a laugh and Steve breathed out in relief.

“Okay. Now, what about... the bit at the end? Do you... feel that way about me?” He mumbled the last bit, so indistinct that Bucky could hardly hear it.

He could still salvage some of this; he'd just kissed Steve to make his point, to be an asshole and scare him a little. He swallowed heavily. “Yes,” he whispered and lifted his fingers to his mouth to chew.

“Oh,” Steve said after a moment, “that's okay.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. I am pretty attractive these days.”

It wasn't just these days, Bucky wanted to say, but this was going much better than he hoped and he didn't want to ruin it. He dropped his hand back into his lap. “Don't get a big head, Steve, you're not all that,” he said, and his voice shook a little, but Steve didn't comment.

“You sound like Peggy,” Steve said, then paused for a moment. “Is that why you don't like her?”

“I...” Bucky shook his head. “I like her okay. She came and found me at the pub before, talked some sense into me.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh. I see why you like her. A lot of things have changed with the two of us and it all made me feel... strange, not just because...” He cleared his throat and shrugged.

Steve looked relieved and bobbed his head. He thought Bucky's feelings were a new development, less scary that way. Bucky could live with that. Steve put his arm around his shoulders and it felt incredible.

“You don't have to keep things like this from me,” Steve said. “It won't make me feel any different about you.”

Bucky slouched his shoulders a little to feel more enclosed by Steve's arm and nodded. “I won't,” he said, and blinked away the memory of that guy struggling to speak with a sliced larynx.

Chapter End Notes

- lbr, the real OTP in this fic is Bucky/Cigarettes.

- See you next time, I'm off to meet Captain Kirk now.
Chapter Notes

Content: body horror, torture, violence, medical imagery, some dehumanisation, arm stuff

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve said he wouldn't think any different of Bucky for his proclivities, but Bucky could tell that he already did. Steve tried his best to keep things the same between the two of them, but the air was different now. They didn't go to the shower block at the same time (Steve never made a thing of it, he just always showered before or after Bucky with casual excuses about being busy with something or too absorbed in his book to come with the others), Steve didn't talk about Peggy at length any more or behave like a lovesick schoolboy when she was around, and he asked Bucky how he was doing practically every damn day. He also never questioned where Bucky had been when he rolled into their tent late at night, smelling like beer and the cologne that Gabe sometimes wore. One night he asked, 'good night?' from his bed at three am and Bucky, feeling loose-tongued and a little nasty, replied, 'want the gory details?'. Steve had mumbled that he didn't with a faint note of alarm in his voice and rolled over to face away from him.

Bucky spent a lot more of his time with Gabe, now that he could. They explored the area surrounding the camp, then did the same when Phillips sent them back to the continent in November. They got bolder, too, groping each other on the street after long nights in clubs.

There were some places you could go in Le Havre if you were that way inclined, bathhouses that charged one franc each for entry unless they liked the look of you; Bucky got in free. By the time they got there, at eleven pm, it was freezing outside but inside it was hot and steamy. They were given a key for a room and a towel each, and changed in front of each other in silence. Bucky was as nervous as he'd ever been and wasn't entirely sure why they'd come here except that he couldn't really bear to lie in his cot across from Steve every night and feel the weight of Steve's earnest understanding press down on top of him. He remembered a couple of the bathhouses in the neighbourhood when he was a kid – there was one near the club and Grandpa had told him that under no circumstances was he allowed to go near that place or any of the perverts he saw coming out of it. Common opinion held that the men who frequented these places would have no compunction about forcing their perversion on young boys.

Their room had unfinished, rough walls and a couple of wooden benches, a complete afterthought to the real purpose of this place. Bucky secured the towel around his waist and looked at Gabe's bare ass. Well, look at me now, Grandpa, he thought, and laughed a little.

“Don't laugh,” Gabe muttered, obviously thinking that it was a comment on his naked body.

“I wasn't laughing at you,” he said and smiled. “So, what do we do now?”

Gabe wrapped the towel around his waist and straightened up. “I don't know. I don't know why you always think I know so much about this stuff, I'm from Macon.”

“Well, I dunno, maybe Macon's a real cosmopolitan place crawling with queers.”
“It's not,” Gabe deadpanned, and Bucky laughed again.

“All right, all right, let's just go out there and figure it out.”

They left the room and walked around a while, trying not to stare at the other men; some of them had forgone the towels altogether and strutted around just in what God gave them, as Gabe put it. It was a real mix, too, some young fit guys and then some old, out of shape fellas; maybe a few more old guys than young. Bucky could see why they were letting good-looking guys in for free, they needed to even up the numbers.

They found their way to a common area with the aforementioned baths and watched the other men socialise easily. It seemed a little funny to Bucky, all these guys talking and smoking with their dicks bobbing around.

“I don't think I really fit in here,” Gabe murmured.

“What d'you mean?” Bucky whispered back.

“Well--” Gabe lifted his shoulders and gestured with a nod of his head to the men before him. “Colour wise, you know?”

Bucky looked around, then lifted his chin towards a Negro guy who was built like a fucking Greek statue. “What about him?”

“Oh...” Gabe crossed his arms over his chest. “Now I feel inferior.”

“Imagine how I feel.”

Gabe shook his head. “There's no one here better looking than you.”

Bucky looked at him, then looked away, feeling heat rise to his cheeks. “Um,” he muttered, then, since they were where they were, he leaned over and kissed Gabe in front of all these people. “The feeling's mutual.”

When they pulled away, a man was approaching them. He had a swarthy complexion and his body was covered in dark hair; he was at least seventy five percent hair with a beard and moustache to match. His dick was hard and red and ready to go.

“Jesus,” Bucky muttered and Gabe snorted.

“You are Americans?” the guy asked, although it wasn't really a question. Bucky had stopped asking how people always knew.

“Uh huh,” he said, “who wants to know?”

The guy laughed, his dick bobbing along with his head as he tipped it back in laughter. “Henri,” he said, “and you?”

Bucky opened his mouth, then paused. He probably shouldn't tell these guys his real name, it'd be a pretty big fuck up if it got out. “Jim,” he said, “and this is... Greg.”

Gabe frowned for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“You are new?” Henri asked, still smiling like a beneficent ruler.

“Yep,” Bucky said.
“Would you like to come back to my room?” Henri asked, and he was looking only at Gabe.

Gabe's eyebrows went up a bit and he looked at Bucky. Bucky tried to smile, but he felt sudden, intense jealousy. This man was going to take Gabe off somewhere to fuck, when they hadn't even fucked properly themselves yet.

“We're together,” Gabe settled on, looking back at Henri. “Me and... Jim.”

“Your beau can come too.”

Gabe looked back at him, eyebrows raised in question. They were going to, what? Do the things that Henri did, but with three of them? He shrugged. “If you want to.”

“I guess I do,” he said.

“Come with me, then,” Henri said, and led the way with his dick.

The light was low in Henri's room, identical to theirs, and he offered them cigarettes when they came in. It was reefer, Bucky realised when he took a draw, but that was okay. Henri wasn't in any hurry to begin, so they sat like pals and talked; or Henri talked and they listened. He was forty two – only a few years younger than Dad – and used to work as a musician in Paris before the war. He'd joined the Resistance, working the radio, and he had a daughter, thirteen year old Adrienne. Her mother had died many years ago, he said; Adrienne didn't know about her father's trips to les bains publics. Bucky certainly hoped not.

Eventually, Henri slid closer to Gabe and dipped his hand underneath his towel. Gabe squirmed a little but didn't look unhappy about it.

“Will you join us?” Henri asked Bucky.

Bucky shifted. “Uh...”

“Or perhaps you like to watch?” Henri continued and Bucky closed his fingers around the bottom of his towel. “That is common.”

“Uh...” He glanced at Gabe, who smiled lazily. The reefer hadn't done much for Bucky but Gabe was feeling it, he could tell. “Yeah, okay.”

Henri didn't hang around after that; Gabe's towel came off and they got down to it. It was embarrassing, at first, to watch them all over each other, groping and kissing, but somehow Bucky couldn't tear his eyes away and the anxious feeling in his stomach started to dissipate when they got to the real stuff, the stuff Bucky and Gabe hadn't done yet.

Gabe was pretty quiet about and so was Henri, but they both made little noises that made Bucky's feet tingle and he got hard watching Gabe moving in time with Henri's thrusts and the bite of his fingers into Henri's thick, hairy arms. He started to jerk himself off underneath the towel and Henri lifted his head and smiled at him, flashing a row of crooked teeth.

“Your beau is shy,” Henri said and Gabe laughed a little, sounding distant and loopy.

Bucky blushed, half humiliated at this asshole Frenchman making comments about him while fucking his... Gabe, but it didn't stop him from coming, curling over and spreading his legs wider. It was all over for Gabe soon afterwards too and they started cleaning themselves up. Henri had places to be and people to fuck, so he left them with two more reefer cigarettes and a cheerful bounce of his dick. Bucky started laughing as soon as he was out the door and couldn't stop until Gabe wound his
fingers in his hair and kissed him.

“So, how was it?” Bucky mumbled against his cheek.

“It was all right. Thrilling, I guess? How was it for you?”

Bucky shrugged. “Made me feel jealous.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh.”

Gabe smiled happily. “Well, that's something.”

Bucky knocked his leg with his foot. “You're starting to talk like me.”

He felt good, the rest of the night, and they got back to their current home, Camp Pall Mall, at
knocking on five am. Steve was up and shining his shoes with quick, tense jerks of the brush when
Bucky strolled in and flopped down on his cot.

“Think I can catch a couple hours sleep?” he asked Steve.

“Sure,” Steve said, sounding all prissy. “You stink like my old cigarettes.”

“Mmhm,” Bucky murmured and closed his eyes, “guess I had an asthma attack.”

“I guess so,” Steve replied.

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They had a few short missions in November and early December, but spent most of their time at Pall
Mall, not doing a hell of a lot. The other units got busywork from their sergeants, like digging
trenches for no fucking reason or going on runs in the frigid six am Le Havre climate, but the
Commandos didn't do any of that shit, and Bucky had told Steve that if he made him dig a hole,
Bucky would bury him in it. Steve said he wouldn't dream of making him work a day in his life.

“Why would I need to when you do all the work for the both of us?” he replied from his cot. Becca
had sent him some Captain America comic books wherein he was a kid sidekick of approximately
twelve. Him and Steve had been sending all their money home since their fight, and he'd written
Becca a letter to tell her to make Ma and Dad take it any way she could. She wrote back to say that
Steve was an untrustworthy fink and that Bucky might enjoy this reading material. “Why don't you
do some more fucking push ups?”

Steve stretched his arms out in front of himself. “You'd like that, wouldn't you?” he said, off the cuff,
then cleared his throat and shifted on his cot.

Bucky glanced at him quickly, at Steve's reddening cheeks and the worried set of his mouth and took
a breath. “Look at this fucking thing,” he said, waving the comic at Steve, “when have I ever uttered
the words 'gee whiz'?”

The corners of Steve's mouth turned up and he lifted his shoulders. “They said Bucky was a child's
name.”

Bucky lit a cigarette and threw the comic at Steve, who leant forward and snatched it out of the air.
“Becca's never gonna let me live this down.”
“Well, they make me out to be kind of a fool out of the suit.”

Bucky slid his eyes over to Steve and flashed his teeth. “That's just the truth.”

“I walked right into that one, huh?” Steve said, ducking his head for a second. He still had some colour to his cheeks, but the moment had passed without comment.

“Yep,” he said, and took a drag of his cigarette.

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They spent the majority of their time, as always, in the canteen, which had become something of a common room for the units, built out of corrugated iron and cold as hell inside. Any time it rained, Bucky could hear the rat-a-tat-tat on the roof like gunfire from the front.

They picked up radio waves from England and listened to swing in the evenings, some of them singing at the top of their lungs, some trying to dance with each other, laughing and loudly wishing for a dame to step on the toes of. Bucky did what he always did: he smoked and drank and watched the others with a smirk; if they didn't want to have a look of queers about them, they shouldn't be trying to negotiate the waltz together. It was all right though, Miller was playing and Bucky was sat at one of the long lunch tables, not getting any hassle.

“You could lose your fingers to frostbite in here,” Peggy said behind him and he rolled his head back to look at her.

“And some other parts,” he said. “Hey.”

“Good evening, Sergeant,” she said with a smile, and sat down on the bench with her back to the table. From a quick glance down at her skirt, Bucky figured it wasn't that easy to manoeuvre in the thing and he scooted around until he straddled the bench. “How are you not freezing? It looks as if these men are dancing themselves into a frenzy to stay warm.”

Bucky held up the bottle. “Gin. Want some?”

“I won't turn it down,” she said magnanimously, and took it from him, drinking delicately.

“Steve's in with the colonel,” Bucky said, “they probably wouldn't mind if you gatecrashed.”

“No, no, I'll leave them to it,” she said, and handed the bottle back. “I wouldn't say no to a cigarette, though.”

“I wasn't gonna offer,” Bucky muttered, but produced one anyway and lit it for her.

She took a draw, then held it daintily between her fingers, her hand tipped away from her body. Bucky left his where it was stuck to his lip. “Steve doesn't really approve of me smoking. He never says anything, but you know, his face.”

Bucky did know. “You should ask him about all the reefer he used to smoke.”

Peggy's face lit up. “Oh, I will, Sergeant, thank you.”

He grinned back at her. “You could also ask him about the dirty pictures he used to draw.”

She cackled with laughter. “Anything else?”

“Well... he's a shit letter writer, can't spell for shit. Or he didn't used to be able to, anyhow.”
“He’s still fairly inept,” she said, “I’ve seen some of the reports he’s submitted to Phillips, very factual and to the point. They read like a telegram.”

Bucky smiled; she was right, Steve could draw the most intricate pictures but when it came to writing, he was unsentimental and never expanded on any details that weren’t relevant to the subject. Bucky was always less focused and ended up going on tangents and rambling sometimes, which had served him well enough for reaching page counts at school. He imagined Phillips preferred telegram reports, though.

“So, what about you, Sergeant?” Peggy asked, taking a quick drag.

“I ain’t tellin' you any of my embarrassing stories,” he mumbled around the cigarette.

She smiled like she’d get them out of him anyway. “You have quite a few siblings, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Three. Becca's only nine months younger than me, her birthday's coming up in a few days. The twins are eighteen, Florence is at Radcliffe, Eugene’s doing seminary school. What about you?”

“One older brother,” she said, and dropped her eyes for a moment. “He passed on the front, four years ago.”

“Christ,” he said and pushed the bottle of gin back over to her. “I'm sorry.”

She took a drink and smiled. “I have a nephew too, he's four. He was born after Michael died.”

“Like Steve and Joe,” Bucky said, mostly to himself, and Peggy nodded. “I'm real sorry.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, and something made him reach across and rest his hand on her arm for a moment. Last time he got even a little chummy with Steve's girl, he turned her head, but he didn't think he needed to worry about that with Peggy, and not just because of Steve's transformation; he'd never met a woman as obviously disinterested in him as Peggy was, and it was clear that she only had anything to do with him for Steve's benefit. That was fine.

She lifted her head and smiled. “So, Steve tells me you went to Harvard and then quit.”

“Is that what he told you?” Bucky said, drawing his hand back, and she raised her eyebrows in challenge. “It was more like I got expelled because I didn't sit my final exams.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I got expelled from my primary school for indecent behaviour.”

“I can see that,” he said and she gasped as if she was offended. “What did you do that was so indecent?”

“I wrote naughty words on the blackboards and disseminated my aunt's uncensored copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to the student population. I taught many girls their first swear words. It seems so silly now, considering how often I hear your lot telling each other to go fuck yourselves.”

“We do like the word,” Bucky said, and took a drink.

Peggy knocked her knee against his and smiled. “I can’t be the only one here who’s got into trouble, though.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t really get into trouble at school. I was popular, I didn’t need to. That came later.”
“Oh yes?” Peggy prompted, and took the bottle again.

“Well, I threatened to kill a guy in front of customers at the store I worked in.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I once broke into my headmaster's house and stole his wife's knickers and some liquor.”

“Not bad. I threatened my brother-in-law's brother with a broken bottle and made him piss himself.”

“I punched a recruit.”

Bucky took the cigarette out of his mouth and pointed it at her. “Steve told me about that, that made a pretty big impression.”

She smiled fondly and took a drink. “He made a sizeable impression too, when he threw himself on that grenade.”

“What grenade?”

“Oh,” she said, and took another draw of the cigarette, smiling a little. “Well, it was a dummy.”

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “Steve would kill me for telling you this, but he wants to marry you.”

That sure wiped the self-satisfied look off her face. “Oh, well...”

“You wanna marry him?”

“I...” She frowned and flicked away ash. “I almost got married once before.”

That wasn't an answer. “Oh yeah?”

“I jilted him on the day of the wedding. He expected that when the war was over, I'd be the good, patriotic woman and pass my job on to a much more deserving man home from the war. Michael thought he was a fool and so was I for entertaining it.”

“What would he think about Steve?”

She ducked her head and smiled. “He'd approve. But what about you?”

“I just want Steve to be happy,” he said, and it was the truth. “When we were kids, he was never happy, it was like he couldn't be so long as there were all sorts of injustices in the world he couldn't do anything about. He's happy now that he can do something, so that's good enough for me.”

She rested her hand on his arm and squeezed it. “You're a very good friend, Sergeant. What will you do after the war?”

“Go home to my mother, I guess. Go back to working at the store I used to work at. Marry someone.” Or not. He wasn't sure he could go back to coasting through his life like he used to, but the alternative was, what, live in secret like the other neighbourhood queers? Visit bathhouses and get accused of being a deviant who leered at young boys from behind his mask of normality? What would Ma think, or Eugene? Eugene could hardly stand to hear about the regular kind of sex, he'd be disgusted at Bucky, or maybe devastated that his big brother was on the direct train to hell.

Life after this war was going to look so different, it made Bucky breathless.
“Will that be enough?” Peggy asked, her gaze serious now.

He flashed a smile. “I ain't ambitious,” he said, “not like Steve. I'll be fine.”

Her brow creased, but before she could reply, Steve called out to them from the mouth of the tent and strode over. Peggy stubbed out her cigarette, then got up and smoothed down her skirt. She wobbled a little when she took a step towards Steve and he reached out and steadied her for a second before withdrawing his arms to maintain some look of propriety in front of the troops.

“You're drunk,” he said, smiling slightly.

“Only a little. I was being a bad influence on your lovely friend.”

Steve laughed and shook his head. “I think you two are tied on that front. Bucky, we've got to head out tomorrow morning for Belgium.”

“Bastogne?” Peggy asked, and Steve nodded.

“Just tell me where I gotta be,” Bucky said, and flicked his cigarette away. “I'd better turn in then. Have fun.”

Steve opened his mouth, looking on in consternation as Bucky got up, but Peggy patted his arm and he deflated some. Bucky waved and turned on his heel before Steve could say anything else.

-The siege at Bastogne went on for six days, right through Christmas Day and into the next day, until they finally broke through the HYDRA troops and Patton sent in reinforcements. Steve was pleased as punch the whole time about how Bucky was getting on so well with Peggy now and didn't blink when Bucky disappeared with Gabe for a few hours at a time.

That, as it turned out, was a problem, because one day, while they were walking back to their impromptu encampment from town, it occurred to Gabe that there were no girls around for Bucky to use as cover and good ol’ Cap must have been asking some questions.

“He's not that smart,” Bucky said, smiling quickly. Snowing was swirling all around them, a real storybook Christmas, even if it was the twenty ninth.

Gabe frowned at that, a ridiculous excuse since Steve proved how fucking smart he was everyday. Bucky lit a cigarette and looked up at the snow-covered trees of this little Belgium town they’d landed in to get some rest. The smoke he blew out mingled with his cold breath.

“He knows, doesn't he?” Gabe asked.

Bucky glanced at him, his face betraying him, and Gabe's mouth dropped open.

“You told my CO that I'm, we're--”

“It just came out, we were fighting. He's not gonna-- you know, he's not got a problem with it. He won't tell anyone.”

“You don't know that for sure,” Gabe bit back, even though Bucky did; he knew Steve's soul, he knew Steve couldn't bring himself to be cruel like that. “Maybe it's okay for you, but I've got everything to lose here.”

“I'm sorry,” Bucky said softly and tried to crowd closer to Gabe – the road they were on was
abandoned, after all, but Gabe shook his head and walked ahead, his head down, hands stuffed in his pockets. When they returned to the camp, Bucky trailing twenty feet behind, Steve announced that they had a lead on the frog doctor, Zola, on his way to Switzerland, and had to leave within the hour.

Bucky watched Gabe collect up his pack and sighed.

“

“You okay?” Steve said, patting him on the back. “I know you probably don't have great memories of Zola. All the more reason to catch him.”

Christ, Bucky hadn't even got to thinking through that part yet. “I'm fine,” he said. “We'll get him, for sure.”

So, he fell. It was such a fucking freak thing, getting blown out that door. He thought he'd make it, he really did; Steve would grab him in time and crush him to his chest on the thundering train and they'd shake together for a while before rejoining the fight, but it didn't work out like that, and all Bucky could think as he fell was that, somehow, this was always how he was going to end up, falling away from Steve.

He hit the ravine at an incredible speed, his body twisted to the left, his side taking the brunt of the impact before his head hit the rocks, and for a few long moments he watched the dot that was the train, and Steve, speed away above him. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he thought, in those final seconds, that he might see that light people talked about, but all he got was darkness.

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Professor Nikolaev was talking away in his harsh voice, criticising every goddamn thing Bucky did, conferring with one of his fucking Ruskie comrades about what an abject failure Bucky was.

Hadh't Bucky left Harvard behind, run back to the safety of his home and his mother? Hadn't Bucky died in a Swiss ravine with his best friend watching? Was his hell populated with people he disliked at school? Who was next, Tim?

He forced his eyes opened, but only one cooperated and for a moment all he could see was white, and he thought maybe that was the light, but then he realised it was only snow and that he was travelling through it, dragged along by two men. He feel frost formed over his mouth and eyelashes, the cold bite of it on his cheeks, but he couldn't feel anything else, and when he moved his eye down he saw an absence where his arm was supposed to be, leaving blood smeared in the snow.

He tried to scream, but it came out a strangled, reedy sound because his throat wouldn't open and close enough, and narrowed to the point of near suffocation as he gasped, trying to turn his head from side to side. The dragging stopped and his gasps filled his ears, blocking out the Russians.

One of the men, wearing a large fur hat, dropped down by his side, his knees hitting the snow hard. He leant over Bucky, his eyes wide, and Bucky started to cry, his tears freezing before they hardly got any way down his temple.

“You are... alive,” the man whispered, almost reverent, and touched Bucky's face. Bucky could barely feel it at all.

“My-- my arm,” Bucky gasped, the words so hard to force past his narrowed airway.

“It was caught between rocks,” the man said, but it was hard for Bucky to hear over the sound of his heart thundering in his chest and the scream of the cold wind around them. “We had to cut, to free you. We thought you were died.”
“I can’t--” Bucky's throat clicked wetly as he tried to speak. It was hard to think of words; it was hard to think of anything. “See.”

The man pursed his lips, stricken by the question. He gestured to the left side of Bucky's face in jerky, nervous movements. “Your face, your, uh... ah, skull, is broken. There was a lot of blood and your...” He fell silent, looking down at Bucky. Whatever it was, he didn't want to share the rest of it with Bucky. “You are American?”

“Cap-- Cap—tain.”

“You are a captain?”

Bucky started to gasp again, the panic squeezing his heart till it split it down the middle. “America,” he cried.

The man frowned, looking at him with eyes narrowed in thought before he took a breath. “Капитан Америка? The Captain America?”

“Unit,” he gasped.

The man's eyes lit with understanding and he nodded quickly; Bucky's chest inflated just an inch more with this small relief. “We will take you to Allies.”

“Thank you,” Bucky whispered.

“You will be okay,” the man said and his comrade came and stood behind him.

Bucky heard, just a second too late, a click and then his saviour's brains were blown all across his face and he slumped, dead, onto Bucky's numbed body. He couldn't even flinch, his body was so paralysed, but he started to gasp and cry again, feeling warm brain matter on his face and against his lips. The man pulled the dead body off him, then leaned down, put his hand over Bucky's mouth and pinched his nose until he started to suffocate. Blessedly, he passed out again.

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Somehow, he still wasn't dead. He was in a room not unlike the room Zola tortured him in, grey walls and ceiling and probably floor if he could turn and look at it. The lights were harsh and unyielding, keeping everything painfully bright. He was lying on a bed now, dressed in thin clothes, bandages wrapped around most of his face, leaving only his right eye and his mouth open. He still couldn't feel anything below somewhere around the middle of his neck and his arm was still not fucking there.

He wondered how long he'd been there, wherever there was, and what they'd done to him. The cloud of panic had lifted off him now, somehow, and he felt calm enough to think things through. He'd fallen maybe a hundred feet, he'd felt the rocks crack his skull like an egg, he'd seen his vision grey out and disappear along with the train and Steve. The man, the kind one who got killed for his troubles, he was obviously looking down at a disfigured American with a broken open head who was somehow still talking. The other one, well, he must have been HYDRA, because the only reason a person survived a fall like that was if they'd been experimented on like Frankenstein and that was certainly in HYDRA's wheelhouse. Bucky had known it for a long time: he couldn't get drunk any more, just like Steve, and just like Steve he didn't need anywhere near as much sleep as a regular human and just like Steve he healed at a much accelerated rate.

Steve didn't go around killing people in a psychotically calm rage though; Bucky was pretty sure about that.
Footsteps approached and he slid his eyes over to the heavy iron barred cell door. A man in uniform dropped a tray of food and water on the floor and kicked it under the door, then walked away. Now, how the fuck was Bucky supposed to eat that? He tried to yell after the guy, but his voice came out as thin as before and left him a little light-headed, so he closed his mouth and saved his energy.

This happened everyday, though Bucky's only marker of a day was when the man brought the tray as there was no window in his cell; the man would bring the new tray and reach under the door to pull the old, untouched one away. On day three, Bucky could turn his head to the door and yell at the guy to actually bring him the fucking food, though the action of inflating his chest to speak made it throb and ache, and on day four he regained sensation in the fingers of his remaining hand and was able to brush his fingertips against the scratchy material of the clothes he'd been dressed in.

No matter how much he yelled, though, the man would never come in, for any reason, even to allow Bucky to use the toilet in the corner, and Bucky's only option was to piss himself, though there couldn't have been much in his bladder since he'd gone at least five days without anything to drink. He didn't know how long a person could survive without water, but he didn't think it was long, even for someone like him, and his throat felt dry enough to bleed.

“Give me some fucking water!” he yelled on the fifth day as the guard walked away.

He could move his hand more now, lift it a few inches at the wrist and grasp the fabric of his pants loosely, and he'd regained sensation in his chest down to his sternum. His other arm was still numb, which was probably a blessing, and he could move his shoulders a fraction.

On day nine, he stopped feeling thirsty and could hardly swallow, despite having feeling down to his waist. He needed to get up right now or he didn't think he ever would again. He twisted his shoulders, getting the left under him, and reached down to swing his right leg over his left. His arm was weak and shaking, but he got it there, then pushed against the wall to roll himself onto his side. It felt like punching sand, using that wall as leverage, but slowly slowly he got himself onto his side, then all in a rush overbalanced and fell off the bed altogether, landing on his back with a crack. Pain radiated across his shoulders, ribs, and head and he lay there whimpering for a few minutes, wondering if he'd cracked his head open again, but darkness didn't come and he steeled himself before opening his eyes and assessing the situation.

He was about five feet from the tray to his left and needed to get closer, but there wasn't anything to push off from down here. The best he could manage was a slow squirm, his stump slapping against the cold floor as he moved his shoulders. The bandages covering it were bloodied, though he didn't think it was actively bleeding any more. He'd tried for this last week to ignore it the best he could, because the alternative made his throat close up and his vision grey out.

Eventually, he got within flailing distance and slapped his hand around until he grazed the tin cup with his fingers. It almost overturned and his heart jumped into his throat, but he managed to get a grip on it and bring it to his lips. He tried to lift his head as high as he could but he was still mostly flat and some of the water spilled down his chin and went down his throat wrong, making him sputter and gasp. He held the cup in an iron grip to keep from spilling any more, and when the spell had passed he drained the last of it and turned his attention to the food. There was a scrap of bread and some watery grey paste slapped directly onto the tray, no utensils, but he ate it greedily, shovelling it in with his hand, then took his first breath in a solid minute and stared up at the ceiling. All he had to do was stay alive long enough for Steve to find him.

The guard came again the next day, his face registering no reaction to Bucky lying on the cold floor. He simply removed the old tray and replaced it with the new, then walked away, as always.

On day eleven, Bucky was strong enough to sit up against the wall and wiggle his toes a little. He
could feel light pressure through his thighs and calf muscles when he pressed his hand to them, and could feel the warmth spread between his legs when he urinated. What a fucking position to be in.

He explored his face gingerly over the bandage, pressing fingers carefully to his cheekbones, his left eye socket, and the back of his head. Nothing hurt any more than he'd expect and he could move his left eye from side to side beneath the bandage, though that didn't preclude blindness. His face had probably been shattered by the impact, maybe he'd been put back together again all wrong, like Humpty Dumpty. He moved on to this chest and legs, which were bruised to hell all the way down his left side; he could make out the individual ribs in the shape of the bruise. He did not look at his arm.

On lucky day thirteen, he was able to bend his knees, and on day fourteen he crawled to the toilet and was able to take a piss sitting down. He smelt terrible, like stale urine and sweat and blood and probably vomit too. There was nothing else to change into, though, and he'd be damned if he was going to go naked in front of these perverts, so he put up with his stained pants chafing his thighs.

Day fifteen and he started to pull himself up by the iron bars of his cell door; he fell each time, legs folding like jelly, but he got stronger, and on day nineteen he lay in wait for the guard, arranging himself to look as pathetic as possible. When the man came with his tray, Bucky kept still until the guard bent down to retrieve the old one, then lunged over, gripped the man's jacket with his hand and slammed him forward into the bars. The guy wobbled, momentarily stunned by the attack, and Bucky forced his feet under him and stood up, grabbing the man again and slamming him into the bars twice more. Bucky's depth perception was terrible, but he tried his best to look for a set of keys somewhere on the man; he found nothing and, having lost focus in his search, missed the guard draw something out of his pocket and stick Bucky with it. Whatever it was made his body go rigid and tumble to the ground.

He woke up with a headache and no tray. On the bright side, feeling in his legs had returned almost entirely and he could stagger up without much trouble. He took stock for a moment, looking around the untouched cell. There was a mirror mounted to the wall near the toilet, which Bucky could only assume was there so that he could really drink in the full horror of his Frankenstein face. Now was as good a time as any, he guessed, to check out the damage.

He set himself up in front of the mirror and started picking at his bandage, trying to find the end of it to unwind, which would have been easier if he'd had both hands, but he managed to free a tucked in end and began the slow process. As he got beyond the top layer, the white gauze became steadily more red and brown, hardened and scratchy with long dried blood. When he got his first glimpse of skin, he shut his eye and kept going, his stomach turning at the feeling of the material adhering to his skin until he gave it a firm tug, just like his burnt back, all those months ago.

When he was done, he dropped the long bandage to the floor, still with his eyes closed, and it occurred to him that maybe it was too early to remove it and he might open his eyes to find chunks of his face falling off. He set his jaw and opened his eyes. The first thing that struck him was that he could see out of his left eye just fine, though the white of it was red and his upper and lower eyelids were purple and swollen. That was something. The whole left side of his face was black and blue with bruising and swollen up like the Elephant Man, but all the individual parts seemed to be approximately in the right locations, no jaw hanging off or missing ear. Just the missing arm, then. His skin was criss-crossed with black stitches, around his ear, under his cheek, running along his jaw, and there were staples all over his head, which had had a very rudimentary shave.

He really had been stitched back together like Frankenstein. Bile started to make its way up his throat
and he swallowed it down and stumbled to the bed to sit. He had one arm, a face like hell, and no water. What would he be if-- no, when he got out of here? Some monstrous freak home from the war? He'd seen people like that as a kid, still struggling after the Great War, with half a face or no legs or skin mottled with scars, and even though Ma had told him that they weren't to be stared at, mocked, pitied, or judged, Bucky was still scared of them, he still thought they were monsters until he was old enough to know better. Even then, he couldn't stop the unsettled feeling that worked its way into his gut. Would he become one of those monsters?

He shut his eyes and thought of Steve coming to the cell door and ripping it off its hinges. Steve wouldn't look at him any differently, he knew that, he was the only one who wouldn't. Ma would weep and Dad would be stolidly heartbroken, Becca would try for a mean comment and stare too long, the kids would whisper to each other and cry, but Steve, he'd smile and say Bucky was home.

It was many days until the guard returned with his tray – though without the guard's punctual visits Bucky couldn't chart the days very well and had to guess depending on his sleep cycles – and he had started to speculate about how to quench his thirst some other way. He could have tried drinking his piss, but no liquid going in meant not much coming out, and the toilet, such as it was, was just a hole in the ground, no water in the bowl, if Bucky could be pushed so far as drink out of it like a dog. So, there weren't any other options but the tray, unless the ceiling sprung a leak, which he didn't expect it to.

In those days, the bruising and swelling had gone down considerably, in a way that he knew was incredibly abnormal.

The guard, a different guard than before, came with a gun drawn, and levelled it at Bucky as he stood and smiled his monstrous smile. He wondered if he even could be killed now, but a bullet in the brain would slow him down, so he lifted his hand in placation and watched the tray be slid in. Today, there was a sheet of folded up newspaper along with the tin cup and splatter of paste, and he called out his thanks as the guard walked away.

He took up the tin cup first and drank it all, rubbing a little of the moisture against his lips to soothe the cracked skin, then picked up the newspaper and unfurled it.

It read: Captain America Dead.

He dropped the paper as a scream wormed its way up his throat and came out as a thin shriek. It wasn't true.

It wasn't true.

He didn't dare pick it up again, as if it would infect him through touch, so he kicked it back out the cell, then picked up the tray, paste and all, and threw it out after the newspaper, where it splattered the food all over the floor.

“You fucking liars!” he screamed. “You gotta-- gotta try something better than that!”

Steve wasn't dead. Steve was like him, only better, so if Bucky wasn't dead from a hundred foot fall, then no force on Earth could kill Steve. This was just some kind of fucked tactic they were pulling to beat him down, just like they tried to beat him down in Austria, like the silent guard, the once a day cup of water, the bright lights and lack of windows. Bucky wouldn't let himself be broken, not until Steve found him.
The guard brought a newspaper or magazine everyday, which Bucky threw out every time, sometimes hitting the guy on the back.

He estimated that it had been a month or more that he’d been here and in all that time he’d done his level best to pretend that his left arm didn’t exist – or rather that it did – but he needed to know what he was working with. His face was blue and purple with bruises but no longer swollen and looked essentially the same as before. He would need to get the stitches out soon, which he expected that they didn’t care about, but he’d been putting it off due to squeamishness. His hair had started to regrow and soon he’d have trouble finding the staples.

But first, the arm. The bandages were brown and smelt awful, but he half hoped that underneath his arm would somehow be regrowing. He unwound the gauze slowly, drawing in shallow breaths; as soon as the stump was open to the air, the smell was overwhelming. A flap of his skin had been stretched over the end of his arm and sewn down, but it was black and filled with pus, and it was so obvious that his flesh was rotting. He fumbled to wrap it back up and threw up as he was doing it, whatever liquid was in his stomach burning his throat and dribbling down his chin as he hunched over.

He stumbled up and retrieved the face bandages that he’d discarded in the corner, wrapping them over the top of the other bandages with a fluttering right hand.

Maybe he could die, maybe he was going to die of gangrene. Even firmly wrapped up like it was, the smell lingered to the point where it felt like he could even taste it in his mouth.

The reading material kept coming. One day, it was a copy of *Life* with Steve's smiling face emblazoned on it. Bucky couldn't bring himself to push it back out like the rest, and retreated to the cot to look at it. It was an army portrait, Steve straight-backed and proud, his chin tipped up, a slight smile creasing his face. The magazine was dated March 5, 1945.

He lay it across his knees and stared at the picture, trying to commit every line of Steve's face to memory. It wasn't the real Steve, the Steve at the World's Fair excited about the televisions; Steve at his stand, angry about the world and doing his best not to argue with customers; Steve with charcoal smudges on his fingers and his face after he blew his nose; Steve at the movies disappearing into a tub of popcorn, watching Bette Davis decimate all the men in her path.

This wasn't that Steve, but it was still the Steve who loved him to the extent he was able, who looked out for him and worried about him and never rejected him even after all the shit Bucky pulled.

He opened up the magazine. All the other pages had been torn out, leaving just the article about Steve. *The Death of Captain America.*

Brooklyn

On a frigid day in late February, men, women, and children filled the streets of Flatbush, Brooklyn in mourning clothes, bouquets of flowers in their hands. This pilgrimage to the Holy Cross Cemetery was to pay their last respects to the borough's most famous fallen sons. Tears were shed and gruff voices discussed in low tones the memories of the two men who burned so bright and brief in the minds of Brooklyn residents.

Captain Steven Rogers, the eponymous Captain America, and his best friend and second-in-command Sergeant James Barnes were symbolically laid to rest on this cold
afternoon, days after details of their untimely deaths were released to the public. The memorial procession was led by Sergeant Barnes's family, reportedly a surrogate family to Captain Rogers. Eugene Barnes, the sergeant's younger brother and a student at Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception, read a number of Bible passages with tears in his eyes and a quiver to his voice.

He dropped the magazine and started to sob. It was true, what all those newspapers they brought him said, he knew that now. He knew that Steve was gone and that he was gone too, according to everyone outside of this prison. The idea of Eugene standing in front of all those people, telling them that the Lord would care for them, that Bucky's soul was saved and in heaven, it made him sick. He was the furthest thing from being saved, his entire life he'd resisted any saviour but Steve; he didn't deserve Eugene's piety or anyone else's grief.

He closed the magazine and curled up on his right side with it cradled against the crook of his arm, Steve's face looking up at him.

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He woke to the sound of footsteps, but he didn't move. There was a metallic jingling, then a scraping and the sound of a heavy lock being opened. They were coming in. Well, let them come, it didn't matter any more.

The guard's lay his hands on Bucky, prodding at the stump and making small noises of disgust. Pretty disgusting, huh, buddy? Bucky thought to himself. He could feel pressure on his skin there, but nothing beyond it, no sensation either way, pain or pleasure.

The guard gripped his shoulder and roughly rolled him over.

“Remain still,” he barked. Bucky stared back at him placidly. The guard fixed a manacle around his right wrist which was attached to a chain with manacles for his ankles; the guard made quick work of them and dragged Bucky up by his armpits. Bucky stood there like a puppet on a string while the man jerked him around by the chains with vicious pleasure on his face. This was the man who he attacked in the beginning, he realised; the guard thought he'd won, that this was his revenge for Bucky's disobedience.

Bucky could only take small steps as the man led him out of the cell, shuffling along like a dog on a choke chain. He thought about Steve, who never backed down from anything, no matter the odds or the consequences. Winning didn't matter, it was the fight that counted.

It was always the fight that counted.

He made himself stumble, bumping into the guard's back, and the guard turned, anger written all over his face. Bucky tipped his chin up and bared his teeth, and he saw the briefest glimpse of fear on the man's face before he lunged. He bit down on the nearest available appendage, the guard's nose, and hung on, pressing down harder and harder until he heard a crack and crunch of bone. The guard was hitting him wildly, but his flailing arms were hardly any defence and Bucky twisted his head, his mouth filling up with the guard's blood.

The guy pushed and pushed at him, hitting out at him, finally fumbling to withdraw a cattle prod which he pressed into Bucky's stomach. Finally they parted, but not without a good chunk of skin held between Bucky's teeth. He saw bone on the man's face as he stumbled to the ground. He grinned as he spat out the skin.

He managed to get back on his feet a minute later, but by then other guards had come running and
they beat him with their batons and their feet, and dragged him back to the cell.

“Come back any time!” Bucky yelled after them, his voice thick from where they'd broken his nose in the attack.

The fight felt good.

They withheld his tray, which he expected to happen, and didn't remove his manacle get-up. To touch his face, he had to sit down and drag his knees up to his chest to get enough give on the chain, either that or hunch all the way over. He reset his nose with his fingers and wiped his teeth clean on the sleeve of his stained top; he guessed him and the guard matched now, though the guard would be feeling it far longer than Bucky.

He started picking at his stitches, digging at his skin to break the black threads. His fingernails were long now where he hadn't bitten them down, which made it easier to get a grip to pull the stitches. It was an incredibly odd sensation, not painful but like something moving under skin, which was exactly what was happening, and each strand came away to flecks of hard, dry skin. The sites where the stitches had gone in bled a little, but nothing that a quick dab of his top didn't sort out.

He worked on the staples next, which were even worse, and he had to put his head between his bent knees to get the length of chain he needed. The staples took more work than the stitches and the process felt like someone using a tiny pickaxe on his skull. When he was done, he looked at himself in the mirror. He had no marks on his face aside from the pinpricks of blood and his mashed up nose. There was no indication that only a couple of months ago his face had been crudely stitched back together. With a pile of stitches and staples on the floor, he went back to his bed and lay down facing the cover of Steve that he'd propped up against the wall, and tried to stave off the wave of agony that threatened to drown him.

He'd have to make it home for the both of them, that was the only way to honour Steve.

One day, he'd stopped being able to chart the days a while ago, a new guard brought him his tray and pushed it under the door with a broom. Bucky smiled at him.

He thought this was probably the longest he'd gone without water and the small amount in the cup tasted like heaven. He ate his slop then retreated back to the bed and looked at his magazine cover. That was all he did now, look at Steve and think about how he was going break out. He didn't see any options at the moment, but he expected that one day they'd drag him out to run some kind of experiment and then maybe he'd have a chance. Really, he should have let the guard he bit take him further, see how the prison was laid out and where the exits were.

Of course, he might just die of septic shock since his arm seemed to get worse with every passing day. He had looked a few times and seen that the gangrene was spreading up from the base of the stump, but the past several days he couldn't bring himself to check.

“Lasciami andare! Mi fai male! Aiuto! Aiuto!” a female voice screamed. It was the first voice he'd heard aside from a couple of orders from the guards and his own yelling. He rolled off the bed and stumbled to the door in time to see a strawberry blonde be dragged kicking and screaming into a nearby cell. The door slammed shut behind her and the guard and she kept screaming as he heard material rip.
“Hey! Hey, leave her alone!” he yelled. “Hey, you fucking piece of shit, come here and I'll give you a good time! You fucking coward, come here!”

The woman's cell door opened and guard came out, locked it, then stormed over to Bucky and withdrew his cattle prod, slamming it into Bucky's neck until he fell to the ground and hit his head against the wall. The man then walked away, muttering angrily under his breath, and Bucky's vision wavered in and out as he lay in a heap near the door.

“Grazie,” he heard a soft voice call to him.

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Her name was Filomena and she was eighteen. She was a member of the Italian resistance, a partisan who had taken up arms in the battle at Monte Battaglia months before, which Bucky had heard about but not participated in. That's where she was from, Casola Valsenio, and she'd fought along side her father, who had died in the fight. She had been on the move since, handy enough with a gun to act as an unofficial sniper, stalking the Emilia-Romagna region with her father's hunting rifle. A week ago she had been caught by HYDRA soldiers who liked the look of her and brought her here to experiment on.

Filomena's cell was at a right angle to Bucky's, which was at the end of the hallway, and if they both sat up against their cell doors, they could see each other.

“What will they do?” she asked. They had spoken in Italian at first, which had soothed her, but she said she was fine with English.

“I don't know,” he said.

“What did they do to your arm?”

“Nothing,” he said, which was the God's honest truth. They were leaving it to rot away, it seemed like. “I came like this, they haven't treated it at all except to stitch it up a little.”

“Does it hurt?”

He shook his head. “I think the nerves have died.”

She widened her eyes. “I am sorry, Bucky.”

“It's okay.”

She nodded and looked at her lap. “Do you think that they will hurt me?”

He sat up straighter. “Not if I have anything to do about it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, lifting her head and smiling.

“Do you know what the date is?”

“I was taken on April 19th,” she said. “I believe seven days have passed since.”

God, he'd been here longer than he thought. “How's the war looking?”

She offered him a small smile. “There's hope.”

“Good,” he said. “Good.”
It was May, he thought, although he'd stopped trying to count the days. His face had healed completely and his hair had grown in again, shaggy and greasy. He had a beard, too, which got more unkempt by the day.

Him and Mena – she had asked him to call her that because it reminded her of home – talked as much as they could, whenever the guards weren't around. Mena got more attention from them than Bucky did, and she'd cry afterwards from fear. He tried his best to comfort her, but it all felt so hollow. How was he going to help her from inside this cell? He could barely even move around because of the chains.

The manacle around his wrist had about a half inch of space and every time he put his arm down it knocked against his thumb joint. If it wasn't for that joint, he'd be able to get it off.

He thought about it for a few days; he'd heal from a break pretty quick, he was fairly sure of that, but until he did, it was the only hand he had, and he didn't know if he was brave enough to break his own hand.

He didn't really have the luxury of cowardice any more.

He waited for the guard to bring his tray, cleaned it of food, and moved out of sight of the door.

“Bucky, what are you doing?” Mena called.

“Hang on,” he said and hunched over, his arm laid out between his legs. He balanced the tray on top of it as best he could, nudging it into place with his chin, then put his left foot on the tray and pressed down. It took a few attempts to get the tray to stay in place and not slip to either side before he could put any real pressure on it.

“Bucky?” Mena called again.

“It's okay,” he called back, “just give me a minute.”

He put his chin on top of his left knee and pushed down with all the strength he had. It didn't hurt at first, just an uncomfortable pressure, but when he pushed past the resistance and heard a crunch, his hand started to throb.

“Fuck,” he muttered and kept on pressing until his thumb really cracked and he yelped in pain.

“Bucky!”

He ignored her, pulling his limp hand away and tugging at the manacle. It still stopped when it fell to the base of his hand, but with the help of his toes and his teeth, he was able to work it off. It fell with a clatter to the floor and he lifted his hand to his mouth and bit down on his thumb. He dipped his head and pushed at his thumb until he heard it pop back into place.

“Fuck,” he grunted, and tested his hand out. He could hardly move his thumb at all and it was beginning to swell, but he was out of the manacle and he figured it would heal in due time. He wasn't sure what to do about his ankles, he didn't think breaking those would help and the only other way to remove them would be cutting his feet off, which had got him into all this trouble in the first place.

“Bucky, please tell me you're okay,” Mena called.
He scooted back to the door and waved. “I'm fine.”

“Your chains...” she murmured.

“Just the wrist,” he said, “but it's something, huh?”

She pursed her lips and nodded. “Yes, it's very good, Bucky. Is your hand okay?”

He smiled and nodded. “Yeah, it'll be fine.”

- 

If the guards noticed that he got his wrist free, they didn't care. In the last little while, the lack of any real food had really taken its toll on him and sometimes he lost his train of thought or became confused when Mena was telling him simple stories about her childhood. She offered him her piece of bread, which she said she could throw from her cell to his, but he refused it. He had to get used to this kind of deprivation if he was going to survive long enough to get out.

“Any siblings?” he asked, once they'd traded tales about school. Mena went to a much more strict school than him, from the sounds of it.

“One. Angelina. She...” Her voice got quieter. “She was killed.”

“Nazis?”

“No, before. Eight years ago.”

He leant his head against the bars. “Sorry.”

“She was only a girl,” Mena murmured, a frown marring her face. “I did love her; she didn't know that.”

“Nah, she knew,” Bucky said. “Siblings always know.”

“Maybe,” she said.

-

The confusion got worse as time wore by. He started to become light-headed and his heartbeat picked up the pace. More often than not when he stood, he fell over, and he felt feverish, his skin cold and clammy. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought he had pneumonia again.

Mena was very concerned, asking him what was wrong, wanting to get the guard. He waved her off as long as he could, but by the time he was being sick every ten minutes, wasting that precious once a day cup of water, and seeing Steve's face on the magazine cover move, Mena overrode his wishes and yelled for the guards help. He didn't really blame her but neither did he think they'd be much help.

He lay on the cold floor, convulsing every few minutes, and watched three guards hurry down the hallway. One stopped and stood outside Mena's cell for a moment before joining the others. They conferred briefly, then drew their guns and unlocked his cell door.

“Do not move,” one of them ordered. It was him, the guy he bit; his face was looking nicely mutilated, the bridge of his nose caved in and his skin mottled. Bucky grinned with his teeth for the hell of it. The man was holding a metal contraption that Bucky belatedly realised was some kind of muzzle, and he kept on baring his teeth until the thing was secured around his face.
They flipped him onto his back, pulling the chains around his legs tight and putting his wrist in the manacle again, this time with his arm wrenched behind his back. Then they started unwinding the bandages around stump.

“Bozhe moi,” one of them said, and he knew what that meant, Nikolaev had said it enough in class, and he knew why they were saying it, too. More to the point, he could smell why. Even though the metal contraption, he could smell the stench of his rotting stump. He must have got used to the smell dampened by the bandages, but this was unavoidable. They muttered to each other for a few minutes, then stuck a needle in his neck, which packed quite a punch.

Waking up was real déjà vu. He was lying on the cot, muzzy-headed, with a dry mouth and a headache, but when he tried to move his arm, he could lift his hand without issue; his chains had been removed. He sat up and rubbed at his face, then looked down at his clothes; they were as scratchy as ever, but clean and white. He thought they might even have washed him, since his skin didn't have that layer of grease and dirt any more.

He turned his head to the left – he had even less stump than before, now it ended at his shoulder. So not really a stump at all. His throat closed up and he bent his knees, tucking his head between them to draw in gasping breaths. They kept cutting pieces off him, stripping him away bit by bit. What if they didn't stop? What if they cut his other arm off next? His feet? He wouldn't be able to fight back at all.

“Bucky?” Mena called. “Are you awake?”

He lifted his head and wiped at his face. “Mena?”

“Are you okay?”

He got up and went to the door. She was pressed up against her door, her eyes wide. “I'm okay.”

“You scared me,” she said softly. “I didn't want to call them, but I thought you might die... Ti prego, perdona mi.”

He smiled. “Nothing to forgive. Have they been treating you right?”

“Well...” She lifted her shoulders and let them drop. “You know.”

That was the thing, he did, and he knew they'd turn on her without him around from them to torture.

“They took your magazine,” she continued softly.

“My--?” He turned around and scanned the cell. She was right, Steve was nowhere to be seen. Tears prickled at his eyes and he pressed his hand to his mouth. That was all he had left, just that picture and his memories, and he knew memories would fade because he could hardly remember the faces of people he knew in high school. He sat down against the wall and started to cry.

“I'm sorry,” Mena whispered.

The guard brought food and water as usual and Bucky didn't know how long he'd been here for; Mena had stopped counting when she got to September. He slept most of the time, he thought, maybe for twelve hours at a time, either on his stomach or with his arm over his eyes to block out the
light. He had crazy dreams, Steve and Gabe and Ma and Arnie even, sometimes, having starring
roles. They were never nice to him in his dreams, always taunting him or abusing him, and
sometimes he fought back, screaming obscenities at them. Mena said he talked a lot in his sleep.

The food wasn't enough and neither was the water, but he didn't expend much energy any more, so it
about evened up.

Mena filled the silence in now when he didn't speak, which was often since he'd run out of things to
say. What else was there to say?

“Bucky?” she called out when he was drifting off on the cot.

“Uh huh?”

“I lied to you.”

He turned his head towards the door, though he couldn't see her from the cot. “What about?”

“When you asked about the war...” He heard her sigh and started to sit up. “The Germans, they...
they're winning. They recaptured Paris and the last I heard, they were on their way to Britain.”

“What?” He got up and went to the door. Mena was sitting in a heap next to hers, her hair limp
around her shoulders. “What about the US?”

She looked up at him and shook her head. “People weren't talking so much about the Americans, but
what I heard wasn't so good. I'm sorry, I wanted to give you hope.”

Hope. He retreated back to his bed and sat down. So, they were going to win? After all these years,
this was for nothing? This couldn't all be for nothing: Steve turning himself into a soldier, Bucky
leaving his family, being tortured and changed into something near monstrous, Steve dying, Bucky
losing himself and then his arm too...

It wasn't all for nothing.

“Bucky? I'm sorry,” Mena called.

“It's okay,” he said, “I'm fine.”

He had a plan. It was a last ditch attempt because he knew they'd kill him after this if he didn't
succeed, but it was all he had left. No one was coming for him, because they didn't know he was
here, everyone thought he was dead. They would have come otherwise; Gabe would have, anyhow,
but who could really predict that anyone was survive a fall like that. Maybe they'd tried looking for
his body, but even if he had been there it probably would have been impossible to find him. He
didn't hold anything against them.

His plan was simple. The guard who brought the tray had a loop of keys hanging from his belt,
slightly towards his back; Bucky hadn't known that the first time, but he'd spotted them since. There
were two keys, one for his cell and one for Mena's. The guard also always carried the cattle prod
with him, and Bucky knew he'd use it, so this whole thing was predicated on the hope that Bucky
would be able to withstand the electrical charge. The last time couple times he got it, it didn't put him
out for long, so maybe he had a chance.

He couldn't tell Mena about the plan because he wasn't sure how much the guards could hear of their
conversations. It was a shame, because this way he couldn't get her prepared to run, but it was the best he could do for the both of them.

He waited a few days, time to screw up enough courage to go for it, and try to come to terms with the most likely outcome: they'd both get killed, but he had to try.

When the time came, he sat by the cell door limply, and watched through the curtain of his unkempt hair as the guard approached. He went to Mena first, sliding the tray in and smiling lasciviously, then kept on going to Bucky. Bucky took a deep breath. The man bent slightly at the waist to lay the tray down and that was Bucky's opening.

He surged upwards, pressing his chest against the bars and grabbed the man by his shirt, slamming him into the bars. The tray fell to the floor with a clatter and Bucky did it again, ramming the man into the door. The guard roared with anger and pulled the cattle prod from his belt, then pressed it into Bucky's neck. Bucky felt his legs lock up and his vision started to grey out; he was going to fall, his body screaming in protest at the electricity coursing up and down his limbs.

He set his jaw and forced his eyes open. The man looked back with fear written all over his face. Bucky had about three seconds to do this before the guy's shock wore off and he gained the upper hand. He let go of the man's shirt and grabbed the prod, wrenching it away from his neck and twisting it towards the guard. They grappled for a moment, his fingers slipping over the guard's frantically, and the guard stuck his other arm through the bars and got hold of Bucky's hair, slamming his forehead into the iron.

Bucky growled and turned his head, biting down on the guard's arm. The guard yelped and Bucky twisted his arm to a brutal angle, breaking the guard's wrist, then yanked the prod away and pressed it into the guard's face. He went down like a ton of bricks.

Bucky dropped to his knees on the floor, laid down the prod, and reached through the bars to get at the keys. They were secured pretty tight to the guard's belt loop, but one wrench of his hand tore the loop loose. He tried one key, then the other and, fumbling, got the door open. He picked the prod up again and stuck it under his arm, then shoved past the guard's prone body and ran to Mena's cell.

“Bucky, what are you doing?” Mena asked, staring up at him with wide eyes.

“This is our only chance,” he said, and unlocked the door before discarding the keys. “If you want to stay here, that's okay, but I've gotta try to get out.”

“No, no, I'm coming with you,” she said breathlessly. “I can't believe you did it.”

He smiled. “I'm more than just a pretty face. Here, hold this.” He pressed the prod into one of her hands and took the other. “Stick anyone with it who comes at you.”

“I will,” she said.

He tugged her down the hallway, running as fast as he could. They took a couple of turns before coming up on another guard who came barrelling towards them. Bucky dropped Mena's hand, put his head down, and ran like he was scoring a touchdown. He slammed his left shoulder into the guard's stomach and drove him backwards until they hit a wall and the guard's head snapped back with a sickening crack.

“Come on!” he shouted and took off again, Mena at his heels. At the end of the hallway, there was an elevator, and judging by the lack of windows anywhere here, he figured they must be underground. He slapped the up button and listened to it rattle down slowly. Mena pressed against
his side and he took her hand again.

“Are we going to get out?” she asked softly.

He squeezed her hand. “We're gonna try.”

The doors rolled open and he tugged her in and got her to hit the button for the next floor up. It was a guess, since the buttons were in Cyrillic, which he figured meant they were in Russia somewhere. That made sense, of course, but he wondered how they managed to haul his body all the way from the Alps to here without being caught. The Nazis really must have got the upper hand.

The doors opened and he waited a second before peering out, checking to either side. They were alone, somehow. He stepped out carefully, and kept Mena behind him.

“There should be people here,” he murmured.

“Maybe we're just lucky,” she said.

He looked around again and picked a direction to start walking. “Maybe...”

Further down the hall, there was a small window with bars over it at the top of the wall. He let go of her hand and ran to it; it was higher than he could reach with his hand outstretched and there wasn't anything around to stand on. The only thing to do was jump and try to get hold of the bars and pull himself up. It took three tries to grab a bar, but there wasn't anything to get purchase on with his bare feet.

“Mena, gimme a boost,” he called. She was a little way away from him and he could hear her footsteps but she didn't say anything. He squeezed his eyes shut and dragged himself up, grunting loudly as his biceps bulged at the stress and it felt like his tendons would snap, and got far enough to peer over the bottom of the window. Outside, it was white as far as the eye could see, miles of snow all around, more coming down in flurries.

“Oh God,” he whispered.

The prod bit into his skin just above his hip and he spasmed, losing his grip on the bar, and fell to the floor with a thud. Above him, Mena was standing with the prod in hand, the corners of her mouth quirked upwards.

“We really didn't think you'd make it this far,” she said. “You were supposed to break. You are very strong, Sergeant. Be proud of that.”

He scrabbled to stand up, but she kicked him square in the chest with her bare foot, much harder than a girl like her should have been able to, and he fell back, hitting his head against the wall. By the time he blinked away stars, the guards were on him, one sitting across his legs, the other closing the muzzle around his mouth and injecting him with something. A third man came up to Mena and trailed his fingers down her side; her face remained stony.

“You have done well, he is as strong as the doctor hoped. Soon, you will be in New York, romancing Stark.”

She smiled at the news. Bucky's head was getting foggy now, but he saw what he could never see from his cell: her smile never reached her eyes. She turned and kissed the man on the cheek, then bent down beside Bucky. He tried to say something, maybe why or help, but it was all nonsense behind the muzzle. She stroked her fingers through his hair.
“Dr Zola will fix your arm, Sergeant,” she said and he tried to scream, the sound caught in his throat, thin and animalistic. “It's a kindness, Bucky, you'll see.” She kissed his forehead and he slipped under for the last time.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Lasciami andare! Mi fai male! Aiuto! Aiuto - Let me go! You're hurting me! Help! Help
Grazie - Thank you
Ti prego, perdonami - Please forgive me
Chapter Notes

A short intermission before we get back to real life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He was ready to comply.

He got out of the chair and stood at attention. The technicians were speaking to each other in frustrated tones; they were saying that he became harder to subdue each time, that he would have to spend more time in the machine. They spoke as if he could not hear or could not comprehend the words, but the soldier understood language very well. Words rarely had any bearing on him, but that didn't mean he didn't understand them.

He was called away by a woman. He thought he remembered her from the past, when she was younger, her hair a lighter colour and her voice gentler. They called her Widow. She had dark hair now and an aged face, a long scar on her cheek. She stroked her fingertips down his face and smiled. The soldier didn't smile – he didn't think he'd ever had cause to – but he held her gaze and her face hardened. She cracked him across the face with the back of her hand and he stood solid as a tree and took it.

She asked him if he thought he could look at her. He said, no, he did not think that. She said that he should not think at all.

His handlers took him to be outfitted with firearms, then put him in a plane. On the journey, they showed him a picture of his target. This man was a dissident, they said, offering refuge for other dissidents in his church. The soldier asked if the man was a priest and was told yes, he was. To kill a priest was a sin, he thought, but he did not need to think. It was a patriotic honour to kill a dissident, they told him.

- It was winter and in Leningrad, the city of his target, the snow fell in blankets. His handlers gave him a warm coat and hat to blend in. The fur lining felt soft between his fingers but he didn't linger on it; they would not approve of that.

His target was a priest at the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God; the soldier did not know his name, but neither did he require it. He needed only his face.

He set up his rifle in an empty building across the road from the church and waited for darkness to fall. The priest would leave between the hours of eight pm and eleven pm and the soldier would lay in wait here until such time as he appeared. When his mission was completed, he would meet his handlers at the rendezvous point further up the river.

He sat at the window, peering out of his sight, as the hours ticked by, and studied every detail of the church. It was bright blue and ornate in style, with a dome and a turret; it might have been called beautiful by someone who saw beauty in things. Widow had wanted him to find beauty in her, but he did not.
This building, however; the longer he lay his eyes on it, felt like a gentle pressure on his mind and his chest.

At ten fifteen, his target exited the doors, replete in his robes and coat and fumbling with a set of keys that made him linger there. The soldier had a clear shot. On the street, children walked by and called to the man and he turned and raised his hand in greeting. He was stout and balding, his face blurred by a beard, but there was something in his eyes.

The soldier drew back from the rifle and shook his head. He would need the machine again soon. He replaced his eye to the sight. The man was still there, now drawing his coat tighter around himself, his breath drifting away from him in white puffs, like cigarette smoke. He smiled when a car beeped at him as it passed by.

This was a good man. This was a holy man and it was a sin to kill the holy. The soldier's breath came harder, a harsh pant in the silent room. It was his purpose to kill this man, he did not have to expend thought on his missions, yet he did. This man, he could not kill.

The soldier pulled the rifle back from the window and packed it into his bag, then put back on the coat and hat and walked quickly from the building. He had several other guns, including a handgun at his hip. His handlers already knew that he had failed in his task. At the rendezvous point, they shouted disjointed words at him that made his head thump, but the roar of traffic drowned a portion of it out and he lifted his handgun, shooting each in the forehead.

He crossed over a bridge on foot, hugging the railing as cars passed him by, blaring their horns at him. Below was a river and he found he couldn't look at it long without feeling that pressure on his mind again. On the other side of the bridge, there was a palace and a wide open square with people wandering through it. He would need to get off the street soon as they would not delay in sending out a retrieval unit for him. There was a hotel near the square, but he didn't have any money and didn't know how to obtain any. He didn't think he had ever been in a hotel before, but he knew it would involve too much contact with others in any event.

He moved on, hunching his shoulders in. The noise here was overwhelming, coming from every direction; the cars on the street, people speaking and laughing in a loud voices, music drifting out of open windows above his head. It had been quiet where they kept him, only the sound of machines and the quick speech of the technicians to distract him, and he spent the time adrift in the blankness of his mind. Here, he could not do that, and although the sounds made a spot in the middle of his forehead pound, he didn't mind it.

Snow was falling and he took his glove off and caught some in his hand. It was cold and wet and he pressed his palm to his face, licking it clean. A lady passing by gave him an odd look.

He walked until the crowds thinned out and it was only him and few stragglers on the street. He saw some women in short skirts and spiked heels and knew them to be prostitutes, though he didn't know why he knew. There were lecherous men lingering around them, taking their liberties and touching bare skin wherever they could find it. They got slaps and harsh words, but that didn't dissuade them all.

The soldier watched from a dark doorway as a man with speckled black hair and a prominent brow line pressed in against one of the women. She exclaimed that he would need to pay first and a knife flashed between the two of them. The soldier emerged from the door, crossed over the road, and took the man by the back of the coat, dragging him away. The woman called out her thanks as the soldier disappeared around the corner with her john.
He snapped the man’s neck and rifled through his pockets. The man carried on him a key with an address tag written in black block letters, a wallet with five rubles in it, and a book of matches. The soldier dragged his body to the river and pushed it in, then went in search of Sofiyskaya ulitsa, 23, apartment 10. He did not know any of these streets but for the five rubles, a prostitute told him.

The apartment was smaller than the rooms the technicians kept him in, but equally as bare. There was a refrigerator, oven, and sink on one side with a small table and chair nearby and on the other side a bed and television set. Through a door on the north corner was a toilet and shower. There were a stack of newspapers on the table and a chest of drawers filled with clothes. The soldier picked up the chest and put it down to block the front door, then set his rifle up pointed at the one window. The television gave him only static, so he sat at the window and watched the street below through his sight.

At six am, the pipes above his head groaned and rattled. The sound made him jump and grip tighter at the rifle, but all that greeted him was the sound of running water. There had been no movement on the street below, but he knew they’d come for him. They were more likely to make a move at night but the dawning light wouldn’t represent a great impediment if they discovered him here.

At six fifteen, he heard a voice on the other side of the wall. It was a woman, complaining about the temperature of the water, speaking to someone who didn't respond. At six twenty five, she told someone to be good while she was gone and then a door opened and closed.

There was a small hole in the door of the dead man's apartment, and he peered out of it as she walked to the stairs. He saw only the back of her, long platinum blonde hair and a blue dress. He went back to the window.

At six pm, she returned home and a few minutes later, music started playing.

_Hey Jude, don't be afraid._

He understood the words, though they were in English, and the woman sang along loudly. This elicited a loud thumping and a male voice shouting for her to be quiet. She shouted back that he could fuck off. The soldier returned to his window.

_She played music whenever she was inside her apartment. Sometimes the words were Russian, sometimes English, but she seemed to favour the English-speaking singers. Her neighbour on the other side didn't enjoy the sound and would bang on his walls whenever she began, but this didn't deter her. She did not allow anything silence her voice. Her name was Nadezhda and she liked to talk on her telephone when she wasn’t at work and speak to what the soldier believed to be her cat. She spoke angrily about 'the party', and about the Apollo-Soyuz – the soldier did not know what that meant. One night, a man called out, ‘Nadya, Nadya’ as the springs of her bed creaked._

It had been seven days since he defected and he had now stopped watching the street below the building. Over the last few days, his stomach had begun to make noises and he knew that he needed to eat, though this was not something he had done where his handlers kept him. He hadn't felt hunger when he was with them, but he didn't know why.

_In the refrigerator, there was a nearly empty tray of butter and a bottle of juice that he thought tasted like apple, though he didn't know why he knew that either. On top of the refrigerator, there was a box with five round, sugared pastries; he bit into one and it was sweet on his tongue. He ate the other four in quick succession and licked his hand. His stomach made more noises, but these ones hurt and he had to visit the small bathroom._
He needed to change out of his tactical uniform, he decided. It was hard to remove all the pieces alone, as he thought his handlers normally assisted him, and he tore some of the stitches to release himself. Underneath the clothes, his body was broad and strong and unmarked except for where his metal shoulder met flesh and a white scar on the outside of his left leg. He traced his fingers up and down it, but felt nothing. He did not know why he had it.

He redressed in the dead man's clothes, stiff blue pants and a grey sweater, both of which were too large but he found a belt to hold the pants up. Nadya was playing a song that made his head feel light if he closed his eyes.

He switched on the little television set. On it, a man was talking about 'the five year plan'. The soldier did not know what that meant, but he sat and listened to report. Nadya's other neighbour hit his wall again and she yelled back that he should 'get a life'. On the television, they were now playing a movie; the screen read Planeta Bur. It was a space movie; the soldier did not know anything about space but he still watched. They had spaceships, Sirius and Vega, and he repeated the word 'Sirius' under his breath. The dog star...

There was a robot and dinosaurs in this movie and he watched it with rapt attention until the end. He did not think that things like that could really happen, prehistoric creatures on the surface of Venus, but the thought of it weighed on his mind still.

The dead man did not have any books, but the soldier read the newspapers. The stories spoke about political and sporting triumphs; he studied the pictures of sports teams and politicians with a close eye but they didn't reveal anything to him.

It had been two weeks and he had not been discovered. The dead man must not have had any family, because otherwise they would have come here to see him; Nadya had visitors most days. Each day that passed, the snow outside came down more heavily and he exhausted all food products he found in the kitchen. He would need to go out and purchase new food.

He had grown a significant amount of hair on his face, which he kept as it disguised his face, but his long hair he cut off with a pair of scissors he found in the bathroom. His handlers knew him to have long hair so it was prudent to change this aspect. His hair did not look like the men he saw on the television, it fell in jagged clumps around his ears, but when he looked at himself in the mirror, he felt that pressure on his mind again. He pushed his fingers through his hair, arranging his hair so that it parted to one side of his head, and the pressure came to his chest again.

His breath began to come in short bursts and he closed his hands around the edges of the sink. It felt as if he was being suffocated and he squeezed his eyes shut. Stop, he thought, stop, stop, stop, and the enamel of the sink broke under his left hand.

He found a scarf and four rubles in the pocket of a coat. He wore this coat and the hat his handlers had given him, put his thigh holster back on, slipped a gun into his pocket, and wrapped the scarf around his nose and mouth.

It was dark outside already. He walked until he found a store that smelt like the sugared pastries and stood at the back of a line to the glass counter. The people in front of him were passing over pieces of paper and receiving either a new piece of paper or a box of pastries in return. When he reached the front, the man there scowled at him and asked for his list. The soldier did not have a list. The man scowled more and asked what he wanted.

The soldier said he wanted food.
The man scoffed and said, 'didn't they all'. A woman tending the pastries said that he shouldn't be cruel because he, the soldier, was obviously slow. The man muttered that that was right and he was holding up the line with his slowness. She shook her head and said she'd take over for him.

It was not the first time the soldier had been called slow, he thought; he had been called many other names that meant the same.

The woman was short, a round chest under her uniform and coarse brown hair hidden beneath a hairnet. She asked what he would like and he pointed to pastries under the glass that were like the dead man's. He knew he shouldn't spend all the dead man's money here today, so he told her he wanted as much as half his money could buy and showed her the rubles. She smiled again and told him he should buy some bread, too, and a some slices of meat. He agreed to this and took the receipt she gave him; he would have to go to the meat counter and obtain a second piece of paper, go to the cashier and pay, then return and get his food. He didn't know why getting food was such a complicated process.

He returned to the dead man's home with the paper bag of food, having spent all the leftover money on the slices of meat. He replaced the chest of drawers across the door, took out one pastry and turned on the television. The man on the television was talking about 'the five year plan' again.

He started to drift. It felt like the first few moments after he was put in the machine, but nothing else happened after the initial drift. He couldn't stop it from happening, and the voices on the television began to sound very distant, as if he was listening through a pipe.

He was tired. He turned to television off and lay down on the dead man's bed. His head felt light and he drifted away.

When he was asleep, he thought and spoke like an American. He laughed and got violent, he filled up all the space with fury and sadness. He felt a terrible loneliness, as if he was missing a chunk of himself. He heard people speaking to him but could never see them. He cried like his soul had been ripped away from him.

He woke up with a damp face.

He was not like other people, the soldier realised. He watched this television everyday and those people on it, they had families and childhoods and memories. They were happy or unhappy, angry or calm; Nadya was always impassioned when speaking on her telephone. She played her music and enjoyed the sounds. He knew that even through the thin wall that separated them.

The soldier did not think there were other people in the world like him, who did not have a past, and he knew that, in fact, he must have a past too. People did not appear in the world fully grown, they had to be a child first. Where his handlers kept him, there were children, little girls with sharp eyes and fingers. Had he been a child like that? Somehow, he didn't think so. Where had he come from?

Nadya's neighbour hammered on her wall again, yelling obscenities. She shouted back in her usual way and perhaps she didn't mind this routine, but it happened every night. The soldier got up, removed the chest of drawers from the door and let himself out into the hallway. It was the evening now and there was no one around. He passed Nadya's door and knocked on the neighbour's. The man who answered had a greasy look to him and the soldier pushed him back into his apartment and held him against the wall by his throat. He told the man to leave Nadya alone, to no longer pound on the walls and shout filth at her, or the soldier would come back and kill him. He asked if the man understood; he did. The soldier pressed his fingers in harder for a moment, then let go and returned to
the dead man's apartment, replacing the chest of drawers at the door.

He went to his box of pastries and reached in to retrieve a new one. They were called donuts, he suddenly knew as he held one in his hand. Donuts were sweet and chewy and he preferred them over the bread and butter. The bread was turning green in places.

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He watched many movies on the television. He preferred the ones about space travel and robots. There were many movies about the past and about wars, which put pressure on his chest. He watched *War and Peace* for seven hours, though he knew what was going to happen at every turn. He didn't know why.

There was a television show they showed every night for a week, *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. It had footage from the Great Patriotic War in it, a man speaking in English, 'Nazism is now like a hunted beast'. The soldier's breathing increased. Nazism was something that had come before, which according to the television had been defeated by the might of Russia. The soldier had thought that there would be a different outcome to the story.

The pressure on his body increased with every passing day and it was at its worst when he watched this show, this Soviet spy in the European theatre of war. These stories made his body feel sensations that were somehow terribly familiar to him, yet he couldn't recall a time before now that he'd felt this way.

Nadya's music soothed these feelings. He moved the narrow bed to the wall he shared with her and pressed his ear to the cool painted surface. He felt most soothed when she played her American music. The words made his head drift, but not from tiredness; they made him feel as if he was somewhere else, with the people who talked to him when he was asleep.

The soldier repeated the words of the song to himself; 'I've come to look for America', 'toss me a cigarette'. He pressed his fingers to his mouth; he'd like a cigarette too.

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He began to sleep more in the dead man's bed, a few hours every couple of days. It had been many weeks now since he'd been at full attention. His handlers would have put him in the machine for losing so much discipline. Sleep was the only thing that eased the pressure on him, despite his dreams leaving him confused and unsure of who he was. This only highlighted the fact that he didn't know who he was. He looked at himself in the small bathroom mirror sometimes and touched his face. He had a symmetrical face, blue eyes and a cleft chin. He thought something had happened to his face once, but nothing looked out of place.

He tried the shower with his rifle leant against the wall beside it. The water came out cold, like Nadya had complained about, but he found that easy to stand. Where he had been kept, the technicians would put him into a booth and spray him down with ice cold water. It built tolerance, they said.

The water ran brown between his feet and his hair became tangled when he rubbed it with a bar of soap. Afterwards, his hair and skin felt clean and no longer oily to the touch. He dressed in soft clothes he found and sat down on the bed. Nadya was having a fight with a man with a deep voice. She was shouting that he was a rat and the soldier lay his rifle across his lap and raised his right hand to his mouth. The man screamed back that she was a slut and a bitch. The soldier gripped the rifle with his left hand.
She screamed for him to get out and something smashed against the shared wall. The soldier got to his feet smoothly and headed towards the door, but then he heard her door open and close and she shouted for the man to never come back. She turned her music on, the volume high on an aggressive song that she sang along to at the top of her lungs. Her other neighbour didn't have a thing to say.

The soldier put the rifle aside and sat down again. The fingers of his pink, fleshy hand were wet with his saliva, his nails scuffed and chewed.

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He'd been without food for a week or more and was feeling the effects. He had no money to buy the needed food with, however, and would have to walk further than the grocery store to find somewhere he could steal food. He dressed in the dead man's coat, put one gun in his thigh holster and slipped another in the pocket. He had a knife strapped to his ankle. He wrapped the scarf around his mouth and pulled the hat low over his ears.

When he stepped out of the apartment and closed the door behind him, Nadya was coming up the stairs. She had pale blue eyes and a line of freckles across her nose. He froze and she smiled when she saw him, nodding a hello. He nodded back. She said her name was Nadya and, after a beat, he said that his was Dmitri; he didn't know where he'd got the name from. She said it was nice to meet him and he said the same. He wondered if she ever considered why her other neighbour no longer berated her for her music, but he just tipped the corners of his mouth up quickly and went down the stairs.

He started walking north, his head down. He was not sure where he could find food here, since so far everything he'd seen had been kept behind glass. He could probably rob one of these places, but that would draw attention to himself. He hoped that perhaps he'd come across someone on the street with food that he could take.

He walked for an hour, taking side streets and occasionally coming across people huddled in corners. Some had food, but they looked like they were more in need than he was, so he kept walking.

It wasn't long after that he knew he was being followed. He became more circuitous in his route, weaving between buildings and going in and out of stores, but he knew he wasn't going to be able to shake them. He took his gun from his pocket and instantly he could see his pursuers. They were all around him, swarming in plain clothes. He shed his coat, hat, and scarf, and took a shot at one of them. People on the street screamed and he started running. He wore the boots he'd been given by his handlers, and they allowed him to run on the snow and ice without slipping, but the same could not be said for the civilians. People slipped and fell all around him, screaming and caught in the crossfire.

It didn't escape his attention that his pursuers were bottlenecking him, pushing him to follow a path of their choosing; he'd done it many times himself. It was impossible to deviate from the path without killing civilians, though, and somehow that didn't seem like an option any more.

He fired as many shots as he felt he could without hitting someone else, picking off a few of the pursuers, but there were many besides and he couldn't see any other options without endangering the lives of the people on the streets. He didn't think he had ever felt this way before.

He burst out into a wide open square and stumbled to a stop. This was where they were leading him, the perfect place to capture someone, not a single place to hide without being seen. In front of him was a terracotta column with a statue of man atop it, and all around him were yellow buildings. People scattered at the sight of drawn weapons, leaving only the soldier and his pursuers. He took his other gun from his holster and held them both as he scanned the scene. There was no good play here.
“Stop!” a man shouted. It was dark enough that even with his enhanced eyesight, the soldier took a moment to place the man who had spoken. Spoken in English, at that. He was walking towards the soldiers, hands out, head dipped slightly in supplication. “Everyone, put your guns down.” He had a voice that commanded respect, that spoke of confidence and self-assurance. The soldier lowered his guns slightly but had the wherewithal to keep hold of them.

The man stopped ten feet from him and lifted his eyes to meet the soldier's gaze, his head still tipped downwards. He had neat, blond hair, blue eyes, and was wearing a blue t-shirt and leather jacket. The pressure on the soldier felt like a punch to the chest.

“I'm sorry they've treated you like this,” the man said. He was American, a lilt to his voice that sounded like, that sounded--

The soldier opened his mouth and made a sound like a wounded animal. The man stepped closer, within arm's reach, and lay his hand on the soldier's arm. “Don't you think it's time to come home now?”

The soldier's face felt hot. “I...” he whispered.

“I know you're scared,” the man said. “I'm here now. Will you come with me?”

The soldier looked at him. The man sounded kind, and his hair and the shape of his jaw made the soldier want to agree. “Yes,” he said.

“You'll come?”

“I'll come with you,” the soldier said, and his voice sounded perfectly American.

The man led him to a van and helped him get settled inside. The van stayed stationary as the man took his guns and laid them to one side, then secured a strap around the soldier's waist, removed his knife from his ankle, and closed manacles around his legs.

“What...?” the soldier murmured.

“I'm sorry,” the man said softly, and took the soldier's flesh hand. He squeezed it for a moment and pressed his fingers to the pulse point of the soldier's wrist. “It's procedure.” He guided the soldier's hand to an open manacle welded to the bench of the seat and locked it into place, then shifted over and did the same for the other arm. Once that was done, he stood up, looming over the soldier, and produced a black bag, which he slipped over the soldier's head and tied tight around his neck.

The soldier began to thrash, but he couldn't move more than a few inches in any direction, and the man pressed something sharp into his neck. It made him begin to drift; a sedative. He heard footsteps receding from him.

“That's some good work,” another man said, his voice becoming muffled as the soldier drifted further away.

“I told you I could do it,” the man said, though his voice sounded different now, harsher. “I've been saying all along that us and the Russians can work damn well together.”

The other man laughed. “I think there's a promotion in your future, Alex.”

He returned to himself in the facility, strapped down to a cold, metal gurney. He'd got used to the
dead man's bed which, while not particularly comfortable, still offered warmth and some softness. The technicians were some distance from him, talking among themselves, and the woman with the scar was there, standing with her hands behind her back. She came closer and peered down at him.

“Did you enjoy trip out into the world?” she asked, in English.

He swallowed, though a strap across his neck made that hard to do. “It was confusing,” he said, but he did like it. He did enjoy being out in the world.

“Yes,” she said, “they will try to confuse you out there, make you question what you know.”

She paused for a long moment, long enough for the technicians to make their way back over. When she spoke again, she said softly, “Once you understand that you cannot escape, you will be content.”

She drew back and the technicians took hold of his gurney and started to push him away, towards the machine. One said – and he was surprised that it was Russian, as he’d already grown used to English – that this was the longest he had ever escaped and that he would need their most comprehensive wipe.

Chapter End Notes

- The songs mentioned in this chapter are Hey Jude by The Beatles (natch) and America by Simon & Garfunkel. If you want to enjoy some far out 70s Russian music, check out radiooooo.com, which I’ve been using a lot while writing this fic.

- Pierce in the 70s.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The man had said that the soldier's name was 'Bucky' and the word rolled around the soldier's mind as he hid among the trees near the Potomac. This was a strategically poor location to be, barely defensible, with far too many places for assailants to hide, and it wasn't long before there were helicopters in the sky. The traffic on the road running along the trail was in gridlock and, after reluctantly shedding his larger weapons, it wasn't hard to slip between the cars and disappear.

It also wasn't hard to confirm the man's identity once the soldier left him on the bank of the Potomac. He was on the front of every newspaper, and they didn't have too much good to say about his behaviour at the moment. That went double for the as-yet-unidentified operative who tore up DC and the catastrophic helicarrier crash that destroyed both it and the Triskelion.

The people on the street were in a panic about the destruction on Roosevelt Island, and it wasn't hard to slip into a store and steal a hooded top, baseball cap, and pair of pants. He changed in an alleyway, peeling off his uniform and dropping it in a dumpster. He knew he wouldn't need it any more, no matter the outcome of all this.

There was a heavy police presence on the streets that day; he stayed in the shadows and hid in a doorway for the night. The next night, the city just as lousy with police, a woman with a silver stud in her nose gave him a packaged sandwich and suggested he go to the local Presbyterian church, which was taking in anyone displaced by the situation on the island.

Being in close quarters with dozens of civilians represented a significant risk, but so did staying on the street. He'd seen police officers moving many of the homeless and had evaded attention mainly out of luck. One cop scrutinising him too closely could have disastrous results. The newspapers in the metal boxes spoke of a state-wide manhunt for the 'HYDRA operative', and the soldier wasn't ready to come in yet.

He chose to go to the church and found the main hall awash with cots, the smell of bodies overwhelming. At the front of the room was a cross fixed to the wall and he knelt down and made the sign of the cross without thought.

“Catholic, eh?” someone said, and he looked up to find a woman in a black shirt and white collar; that was called a dog collar, he thought.

He looked down at his bended knee, then back up at her. “I... guess,” he said.

She smiled. “I won't hold it against you. I'm the pastor here, Nicola Hickey.”

He stood up and instantly loomed over this tiny woman. She had close cropped hair and dark skin, quick to smile despite his physical presence. She didn't ask for his name and he didn't offer one, but she did show him to a table of sandwiches and bottles of juice and told him to 'help himself'. He found it within him to thank her and constrained himself to two sandwiches and a plastic cup of apple juice, though he thought he could eat much more besides.

He took a cot in the corner, where he could see the whole church. The lights went out at ten, but Nicola passed out flashlights to them and the soldier lay on his cot and listened to the quiet conversation. There were some families here, mothers with children all piled into one cot, a lot of
girls and boys who couldn't be much past sixteen, and dozens of grizzled looking men. He heard quiet bed time stories, hushed prayers, and a few rambling stories about meeting Captain America. The soldier tried to keep his laughter to himself; he was sure he was the only one here who had 'met' Captain America today, and done much more than that.

He stayed awake all night and watched the light of passing cars outside play along the walls, elongating into bizarre shapes before fading away. In the morning, Nicola and her helpers started bringing in the supplies for the day. Most everyone was still asleep, and the volunteers worked quietly, but the soldier could see that they were struggling with the heavier crates. He watched for a few minutes before getting up and taking a crate out of Nicola's hands and carrying it easily to the small kitchen in the back. When he was done, he looked back and saw that some of the volunteers were watching him nervously, but Nicola just smiled and thanked him for his help. He could have first pick of the sandwiches, she said.

Most of the people here left in the daytime to wander the streets or look for jobs and places to live, but the soldier stayed inside, away from the eyes of others, and lay on his cot, trying to think. Thinking was not something that he found easy, nor was it encouraged; thinking too much meant the machine and the dizzying static in his head that proceeded it. He could feel the machine's effects breaking down already, just like they had last time. They had wiped him recently, but it hadn't lasted and he had shadowy memories of a bridge and an armoured car and this Captain America man. The memories were so close, almost within his grasp, but dwelling on it made his head pound.

He knew only a few things now, in this new world: he couldn't go back and he didn't know how to go forward. The few times he fell asleep, he dreamt of choking the life out of Captain America and woke up gasping. The sensation was oddly exhilarating.

He spent a week and a half in the church, until the situation outside calmed enough that he had a chance to make an escape. Nicola gave him a backpack and a jacket because he didn't have either and she said it was forecast to get cold soon. That was kind of her.

He didn't know this area at all and expected that he'd have to travel mainly by foot. He was hardly any distance from the church when he saw a billboard proclaiming Captain America: America's First Superhero, September 1st 2013 – January 30th 2014. It was some sort of exhibit at a place called the Smithsonian, an entire event just for the man who the soldier tried to kill, then dragged out of the river. It shouldn't have been of any interest to him, he had never let things of little importance arrest his attention before, but he found himself asking someone on the street for directions and walked for an hour to come to the place.

He entered the museum without impediment and was confronted with many floor to ceiling sized images of Captain America. The whole exhibit was a monument to American exceptionalism, excess, and patriotism, yet his chest started to burn as he looked at life size pictures of the Captain 'pre-serum'. He held back and waited for parents to lead their kids away before approaching it. The top of the picture came only to his chin. The text next to the picture said that at this stage he was 5'4'', but afterwards was 6'2''. The soldier didn't know how that was possible, but his chest continued to burn.

He didn't need to walk much further into the exhibit to be met with his own face, or something approximating it. This was the 'Bucky' the Captain had been talking about, and the soldier crept closer to it, though there weren't many people looking at this part of the exhibit.

The oldest of four, it said, an excellent athlete. He looked unhappy in the photograph, and the soldier felt a sudden cavern of sadness open up inside of him. He took a strangled breath and turned away – it was a stupid risk to come here at all and he needed to leave DC as soon as possible. That man had
scrambled with his mind and the soldier couldn't strategise clearly any more.

As he made his way back out of the exhibit, he passed a glass fronted store that said it was the Museum Store. At the front of this store was a display of books with his face on the cover, titled with one word: Sidekick. He scanned the area, but no one was looking at him and he found himself making a right turn into the store.

Stacks of these books were laid out on a table, nestled between plastic replica shields and model planes. He approached the table slowly, keeping nearby customers in his sights, and picked up one of the fat, paperback books. The book was written by a Edward Ravitz and underneath his name it said, 'Revised with a new foreword by Father Eugene Barnes'. He curled the cover over and turned to the first page.

As a child, I was always fascinated by the old tales of Captain America and his Howling Commandos, though when I was growing up in the sixties and seventies to the backdrop of the Vietnam War, there was little interest in these old war stories. For obvious reasons, when it came time to write my doctoral thesis, I chose this childhood hero of mine, and it was only then that I began to notice lack of scholarship on Captain America's greatest ally and firmest friend. The story of Sergeant James Buchanan 'Bucky' Barnes was overshadowed by the comic-book-like heroics of Steve Rogers, but any story of Steve Rogers is only half told without the story of Bucky Barnes.

James Buchanan Barnes was born on March 10, 1917 to Florentina Barone and Eugen Ungureanu, immigrants from Italy and Romania respectively, in Brooklyn, a borough filled with immigrant families. Indeed, the future Captain America himself was a first generation Irish immigrant. Known to all as Bucky, Barnes had an atypical immigrant experience--

The soldier closed the book. His eyes felt hot and his chest burned again. The man couldn't be lying, not with all of this evidence to support his story, and he couldn't make the soldier feel this way, like there was a cavern inside his chest swallowing everything up. He slipped the book into the deep pocket of his jacket and walked out of the store. Behind him, someone called out for him to stop, but a few quick turns lost them.

He still needed to leave the city, even if he was this person everyone thought he was. He went back out onto the street and picked pockets until he had a few hundred dollars, then asked for directions to the train station.

At Union Station, there was a train departing in fifteen minutes time to Colorado Springs and another train departing in forty five minutes for New York.

"Where are you going?" the ticket seller asked, and the soldier bit down hard on the inside of his mouth.

"New York," he said roughly.

It was a three and a half hour trip at fifty dollars, and he found a seat with good visibility in all directions to wait for the departure time. He tore the front and back covers off the book, dropped them in a trash can, then settled down and kept reading. Apparently Bucky Barnes was known in his neighbourhood for being loose with his affections and looking like a movie star (an asterisk there led to a note at the bottom of the page that stated he'd been voted most likely to marry a movie star in his senior year), but to his family and close friends, he was intelligent, academically accomplished, kind, and generous. The writer quoted his sister as saying in an interview in 1982 that he was just like their father, he let everything roll off his back until the moment he snapped. Unlike their father, though,
Bucky's temper was 'spectacular'. Bucky Barnes did not shy away from violence.

That made the soldier snort without humour.

He read through two chapters before the train arrived, then boarded and settled in a seat by the window. The train was half-filled but unfortunately an old lady sat down in the seat beside him and took out a pile of knitting. He could move, he thought, but the seats were assigned and it would probably look more conspicuous than staying where he was. The train began to move and he opened the book again. According to this Ravitz guy, Bucky Barnes was devoted to Rogers and to his family, but it felt to the soldier that the family came a close second. He wasn't sure why he felt that, whether it was something he'd gleaned from the book or something that rolled around his head, but either way, he knew that Barnes's loyalties were stacked in the Captain's direction.

He came from a criminal family; his grandfather, Lucio Barnes, ran some kind of bootlegging, gun smuggling, drug dealing, prostitution empire, which Bucky lent his hand too, but the author skittered around the point, not willing to condemn him for his work as an 'enforcer'. This made Bucky a bad person, no matter how much the author would like to think that being kind to your mother absolved you of sin.

Perhaps the soldier was this person.

Chapter three detailed Bucky's academic and athletic triumphs, which were apparently numerous. His sister was quoted as saying that he was frequently 'dumb as a rock', but he excelled in high school and never had any trouble there, just 'trouble everywhere else'. And trouble only seemed to get worse as he grew older, struggling and failing at Harvard, unable to find his place in the world.

In one of our discussions, Becca told me that one day Bucky began to lose his way. She speculated that it could have begun with his football career ending car accident that broke his lower leg in half and tore his ACL, though he never expressed much sadness or regret over losing the sport that had once made him so happy. Indeed, in my talks with his fellow Commando, Gabriel Jones, Jones said he had only shrugged at the memory and said there was nothing to be done about it now. Becca concluded, and I tend to agree from my own research, that the car accident wasn't the trigger. Perhaps it came later, in Harvard, or earlier from some unknown event, but whenever it happened, it turned Bucky from a gentle, sweet-natured child to an anxious young man prone to violent outbursts. The change didn't extinguish his family's love for him, but it certainly contributed to Barnes's bouts of bad behaviour.

In her famous 1953 interview with Edward R. Murrow, SHIELD co-founder Margaret Carter said of Barnes, 'he was a complicated man, though he did everything he could to have you believe otherwise. Steve used to say that he got easily wound up over things, so sometimes Steve was economical with the truth. I wish I'd known him better, but he was difficult to get close to'.

The soldier put the book down and looked at the trees and fields passing by outside. He blinked slowly and saw a woman with red lips and curled brown hair; she said that she knew he didn't like her. He frowned at this new memory. Why hadn't he liked her? He could feel it when he shut his eyes, pressing down like a weight on him, his anger at this woman.

He took a breath and opened his eyes again, and the old lady beside him glanced at him quickly and smiled. He managed to smile back, though the action felt strained, and looked back down at his book. He flipped through some pages, skipping past chunks of his childhood, and found a chapter titled Connie. Constance Magdalena Wronski was born on May 17th, 1921, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and she was Bucky's only serious girlfriend, the two of them having dated for two years.
The author wrote about assorted anecdotes about their relationship, from his siblings and from Connie herself, but the soldier had trouble conjuring her face in his mind's eye.

Towards the back of the book, there was a collection of shiny pages that stood out brilliant white against the rest of the off-white paper when he closed the book. He flipped to them and looked at the pictures there. The first picture was of a young man and woman, she was wearing a loose, lacy dress and veil, and he had on a suit with a flower in the lapel, little round glasses on his face. The soldier thought he looked like a slimmer, finer-featured version of Barnes and she had the same mouth and smug look in her eyes. The caption read: Florentina and Eugen on their wedding day, June 22nd, 1916. In her later years, Florentina admitted that she may have already been pregnant with James.

The edges of the soldier's mouth turned up. Ma, he thought, unbidden, and took a deep breath. Below his parents were baby pictures, pictures of two toddlers with matching dimpled chins holding toy horses and cats, smiling widely, and over the page two boys, one almost twice the height of the other. The tall boy looked happy, his eyes bright, while the small, light-haired boy looked slightly surprised. Bucky and Steve, 1928...

He found Connie a few pages on, held in the arms of Barnes. He didn't look as happy any more, though his mouth was pulled wide. She had dark hair, a small heart-shaped face, and a bow for a mouth. She was very pretty and he thought she looked nice, like the pastor at the church had been nice to him.

On the next page was a picture of three people in uniform, two men and a woman. Bucky, Steve, and Margaret ‘Peggy’ Carter at Camp Lucky Strike, 1944. Barnes didn't even try to look happy in this picture; Rogers was standing proudly, chest puffed out, chin tipped up, and Carter looked confident and beautiful beside him. Barnes only wanted it to be over, having been able toduck the army photographer most other times.

The reason he didn't like Carter was because he wanted Rogers for himself and the feeling wasn't mutual. The soldier flipped back to the picture of them when he was eleven, and he remembered it being taken now, Becca with her Kodak camera, ordering them to stand where the lighting was just right. Steve never knew what to do with himself for pictures, but Bucky was used to being photographed and had no trouble with it.

The soldier's breath caught in his throat. He remembered this, he remembered being... being this person, being Bucky, and that was his name. That was his name. His eyes felt hot and he covered them for a moment. He had three siblings and a mother who thrived on being dramatic and a father who never said a cross word to anyone and Steve, a boy, a man, who he loved more than he should have.

“Are you okay, dear?” the lady asked softly, a frail hand brushing briefly against his arm.

He dropped his hand and looked at her. “I'm fine,” he said quietly, “thank you.” His voice sounded awful, rough and alien to his ears.

“Maybe you shouldn't read any more of that book for now,” she continued, and he looked down at it. She was right, that was enough for now.

“Yeah,” he murmured.

She smiled, her lips drawn thinner by the movement. “Have a little nap, I'll wake you when we get there.”

“Okay,” he said, and leant his head back against the seat. He was tired, though he thought he could
go much longer than this without sleep; he just felt so worn out. He slipped into sleep quickly and
dreamt about being a soldier, but not the kind of soldier he was now. He dreamt about a man with a
goatee and Steve with his golden hair.

He woke up as they were pulling into Penn Station and helped the lady get her bag off the luggage
rack when he saw her struggling.

“You don't have any bags?” she asked when he stepped off the train beside her. He shook his head
and she frowned a little. “My granddaughter's meeting me here, we're having a little holiday.”

“That's nice,” he said.

“Is anyone meeting you?” she continued gently.

His father met him at a train station once, in a car with a long hood; maybe more than once. He
shook his head again.

She pursed her lips. “Where are you going?”

“Brooklyn,” he said without thinking. They'd reached the main thoroughfare now and she stopped to
tidy her clothes.

“Do you have enough money?” she said, her hand drifting to her handbag.

He smiled and it came easier this time. “Yeah, I have enough money.”

“Well,” she said, and a young woman twenty feet away called out, 'Grandma!'. She turned and
waved, then looked back up at him. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will,” he said.

She started walking, then stopped again and frowned at him. “You know, you look awfully
familiar.”

“I just have one of those faces,” he said and ducked his head as he walked away.

He found the subway train he needed without much trouble and paid the fare. It was the A train,
ROCKAWAY PK-BEACH 116TH ST bound. He knew the trip would take a while, and wondered
how many times he'd done it in his past life. He took the book out again and went back to the photo
pages. There was a washed out colour picture of four women, one holding a young child in her arms,
standing on a podium with a sign behind them that read, 'End the war in Vietnam'. The subtitle said,
Florentina with Becca, Florence, Carolyn Lloyd, and young Summer, speaking at the Jeannette
Rankin Brigade anti-war march in Washington, DC, January 15, 1968. She spoke movingly about
the loss of her son and her grandson to war.

He frowned; her grandson? That must have been Florence's son, because he felt that Becca wouldn't
have had children, for some reason, and Eugene was a... priest. He didn't think he knew any
Carolyn. His mother was wrapped up in a dramatic coat with a large fur collar, her hair tucked under
a hat. She looked small and frail beneath all the fluff. Beside her, Becca looked severe in a sweater
dress. He thought that she must have been fifty by then. Florence wore a simple dress and coat, dull
behind the eyes. The girl with the toddler had long blonde hair and wore blue jeans and a patterned
poncho. He thought the word for that was 'hippie'.

Below it was another colour picture, of a smiling boy with messy shoulder length hair and bright
blue eyes. James George Barnes on his high school graduation day, 1964. His unkempt appearance
incensed his principal.

He flipped to the index and found Barnes, James G. listed as first mentioned on page 259. He flipped back and scanned the page until he found the name.

In 1946, Florence became pregnant by her college boyfriend, Jonathan Haig, who was studying geography at Harvard. They weren't married and, according to Florence and her siblings, Haig quickly showed his true colours, harassing Florence over several months. He demanded that they marry and she leave Radcliffe immediately, to save face with his well known Connecticut family. This culminated in him travelling to the Barnes family home in Florence's eighth month of pregnancy and threatening to have the baby boy taken from her upon his birth. He was summarily ejected from the home and did not return.

James George Barnes was born October 12th, 1946, named for his uncle and his grandfather. Florence returned to Radcliffe in January, '47, and James – Jimmy to his friends – was raised by the whole family, splitting his time between his mother, his grandparents, and his aunt and uncle, Becca and Arnie. Eugene provided spiritual guidance. He was remembered by his family as an easy, uncomplicated child who loved his half-sister, Linda, when she was born in 1957 to his mother and stepfather, Andrew Collier. In his teenage years, he embraced the new counterculture hippie movement of the early 1960s. He didn't do particularly well academically, and wasn't interested in athletics, but he was happy to do manual labour and got a job painting houses at seventeen. At eighteen, he got his girlfriend, Carolyn, pregnant and the two of them moved into a small apartment in Greenwich Village. Neither believed in marriage, to the consternation of their families, but that caused them little concern. Fearing being labelled a hypocrite, Florence accepted their choice, and welcomed Summer Lloyd-Barnes into the family.

Tragically, and perhaps ironically, Jimmy was caught by the draft in 1967 and shipped out to Vietnam, where he was killed only six months later by a stray bullet fired by another man in his unit. The family buried James G. Barnes beside the memorial plaque for James B. Barnes at Holy Cross Cemetery.

He closed the book over, suddenly sad. He remembered swimming with Florence at the beach, watching her play against with neighbourhood boys and wipe the floor with them. He missed her high school graduation, and Eugene's, because he was somewhere in Europe. She didn't deserve to have something like that happen to her.

Maybe the name was a curse. He knew he was a curse – people were cursed to meet the Winter Soldier and never be seen again – but maybe it was the name, too. This boy didn't deserve that.

He kept reading, about playing Puck in a school play and struggling at Harvard. Former Senator of Connecticut, Charles Butterworth III said that Bucky was intelligent but seemed constantly stressed and angry, which Charles – Chuck, he thought – didn't make any better as back then he was 'hopelessly stuck up'. Noted stage actor and Tony Award winner Matthew Fleming wrote in his 1982 autobiography that Bucky's former team mates bullied him for being gay, but Bucky never had anything to say on the matter and Matthew formed a terrible crush on him while they were rehearsing for the play; 'he wasn't anything like I thought he'd be, having admired him from afar since I was fifteen'.

Bucky smiled; he had a hell of a time with that play, and he was terrified of messing everything up and making a fool of himself. Matthew being queer... he thought he knew that, but there was more to
it than that. He went back to the index and looked up 'gay', then 'homosexuality'. There were several
mentions and he turned to the first one, which read, 'In 1936, Becca revealed to Bucky that both she
and her husband, Arnold Roth, were homosexual, and had married in an attempt at mutual bearding.
Bucky responded better to it than she thought he would'. The next page listed was about Matthew,
and then later chapters talked about the family's presence at Pride parades. He thought there should
be more than that.

The subway reached the Jay Street – Metrotech Station and he got off and started walking south,
then took a left turn and walked until he found a tall building with arched windows and an arched
doorway. There were signs on the outside that said T.J. Maxx and Nordstrom Rack, but he looked at
the photo pages again and found it in there, Martin's department store, where Bucky worked from
1939 to 1942. He remembered the building, but the surrounding area was frenetic and unfamiliar. He
moved on.

He kept moving south until he reached Park Slope. It had been mentioned several times in the book
as the place he grew up and he recognised some of it, though his mind overlaid automatons and movie
theatres where now there were clothes shops and computer stores. The images came too fast, making
him dizzy and distracted on the street; he needed to get inside somewhere, cut down on the amount
of stimulation he was receiving. This would happen sometimes before, a mission would
overstimulate him, making the machine immediately necessary.

He found a motel called a Super 8 and paid for a room for the night. It cost over a hundred dollars,
which seemed astronomical, but it meant he was alone, away from people who might look at him too
closely. The room had a double bed, a television, and free wifi, although he only vaguely knew what
that meant.

He switched the television on and easily found the news, which was talking about aftermath of the
SHIELD conspiracy. Analysts were poring over the contents of Black Widow's 'data dump' and
discussed Captain America's progress – he had been out of hospital for a few days, according to
sources, despite sustaining a spinal fracture, broken ribs, and bleeding on the brain. Bucky felt cold
and hot at the same time; Steve was okay, he'd survived that fall like a miracle, but the Soldier had
done that to him, he'd made him fight, he'd made him give up and take the beating. Steve never gave
up, Bucky knew that unquestionably, even if he didn't remember all the rest. What could a person do
to break a spirit like that?

He sat on the end of the bed and kept watching the television, his right hand drifting to his mouth,
where he chewed on his fingernails. He'd come back from missions sometimes with blood dried
beneath his jagged nails, and technicians spoke angrily about habits they weren't able to scrub.

The people on the news discussed whether Steve should be taken into custody, and by which
authority, and speculated on the identity of the HYDRA operative known only as the Winter Soldier.
They didn't have a name or a clear picture yet, but sources said it wouldn't be long yet.

Bucky wouldn't have this freedom for long, so he got up and took a shower.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd washed himself – he refused to when offered the opportunity
at the shelter – but he recalled the sound of rattling pipes. He recalled, also, being put in a box and
sprayed with cold water from high pressure faucets. The pipes here rattled too, but the water was hot
enough, and he lathered himself in soap, working it into his skin and his hair, watching grease and
dirt swirl away down the drain. He turned the water as hot as it could go and his skin began to turn
red, everything but the scar on his leg, which stood proud and white, running a line from his ankle to
his knee. He ran his metal fingers down it, but there was no sensation there. The book said that he
hadn't minded losing his football career and he couldn't remember it but he knew it was for Steve. He
got this scar for Steve and he didn't mind it.

He stayed in the shower until the water turned cold, then got out and dried himself off. The television was still running in the bedroom and he came back out to some politician talking about the state of America today. He flicked through the channels until he found a movie with an unconvincing looking alien, and sat down to watch it with the ends of his hair dripping on his shoulders.

Later, he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, the television still running in the background, and fell asleep. He dreamt about running down a football field with a pigskin in his hands, and kissing a man with facial hair that scraped roughly against his chin and cheeks.

He had never dreamt in cryo, for reasons that he was not privy to, so the effects of all these new dreams left him disoriented upon waking. It was dark in the room, aside from the flickering light of the television, and he was on his feet as he faded out of the hazy in-between world. The room was secure and there was a commercial running about how to get rid of facial wrinkles. He shut it off, but then the room was dark and quiet and it made him feel a kind of discomfort that he had never been able to indulge before—or not in a long time, at least. He turned the television back on and watched a program about living in tiny houses. It was four am, which meant he had slept for seven hours. The sensation was strange.

Steve had lived in a tiny place like the ones on the television; back then it wasn't something to aspire to. The idea of it made him feel vaguely derisive. Bucky had lived in a big house with windows that let in the sunlight and chandeliers in most of the rooms. There was a monstrous oil painting in the living room that made him cry when he was small and his father had gathered him up in his arms and told him that looking like monster didn't make you one.

He picked the book up and looked at the pictures of his father again. The author had commented several times that Bucky looked like his father and belaboured the fact that Bucky was considered to be uncommonly handsome and a 'cute little boy'. He went to the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. Abstractly, he knew his appearance—the location of his mouth and his eyes, the colour of them—but the longer he looked, the further away he drifted from it. It felt as if he was looking at some other person, and not the man in this book, either. He touched his face, tracing his fingers over his left cheek and eye socket – there had been stitches here once, but when? There wasn't anything like that in the book. He ran his hand up into his hair and gave it hard tug; something had happened here as well. He didn't know what; he didn't know anything. His left shoulder dipped lower than his right; he pulled his sweater up and turned around, looking over his shoulder at the mirror. His spine curved to the right while his left shoulder pulled lower with the weight of his arm. That was called scoliosis, he thought. He could wear a brace to fix it, but he didn't think anyone would be interested in giving him one.

He went back to the bed and studied the photographs for hours, until the sun shone brightly through the blinds on the windows. There was a note on the night stand that informed him check out time as eleven am, and it was six thirty now. It was better to move while it was still early. He put his book in his bag and double-checked the location of his weapons, then put it on his back and left the room. The person who'd checked him in yesterday requested he return the key when he left and for some reason he complied, dropping the key and plastic keychain on the counter.

“We've just put out the complimentary breakfast in the room to your right,” the girl on the counter said. He looked at her for a moment and she cleared her throat. “It's part of the cost of your room...”

“Ohay,” he said, and went where she pointed. On a table was a spread of waffles, cereal, toast, juice, and coffee. He had eaten occasionally at the shelter when he felt he wasn't being watched, but nothing since then. He felt a slight disappointment that there weren't any donuts, then frowned at the
thought. He took a waffle and ate it carefully, placing himself with his back towards a wall with no doors, and watched the other few people milling around, looking sleep deprived. The waffle was cold already, but it was better than the sandwiches and his stomach growled in approval. He went back for a second one and some toast as well. He was hungry and he liked this food. He liked eating. If he ate too much, though, it would make his stomach hurt and it would draw too much attention to himself, so he took a bottle of juice and left.

The streets were still quiet, but they wouldn't be for long, people already spilling out of buildings with scarves wrapped around their necks as they hurried towards subway stations. He walked until he reached a large park. There was a zoo here, he thought; he used to come here when he was a child.

There are people in tight, brightly coloured clothing running around the perimeter of the park, little puffs of white air lining their way. He walked onto the grass, which crunched slightly under his feet, and looked around himself. The sky was blue-grey and the trees were blowing gently – he liked it here, but it wasn't an area with good cover, so he kept walking. After a few minutes walking, he found a library with giant doors like a castle. It was somewhat familiar, but not overly so. It would be another couple hours before it opened, so he found a low concrete wall to the side between the building and the road and hunkered down there. There were other people scattered around, some with shopping carts piled high, others taking shelter in oversized boxes; homeless people. It made him feel uneasy, but he wasn't sure why.

The book told him that he was part of an elite team in the Second World War – the Howling Commandos. What a dumb name. There was him and Steve, Timothy Dugan, Gabriel Jones, Jim Morita, James Montgomery Falsworth, and Jacques Dernier. In the photo pages, there was one photograph of the team: Steve smiling, Bucky with a cigarette hanging from his lips, and Jones at the back. He couldn't put all the names to the faces immediately, but he knew that was Gabe. That was the only picture of him, and the index produced just a couple of quotes from him on the subject of Bucky's character on the front, nothing more.

In the last chapter, there was some information about what became of his family after his 'death'. Along with Jimmy, Florence won gold at the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, and divorced her husband, the father of her second child, in 1965; she didn't marry again. Becca and Arnie moved to San Francisco in 1963, and came out to their families in the seventies. Eugene became the pastor at St. Therese of Lisieux in Brooklyn in 1956. The house was sold in 1953 and converted into apartments in the eighties. His father died in 1983, his ma in 1991.

The thought of her living those years without his father made his chest ache.

A staff member opened the doors of the library at nine am, and he shuffled in alone with the other vagrants. He kept his ballcap low, but no one paid any attention; he guessed they were used to suspicious looking guys sloping around. He walked in further and saw bays of desks and computers. He wasn't sure if he'd ever used a computer before, but he thought he knew the basic idea. The technicians used them, often sighing about 'the system' being 'down' or needing 'upgrading'.

He sat down at one located in the corner with good views of all the doors and stared at the screen, then down at the keyboard. It didn't look much like the old typewriters – Steve's mother borrowed a typewriter sometimes to do some typing work and Bucky would pick at the keys when she let him – but it was pretty straightforward. There was a white page on the screen that said 'Bklyn Public Library' and across from that, 'Find books, music, movies, and more'. He slowly typed 'Captain America', then pressed the search button. It brought up hundreds of results in books and movies and a musician called Jimmy Buffett. He scrutinised it all for a moment, then clicked on a listing for TIME-LIFE Captain America in 500 Photographs. There was a pad and pencil next to the computer
to write down call numbers, but he could easily memorise it, and got up to search it out.

The pictures were all black and white, a few of Steve when he was still small, but mostly of after, when he looked like a god. It made his chest ache again. He'd... loved Steve his whole life, but Steve hadn't known, or hadn't wanted to know. Steve had become a different person when he became Captain America, and Bucky hadn't really known him at all. Bucky himself still looked unhappy in every photo he was featured in, and the sudden memory of his unhappiness came like a punch to the gut. He'd hated every moment of it that he wasn't with Steve or-- or-- And in those brief moments of consciousness in the years after, he'd hated that too. His throat would close up and his vision would fade, and they'd have to force him into the machine, five men just to hold him down.

He slammed the book closed and hurried out of the library. He walked further into the park with his head down until the building was well out of sight, then stopped. Suddenly, it felt like he was back there, in the machine. He fought them sometimes, he did; he did try. He didn't fight like how it was described in the book, dirty and vicious, and he didn't rail against injustice like Steve would have—Steve wouldn't have let a thing like this happen to him—but he had tried, hadn't he?

He started walking again. He left the park and went to the Eastern Parkway station, where he got on the 2 train headed towards Brooklyn College. He thought he wanted to go there once, but his mother wouldn't have liked it. He got off at Beverly Road and walked east until he got to the twin archways of the Holy Cross Cemetery. He had a dim memory of having come here before, and the thought of it made his stomach clench.

There were few other people in the cemetery, just a man who looked like a grounds keeper, and a woman walking away from Bucky. Catholics didn't go back to the grave after the funeral, he thought; the soul had already left the body and all that remained was the mortal shell. Maybe his soul had left too, and he was just the remains.

He kept to the path, looking at each grave as he passed, hundreds of deaths, some recent, some long ago. Eventually he came upon a large stone cross with 'Barnes' engraved on it. In front were five gravestones: Lucio Barnes, George 'Eugen' Barnes, Winifred 'Florentina' Barnes, James Buchanan Barnes, and James George Barnes, laid out like that in a row. Bucky's gravestone was the most weathered, edged with moss and flowering weeds growing in the grass around all five. The epitaph read: ‘...the one who endures to the end will be saved - Matthew 10:22’. He stared at them for a few minutes before moving on, tracing the path again.

He got all the way to the edge of the cemetery before he found a more modest set of gravestones: Joseph, Sarah, and Steve Rogers. The name was spelt wrong on Joe's stone: Rodgers. They could never afford to change it. 1898-1918, it read. Dead at twenty. Sarah's read 1900-1937; thirty seven years old. She died just a month after her birthday, struggling to breath in her bed, fabric nailed to the windows to keep the room warm, though it hadn't really worked. Bucky could feel her frail hand in his, the ghost of a memory on his skin. She knew she was going to die even while he denied it. Steve knew too; Bucky was the only one who tried to fool himself into hoping for a miracle.

He started to cry, a hot feeling in his chest, a band of pressure around his forehead. Steve's gravestone read 1918-1945; he had 'died' before he reached his birthday, at twenty six. Captain America Dead. Even though Bucky knew he wasn't dead, knew that intimately, it didn't feel like it at this moment. It came to him in one devastating moment: the newspapers, the cell, his putrid stump. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground, his breath coming in short bursts, as if he couldn't inflate his chest enough to let the air in. He wrapped his arms around himself in a crude approximation of a hug, and ducked his head. It was too much, the memories, the past. He had lived a kind of simplicity before, his mind was uncluttered by anxiety and doubt and if they did come, the machine cured it. If this was how he'd felt all those years, he didn't want it, he didn't think he could bear it.
After a few minutes, the episode passed, the panic loosened its grip on his chest and he sat all the way down on the grass. The grass was slight damp with dew, and the coverage here wasn't good, but in this moment, he didn't care. He didn't care about any of it. He felt... different, somehow alive despite the gnawing feeling in his chest. He was alive, but perhaps life wasn't always welcome.

He pulled the book out of his backpack and folded back the front page. He'd read several chunks of the book now, but he'd skipped the foreword. Now he went back to it, lingering on the page for a few minutes before reading it.

My brother was my hero. Over the years, that has often come as a surprise to my peers and parishioners. Bucky was a hard drinking, hard smoking, not especially hard working young man, while I was bookish, skittish, and religious. He got into physical fights regularly and only attended church to the extent that made our mother happy. When he was young, before I was born, our priest requested that he discontinue being an altar boy due to his poor attitude and lazy ways. Needless to say, there was not a meeting of minds between the two of us in the common sense. That didn't make him any less of a hero to me. When we were all children, our father was commonly believed to be somewhat ineffectual; whether that was the case or not, for my sister and I, Bucky filled in some of the gap. He made us dinner when our parents couldn't, took us out to movies and bought us toys, and attended our various activities with some regularity. Bucky was quick to grumble about his perceived responsibilities, but he met them all the same.

Bucky was our mother's clear favourite, but I don't think any of us minded too much. She was a good, loving mother, but Bucky would always be her first baby, her symbol of the love she and our father had for each other, and I believe she found some of Bucky's more immoral, roguish behaviour charming, even while she admonished him for it. Our older sister, Becca, was fiercely adversarial with Bucky, who was only nine months older than her but loved to make sure everyone knew he was the first born. Woe betide anyone who insulted either of them, though; Bucky was free with his fists and Becca was free with her words. Together (and later on with the addition of Steve) they were a force to be reckoned with.

Edward first came to us with the idea to write about Bucky in 1992, just after the death of our mother. At the time, he was only in his late twenties and we were generally opposed to the idea, but he was persistent and eventually Becca deemed it acceptable. When it was published in 1996, the book didn't gain much popularity outside of history buffs and some long time Brooklyn residents, but since the miraculous return of Steve Rogers, interest in this history has sky rocketed. When Edward asked me if I'd write a new foreword, I wondered what I could really contribute to the book. I'm still not sure, but I never really told my brother how much I admired him, so perhaps I can write this letter to him, seventy years late.

The Reverend Father Eugene M. Barnes, O.F.M.

2012

Bucky lowered the book and wiped at his face. The main thing he remembered about Eugene was the vague sense of irritation he often felt towards him. That didn't seem much like heroism. These people, they felt these things about him so deeply, but for him it was just a string of disjointed memories and half-cooked feelings. The technicians always said he didn't matter; his comfort, his mute presence when they were discussing personal matters, his cries and shouts. He mattered to these people. His life had mattered.
He left the cemetery and walked along the outside of it until he turned south on Troy Avenue until he reached his destination, a brown, windowless brick building: St. Therese of Lisieux Church. He guessed he must have come here as a child, though he didn't recall it. The plaque on the door said the parish priest was 'Robert Angelo'. Bucky wasn't sure if he was disappointed or not, but pushed the door open anyway and stepped carefully inside. The lobby was empty of people, one whole wall papered in flyers for local babysitters, junior league tournaments, support groups. He looked over them for a moment, then walked further into the church. The crucifix hung on the wall before him, and he felt a deep discomfort in his chest that he knew he'd felt before. He flexed his left hand a couple of times, then knelt down and crossed himself. To his left was the bay of votive candles; he got up and walked over to them. You lit a candle to symbolise a prayer for someone, a prayer for the deceased, he thought. He could light every candle here and burn the church down and still have prayers left besides.

He picked up one of the already flickering candles and tipped it towards an unlit one. He thought of beating Steve's face on the helicarrier, of making him lose his will, of killing that guy in the car and all the rest; but mostly, he thought about himself. It was a terrible, selfish, but he thought mostly of himself, a prayer for himself, for the man in the book and whatever that man was now.

He heard a door creak quietly, followed by soft footsteps, and peered carefully over his shoulder. A man was leaving the confessional booth, now kneeling in the aisle to say another prayer. Bucky turned away quickly and kept his head down. After a few minutes, the man left and Bucky turned around and looked at the booth.

What would he confess? The Winter Soldier's confession would take years and decades. Wasn't a confession just a way to cleanse one's soul? Did he deserve to be cleansed? Anyone could go to heaven if they confessed all their sins, but Bucky didn't think that was right.

Still, he didn't leave. He walked over to the booth and hesitated in front of the door for a minute, able to see the priest's robes through the latticework; he sat placidly, surely able to hear Bucky's indecision.

He opened the door and sat down. The priest remained placid as Bucky cleared his throat.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen,” the priest said softly.

Bucky cleared his throat again and made the sign of the cross. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been... a long time since my last confession.” That was putting it lightly. “I... don't know what to say. It's too much. It's too much to confess.”

The priest was silent for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Start anywhere, my son.”

“I... have killed a lot of people.” It felt strange to say, that he, an individual, had killed. He hadn't worked under the capacity of individual, only of weapon, and as a weapon, he passed no moral judgements in the moment – or, at least, that was the ideal. But he wasn't the weapon any more, and he was an individual. All those deaths, they were still on him.

“Did you kill with malice?” the priest prompted.

“No, I didn't care either way, at the time. Didn't know who I was killing, or why.”

“Do you regret your actions now?”

“I guess,” Bucky said. “I don't... feel connected to it all, most of the time. My memory isn't... great. I don't want to do it any more, if that helps.”
“It does,” the priest said. “Am I correct in assuming that you were a soldier?”

“Da,” he said and twitched. “Fuck. Uh, sorry, yes.”

There was another long pause before the priest spoke. “You're Russian?”

“Not willingly.” He took a deep breath. “I really don't know why I'm here, I don't deserve-- It's too much, it's too much to atone for.”

“None of us are without sin, my son, we all have to atone.”

Bucky snorted. “Ain't that the truth. But I gotta tell you, I think I'd blow your parishioners out of the water.”

There was another long pause – it made Bucky wonder if priests did cast judgement on their parishioners, even as they sat there and preached forgiveness and atonement.

“Are you religious, my son?”

“Only to the extent that made my mother happy,” Bucky said off-handedly, and there was a breathy sound from the other side of the partition. The priest got up and exited the booth quickly and Bucky turned his head and looked out of the latticework. The man stood in front of the booth, his hand clasped over his robes. He was elderly, Bucky could tell, and suddenly his stomach dropped. He put his right hand to his mouth for a moment, watching as the man—his brother; his brother—stood and waited for him to come out. He would have to come out now; he'd have to be brave.

He opened the door slowly, keeping his eyes on the ground and his cap low over his face. Eugene moved his weight from foot to foot and Bucky lifted his head slightly. Eugene had neat white hair, eyes greyer than Bucky remembered, and much more girth than he'd had as a child.

“God, you look like Grandpa,” he said suddenly.


Bucky did his best not to curl in on himself as he answered. “You seen Steve?”

Eugene's eyebrows twitched a little. “Yes. Did the same thing happen to you?”

“Not exactly.”

Eugene pressed his hand to his mouth and shook his head. “It's a miracle.”

“Yeah, well, you're supposed to believe in those, aren't ya?”

“I think I stopped, for a long time.”

Bucky dropped his gaze. It did something to his heart, to hear that Eugene had lost part of his faith. “Can we go somewhere private?”

Eugene took him into an office in the back and they sat down at the two chairs in front of the desk. He didn't know what to say any more, so they sat in silence for a few minutes.

“You're really old,” Bucky blurted out finally, then dropped his gaze to his lap; what a dumb thing to say. Eugene was old, though: the bottom of his face had turned jowly, his stomach protruded outwards like old men's did, his eyes had a cloudy quality to them. But he smiled when Bucky said it, and Bucky pressed on a little. “Shouldn't you be able to retire by now?”
“I have,” he said, “I just help out where I can now. Even the elderly and infirm can sit and take confession.”

Bucky offered him a smile back, then looked downwards at his lap, and Eugene smoothed down the front of his robes, a nervous movement that seemed not to match his authoritative presence. “How long have you been back?” he asked.

Bucky lifted his head, but found he couldn't look Eugene straight in the eye. “A few weeks.”

“Where were you-- Were you in the ice?”

He shook his head. “Not really. Did you see what happened in Washington, with Steve?”

“Yes, of course.”

Bucky bit his lip. “The operative they've been talking about? That's me.” Eugene paled at the confession. “This is confidential, right?”

Eugene shook himself a bit, as if he was waking up. “Of course. I wouldn't snitch on my big brother.”

Bucky barked with unexpected laughter and shook his head. “Didn't you used to be uptight?”

“Well, age mellows you,” Eugene said, and smiled. His teeth were very shiny and white, and after a minute, Bucky realised they were dentures. “So does ministering in Brooklyn in the seventies.”

Bucky nodded, though he didn't understand the significance. “You're taking this well...”

Eugene tipped his head slightly. “The world's a different place since Steve came back. Even before, with Iron Man and the incident in Harlem. It never helps anyone to close your mind to possibilities. And seeing you here, alive, it fills in part of my soul.”

Bucky dropped his head and swallowed. “I don't think I'm who you remember me being.”

“That doesn't matter, Bucky,” Eugene said, and reached across, laying his hand over Bucky's gloved left one. Bucky could see a brief frown pass across his face at the unyielding 'skin', but he didn't comment on it.

“You seen Steve? You know, in person?”

“Unfortunately not, but a friend of his came here recently, just after the incident in Washington. I suppose he was looking for you, but he didn't say anything.”

Bucky wondered who that was. It was good he had a friend, Steve always needed someone at his back, even if he didn't think so. Bucky remembered that much.

“I read the book,” he said, and pulled it out of his bag, battered and slightly water damaged now. Eugene smiled a painful looking smile, layers to it that Bucky couldn't parse any more.

“It was hard when he was writing it, it dredged a lot of things up, especially for Becca. It changed her a lot, when you passed.” He withdrew his hands and smoothed his robes. “And after Jimmy. It can be hard to keep the faith.”

Bucky nodded. Did he have any faith? Had he ever? He thought he just did what he was told, let himself be led by others. The perfect base for an unthinking assassin.
“It says in here that she told you she was queer.” And that he had known long before. He didn't remember being told, but when he thought about it, he felt this breadth of guilt pool in his stomach.

“Yes, that was... unexpected,” Eugene said, tipping his head. “Ma did what she always did, took to her bed for three days, then told Becca she loved her all the same. Dad said it wasn't any of his concern. I didn't react very well... It took some time for me to reconcile it, but Becca forgave me.”

“Becca was always the bravest. Braver than me,” Bucky said, the words slipping out, and they felt true, even if he didn't know why.

Eugene nodded. “Arnie and Becca did eventually tell us about your homosexuality. I don't think bravery came into it, when we were young.”

Bucky blinked and met his gaze for a moment.

“You didn't know?” Eugene asked gently.

Bucky shrugged. “I guess I do now.”

Eugene smiled again. “You should see her; Becca.”

Something inside Bucky's chest filled up all of a sudden and he sat up straighter. “She's still alive?”

“She's about to celebrate her ninety sixth birthday, but her health is... what you'd expect it to be. She lives in California with Florence and Florence's great granddaughter, Katie. If you want to see her, I suggest you go now.”

Bucky looked down at his lap. “I don't think I deserve to see her. Or you, or Florence.”

“Maybe we deserve to see you,” Eugene said.

Bucky glanced up. “It's dangerous. You don't know how dangerous it is for me to even be here. I'm putting you at risk right now.”

Eugene looked at the wall behind the desk—there was a picture of Bucky there, in his uniform, a half-smile on his face. Eugene touched the cross around his neck and turned back. “That's a decision you have to make, but we've never been a family adverse to risk.”

He thought that was probably true, from what he read in the book, and the patchwork memories he had in his head. Bucky had taken risks, big and small, stupid and, maybe occasionally, heroic. He wasn't brave, but he saw bravery in others and wanted to emulate it, and sometimes did halfway to a good job.

“You could give me their address, I guess,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

- Woo, I finally got this chapter out! Sorry for the delay, I'm preparing for a transatlantic move at the end of the month, so the last few chapters of the fic before trickle out a little slower than the early ones.

- We've finally learnt George/Eugen's original surname!
Chapter Notes

Don't call it a comeback! It's been over two months since I last updated! In deference to that, please enjoy the world's longest chapter. Please see the end note for spoilerly content notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Florence and Becca lived in the Mission District of San Francisco. Bucky didn't know the place, but Eugene gave him a guidebook to help him out and money for the train journey. Going by train cost quite a bit more than a greyhound bus, but Eugene insisted, telling Bucky that he had more than enough money to pay it after a lifetime of frugality. It was preferable to the close quarters of a bus and jacking a car would present too large of a risk for running into law enforcement.

Bucky still didn't feel like it was a good idea to visit people who surely must be under some level of surveillance, but he could read between the lines of Eugene's assertion that Becca was as healthy 'as you'd expect' for a ninety five year old. He made Eugene promise not to call ahead, since sensible paranoia told him that the lines would be tapped. Eugene accepted this as the truth and they said a prayer together before he left.

To get to San Francisco, he'd first have to travel to Chicago, then transfer to a train headed to California. From there, he'd take a final forty minute train journey to get to the Mission District. All in, the trip would take just a little over three days. The Chicago leg was nineteen hours alone and he got a sleeper car to himself. Before boarding the train, he bought some food, a notebook and pen, and a cheap phone from a man on the street corner. He didn't recall how he knew about cellular phones, but he knew enough to pull out the battery and stow it in the bottom of his bag for emergencies. The notebook was dark blue and hardbound—nicer than he needed but the only one they had at the store in the station—and he intended to use it to make sense of what was going on in his head.

He'd been in a sleeper car before, when he was very young. Him, his parents, and Becca had gone to Florida on vacation, but there were no mentions of Florida in the biography index, so he took out his notebook and started writing. He thought he'd been five or six at the time and he recalled hot sun so it must have been summer, which meant that Becca was four or five, depending. He wrote that down.

He didn't remember much about the vacation itself, aside from the fact that they went to St. Petersburg – he smiled at the irony of it now – but he remembered the journey there on the train, the four of them piled into one room, Bucky and Becca on the top bunk, their parents below. Dad read bed time stories in his thick accent that sometimes Bucky couldn't understand, and Bucky and Becca fought over the blanket but still slept curled up together with their bears.

He wrote that all down, his father's voice, the bickering, the trees and lakes passing outside the window, and remembered another sleeper car, eight men to a bunk. That was for the army, going somewhere for training. He consulted the book and found that he had trained at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, where he'd excelled at the gun range. No surprise there.

He ate a few of the candy bars he'd bought and went to sleep early. The hum and occasional shudder
of the train was oddly soothing and he fell asleep more easily than normal, dreaming about war and his father.

The train pulled into Union Station in Chicago at close to ten am and from there he had a five hour wait until his next train departed. He bought a pair of sunglasses from a freestanding hut in the station that inexplicably sold sunglasses in November and left the building. He could have stayed inside the station for the five hours but being recognised while on the move was a better situation than being recognised inside with a finite amount of escape routes.

He didn't think he'd ever been to Chicago before, but he associated it with his grandfather, the criminal. He didn't know what to make of his memories of him. He felt that he'd loved his grandfather, but he also knew he was somehow scared of him and that was a combination he found infuriating. The book said that he 'lost his way'; was that because of his grandfather? Why had he let that happen to himself?

Why had he let any of this happen?

Around the station, there was a river to one side and some businesses to the other, mostly restaurants and cafés. He passed by a pizza parlour and lingered there for a second. He liked pizza, he thought, but the place wasn't even open yet. It had just gone nine in the morning and the parlour didn't open until eleven. Eventually, he found a small patch of park and sat down on a bench there. It was mostly empty, aside from some morning joggers, and he opened his notebook again. He couldn't think of anything to write, so he tried to draw instead, scratchy little faces in blue ballpoint pen. They looked terrible, like a kid's worst effort, and it seemed amusing to him. Steve had never been without a sketchbook and some pencils. He drew... buildings, cityscapes, nudes, and beautiful women with dark hair, red lips, legs for days, and a look about them that suggested they could unhinge their jaw and swallow you whole. He had a sudden memory of Carter; he was in a crowd of men and she was there in front of him, all her attention on Steve. Bucky hated her instantly.

He started to write: Carter, Steve, the sketchbooks, Italy. His mind shook on the subject of Italy and he tried to follow the train of thought but it made his pulse quicken and his palms turn clammy. He went back to the crappy sketches.

The five hours didn't pass so bad – if there was one thing the soldier had been good at, it was waiting. He'd wait for hours, days, hunkered down in some little hole, crouched, unmoving. He could stay still for as long as the job required.

He got back on the train at two and found his sleeper car. This leg of the journey was fifty two hours and he had nothing to entertain himself with except the biography and his notebook. He'd never needed to be kept entertained before.

He watched Chicago fade into Iowa and wrote down stray thoughts, mostly names of people and places. A lot were in his book already, but not everyone and he dug deep to find them. By six, his stomach felt uncomfortably empty. The food from the dining car was included in the price but he'd avoided it on the first train in case he was recognised. He had planned to do the same on this train, but he hadn't thought ahead and brought food to tide him over; he'd never had to think about eating before. His stomach growled and grumbled, so he didn't have much choice but to get up and make his way to the dining car with his cap pulled low.

He had to wait to be seated, like a real restaurant. He wondered when he'd been before; dimly, he remembered taking Connie out places and wanted to write that down, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself, so he kept his notebook and biography wedged under his arm until the waitress was able to squeeze him in at the end of the carriage. People normally made reservation, she told him, superiorly.
He ordered a steak, which seemed astronomically expensive, but the waitress confirmed that it was included. It tasted like fucking heaven; it tasted like nothing he remembered but probably had eaten before. Across the aisle from him, there was a family with two kids. One kid was colouring on a piece of paper the waitress had given her, while the other made a fuss about the mushrooms on his food. Bucky smiled; he'd been a little terror in the dining car on that Florida vacation, he tore up and down the aisle and hid under the table. God, his parents had been so lax with him, it was no wonder he grew up to be a little prince. His chest constricted with guilt; his parents loved him and Ma did her best despite the ditziness.

The waitress came back when he was done and asked if he wanted dessert.

He looked down at the menu. “Chocolate. This thing, the chocolate tart? Is it big?”

She indicated with her hands that it wasn't very big, which he felt disappointed about. He ordered a coffee as well and tried not to inhale the food when it came, but it was hard because he remembered, now, his appreciation for sweet things. Later, his stomach didn't thank him for it, but he didn't regret it.

He slept for six hours and spent the early morning looking out of the picture window. They were in Colorado now, according to the guide he'd been given, and he thought he'd been here before but not for good reasons. There was a big Air Force base here; his stomach turned anxiously. Christ, what had he done here?

He came out for breakfast, despite not feeling any urgent hunger, and went back for lunch too, though he resisted the urge to eat too much. He wasn't sure how they'd given him nutrition before, but he didn't think it involved solid food and his stomach was certainly having trouble adjusting to the change.

They were in Utah by the evening and he stayed in his car, choosing not to come out for dinner. They were close now and would be in California by tomorrow afternoon; the thought of it made newly familiar anxiety bubble up in his stomach. He didn't know what he was going to say to them, how to explain what he was now. It seemed easier with Eugene, his being a priest. Maybe priests were better positioned to believe the unbelievable, to have faith in the fantastic; or maybe Bucky had just never been that close to Eugene and the stakes weren't as high. That made the anxiety swell.

Eugene had given him rosary beads before he left the church. He took them out of his bag and looked at them. The beads were smooth and wooden, and the cross was silver with a small rendering of the crucified Jesus on it. He turned it over so he didn't have to look at the crucifixion and gathered the beads in the palm of his right hand. He liked the sound of them knocking together and the weight and feel of it in his palm. He touched the silver cross with his other hand, where it made a dull sound through the leather of his glove. He kept the glove on at all times so that he never had to see his hand. He had some feeling in his arm, heat, cold, and pressure, but he wouldn't be able to feel the small ridges of the cross with the fingers. Around the arm's implantation in his shoulder, it hurt, and increasingly so. It hurt his shoulder and the top of his spine. He had always felt this pain, he thought, but had never acknowledged it as something limiting or unpleasant. Now he couldn't help but dwell on the discomfort.

He lay down on the bed and deposited the beads on his chest with his right hand pressed on top. The hum of the train lulled him like a lullaby and he fell asleep on top of the covers.

He woke to light streaming through the window and his dick hard against the fabric of his pants. He lay still for a few minutes, hoping that it would subside on its own, but of course it didn't. He had had moments of arousal before, he thought, but they quickly went away or made to go away. This one wasn't going anywhere.
He listened out for a minute to ascertain if anyone was outside the door. The train appeared to be silent and he assumed it was early morning, though he didn't have a watch. He'd need to get one soon, he thought vaguely, and put the rosary aside before pressing his hand into his pants. He grunted and spread his legs wider; his dick throbbed.

It came to him suddenly, a body pressing down on him. He'd been held down many times and hated it, but this made his body flush hot. A man, with dark skin and facial hair, a nice voice; Steve, protecting Bucky with his shield, in the bed next to him, his strong jaw, his thick muscles, his skinny legs and frail chest. A hand resting in his hair as he slept, kissing outside on the grass with the stars above them.

He came all over his hand, hot and fast. It made his fingers and toes tingle, and soothe the pain in his back for a few minutes.

“Jeez,” he groaned, and wiped his hand on his thigh.

The rest of the day flew by and then he was getting off at Richmond Station. It was raining and he put his hood up over his cap and found his way to his final train, where he huddled in on a window seat and watched the totalitarian station disappear behind him and California bloom around him. It was a nice looking place, he thought. Steve had always wanted to go. Had gone, as a celebrity, not a tourist.

Bucky scribbled that in his notebook, along with the name, 'Bette Davis'. He stared at it for a second, frowning, then stuffed the book in his bag.

All too soon, they were pulling into 16th St. Mission Station. There were signs around that said BART, though he didn't understand the significance, and palm trees outside. Laughter bubbled up in his throat and he smiled to himself. It was now four fifty in the afternoon, a clock on the station wall told him. The sky was starting to darken, a black cloud looming overhead. Perhaps it'd come with Bucky. His stomach gurgled unhappily and he took the map out that Eugene had given him.

The house was nearby on, ironically, Capp Street. Bucky wondered if the name had anything to do with Steve, but he guessed it probably didn't. It took only fifteen minutes to find the place, but he kept on walking with only a quick glance at the house. He wanted to wait until it was dark to go up to the door, or that's what he told himself, anyhow. There was a lot of litter on the street and he wondered what kind of area it was. Nearby, there was a pizza parlour and, after some deliberation, he went in and ordered a medium pizza for himself. He hadn't eaten since lunch the day before.

It was a divey place and the food wasn't great, but he ate it all the same, grateful for every bite. No one looked at him, even though he was eating alone. At the table next to him, there were a couple of teenage girls hunched over their phones, laughing and chatting about school. They were getting dirty looks, but Bucky thought it was nice; they sounded happy and that was a good thing to hear.

By six forty five, it was completely dark and he'd lingered as long as he could over his pizza. He paid and left, walking the few minutes back to the house. He'd transferred the rosary beads to his pocket and twisted them around the fingers of his real hand to keep his mind from wandering too far. He pulled his cap low and peered at the house from the road. The first word that came to mind was 'cute'. It was set back a way from the road with ten steps up to the front door. The house was blue and white and had fussy little arches and details over the doors and windows. There was an old looking bench near the front door. It felt inviting.

He climbed the stairs slowly. There was a light on in the front room, so he knew someone was home. The door was a deep mahogany colour and he now noticed some kind of flowering vine in a pot across from the bench. He stared at it for a moment, his palms turning clammy. He clung onto the
He took a breath; he had to be brave. He'd never make it out here in the world if he wasn't.

He rang the bell.

"I'll get it, Grandma!" a voice called from inside. He ducked his head and clenched his hands at his sides. A minute later he heard scuffling by the door, the locked clicked open and the handle turned. He could hardly breathe at all, so he held it instead. The door swung open, bathing him in yellow light, and the girl—Katie, he thought—said, "Hey, can I help you?"

He tipped chin up enough to see her, and anything he could have said washed away. It felt as if he was back in time, looking at a twenty five year old Becca, except her hair was long and tied back, and she was wearing soft looking pants and an oversized sweater, with no make up. Becca never would have answered the door without her make up on.

He stared at her and she stared back. Her mouth opened, but she didn't say anything, and slowly she turned her head to the left and looked at something he couldn't see behind the door, then slid her eyes back over to him. Her eyes got wider and he backed up a step.

"Uh," she said. "Don't-- go." She turned again and called out, slightly hysterically, "Grandma! Can you come out here? There's someone... Uh. Please come out here." Every word from her mouth sounded like a struggle, like she couldn't figure out what she wanted to say.

He heard soft shuffling footsteps and a slight grumble. "If it's someone collecting for something..."

"Grandma," Katie said, and 'Grandma' stepped out into the hall. Even with coarse grey hair, lines all over her face, and glasses, Bucky knew that it was Florence. He knew it was his little sister.

Florence shuffled closer, squinting behind her glasses. He glanced quickly over his shoulder, then let go of the beads and removed the cap from his head, squeezing it between his hands. "Florence," he murmured.

"Bucky?" she whispered, and he pressed his lips together. She hurried up to him—she could move fast for an old lady—and put her hands on his face. It made him start, the contact, but he stayed still as she stared at him fiercely behind her glasses. "Bucky," she said again, firmly, and wrapped her arms around him. He hugged back, dropping his forehead to her shoulder. "Oh my God," she whispered, and rubbed her hand up and down his back. "You came back."

"Wait..." Katie said. "How are you--?"

There were a lot of ways she could finish that question and few he could answer.

Florence pulled away, her face already wet with tears. Bucky's eyes felt very hot. She gripped his arms and guided him through the door, then closed it behind him. All around him were framed photographs, and he could see what Katie must have been looking at: a picture of him grinning at the camera with lights and geometric buildings behind him. Bucky didn't think he looked much like that man any more, but maybe just enough to be recognisable.

"Were you with Steve?" Florence asked.

He shook his head.

"But you're ninety six and don't look a day over thirty?" Katie said.
“I guess,” he said, and something about that made Florence laugh a little.

She shook her head and took his hand. “Let’s go to the kitchen and try to make sense of this.”

“Grandma,” Katie said and gave a look that added: there’s no sense to be made here. Bucky didn’t disagree.

Instead, Florence made tea.

“Is there a reason we're not freaking out?” Katie asked. Florence had sat Bucky at a square kitchen table, while Katie stood, shifting from foot to foot. The kitchen was cute, like the house, all floral and frilly. He asked them to draw the blinds before he came in, and they were the fancy wood kind. He liked it.

“When you're seventeen and a boy you've known your whole life becomes double the man he was overnight, and then when you're eighty six and that same boy returns, still twenty six and beautiful, and fighting aliens in Midtown, there’s not much left to freak out about, dear,” she said mildly, dunking a tea bag into a mug.

Bucky laughed, even as the phrase, 'double the man he was' pinged in his head and made him feel off-kilter. Florence set the mug down in front of him and he snapped back to this kitchen in San Francisco.

“Milk, two sugars?” she asked gently.

“Three,” he said, and blinked. “Can I... eat a couple?”

“Have as many as you like,” she said, and set a box of sugar cubes down on the table. He took two and sucked on them until the edges crumbled and dissolved on his tongue. He took another.

Katie took a breath. “Okay, but... can you tell us something about what's going on?”

“Yeah,” he said, and closed his flesh hand around the cup. “Has anyone come around asking questions?”

Florence nodded. “A friend of Steve's visited a few weeks ago.”

The same friend that Eugene spoke too, Bucky bet. “Anyone else?”

“There were some shady looking guys hanging around last week,” Katie said. “Remember, Grandma? I said they looked like spies – you said I should dial back my imagination.”

Florence rolled her eyes a little.

Bucky sat forward. “But they haven't been around since? Could they have got in, planted something?”

“I don't think so,” Katie said.

Florence shook her head. “There's always someone here and we have security cameras. What happened to you?”

So he told them; bits of it, at least. Florence held his hand as he mumbled about being the operative all over the news, about his memories, about being hunted, and she reminded him of no one so much as Ma, her loving presence. Who would have thought Flo would have turned into their mother?
Katie looked frightened, which he didn't blame her for. He was frightening and maybe it was because of their upbringing that Florence wasn't scared too. She rubbed her papery thumb over the back of his hand and watched him like he'd hung the moon.

“I saw Eugene in Brooklyn,” he said. “He looks like Grandpa.”

“He didn't tell me,” Florence said, and for a moment he saw her as a little girl, deeply insulted that her twin would withhold any scrap of information from her.

“I told him not to. Uh... Becca's here, isn't she?”

“She's in the back, sleeping,” Florence said.

“We moved her bedroom downstairs a couple years back,” Katie added.

“How is she?”

Florence looked like she was choosing her words carefully. “She's... okay. Her arthritis has been getting worse and her kidneys aren't functioning well any more, but all things considered...”

He knew there was something she wasn't telling him, but he didn't pursue it.

“We're going to wake her soon for dinner, would you like to see her?” Florence added.

He slipped his right hand into his pocket and fiddled with the beads. “I dunno. What if she has a heart attack or something?”

“She's as tough as she ever was, Bucky,” Florence said, and squeezed his knee. “You came all this way for something.”

He worried his lip for a moment, then nodded. “Okay,” he murmured.

Katie prepared Becca's dinner, lukewarm soup, some bread, and a cup of tea, and filled a tray to carry in to her. Katie was twenty eight, Florence said, and had lived with her great grandmother (though she called Florence 'Grandma' unless her actual grandma Carolyn was around) since 2010, after she completed her 'useless' masters degree in English Literature. Now she worked on the register of a grocery store and helped take care of Becca. Becca also had a nurse that came a few times a week and checked on her, so Katie only had to do the minor things. She needn't do them at all, Florence whispered to him, but it made her feel like less of an imposition.

They led him down the hall to Becca's room, but when they reached the door, Bucky stopped.

“Can you just... go in first?” he said softly. Florence put her hand on his back and gestured for Katie to go in.

“It's okay to be scared,” she said.

Fear had never been okay before, but he guessed this was a brave new world. He was scared and he held onto the beads tightly as Katie told Becca there someone here to see her. Florence gave him a push that seemed pretty strong for an old lady. She was still athletic, even at eighty seven. He shuffled to the door and stared at Becca. She was sitting up in a bed that seemed to be bent in half and she had squishy pillows scattered all around her and a blanket tucked in under her armpits. Her hair was still styled in short waves, but there wasn't much of it now and he could see patches of her scalp when she turned and looked at the door.
His stomach rolled, but she just blinked milky blue eyes at him and Katie handed her a pair of thick glasses. She put them on with frail hands, frailer even than Sarah's had been. She blinked again and squinted.

“You'll have to come closer,” she demanded, “I'm more blind than not these days.”

He stared at her – she had a deep wrinkle that ran horizontally above her top lip and pulled strangely when she moved her mouth. Florence gave him another shove and he stumbled into the room.

“Stand over here, then she'll be able to see you,” Katie said, gesturing for him to take her place beside the bed. He came over slowly as Becca frowned at him, her eyebrows a speckled grey, and got close enough that his knees touched the mattress. He resisted the urge to chew on his nails, choosing instead to chew his lip as she looked him up and down.

The moment seemed to stretch on forever before she took a breath. “I guess dementia's finally got me.”

“Not yet, Becca,” Florence said and raised her eyebrows at Bucky. “Say something.”

“Hi,” he murmured, and Florence flapped her hands irritably. “It's me, Becca. It's... Bucky.”

She reached for his hand and he gave it, brushing his fingers gently over her skin. Tears began to collect at the corners of her eyes.

“We'll leave you to it,” Florence said, and ushered Katie out.

Becca wiped at her eyes and sniffed. “How are you...?”

“It's a long story,” he said and added, lamely like every other time, “You saw about Steve? Like that, but... different.”

She swallowed, the sagging skin on her neck moving up and down, and patted the empty bed beside her. “Sit.”

He came around to the other side and sat down carefully, in case he tipped her or her tray of food. She kept staring at him and the phrase, 'is there something on my face' came to mind, but he didn't say it. Maybe he was the kind of person who would have said it before. She lifted her hand and brushed it across his chin and cheek; like with Florence, the touch felt alien, but he remained still beneath it.

“I always hated you with facial hair,” she said.

“I'll shave,” he replied.

She pursed her lips, then gave his hair a tug. “And what's this? You look like a hobo.”

“At least I have hair,” he said, and she narrowed her eyes slightly. Perhaps he shouldn't have said something as mean as that.

Finally, she smiled. “This is what happens when you get old, brother.” Her smile dimmed as she squinted at his face. “Why aren't you old?”

“I... I don't... really know,” he hedged. It was a lie; he knew why he was still young, it was because of the cryo, but he guessed he didn't really know why any of this had happened to him, so in that sense, he was telling the truth. “There's a lot I don't remember.”
“Same here,” Becca said, and he laughed a little, despite himself. She tapped his gloved hand. “What's this? You look stupid with just one on.”

He took a breath and tugged the glove off, then held his hand out to her. Her mirth faded away as she looked at it. She touched the plates of his fingers so lightly that he couldn't feel the pressure.

“What happened to you?”

“I lost my arm,” he said and because it sounded funny like that, he added, “I misplaced it somewhere.”

She pressed her lips together again. “How?”

“I don't--” He paused, thinking. He remembered snow, rocks, an icy river. He remembered his cell and stench of his rotting arm; being sick, surgery, the girl... “I lost it when I fell. From the train.” The train that carried Steve away from him.

“Oh,” she said quietly. “How is it?”

He shrugged. “It works okay. I can't feel a lot of things with it, but I guess it's better than the stump.”

Her eyes went wide and he realised that he shouldn't have said that, the 'stump', that brought up bad images. She took his real hand again and he curled his fingers into her palm.

“Did Steve ever come see you?” he asked.

“No. It was such a shock, seeing him on TV, I thought I was hallucinating. We thought he'd come but he never did. We tried reaching out to that SHIELD organisation, but they weren't interested in old people like us.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, “he should have come see you.”

“Have you seen him?”

He snorted. “I did more than that,” he said, and realised he should have opened with this, like he had with the kids. “I tried to kill him. That operative on the news? That's me.”

He held his breath and looked at her. The corners of her mouth tipped up. “Are you planning any more attempted murder?”

He shook his head. “I don't want to.”

She squeezed his hand and smiled. “Tell me about your life?” he asked.

She did, as she sipped on her soup. Her and Arnie came to San Francisco in 1963, like the book said. It was 'happening' she said with a slight smile, though she and Arnie were far past the age of the hip kids by then – she was forty six and he was forty eight – but they still did their fair share of partying. There were a lot of older folks in the clubs back then, the ones just peering out of the closet. Bucky didn't know exactly what that meant, but he didn't interrupt her. In 1967, Lily moved out there too. “Do you remember her?” Becca said, ‘Lily Proctor?’ He remembered a cold, pretty blonde who never had much to say to him. Becca said that was her, and that she passed away in 2010. Bucky felt sorry about that.

Coming out to the family went in stages, first Florence and Linda, then Ma and Dad, and finally Eugene. Like Eugene said, he didn't take it so well, but Becca skirted around the topic. Arnie met
Michael Bech in 1971, some twenty-five years younger than him at thirty-one— which was common at the time, she said—and for the first time since 1935, Becca and Arnie began to live apart, though Arnie moved only a few blocks away, on Valencia, where he lived with Michael until his death in 1997. The book said that Bucky was irritated by Arnie, but he found that he was deeply sad to hear that he'd died.

Becca talked a little bit about Jimmy; he helped heal the family, she said, and Ma had once confided in her that the timing of Jimmy's conception made it feel like Bucky had been reincarnated within him. That was a nice thought, Bucky wished it were true. Of course, his death chipped away at the family a little bit more and Becca got teary-eyed talking about it.

She started to tire after that, her eyelids drooping as her speech slowed. He set the tray down on the floor and fussed with her blankets and the elevation of her mattress (it moved up and down!) until she slapped his metal arm and told him to stop being an old woman. He smiled and kissed her forehead while she tutted at him, but she was asleep before he left the room.

He carried the tray back to the kitchen and washed the bowl and spoon in the sink. His bag was on the floor by the kitchen table and he quickly rifled through it to make sure everything was still there. Of course it was, Florence was hardly likely to steal his notebook or the few candy bars he had left at the bottom.

"I've made up the guest room," Florence said from the door, her eyes briefly falling on his ungloved hand. He looked up at her and she raised her eyebrows in challenge.

"Okay," he said, "thanks."

The room was cute, like the rest of the house, painted in light blues, with a frilly, floral quilt on the bed. It made him think of Ma, for some reason, and it wasn't even nine yet when he curled up under the covers with his pants and hooded top still on. The linen smelt nice, like lavender but musty, like no one had been in here for a while. It was comforting.

Still, he couldn't sleep. The first noise he heard outside said his heart hammering against his chest, and after watching the light of a few car headlights pass slowly over the room, he wrapped the blanket around himself and went to the window to peer out. He could only move the curtain a fraction to not be seen from the road, which didn't give him a great range of vision, but he didn't see anything out of the ordinary. That didn't mean there wouldn't be anything; it was unthinkable to him that he wasn't followed here.

He spent the whole night staring out of the window, sat on a chair with the blanket around him, until seven, when he heard Florence and Katie moving around in the hall. Florence knocked on the door and called out that she was going to make breakfast and what did he want. He didn't know and she suggested oatmeal since it was cold out. That sounded fine to him.

Katie was helping Becca into a chair when he came down and Florence gestured for him to sit down beside her.

"What--" Katie said and stared at his metal hand. Christ, he'd forgotten to put the glove back on.

"What happened to your hand?"

He looked at it for a moment. "I lost the real one," he said.

"That's... a hell of a prosthetic," she said, and Florence shushed her. "Sorry."

"It's okay. It's... a good arm, I guess. Strong." Too strong, actually.
Florence put a bowl of oatmeal down in front of him. “What do you want on it?”

He didn't know that either.

Becca cleared her throat, and in a creaky voice said, “You used to have it with about a cup of sugar and chopped up strawberries. Ma used to cut up your strawberries every morning after Cook was let go. You were such a little prince.”

That sounded like a bad thing, but she smiled and he smiled back. Florence said they only had blueberries, so he’d have to have that. She was right to suggest the oatmeal and it brought back hazy memories of morning rituals.

“We all had to eat together in the mornings, didn't we?” he asked.

“Morning and evening,” Florence said, “Ma was very firm on that.”

“She said she always had breakfast and dinner at the table with Grandpa and Grandma until Grandma died, and then she hardly saw Grandpa at all. She didn't want that for us,” Becca added.

Bucky wondered about Grandpa. The book said he had died in 1952, at Fishkill Correctional Facility in Fishkill, New York. He was stabbed by another inmate, but they never discovered who and before he died he refused to give up the name. That was honour of sorts, Bucky guessed. He wondered if Grandpa's death was why they sold the house the following year.

He recalled some good things about the man. He remembered the feeling of overwhelming awe he had for his grandfather as a child and he felt he'd been severely spoilt by him, but as he grew older, things got complicated. Steve had said something, once, about Grandpa, he thought, and something had changed after that. Bucky became this anxious, violent man that Ravitz had pondered on.

“I always had breakfast in front of the TV, watching cartoons,” Katie said.

“Kids these days,” Bucky said, and drew surprised laughs.

Katie had to leave for work not long after, though she told Florence very firmly to call if she needed anything; she didn't trust Bucky here and she wasn't wrong to. Florence was unfazed and suggested that they look through her and Becca's old photo albums. The few pictures in the book had triggered a lot of his memories, so he expected the albums would be even better.

There were dozens of them, heavy with pictures and names and dates on them all. Florence had drawn the curtains first—all the windows were covered now and he thought that if there was someone watching the house, that would seem suspicious—and he sat on the end of the couch as they narrated everything. There were hundreds of pictures of him, in all stages of life up until the war. It seemed so... self-involved to look at them all. Becca and Florence liked it, though; Becca made mean comments and Florence said which ones had been Ma's favourites.

“Oh!” she said after a while. “I have videos, do you want to see them?”

He did, and she bustled off and returned with a computer—a laptop, he thought—and tapped around on it for a while.

“Katie got them all put onto digital,” she said and clicked a little picture on the screen. She was good on the thing.

“Can you show me how to use this?” he asked.
She laughed and shook her head. “I'll show you,” she promised.

“I'm better than she is,” Becca insisted. “I was doing programming in the sixties for IBM.”

“But you don't have a Facebook,” Florence replied.

Becca pursed her lips. “All my friends are dead.”

Florence shook her head and hit play. “This was on an old reel we discovered about ten years ago. We didn't know that it existed until then.” The footage was grainy, in black and white, and a little out of focus, but it looked like a beach. “This is you and Becca with Ma, Dad, and Grandpa at Coney Island. Judging by your age, we think it was probably filmed in 1921 or '22.”

That made him four or five, he thought. There was no sound on the video, but there were two little kids running around and a woman in a big hat sitting on a towel. A large man came into the frame and picked up the boy and the girl, throwing them over his shoulders and spinning them around. That was his grandfather, he thought, spinning them around until they got sick. Bucky didn't think he had enjoyed it very much.

When Grandpa put them down, little Bucky walked a few steps, then fell over and started crying.

“You were such a crybaby when you were little,” Becca said.

He smiled a little. A slim man came into the frame and picked the boy up, cuddling him for a moment before putting him down next to the woman on the towel. His father and mother, he thought. Ma gave him a kiss on his forehead, then Becca toddled up and yanked on his hair; they went tearing off together towards the ocean and the screen went dark. Florence tapped at the computer and closed the window.

“Do you have any more?” he asked.

“Not of you, the other reels were too damaged. I have some of the family, if you'd like to see?”

They watched videos from over the years, birthday parties, weddings, marches. Florence had footage of Ma at what they identified as a pride parade in 1978. Ma was there with a feathery thing around her neck, along with the girls and an older Arnie with a tall, broad-faced blond guy. That was Michael, Becca said, he was always beautiful. Bucky thought he recognised Carolyn with a young girl he assumed was Katie's mother.

“Can you imagine, Ma at pride parades,” Becca said with a laugh. Bucky hardly knew what pride parades were. “She was always a bit of a showboat, though, so she fit right in once she got used to the idea. She went down a storm every time.”

The last video was of Jimmy. It was another silent film, Jimmy laughing at something and playing with a baby. He looked terribly young, but Bucky guessed he was young. He had long, messy hair, longer than Bucky's, and a broad nose and soft face; he didn't look a thing like Bucky, despite the shared name. A girl with long blonde hair came into the frame, obviously Carolyn, and sat down on the armrest next to where Jimmy and the baby were sitting. She looked even younger than him, her face freckled and unmarred by any lines. She kissed the baby on the head, then leaned over and kissed Jimmy. The footage didn't run much past that.

“You know,” Florence said, and her voice sounded thick. He looked at her and her eyes were glistening with tears. “That book made it seem as if he was stupid; he wasn't, he was just content with life.”
Bucky smiled and took her hand. It sounded nice, to be content; that was something he thought he could never get to grips with. Florence smiled back and gripped his hand tight. On the other side of him, Becca was flagging, her eyelids drooping heavily, and Florence told him she often took naps in the living room and that they could go have something to eat in the kitchen.

“Sandwiches?” Bucky said, following her in. “I can make them.”

She smiled a little. “Jimmy always used to comfort me that I had lots of other talents besides making food.”

He laughed and picked up a couple of plates. “What do you want?”

“Surprise me,” she said, and lowered herself onto a chair. The difference in activity between her and Becca was like night and day, but he could still see that she was tiring as well. He dug out some lettuce and packaged ham from the fridge and busied himself with that for a few minutes. He thought that when he was young, it wasn't so easy to make yourself lunch like this.

Florence accepted the plate gratefully when he brought it over to the table and they ate in silence for a few minutes. The blinds in the kitchen were still drawn, in deference to him.

“I should really... go,” he said.

She lay down her half-finished sandwich – he had already inhaled his. “I want you to stay.”

“It's not safe for me to be here, not for you.”

“I don't care about that,” she said firmly.

“Flo...”

She smiled a little and he saw tears collect on her eyelids. “It's only a couple of weeks until Christmas and Becca's birthday.”

“I can't stay that long. Aren't you going to have people to stay?”

She shook her head. “Carolyn lives in North Beach, so that side stay with her. Linda always insists in a hotel. The only person who'll be staying is Eugene. That's the beauty of being very old, you can refuse to put up guests and no one can argue.”

“But there'll be people here in the day, won't there?”

“For the afternoon,” she said, then reached over and lay her hand over his. “Please think about it.”

“I...” She was looking at him imploringly and he thought he remembered that look, a little girl staring up at him outside a toy store or ice cream stand. He smiled a little and turned his hand so that their palms met. “Okay, I'll think about it, but I don't think Katie will like it.”

Florence clicked her tongue and sat back. “She thinks we're a couple of silly old women who can't look after ourselves.”

“Why doesn't she live with Carolyn; that's her grandmother, right?”

“Yes, but Carolyn's a bit too much of a flowerchild for Katie. They always butt heads. I guess you don't know what that means, though.”

He grinned. “I can take a guess.”
The wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she smiled back.

“You know, Katie really looks like Becca,” he said.

Florence took a breath. “Oh Lord, I know, it's alarming sometimes how much. Behaves like her too.”

After lunch, where he insisted on doing the washing up, Florence gave him a spare laptop and showed him how to use it, which she found hugely amusing and said that Katie would ‘die laughing’ about when she heard. She showed him how to search for things and go to different websites, then left him with it in the kitchen to look through seventy years worth of news. A lot of it was familiar and he wondered what hand he played in this coup or that assassination. The only news he was truly interested was about Steve, though.

The articles published after his 'death' were hard to read, his breath quickened and his chest tightened. He found a picture of an issue of Life magazine and had to put his head between his legs until the overwhelming sense memory of rotting flesh passed. He decided to skip the rest of them.

The articles from 2012 were a lot more wild; the main theories on Steve's return were that he was an actor, a clone, or some soldier who'd been subjected to extensive plastic surgery. Bucky found the idea of the last one deeply unsettling and flexed his left hand. This was all quite aside from the fact that there had recently been aliens in New York and that, in fact, aliens existed. Bucky remembered that he liked all those movies with guys in unconvincing costumes and was pleased by the idea of it, though maybe not so much all the destruction they wrought.

The recent news on Steve was all about SHIELD and HYDRA, of course. Charges against him and Romanoff had been dropped once the authorities figured out that Steve was telling the truth about the infiltration. The government was in a shambles and senator after senator were being flipped and begging plea deals. There was speculation in some of the articles about who else might have been HYDRA – one suggestion had it that the Starks, Howard and Anthony both, were in HYDRA's pocket, which got a very harsh response from someone called 'Virginia Potts'.

It wasn't until he saw a picture of Howard Stark that he truly remembered him. In his travels, he'd seen the eponymous Stark Industries around and there were a few quotes from Howard in the book, but it wasn't until he saw the man's face that he remembered snippets of afternoon's in a laboratory or even nights in drinking establishments. A hazy memory of a dark road. Howard was a frequently sleazy asshole who was nevertheless tight with Carter; Bucky limited the amount of time he spent around him and, for most of the time he was on the front, Carter too.

Katie came home at five with armfuls of groceries and said she would start on dinner. He offered to help but she said she was fine. She was still skittish around him, and why not? She was the only sensible one in this house. When they sat down to dinner, Florence informed the table that she'd taught Bucky how to use the computer, which produced only a wan smile from Katie.

“Bucky's going to be staying with us for a while,” Florence added.

Katie glanced up at him, then over at Florence. “How long?”

“Hopefully until the new year,” she said and looked over at him.

“Maybe,” he said, and looked down at his plate as Katie's mouth tightened up.

“What about Christmas, everyone is going to be over here.”

“We'll come to that when we come to that,” Becca said firmly, sounding like no one so much as Ma at her most irritated. Katie pursed her lips and went back to her food. Bucky kept his attention on his
The atmosphere in the house remained tense for the rest of the evening and he excused himself to bed after Becca had retired to hers. Florence had 'her show on Netflix' to watch, she said, and Katie was in the kitchen, tapping away quickly on her laptop. Maybe she was reading things about the Winter Soldier and all his atrocities.

He did the same, reading as much as he could stand. The news was so awful and they were so close to discovering his identity, it made his stomach twist uncomfortably. He didn't want to come back in now, to anybody, but they'd take him, alive or dead. Steve wouldn't be okay with that and everything would go to shit.

He went back to his book and read about the soothing stories of his past life. Like he'd read before, his only romance of note in the book was with this woman Connie (although he did have a brief love affair with black dancer and actress Hazel Landale who said he was 'a good soul but too unfocused'), but he knew that wasn't the end of it. It was clear to him now that he was homosexual, even though there was nothing to indicate it in the book and when he searched it on the computer, nothing much came up there either. He sat on the bed and stared for a moment at the phrase he'd typed 'bucky barnes gay' (that was the term now, he'd figured out, and he liked it better than 'queer'), then deleted it and quickly typed 'gabriel jones'.

There was a photographer called Gabriel Jones, but that wasn't it. Further down was a link to a website called Wikipedia and on there was an entry about Gabriel Jones, born August 14, 1920, an original member of the Howling Commandos. He served in Europe from 1943 to 1947, staying after VE-Day to help liberate the camps and serve as translator. He went on to work as an interpreter for the UN in the late forties and fifties before taking a position in the French department of NYU, and lived in New York until the early nineties, when he retired and moved home to Macon, Georgia. He had a wife and three kids.

There was a special section on the page entitled 'Barnes recovery mission'.

In the weeks after the death of James Barnes and disappearance of Steve Rogers, Jones organised a recovery mission in the approximate area of the Eastern Alps that Barnes fell. The team consisted of the remaining Commandos, with the addition of Captain Samuel Sawyer, and involved repelling down the mountain face to reach the bottom of the ravine. The search lasted three days of thorough sweeps, but all that was found was a torn blue sleeve likely belonging to Barnes's jacket. No body was ever recovered.

Bucky closed his eyes and remembered Gabe's hands on him, his rough facial hair, and the smell of his cologne. He remembered how Gabe took care of him in that godforsaken munitions factory, kept him eating and drinking as best he could. He remembered that he was happy with Gabe.

He took a breath and looked at the picture on the page, Gabe handsome and smiling. Bucky thought maybe he had been in love with him; something solid and real, not like with Steve. Something that could have lasted for both of them.

Gabe was still going, at the ripe old age of ninety three and that made Bucky's chest expand. He closed the lid of the computer and shut the light off before laying down to sleep.

When he came downstairs in the morning, Katie was already up, the only person in the kitchen. She felt his presence as soon as he came in the room and glanced over her shoulder.
“Morning,” she murmured, then returned to stirring her cup. She was still in her robe, her hair lying limply across her shoulders.

“Morning,” he echoed. “I can, uh, make breakfast?”

She looked over at him again and frowned. “It's fine. Isn't that what you wore yesterday? And the day before?”

He looked down at his jeans and hooded sweatshirt. “I guess so, yeah.”

“Is that all you have? Do you sleep in it?”

He shrugged in answer and she pursed her mouth. She looked so much like Becca that it made his heart ache.

“I'll buy you something today after work. What size are you?”

He thought for a moment. “Thirty three?”

“Thirty three what?”

He frowned; that was a good question. “Waist? And... inseam? I think.”

“What about on top?”

“Medium? Large? I-- don't know...”

She sighed and shook her head. “I'll get a selection, I guess.”

She didn't stick around for much longer after that, as Florence came in with Becca and announced that today they were going to clear out the attic. Katie reminded her that Becca's nurse was coming before she stalked out of the room.

“The nurse doesn't stay long,” Florence said, “you'll have to stay out of sight while she's here.”

“Yeah,” he replied, “that's fine.”

The attic had a rickety ladder leading up to a hatch. Bucky elected to go up alone and bring the boxes down for Florence to peruse. Becca was markedly more tired today and had gone back to bed.

The attic itself was dusty and filled with spiders. There was a lot of old sports equipment, boxes of records, and boxes of pictures and clothes. He brought down a good dozen and Florence brought out a chair from her bedroom to sit on while she looked it all over. There were some bits and pieces that she deemed to be trash, but not much.

“Oh,” she murmured as she pulled a lid off a box. “These are Jimmy's things.” She bent down and lifted out a suede jacket covered with tassels and beads. “This was his favourite – Carolyn made it for him.”

Bucky leaned forward and touched the material; it was still soft at the bottom despite its age, but was worn thin in other places. “She was a good seamstress.”

Florence lay the jacket across her legs and smoothed her hands over it. “She still is, she made me a lovely dress for Linda's wedding.” Her brief smile slid away again and she closed her hands around
the fabric, bunching it slightly. “You never get over it,” she said softly, her eyes turning shiny behind her glasses.

He got up onto his knees and hugged her; he wondered how Ma and Dad had coped with his ‘death’ but he didn’t have the heart to ask. Florence curled a hand around his arm and kissed him on the forehead.

She took a deep breath a moment later and Bucky sat back on his haunches. “I’ve done enough crying for one life,” she said, and pointed to another box. “Bring that one over, I have a suspicion it’s got some things of yours in it.”

It did, holding mainly clothes, including several school uniforms and his football jersey, which had the number fifteen embroidered on the front. It was fraying in several places but still in good condition considering that it was eighty years old.

“I wonder if it still fits you,” she said.

He looked down at it held in both his flesh and metal hands and bit his lip. “Probably not,” he said, and put it aside. Trying it on would mean the both of them having to look at his left arm and he wasn’t ready for that. There was a leather helmet, though, and he pulled that on. It was a tight fit.

“Maybe my head got bigger,” he said and went back to the box and sifted through twenty or so soft toys. At the bottom he found a small, velvety green box and popped it open to find a ring inside. It was gold, with a diamond and a pearl. “God,” he said, “I was going to give this to Connie, wasn’t I?”

“That’s what Becca told us,” Florence said.

He slipped the ring on his index finger where it could barely reach the first knuckle. It was a tiny little thing. “She never knew, did she?”

“We didn’t tell her about it, it seemed cruel,” Florence replied, and he nodded and replaced the ring in its box.

“You kept a lot of my junk.”

“Ma and Dad kept it all,” Florence said. “When he passed, Ma moved in here with Becca and Lily and brought it all along. There’s more up there besides this.”

He nodded and refolded the jersey carefully, returning it to the box. The next box wasn’t as full, but it gave him pause when he looked into it. Florence peered over and hummed.

“Your army things,” she said and he swallowed. His army things.

There was a shoebox inside, which he took out and put to one side. Underneath it was a green-brown jacket and hat. On the sleeve of the jacket was a sergeant’s insignia and on the hat was the United States coat of arms. He had only worn this uniform briefly, for photos and to show off and look professional – the rest of the time he wore the blue jacket that Steve got custom made for him. It was double-breasted and quilted on the inside. The family hadn’t got that one, though, since he fell with it on and they likely cut it off him before stapling his stump together and locking him in a cell, paralysed and dehydrated.

Bile rose up to his throat and he leant forward and gagged.

“Bucky?” Florence said in alarm, “are you okay?”
He swallowed heavily and sat back again. “I'm fine,” he murmured. The rest of the clothes in the box were more assorted items of uniform, many torn and frayed and yet still lovingly preserved all these years. He turned his attention to the shoebox and found a stack of letters bound with ribbon. He flicked through them, stopping at the messiest handwriting he'd ever seen. The first part read: Bucky, Sorry for taking so long to write. Things are OK with me, hopefully they are good with you to.

He smiled to himself. That was Steve and his crazy post-serum handwriting and averagely bad spelling. The rest of the letters were mainly from Becca or Ma, along with a couple from Connie. He grimaced at the letter calling him cruel and grimaced some more at the photographs of the two of them nestled at the very bottom.

“Was she okay? Connie, I mean, after the war?”

Florence pressed her lips together. “I think so. Honestly, between Radcliffe and Jimmy, I wasn't very involved in all the stuff going on at home. She married one of her brother's friends and had five children, I think.”

That would have made her happy, he thought, all those kids; she would have loved being at home looking after them. It was a good thing he hadn't come back from the war, he wouldn't have been any kind of husband for her. He took a breath.

“How'd you get all this stuff, anyway?”

“Oh,” she said, “well, Ms. Carter brought it to us personally.”

“Carter?”

Florence nodded. “You should ask Becca about it, she was the one who met her. Ma wouldn't leave her bedroom and Dad was at work. I remember her telling me that Carter spoke very highly of you.”

He snorted. “I was a real asshole to her.”

“Well, that's a given,” she replied with a sly smile.

After another hour or so, Bucky took the boxes back up to the attic minus a couple of broken TVs and a metal fan, which he took downstairs to the back door but couldn't take to the trash in case he was spotted. That would be Katie's job when she got home. Becca's nurse came at one and he shut himself in the guest room and locked the door.

The rest of the afternoon passed quietly and he spent most of his time clicking around on the laptop – it turned out to be quite addictive.

At six, Katie came home with a bag of clothes for him.

“Keep the tags on the ones you don't want,” she said, and smiled ever so slightly.

Only one of the three pairs of jeans she bought fit him and were halfway comfortable at the same time; the denim was stiff and didn't come up as high as he recalled pants being. He hadn't considered this a problem with the pants he'd stolen in DC – which were pretty ripe now – but in comparison to the leather armour, anything would have been better.

She'd bought him three tops, a white t-shirt, a grey t-shirt, and a red henley like the kind he used to wear as an undershirt. He stared at himself in the mirror for a few minutes before unzipping his sweatshirt and peeling off his shirt. He closed his eyes as the shirt came off over his head and stood there for a moment before reopening them. The sight of himself made his stomach lurch. The arm
enveloped his entire shoulder, he had nothing left there of his own. He wondered what was beneath, if there was any bone or muscle, or if it was all just metal.

The memory from before came back to him, the stump, the bloody bandages, the stitches in his face, the stench of decomposition. He hunched forward and threw up, retching over the sink until there was nothing left to bring up and his throat burned from the bile. He looked back up at himself, at his now pale lips and swallowed the last of it down. He remembered blood in the snow and a man leaning over him and assuring him that he would be okay. Bucky had believed him until the man’s brains blew across across his face.

He gagged again and turned away from the mirror to retrieve the first top. All three fit, though the henley was a little loose. He liked it the best, though, so he wanted to keep it. With only a t-shirt on, he could make out the ridge where metal met flesh, so he pulled the henley over the top, even though it seemed dumb to wear two undershirts together. He gargled some water and cleaned the sink, then went back downstairs. Florence said he looked very handsome and he rolled his eyes.

Becca was still too tired to come out when it was time for dinner, so Katie fixed her a sandwich and soup and gave it to him to take in. She didn't stir when Bucky stepped in and he stood at the side of her bed for a few minutes, wondering if he should let her sleep, when she came to with a huff.

“Oh,” she said, blinking over at him. “Don't stand there like a creep.”

“Sorry,” he murmured and came forward with the tray, setting it down on the empty side of the bed. “Do you need--” he began, but she had already jabbed a button beside her and got the mattress to raise her up a few inches. She smiled smugly and took the sandwich.

“Sit down,” she said, and he did. “Say something.”

He smiled. “Florence said I should ask you about when Peggy Carter delivered my things home.”

“Oh,” she said, and lowered the sandwich. “She was a beautiful woman.”

“That's what you noticed?”

“Well, not at the time, but in hindsight, you know. Absolutely gorgeous.”

He shook his head. “What about Lily?”

“Lily'd have done her too.”

“Becca!” he said, laughing despite himself. “I thought I was supposed to be the womaniser.”

“Mm.” Becca smiled, her lips thin and her wrinkles deep. “Ms Carter told me that the two of you didn't get on very well.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows knowingly. “Because you were jealous of her?”

“I guess,” he said, and smiled. Even though he couldn't recall the actual thoughts he'd had on the subject at the time, he could feel the jealousy churning inside of him. “Arnie told you?”

“Eventually,” she said and took a bite of the sandwich. “Honestly, I felt like such a fool. It was the sixties and we'd just moved out west – I'd got a Christmas card from Connie and started lamenting how sad it was that the two of you had ended in tragedy. Arnie said something like that wasn't the
tragedy of it and once I forced it out of him, I was shocked. He asked me how I'd never noticed, that it was so obvious that you were in love with Steve. Of course I knew you were a little overly devoted to him, but I never followed it to its obvious conclusion. We kept it from Florence and Eugene for years.”

“Did you tell Ma and Dad?”

She shook her head and laid the sandwich down. “No, I didn't want to ruin their image of you. I know that sounds awful these days, especially from an old dyke like me, but you were everything to them. You were perfect, and I didn't want to tarnish that.”

Bucky nodded. “Did anyone else come after I was gone?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, a young African American man.”

He couldn't help but smile. “Gabe.”

“Yes. You had something with him?”

“I think so. I think... I loved him.” He remembered feeling safe with Gabe, his sharp edges and bilious temperament soothed temporarily. He felt cared for, which he thought was all he ever wanted. “He looked for my body, after. Did you know that?”

“No,” she said, and her eyes turned downcast. He laid his hand over hers.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

“No, no,” she said, and wiped at her eyes with her free hand. “I wish we could have shared this when we were young.”

“I don't think I would've been ready, I think it would have taken decades. I couldn't... understand who I was.” And he understood even less now.

“Well, we can make up for it now,” she said, and raised her eyebrows. “What did you get up to with your young man?”

He ducked his head and laughed. “I don't think I should tell you that, you're still my little sister, you know.”

“And you're still my big, dumb brother,” she said, and tapped him on the chin until he looked back up. “I'm sure there's nothing you got up to that I didn't do in the sixties.”

He smiled. “Honestly, I think I was kind of a prude.”

“A prude? Steve must have rubbed off on you out there.”

He tipped his head a little in acknowledgement, though he didn't think Steve had come into it in that respect. “I think that, back then, I thought if I did... that kind of stuff—” God, he couldn't even say it now. “—I wouldn't be able to go back to being... normal. I'm sorry.”

She shook her head. “We all went through it back then, it's not like now; you struggled along on your own until you made your peace with it or pushed it back down.”

“I think I would have pushed it back down, if I'd come back.”

She smiled. “I think so too.”
“Hey...” he murmured, and smiled a little. “Steve knew. I told him one day and I think I kissed him.”

Becca's eyebrows went high on her face and she sat forward. “What happened?”

“He didn't kiss me back. I knew he wouldn't.” He'd known Steve wasn't the way he was. Even though people had cast aspersions on Steve when he was young, Bucky had always known that Steve's head was filled with thoughts of girls. Bucky would always play second fiddle to that.

“I'm sorry,” Becca said, and patted his hand. He didn't realise until that moment how sad he felt, like a blanket of defeat had settled over him. He never had a chance with Steve, but he'd never been able to let go. He blinked against his warm eyes and took a breath. Becca had flagged, her eyelids beginning to droop. He took the plate away gently.

“I'll just leave it on your night stand,” he said.

“Oh no, you eat it. I'm full and it'll be soggy by morning.”

Full after a couple of bites? He tried not to let the concern show on his face, but he guessed it did anyway because she patted his hand again.

“Really, Bucky, don't let it go to waste.” She prodded at the bed controls to tip her back and sighed. “It's no fun being old.”

He left her to sleep a few minutes later and ate the sandwich on his way back to the kitchen. Florence and Katie were in the living room and he tackled the sink of dirty dishes before Florence came out to investigate and shooed him away. He went to bed not long after, despite Florence's suggestion that he watch *Downton Abbey* with Katie; Katie looked slightly alarmed at the idea.

Katie had bought him two sets of pyjamas along with the other clothes, and he changed into one and got under the covers. It had started to rain outside, a steady misting on the window, and he fell asleep easily.

In the morning, he woke with his dick heavy between his thighs and took care of it in the shower. He began with his right hand, then switched to his left out of curiosity. The decreased sensation in the hand mimicked, to a degree, being jacked off by someone else, which was okay at first, even kind of nice, but the longer he looked at the sight, the thinner his breath got. He wasn't being jerked off by Gabe or Steve or someone with his pleasure in mind; he was jerking it with this alien appendage that hung from his side and twisted his body.

He drifted away from himself for a while, snapping back when his orgasm petered out unsatisfactorily and nausea rose up his throat. He swallowed it down and rinsed himself off.

It was early when he went downstairs, only a little past six. He thought Florence got up around seven, so he got out the ingredients he thought he'd need to make pancakes and tried to time it for her coming down. He'd done half the pile when she came in.

“I'm making breakfast,” he said as she stared at the spatula in his hand.

“I can see that,” she said, and smiled. “You didn't have to.”

“I wanted to, gotta earn my keep, I guess.”

She tutted and went to fetch Becca. By the time they returned, Katie had come down too and eyed him carefully before taking a seat. He served up the pancakes that were burnt in places, half of them cold because he wasn't quick enough pouring the batter.
“These taste just like Dad used to make them,” Florence said.

“Thin, burnt, and cold?” he replied, pouring some more syrup over his plate. He wondered if he'd always been this bad.

“Well, maybe not so burnt,” she allowed. “But this is how pancakes are made in Romania, without baking powder. I just used to think it was another thing Dad couldn't do right.”

“That book said his surname was Ungureanu,” he said around a mouthful of pancake. Becca gave him a look and he covered his mouth with his hand. “But we didn't know what his last name was, did we?”

Florence smiled proudly. “That's right, he'd never tell us. It was only when Ed began researching the book that we found out. He took a copy of Ma and Dad's wedding photo – since that was the youngest picture of Dad that we had – to Dorohoi, and showed it around. Eventually, an old man said he resembled a long dead shoemaker he'd known in his youth and Ed uncovered a whole mess of new cousins. We keep in touch, though probably not as well as we should. In fact, I have pictures!”

She got up and hurried out of the room and Bucky caught Becca's eye.

“She was very excited when we found out,” Becca said. “She tried to get Dad to tell us about his other family when he was old, but none of us could ever convince him. We're not even sure how much Ma knew.”

Florence bustled back in with something flat in her hands.

“What's that?” he asked.

“My iPad.” She lay it down in front of him and touched the screen. “You operate it just by touching it.”

Katie smiled down at her plate as Florence showed him all the little square pictures to touch and started sliding the photographs of their Romanian cousins across the screen. She stopped at a picture of a young blond man and tapped at it until it got bigger.

“This is Neculai,” she said. “Nicu. He's seventeen; I always think he looks like you.”

Bucky looked at the boy again; he certainly had the same cocky smile that Bucky had sported in so many of those old photos.

“Have you met any of them?”

“We had a big get together in 1997. Most of the family had moved from Dorohoi to Botoșani after the war, and in fact after the State of Israel was established, a good portion of the family emigrated there. I have more pictures somewhere.” She went back to fussing with the device and Katie cleared her throat carefully.

“Nicu and his family came out here a few years back – he's crazy for all things American – I think that's the last time we've seen each other, right, Becca?”

Becca nodded. “We went on a family trip to Israel in 2003 – your mother wouldn't let you come, Katie – and some of them have come over here over the years. We write occasionally, Florence has them on the Facebook.”
“The Facebook’,” Florence said with a shake of her head and slid the device over to him again. She showed him all the photos of their first big family get together and pointed out all the silly hairstyles and outfits that were 'classic nineties', according to Katie. Bucky nodded along.

When breakfast was finished, Florence insisted that he not do the washing up, having prepared them such a lovely meal. He thought she might be being sarcastic, but she said it with a straight face. Katie had the day off, she said, and was planning to repaint her bedroom.

“I can help,” he said, and tried to smile when her gaze flickered over him. “If you want.”

“Bucky redecorated almost all of my first apartment when we were young.” Becca said. Florence took the brake off the wheelchair and started wheeling her out of the kitchen. She swatted at Florence's arm. “I wasn't finished talking! Bucky is very good at mindless tasks, hardly ever used to complain.”

Bucky snorted. He didn't remember any decorating, but 'good at mindless tasks' was a fair assessment.

“Well... okay,” Katie murmured. “I need to move some stuff out first.”

“Just show me what you want me to do,” he said, and tried for another reassuring smile. He didn't think it landed that well.

Her room was cluttered with books and papers and clothes, and she piled them onto her bed hurriedly while he looked at the ground.

“We need to pull the bed away from the wall and take the dresser out.”

“I can do that,” he said.

She looked at the dresser and frowned. “It's heavy.”

He smiled and went over to it. It was just a little under the width of his arm span, small enough for him to pick up on his own. He carried it out into the hallway and set it down carefully, then returned to Katie's surprised face.

“I guess the bed won't be any trouble for you,” she said, and he couldn't help the smug smile that crossed over his face.

Once it was moved out, Katie covered everything in protective sheeting and put a loose shirt on over her top. He'd dressed in the t-shirt and henley again and she gave him a look as she pried a pot of paint open.

“You should probably take the henley off if you don't want to get paint on it,” she said.

He looked down at himself; she was right it would get paint on it, and it was his favourite out of all of them. He flexed his left hand a couple of times; they'd seen it already, he'd given some minimal explanation as to its origin, but the extent of it was something he liked to keep under wraps. He couldn't hide it forever, though, and soon everyone in the world would know about him and what he was.

He took a breath and pulled the henley over his head. The t-shirt rose up slightly and he tugged it back down, keeping his eyes averted from Katie. The plates in his arm shifted when he tossed the henley out the door with soft clicking sound and he closed his eyes for a moment before looking back at her. She was staring at his arm, but snapped out of it when he shifted from side to side.
“Take the roller,” she said, and turned away to pour the paint.

They painted in silence for a while, Katie's eyes drifting over to his arm every few minutes. He ignored it for as long as he could, but he could feel her gaze like ants crawling up his back.

“Do you want to...” he began, turning to face her, and she startled and looked away.

“Sorry,” she said. “Sorry.”

“It's okay,” he said. “Do you want to ask?”

“Uh,” she muttered, and glancing at his arm one last time before looking at his face. “How... far up does it go?”

He touched the ridge of metal where it met skin at the base of his neck. Katie's eyes widened.

“God, that far?” she murmured, not really a question. He nodded anyway. “Does it hurt?”

He swallowed. “Yeah.”

“God,” she repeated. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. It doesn't really feel like it's part of me, most of the time.” He bent down and loaded up his paint roller again. He slopped the extra paint onto the wall and continued painting. “You're not wrong to be scared of me,” he said to the wall.

“What?” she said, and he heard fear in her voice. He looked back at her and tried to keep his face soft.

“I don't mean... that I'm going to hurt anyone. I just mean that... I'm not the guy that Becca and Florence remember, I'm not that harmless big brother they knew – I never was, I think I just hid it better, back then.”

Katie took a breath, then smiled slightly. “That's the most I've heard you say since you got here.”

He smiled back.

“I grew up with stories about you,” she continued. “All of us did. You were like a character in our favourite book, you stayed so vibrant in their memories. I remember Granny Tina a little, she died when I was six, and she used to say that she felt you looking over her, like a guardian angel. You and Uncle Jimmy.”

“I wish that were true.” Did he really wish he was dead? Maybe he did. Katie didn't comment.

“It was always really obvious how much they loved you. Granny Tina said you inspired it in people.”

He snorted. He'd inspired a lot of feelings in people over the years, but never love. “Thanks,” he murmured.

She smiled back, then returned to the wall.

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Between the two of them, they finished by the early afternoon, at which point Florence appeared with a list of things for Bucky to do around the house; blown lightbulbs, dripping faucets, creaking
hinges. He didn't mind it, it kept his mind busy, off thoughts about the future and about his arm. It felt more and more like a hunk of metal stapled to his side everyday, the pain in his spine worse everyday. He'd been taught that his body was like a machine, available for use when required, fixed when broken, with no emotions, no mechanism with which to feel pain. Pain was such a weak, ordinary thing to feel – the soldier was not burdened with such problems. In some ways, the soldier was innocent, living in blissful ignorance of right and wrong, morality and immorality, the power of crippling guilt and anxiety. Bucky felt only guilt and anxiety now, so he guessed that made him a human being.

They ate dinner early and he stayed downstairs to watch an old movie with Florence. She said it was called *Animal Crackers* and that it was one of his favourites.

“I knew someone who liked animal crackers,” he said and Florence looked at him like he was a little stupid before nodding.

When she called it night, he stayed up watched the television until it devolved into advertisements for telephone sex. He wondered if people did that when he was young. He could imagine that making for some sticky situations on a party line, then laughed to himself. *A sticky situation.*

He flicked through channels until he found some movie about aliens. His shoulder ached and he grabbed some cushions and propped his arm up, absently flexing his left hand.

“Hey, *Men In Black,*” Katie said from the door and he looked over his shoulder at her. She looked like she was going to come in, but thought better of it. “It's a good movie. More true than anyone knew in the nineties.”

He nodded slowly. So far, there'd been a talking dog – was that something he should be looking out for these days? Jeez.

“Hey,” she repeated, and took a breath. “I thinking about your arm...”

“Oh yeah?”

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, well, I was thinking about how you said it didn't feel like a part of yourself? I remembered reading about amputees and how they had phantom limb pain. You know, when you get pain in a limb that's no longer there?”

He stared back at her.

“Well, anyway,” she continued, “I read that holding a mirror up and reflecting the remaining limb so that it's like you still have both is supposed to, uh... help with it. Trick your brain or something... I know it's kind of the opposite thing, but I just thought that maybe if you were having trouble...”

“Yes,” he said. He didn't really understand the point, it sounded like quack stuff to him, but she didn't mean it bad. “Maybe I'll try that.”

She smiled quickly, looking embarrassed. “Okay. Well, um, enjoy the movie.”

“Thanks,” he called, but she was already hurrying away.

The movie was okay, but the fancy pens that wiped memories landed a little close to home for him. He switched the TV off and headed up to bed around two. He did his teeth slowly, keeping his eyes trained away from his left arm. It became more foreign as the days passed, as he became more familiar to himself.
To his right was a round mirror that extended out from the wall and he eyed it as he finished doing his teeth. He ducked down and washed his mouth out, then set the toothbrush aside and pulled the mirror out until almost to the middle of his chest. He put his left arm behind his back and turned to face the mirror side on, with his right arm catching the reflection.

He stared at it for a few minutes, feeling dumb; no little magic trick was going to make him forget that his arm was chopped off and replaced with a metal monstrosity. He didn't remember it being chopped off, thankfully, but he'd been remembering more and more about what happened afterwards. The cage and that smell; the surgery. He remembered the brutality of it and his heart beat faster.

He stared at the mirror, put his all into it, blocking out anything around him; the soldier was good at that. He remembered dancing with Connie, their hands clasped together; he remembered sliding his palms over Gabe's face and kissing him in dark corners of Europe; he remembered playing the piano in pubs, in his parents' living room, beautiful music that made people smile. He played the *Clair de Lune* for his mother, the keys cold and smooth under his hands. He always liked that feeling. He heard the slow music in his head. Everything else fell away, just him standing there, both his arms intact, his heart beating slowly. He took a breath, light-headed. Maybe Katie was onto something.

The experience left him heavy and tired, and he rolled into bed without even checking the situation out on the street below.

The days passed and he stayed. He read his book from cover to cover and back again, and wrote all his findings in his notebook. He was remembering more and more now. He remembered Gabe and some of the things they got up to. In England, they saw *Henry V* with Laurence Olivier and kissed in a dark corner in the back for the whole two and a half hours. Gabe had whispered, 'oh, Heathcliff', and Bucky had about died laughing. They went stargazing like a couple of dumb kids, and had had what he guessed now was a threesome with a Frenchman.

"Someone told me I look like Laurence Olivier once," he told Becca one day over breakfast. She was too tired to come out to the kitchen.

She barked with laughter. "With that face? I don't think so."

He pulled a face at her and went back to his toast.

"You should cut your hair," she said.

He shrugged. "I think I like it how it is." He guessed he did, since he didn't feel compelled to change it.

"You never did have any sense," she said.

"Maybe not." He chewed on his thumbnail for a moment. "Do you think-- do you think Steve could've ever loved me?"

She put her plate aside and frowned at him. "Steve did love you-- does love you, I'm sure."

"Maybe. But I think it was hard for him to love me, I made it hard, behaving the way I did. And even then, he didn't love me the way I wanted."

Becca pressed her lips together and reached out to take his hand. "The first girl I liked was in third grade. Her name was Helen and she was a Girl Guide. She had curly red hair and green eyes. I
thought she was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. I gave her a secret Valentine's Day card, and she was thrilled-- because she was sure it was from Tommy Gordon from the nearby boys' school. We were friends for ten years and I never told her how I felt; it was heartbreaking. We all have a story like it. Arnie's was about you.”

He took a moment to comprehend what she meant. He had some memories of Arnie – he remembered that he found him annoying and fussy, and that he felt sure Arnie was a threat to his and Steve's friendship. “Oh,” he said, when he understood. “He... was attracted to me?”

“Hopelessly,” she said, and he felt his cheeks begin to warm up, a foreign sensation. “He told me that he found you incredibly frustrating to be around, but that nevertheless...”

“I kissed him,” Bucky said suddenly. Had he? “At least, I think I did...”

Becca laughed, a hoarse sound that set off a short burst of coughing. “You did. He told me a long time after. Had it been under other circumstances, who knows what might have happened.”

“I wish we could have talked about this when we were young,” he said.

She rubbed his hand and smiled. “At least we're talking now.”

- On December 21st, they put up the Christmas tree. It was a plastic thing that smelt funny and sprinkled white plastic snowflakes on the hard floor of the living room. It came in three sections and Florence pressed him into service putting it together. They had boxes of decorations all over the living room ranging from newly bought to seventy years old.

“This was my favourite,” he said, holding a glass Santa Claus with no face left to speak of from years of wear.

“Really?” Florence said. “I didn't know that.”

He frowned to himself – maybe he was mistaken, if they didn't know about it. “It was my favourite because...” He frowned down at it. “Ma took me to... Martin's and let me pick it out myself.”

“Where was I?” Becca asked. She had set herself up by the couch, stringing popcorn for the tree, but he could see how much her hands were quivering.

“I dunno, I just remember being alone with Ma. She bought me a malt, too.”

“Oh, well, how nice for you,” she said with a wrinkle of her nose, and he laughed and hung the worn decoration.

The final touch was the angel, which he had to stand on a chair to place. Katie pulled out a phone, but he hid his face before she was able to take any pictures.

“Is that thing connected to the internet?” he asked, still atop one of their dining room chairs.

“Uh, yeah?” she said.

He tried to smile apologetically. “You can't take any pictures of me on that.”

She looked at it and frowned. “How about a regular camera?”

He'd been reading a lot on the internet about different technologies, cellphones and computers and
the like. Some things were familiar to him, even though he knew there hadn't been anything remotely like a cellphone when he was young. "Is it a digital one?" he said carefully.

She smiled a little. "Yeah, I guess that's no good either, huh?"

"Sorry," he said.

"We'll take a picture in our minds," Becca said, "like in the olden days."

Florence clicked her tongue. "Becca, you weren't ever without your camera."

She shrugged. "Bucky's face'll break the lens."

He shoved the angel on top of the tree. "Merry Christmas."

- 

Eugene arrived the next evening. Bucky hung back from the door as Katie let him in and did a quick check of the street. He hated that they had to do things like that because of him. Katie closed the door firmly behind Eugene and straightened the drapes before Bucky peered out from the living room doorway.

"Bucky," Eugene said warmly, and set his bags down. Bucky came forward and they hugged. "I remembered what you said about not making any phonecalls. I hoped you'd come here."

"You gave me all that money for the tickets," he replied.

Eugene stepped back and looked at him. "You could have used it for food, you were skinny when I saw you last."

Bucky smiled; he'd been pretty lean in DC, but a few weeks here had filled him out more than a little. He took Eugene's bags up to Becca's old room and helped him settle in – the bed had been made with military precision and Bucky had to pull the corners free.

"Thank you," Eugene said, and patted him on the shoulder. Bucky knew he was being dismissed and left his brother to get some rest after his flight. Six hours was a long time for someone his age, Bucky thought.

On the morning of the 23rd, he got up first and made breakfast for them all. Florence had an unloved waffle iron in the cupboard and he found a recipe on the internet on how to make them. By the time they began shambling in, he'd set the table with stacks of waffles and syrup. Florence smiled and kissed him on the cheek. He left them to it with a smile and went to Becca's room to rouse her. He could hear from the doorway that her breathing was laboured.

"Becca?" he called from the door.

"Oh," she said, her voice hoarse. "Is it morning?"

"Yeah, I made waffles, do you want some?"

"Will I get food poisoning?" she said, but there was no bite behind it. She tapped on her bed remote and raised the mattress, but still struggled to sit up. He came round and helped her upright, his hands enveloping the tops of her shoulders.

"Do you need help getting into the wheelchair?"
She sighed and shook her head, but he knew that she did. “I hate for people to see me like this,” she muttered.

“Hey,” he said, and squeezed her bony shoulders. “I'm your big brother. It doesn't matter how you look, you'll always be a snotty eight year old to me.”

She laughed quietly and reached up, cupping his hands. They stayed like that for a few moments, in content silence, before he picked her up and settled her in the wheelchair. He hadn't been made for gentleness, but he did the best he could.

Today was the last day he would really spend with them all until after Christmas, as the next two days he'd be confined to his room while more distant relatives roamed around the house. They made the most of it, setting up in the living room for a long walk down memory lane. Eugene had another photo album, one he'd brought with him; nothing special, just more day to day pictures, dozens of Jimmy.

“I didn't tell you about Jimmy's father, did I?” Florence said, lingering over a school photo.

“I read about it in the book, he was some asshole who threatened you and got thrown out of the house?”

“Mmmh,” she said, with a slight smile. “So you haven't heard the story of the last time I ever saw him.”

“Eugene,” Eugene said, a little plaintively, and she smiled wider.

“Well, I was eight and a half months pregnant, days away from giving birth, and John came around. He'd got in a whole lot of trouble with his parents, you see, and was desperate for me to go away, have Jimmy adopted or something like that. He was scared what it would all mean for his future, which I suppose wasn't unreasonable, given the time, but he was horribly aggressive about it. So he was shouting and Becca was shouting back and Dad was threatening to call the cops, and then in walked this one—” She gestured to Eugene, who sighed a little. “—in robes, fresh from church. He asked what was going on, then told John to leave. You can imagine how that went. I believe the words John used were, 'fuck off'. Eugene tried to pull him away, but John was set on berating me, calling me a whore and so forth. I saw something change in Eugene's face and then suddenly he yanked John round and punched him in the face!”

Bucky's mouth dropped open. “Really?” he said, looking between the two of them. Eugene cleared his throat uncomfortably and nodded.

“Dad turned him out after that,” Florence continued, “Eugene was in shock.”

“Well, it hurt,” Eugene said, and smiled a little. “I hadn't expected how much. I broke my thumb! We negotiated with Ed to keep that particular story out of the book, in case my parishioners read it.”

Bucky laughed. “Punched with your thumb tucked under, huh?”

“Well, I never learnt the correct way and I can truthfully say it's the only time that gap in my education came back to haunt me.”

“Why'd you do it at all, if Dad was calling the cops?”

Eugene smiled slightly, his eyes a little watery. Bucky thought was from age, but it gave him a very sombre look. “The filth he was directing towards her. I thought about what you would have done; you wouldn't have stood by and let your sister get abused. It was still very raw for us all then, and I
felt you with me a lot. Anything else would have dishonoured your memory.”

Bucky held his gaze for a moment, then looked at the floor and swallowed. He wondered where he really was when the incident took place – not up in heaven like they hoped, but maybe down in hell. There was a moment of awkward silence, until Katie shifted in her seat.

“Uh, since we're looking at pictures...” she said, an awkward segue if ever he'd heard one. He smiled at her to go on. “I got a Polaroid in the sales yesterday. Well, you know, not a real one, but close enough.”

She pulled a bulky camera out of her bag and showed to them.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Instant film,” she said. “I figured we couldn't take a picture of you on a normal film camera, since that has to be developed and stuff, but this does the whole process for us, no middleman. Okay, everyone crowd in!”

Florence tugged him over to where Becca's wheelchair was and they all crowded in with Katie holding it at arm's length.

“It has an attachment for taking selfies,” she said.

Becca tutted. “That's the worst thing I've ever heard,” she said, but still smiled on cue. Katie took a couple and laid them out on the table as they developed.

Bucky smiled as their faces faded in; he thought they looked happy, even him. The pictures were near identical, but he thought his smile was wider in one of them, and picked that one up.

“Can I keep this?”

Katie brushed her hand against his metal arm quickly. “Yeah, of course.”

- 

On Christmas Eve, people began arriving in the early afternoon to celebrate Becca's birthday. Florence set him up in her own bedroom, since it had an en-suite bathroom – not that he could flush the toilet or run the water without arousing suspicion. He settled down with the laptop and a pair of headphones and spent the day listening to music and reading up on the world. He discovered that, along with Gabe, Morita was still alive and living back in his hometown of Fresno. Dum Dum had died in 1966 under classified circumstances, Dernier in 1987 after an illustrious career in trains, and Monty lived out his years as the literal lord of the manor before dying of a heart attack in 1996. Old Colonel Phillips had died in 1950, of lung cancer.

The onslaught of deaths made Bucky feel breathless and he wondered at the circumstances of Dugan's death. Something in relation to the Cold War, clearly, and who was more present then than the goddamn Winter Soldier himself? He hoped to God that wasn't the case, but he felt death all around him, a palpable, cloying presence.

Florence called him down at eight, once the house had emptied, and he went to sit in Becca's room. She was 'worn out', Florence said, and Bucky sat down on the bed next to her while she slept. Her chest rose and fell so slowly, so shallowly, that sometimes it seemed like she wasn't breathing at all. He lay down on top of the covers and watched her breathe until he fell asleep.

On Christmas morning, he woke early and the room seemed so quiet. He lifted his head and looked
at Becca – she was so pale now, so unlike the summer-tanned, ruddy faces of childhood. He pulled himself up and got up onto his knees to lean over her. Her lips were dry and chapped and her face looked like a map of things he'd never experience.

She took a shallow breath and opened her eyes. “Ugh,” she muttered, and slapped him lightly across the cheek. “I'm not dead yet, Buck.”

He smiled. “Merry Christmas, I didn't get you anything.”

“Well, neither did I.”

He kissed her on the forehead before she could bat him away.

The day went the same as the day before. He helped Florence get the turkey going, then retired to her bedroom and spent the day reading. He could hear excited chatter coming from downstairs, carols being sung, people laughing. It had been so long since he’d heard anything like it and he lay on the bed with his eyes closed, letting it wash over him. He'd spent Christmases in canteens and battlefields, New York, England, France, with his family, with Steve, with Gabe. He'd been all over the world, but he'd never wanted to leave home at all. He would have been quite spending his whole life in their house in Park Slope, dinners with his parents, lightly pining for Steve. He would have been content like that.

He had a hazy memory of a city lit like a Christmas tree and a woman with hard eyes telling him to pay attention when she was talking. This was the soldier's memory, he thought, when he lived in a twilight world, conscious enough to understand but not comprehend.

Comprehending was the worst part.

At lunch time, Florence brought up a tray heavy with turkey, gravy, stuffing, and bread dumplings. She promised to bring up some chocolate log and baked Alaska later on. The memory of lop-sided baked Alaska made him laugh suddenly.

The last of the guests didn't leave until near midnight, by which time Becca was exhausted and the three of them, Florence, Eugene, and Katie, whispered amongst themselves while Bucky took her to bed.

“They're worried about me,” she said, as he lifted her into bed.

He lay her down carefully and adjusted her pillow behind her head. “You shouldn't have worn yourself out like that.”

“It's my last chance to see all the family together, I wasn't about to call it a night at six.”

He straightened up and looked down at her. “Becca...”

“No, Bucky,” she said, and grasped his hand. Her grip was strong, given her frail body. “We both know my days are numbered. Ma knew when it was time to say her goodbyes and I do too.”

His eyes started to warm and he bit his lips. “I don't... want you to,” he whispered.

“I know that, dumb dumb, but that's the way it is for most of us. I've had a good life, only a few regrets.”

He breathed out heavily. “I have so many regrets.”
She smiled, her wrinkled face stretching in that strange way. “You've got your whole life to make up for it, you and Steve. I think that's fitting, somehow.”

He shook his head. “We're on different sides now.”

“Buck, you and Steve are always on the same side.”

“I only just got here,” he said quietly, and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment.

“You came exactly when I needed you most.” She rubbed her thumb across the back of his hand. “Like always.”

He took a breath and wiped at his face. She patted the empty side of the bed and he let go of her hand just long enough turn the lights out and get on top of the covers, then took her other hand and lay down. She lay her head down against the pillow with a sigh.

“Before the twins were born, we used to share a bed all the time,” she said. Her voice sounded so small. “Ma thought it was a little strange, but Dad said it was fine. Do you remember that?”

“No,” he whispered, and started crying again. He pressed his face into the fleecy blanket.

“That's okay,” she replied, far away. “You will.”

In the morning, his face felt tight from crying and her hand was cold.

He sat with her for a while, looking at her body. He knew what death looked like, what it smelt like. He knew the frozen grimace that would forever contort their faces, the dark red blood stains on their skin, the final rattle of death.

Becca looked peaceful, her skin barely paler than it was when her blood was still pumping. It was five am, so she could only have been dead for a few hours and rigor mortis had hardly set in yet. Still, he wondered if this was how it was to die a good person, not to rot and bloat like the bodies he spent hours with after delivering the killing blow.

He remembered Sarah, the first dead body he'd ever seen, and laced his hands together.

“Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,” he murmured, hearing his mother's voice saying the words as if she was sitting beside him. “And let perpetual light shine upon them. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”

At five thirty, he got up and left the room. In the hallway, he could hear a TV playing and at the doorway of the living room, he found everyone watching a news report.

“Sources at the DoD say that we are days away from discovering the identity of the Winter Soldier—”

He sighed and everyone turned and looked at him – they all looked exhausted.

“She's gone,” he said. Katie lowered her eyes and Florence hurried over to hug him. He returned it firmly, pressing his face to her shoulder. Eugene stood as well and pressed his hand to Bucky's back before leaving to pray over the body.

Bucky knew he would have to go soon as well, but it could wait a little while.
He left before dawn on the twenty eighth. People had been in and out of the house since news of Becca’s death had spread and he knew it would only get worse as the funeral got closer. The funeral director had taken the body away on the morning of the twenty sixth and the funeral was arranged for a week later.

No one argued with him when he told them he was leaving – he hadn’t seen sunlight in weeks and he ached to move around outside, despite the risks. It was best to leave under the cover of darkness, thought it meant they all had to stay up late, which wasn’t an issue for him, but he tried to tell Florence and Eugene he’d say his goodbyes early so that they could go to bed. They wouldn’t hear of it.

“This is for you,” Florence said at the door, handing him a thick envelope. Her eyes were ringed red, but she wasn’t crying.

Inside were dozens of pictures – all copied and printed by Katie, Florence said – and bill after bill of money.

“How-- how much is this?”

“Ten thousand, give or take,” Florence said, and when he opened his mouth, she held up a hand and continued. “And before you try to turn it down, we’re good for it, and before you worry, we all chipped in and withdrew a little at a time. We assumed all at once would look suspicious.”

He stared at her for a moment, then looked down at the envelope. He hated that they had to think like that. “Thank you,” he murmured.

She rested her hands on his shoulders and looked up at him. “Try to be safe out there.”

He smiled wanly. “I’ll do my best,” he said, and hugged her.

“Take care of yourself,” Eugene said as they hugged next.

Katie was last in line and she held herself awkwardly but hugged him anyway. “It's been crazy getting to know you,” she said with a quick pat to his back.

He snorted and shook his head. “Ain't that the truth.” He shouldered his bag and turned towards the door. “I'll come back if I can.”

“We'll be here,” Florence said, and patted his shoulder briefly before he opened the door a little and slipped out into the night.

He didn’t look back until he was out on the sidewalk; the curtains were still drawn and the lights were low, but he knew they were watching. He tipped his head up, then walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Content: OC character death
Chapter Notes

After a hilariously long amount of time, I'm back! In this chapter, you can hover over dialogue in other languages and get the translation!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He spent the morning after leaving Florence's house mulling over his options, hiding out in various alleyways, and the only plan he could come up with was to somehow get across the border to Canada or Mexico and then somehow leave the continent. Somehow. He'd never had to make travel arrangements for himself when he was a brainwashed assassin.

Given his location, going up the coast to British Columbia seemed to be the most obvious choice. At the border crossing, he'd have to hop a ride in the back of a truck, most likely, which had no guarantee of working. He didn't know what the rules were like these days, but he bet security wasn't as lax as when he was young. Still, he didn't have any better ideas.

He found a bus terminal a couple of miles from Florence's house, one he'd looked up on the internet the night before. He'd take a bus as close to the border as he could, then get off and smuggle himself along with some unsuspecting trucker. The terminal was a one storey, metal building that looked like a hospital on the inside. He remembered his mother washing his hair in a hospital bed, her gentle hand massaging shampoo through his hair carefully.

There were cameras mounted on the walls so he looked ahead and slightly down, trying his best not to look like he was actively evading being filmed. Around him, most everyone was looking at the ground, shuffling, so he was in good company there. He waited in a sprawling line to be served, listening to the ambient noise of weary travellers, some angry, some resigned to their fate.

When he got to the counter, a young man asked him, his voice overly cheerful, where he was headed today. Bucky opened his mouth and looked at the greyhound logo behind the man's head.

"How far is it to Macon, Georgia?"

It was sixty two hours, three transfers, and two hundred and forty one dollars. Bucky bought the ticket and shuffled out along with everyone else to wait for the bus. He bought some candy bars and cans of soda along the way for the journey and got on the bus at near one in the afternoon.

It took a good fifteen minutes for everyone to settle down, stow their bags, and get comfortable. He managed to snag a window seat at the back and thought he might get away with being alone until a kid jumped on at the last second, wearing a t-shirt with Steve's shield on the front. Bucky bit back a laugh and took out his notebook to occupy his attention while the kid sorted himself out. On his backpack he had a patch that said, 'University of Texas'. The driver, annoyed at the latecomer, started driving while Captain College was still trying to stow the bag; pens spilled out across Bucky's lap and rolled down into the well at his feet.

"Shit!" the kid said, and Bucky leaned down and collected up the mess. "Hey, thanks, man," he added as Bucky handed them back.
“No problem,” he said, and turned back to his notebook, but the kid thrust out his hand. 

“Hi, I’m Tom,” he announced. Bucky took his hand and shook it briefly.

“Dmitri,” he said. He turned to Tom slightly, but tried to keep his face downturned without looking like a complete freak. He had some facial hair to blur his features, but a kid wearing a Cap t-shirt might just know the face Steve’s greatest sidekick.

“You’re Russian?”

“In a roundabout way.”

Tom smiled. “That’s cool. I wanna visit Moscow one day, it’s on my list.”

“Well, I can’t say I recommend it,” Bucky said. Tom’s face fell a little and Bucky sensed he wasn’t getting out of this conversation so easily. “So, where you headed?”

Tom brightened a little again. “Texas, back to school, how about you?”

“Georgia,” he said, even though he thought maybe he shouldn’t share his travel plans with strangers that might one day be witnesses at his various trials. If whatever organisation finally got their hands on him let his capture be that public, of course. “Relocating. Cheaper than California, you know?”

“Oh man, tell me about it,” Tom said, “No way I could stay out west for college, cost of living’s way too high.”

Bucky smiled and nodded and the conversation thankfully petered out on its own. Tom took out a book to read and Bucky started writing in his notebook. The name Dmitri brought back memories, of a cold winter, dead men’s clothes, and a hard woman. She featured in too many of his memories, her hair colour different each time, her face hardening as the years wore on. He didn’t know who she was, but he knew she was a prisoner just the same as he was.

When he ran out of things to write, he took out the stack of pictures Florence had given him and went through them. There were a lot of him and Steve, a lot of his ma, modelling for the camera, and a lot of the family together. She had included pictures from all through the years, Jimmy smiling like the sun, and holidays snaps of their Romanian relatives. On the back of the packet of photos, there was a note stuck on it with an address for Mihai and Elena Ungureanu in Botoșani. A trip to Romania didn’t sound so bad.

They stopped a few times in the afternoon before arriving in LA at nine thirty in the evening. From there was a transfer to another bus that would leave at close to midnight, giving them all plenty of time to freshen up and eat. Bucky sought out the greasiest cheeseburger he could find and enjoyed a couple of milkshakes as well. He recalled the countless malts he’d drunk as a kid and missed the taste.

Once they got moving again, most everyone settled down for sleep. Bucky couldn’t sleep, not with so many at such close quarters, but he kept the overhead light off in deference to Tom. There wasn’t much to do except watch California pass him by, lit up by signs and street lamps. Around two am, they passed into endless desert and mountains that lay beneath a clear, starry sky. He remembered lying on the grass with Gabe, Pegasus the square horse. Bucky still couldn’t fucking see it, but then he was always hopelessly unimaginative.

They reached Arizona by four am, and a couple of hours later, Bucky was watching the orange sun rise over Phoenix from a Greyhound station café on a road called ‘Buckeye’. The world was a weird fucking place sometimes.
By the late afternoon, they got to Tom's stop in El Paso and a middle-aged woman took up his seat beside Bucky. She eyed him nervously and gave him a quick nod before taking out a book. He guessed he looked a little rough now, with his long hair and his growing beard, and the fact that he hadn't used a rest stop shower and was probably starting to smell a little ripe. Her silence was preferable to Tom's attempts at conversation, though.

After El Paso, they drove almost uninterrupted through the night and came up on Dallas at seven the morning to change buses. From there, he had just under twenty four hours left to go and it was only then that it occurred to him that he didn't know where Gabe lived. What was he going to do, ask the first person he saw if they knew an African American fella about yea high? What a fool.

He had an hour and a half to wait in Dallas and a woman at the station directed him to a library a few blocks away when he asked. Back in the day, he would have looked up someone's address in a directory, so he figured nowadays people did things like that on the internet. Lo and behold, 'address directory' brought up a website that gave only two people in Macon under the name Gabriel Jones and only one in the 65+ category. He took down a note of the address and telephone number, then went to the restroom and put his nearly forgotten cell phone back together. By the time he'd done all that, he only had forty minutes until he had to get back on the bus and he hadn't even got anything to eat yet.

He found a place that made something resembling hash browns and took a seat in the corner. He didn't need to call the number at all, he could save all of this for standing on Gabe's doorstep, but if he wasn't the right Gabriel, Bucky would expose himself to stranger while every kind of law enforcement and every news outlet was going crazy over finding him. He had to be brave again, like at Florence's, like when he kissed Gabe all those years ago.

He flipped the phone open and quickly dialled the number. He wasn't sure what the time difference was between Georgia and Texas, but he hoped it wasn't much.

The phone rang five times before being answered, just as Bucky's courage bled off and he moved to end the call.

“Jones residence, Gabriel speaking,” a creaky, yet familiar voice said. Bucky could hear the years separating them in his voice, but it was undeniable. He drew a breath and Gabe spoke again. “Hello, is anyone there?”

“Oh, s-sorry,” he murmured, his voice so quiet. “Wrong number.”

“Uh, s-sorry,” he murmured, his voice so quiet. “Wrong number.”

“Uh, s-sorry,” he murmured, his voice so quiet. “Wrong number.”

“Uh, s-sorry,” he murmured, his voice so quiet. “Wrong number.”

Bucky snapped the phone closed and finished the last of his hash browns.

His nervous seatmate got off at the first stop in Louisiana, replaced by a guy who smelt probably worse than him. He introduced himself as Allen and talked to himself intermittently. Bucky turned his head and stared out the window, his notebook clasped to his chest.

-They arrived in Macon at six am, tired and sore, even Bucky. It was cool outside, an overcast sky hazy pink with the sun rise, and everyone staggered off in their various directions. There was a gas station nearby, which Bucky headed over to to pick up some food. He was the only one in the store, aside from the clerk, who glanced at Bucky dispassionately, then returned to her magazine. The newspapers laid out in front of the counter were all variations on the theme, 'Calls for President Ellis's Resignation Intensify'.
He turned away and walked down the aisles, picking up whatever took his fancy, candy bars, soda, bags of chips. It didn't make for a balanced meal, but Bucky couldn't bring himself to care about things like that any more. He also snagged a map of the area and brought it all up front to deposit them on the counter. The girl dispassionately started ringing them up while above her head hung a sign that said, 'the sale of cigarettes to persons under eighteen is prohibited by law'. He picked up a lighter from a display to his right and added it to the pile.

“And a packet of cigarettes,” he said.

“Type?” the girl asked.

He shrugged. “Whatever's cheapest.”

She sighed and turned around, plucking a box from the shelf and showing it to him. American Legends, with a picture of an eagle and a shield that looked suspiciously like Steve's on the front. He snorted and said it was fine.

She bagged his stuff up in a flimsy plastic bag and he left the store, walking a little way from the gas station before stopping. There was almost no one around at this time of the morning, just a couple of truckers and an old man jogging down the street in a belaboured fashion. He tucked the bag into his pack and fished out the cigarettes and lighter. The packet said, 'Smoking can kill', and had a picture of some kind of rotten organ on the side. Too bad it wasn't going to kill him.

He lit a cigarette like it was second nature, the quick rasp of the flint a sound he didn't realise he'd forgotten. The first draw of the cigarette was hot and scratchy, but he didn't gag or cough, and even though he knew it tasted awful, he sucked the smoke in anyway and held it until his chest burned a little with the effort, then let it out in perfectly formed rings.

He tucked the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and got the map out. Gabe lived on Ingleside Avenue, approximately two miles from where he was. It wouldn't take Bucky long to walk over there, maybe forty five minutes. That would only put him at seven in the morning. That was early to gather up enough courage to ring the bell.

He sucked on the cigarette until ash crumbled between his fingers, then flicked the last of it under his boot and rubbed it into the sidewalk. There was a burger joint across the road from him that looked to be open, filling up with early morning travellers and workers. He went in and ordered the biggest breakfast sandwich they had, tucking himself into a corner booth. The place felt desolate at this time in the morning, its staff moving around sluggishly and the patrons staring blankly out the window or at their phones.

By the time he was finished, he'd only managed to kill forty minutes. He went back outside again and started walking, not referring back to the map just yet. He walked past a strip of shops, another gas station, a couple of restaurants, before coming upon a cathedral. It was a beautiful building, dark red brick and gothic spires. He remembered as a child going to an imposing church like this, though it was stone rather than red brick. He'd found the whole thing very intimidating when he was little, the vast domed ceiling, the saints looking down on him and Jesus on the cross. He'd been happy to be kicked out of the altar boy position.

The doors opened while Bucky was staring up at them and a man in white robes stepped out. They looked at each other for a moment before the man spoke.

“Would you like to come in?” the man said, a twang to his voice.

Bucky dug his hands into his pockets. “Are you open?”
“We will be in a few minutes, but you're welcome inside now. Mass is at eight.”

Bucky hesitated for a moment and the man opened the door wider. “I can offer you some tea and cookies, if that'll sweeten the deal any,” he added.

Bucky guessed he looked pretty homeless to get such an earnest offer of food. “I've already eaten, but... okay.” He climbed the steps two at a time, keeping his head tipped down slightly. The man let him pass first, and introduced himself as the deacon of the church, then left Bucky to his thoughts and went through to the back of the church. Bucky genuflected at the bottom of the aisle, then took a seat in the back row. The place seemed just as vast inside as his childhood church and certainly as intimidating.

He dropped his pack between his feet and took out Eugene's rosary. He didn't remember many prayers and none that were appropriate at the moment, but he ran the beads through his fingers and let himself think about Becca. It was a good end – as good as any end could be – and he thought she'd had a good life too. He hoped so. He hoped Gabe had as well.

The sound of the deacon's voice made him think of Gabe; he remembered Gabe telling him that he'd made an effort to lose his accent at Howard, on account of the comments he got from the local white folks, but sometimes it slipped out when he was tired or talking fast, a long back and forth between them about what in the hell 'oll' for the truck was or a wet spring day in France when he looked up at the blue sky and said, 'it looks like the devil's beatin' his wife'. In retaliation, Gabe would always laugh when Bucky tried to get extra 'cawfee' out of the cafeteria staff and for turning the air blue with profanity. Bucky had hated being teased about his voice in college, but from Gabe, he didn't mind it.

He didn't mind a lot of things when Gabe did them.

He sat in the quiet until parishioners began to enter for mass. He considered slipping out before the service began, but people were grouping together, talking quietly amongst themselves and not paying any attention to him. The service began and it felt good to be here, to hear scripture and sing hymns. Bucky had always had a nice singing voice, deep and strong; Steve sounded like a cat being strangled. Bucky had never set much store by religion, but the familiarity of it soothed him. He stayed seated when it came time for Communion; he knew that as a stranger here he wouldn't be allowed to receive the Eucharist and that, anyway, his soul needed to be free of sin first. Some of the little kids had their arms crossed over their chests to receive the priest's blessing – he remembered doing too, before he received his First Communion. He hated how it marked him out from the other, older kids, even while he hated attending Sunday school.

He left when it was over, stepping back out into the cold Macon sun at eight thirty in the morning. It was still so early, and he didn't know what to do with himself. He walked for a while before coming upon a library that had just opened, so he went in and wasted some more time reading history books.

By noon, he couldn't put it off any longer. He started walking to Gabe's house, an easy route north west from the library. He came up on the house close to one in the afternoon and hung back behind the trees on the other side of the road. The house was on a corner plot, with thick foliage all around, rose bushes out front, and a wide deck that stretched all across the front of the house. There were deck chairs and a swing on the patio, a wreath on the front door. It looked like a house people would be happy living in.

The door with the wreath swung open. Bucky crouched down quickly behind his tree and peered out between the branches. Two black men stepped out, one young and handsome, the other old but equally as handsome to Bucky. It was Gabe, he knew immediately. He'd hardly seen any photos of him, but recognised him without any trouble. Gabe wore glasses now, small wire-framed ones, and held a cane loosely in his right hand.
“So, I'm going to be away for a while, Grandpa,” the young man said. Bucky wasn't that far from them and with his hearing, he could hear every word they said.

Gabe pursed his lips. “You already told me that.”

The man grinned and it felt infectious. “I'm not casting aspersions on your memory. Mom's gonna drop by tomorrow and see you.”

“You and your mother worry far too much, Antoine, I've been alone before.” Bucky felt a pang at that, though Gabe's tone was light.

“It's just 'cause we love you, old man. Anyway, look, I'll be in touch whenever the boss gives me a chance.” They hugged quickly before Antoine left, heading towards a car parked out front. He waved to Gabe as he got in and pulled away from the curb, leaving in the direction Bucky came.

Judging by their conversation, Gabe was alone in the house now; this was Bucky's best opportunity. He'd wait for Gabe to go in, then knock on the door and go from there. Gabe started to go back inside when a woman called out from the neighbouring house. Gabe greeted her warmly and went to the edge of his deck to talk to her. On Bucky's side of the road, a garage door began to open. This was not a good position to be in.

He took the long way around the four way intersection, crossing to the other side, then back to reach the border of Gabe's property. There was enough growth there that he could slip in without being seen and approach the side of the house. There was a door there, and after a moment's hesitation, he tried the handle. It was unlocked. As he stood there, wondering if he should go in, he remembered another time he broke into a house, a huge red brick manor with wide open grounds and sick people attended to by staff. He turned it over in his mind for a moment, but couldn't draw out any more details. He opened the door and stepped into a light, airy kitchen.

The walls were a pale yellow with a floral border running along the middle and the cabinets were all a light-coloured wood. There were several cookie jars on the counter tops and a fridge covered in drawings and words spelt out in fridge magnets. Bucky slipped his boots off and crossed the room in his socks. The door to the hallway was open; he stepped out carefully and followed a line of photographs. He could tell that they traced years of family history; graduations, grandchildren, army portraits. He stopped for a moment at a picture of Gabe, his face slightly lined, shaking hands with a man who Bucky thought was President Eisenhower.

He moved on, making it to the end of the hallway, where there was a small table with a vase of blue flowers and above it, a wedding photo. He stepped in closer and took it in. It was Gabe and his wife, of course; him in a suit and bowtie, his wife wearing a dress with a lacy neck and sleeves. She was undeniably beautiful; upturned nose, intelligent eyes and short curled hair beneath a veil.

He heard the creak of footsteps too late.

“I don't want to shoot you,” Gabe said. He was standing behind Bucky, ten feet or so away. In the glass, Bucky could see Gabe's reflection, levelling a handgun at him. Bucky swallowed and lifted his hands.

“Not looking to get shot,” he said.

“Good, then you'll stay right there 'til the cops come.”

“Wait,” he said. “Just, uh, I'm gonna turn around.”

He saw Gabe falter, lowering the gun slightly. “Go slow.”
“Yeah,” Bucky murmured, and turned on his heel. He kept his chin raised, despite the urge to hide his face under the brim of his cap.

Gabe's hands shook, dropping the gun lower. Bucky hoped it didn't go off and take out another one of his limbs. “Bucky?” he whispered.

“Archangel,” Bucky replied, the memory coming to him in that moment. “Can I come closer?”

“Yes,” Gabe croaked, and dropped the gun to his side. Bucky approached him until he was within touching distance. He took off his cap.

They stood in silence for a moment, looking at each other, before Gabe lifted his hand and pressed it to Bucky's cheek. ‘God, your voice... It was you on the phone, wasn't it? You look the same.”

Bucky didn't know about that, but he nodded all the same. “Yeah. It's a long story,” he offered with a smile.

Gabe nodded, not picking up on the humour of it, his face still awash with shock.

“Maybe we should sit down,” Bucky said.

The lace curtains in the living room were already drawn, so he sat down without too much anxiety. The room was painted a pale pink with white detailing, more photos on the walls, and the couches were floral patterned. Gabe stowed his gun away in a safe and buffed his glasses on the corner of his shirt before sitting beside Bucky on one of the couches and resuming his staring. Bucky was all ready to rattle off his usual 'like Steve, but not' explanation, but what Gabe said was,

“I looked for you.”


That drew out a surprised chuckle from Gabe before he grew sombre again. “I could feel you there. The rest of the Commandos, they thought I was crazy. It got dark and I wouldn't leave. The temperature plummeted but I wanted to keep searching. We went back twice more. I think by the end, they knew that there was something more between us.” He looked up for a moment, his eyes growing shiny. “I was so sure you were there. Was I right?”

“L...” Bucky looked down at his gloved hands. So far, he'd tried not to dwell too long on that period of his life. It was torture beyond what he faced later, because he was so new to it then, an innocent to that level of brutality. He dug deep for Gabe, though. “When I fell...” His head was cracked open like an egg. “I was very badly injured. My skull was cracked and my arm broke my fall.” He pulled off his left glove and flexed his hand. Gabe's lips tightened. “I was told that my arm was trapped between the rocks in the ravine, so they cut it off.”

He stopped, his breath coming fast, a sick feeling creeping up his throat. He remembered the men who found him, the one who tried to help and the one who didn't. Gabe reached across and took his hand, folding his fingers around Bucky's metal ones. “I found part of your jacket,” he said.

Bucky nodded. “I was taken somewhere. They were Russian. Someone tried to help me, but they were killed. I don't know how long I was there before they found me, but I was probably gone by the time you got there. I don't know how far they took me, maybe all the way to Russia, I was unconscious a lot of the time. They kept me there a long time, and then...” His voice petered out for a moment, but he sucked in a breath and continued. “Eventually they broke me and they brainwashed me and turned me back out into the world as the Winter Soldier.”
“Oh,” Gabe breathed, then raggedly, “God, I heard rumours about him-- you-- back in the sixties. We all thought it was Cold War propaganda.”

“That's what they wanted you to think.”

“Did you really try to kill Steve a couple months back?”

Bucky smiled a little. “I got over it.”

Gabe didn't smile back. “I should have kept looking for you. You were only in Russia, I should have found you.”

He shook his head. “They shouldn't have done it, that's the only blame to go around here.” That and his portion, but it didn't seem the time to bring all that self-loathing up. “I hope this isn't too much, I'm not trying to scare you.”

“You could never scare me, Buck,” Gabe said. Bucky was quite sure he could prove him wrong on that account, but he let it lie. “I knew there was something... different about you after the weapons factory. I always knew but you wouldn't tell me what happened.”

Bucky frowned. He remembered a section of the book about the 107th being captured by HYDRA, and it said a little about Bucky being sick, but not much else.

“What happened to me?” Bucky asked.

“You don't remember?” Gabe said, and when Bucky shook his head, the pressure on his hand increased. “You didn't do well in the war, not to begin with. You hated being away from home, it was palpable. When we were deployed to Azzano, you started to get sick. There was a lot of walking, the climate was wet and muggy. The leg you'd broken when you were younger started causing you trouble and you contracted pneumonia. In the factory, they beat you – they beat all of us, but you didn't know when to shut up.”

Bucky snorted – that was certainly the impression he had got from the book. Gabe smiled for a moment, but it slid from his face as he continued.

“You were gonna die, I could feel it. I had to feed you towards the end, sometimes give you water from my hands. Then they took you. They'd taken dozens of other men, but none returned – I looked, after we were back at the camp. You were the only one who survived the experiments, and you were healed, good as new, pneumonia gone, leg fine. It was bizarre and I thought, hell, I believe in the Almighty, but not that much. You got angry when I brought it up, though, and the rest of them ignored it – Steve never knew the whole story. He didn't know how bad it had been. You were harder; not always, but a lot of the time. You drank a lot but never got drunk, you wouldn't sleep for weeks at a time, you never got sick or hurt again. I used to think, maybe after the war was over, you'd get back to being how you were when we first met. I used to think a lot about what would happen after the war.”

Bucky covered the top of Gabe's hand with his real one, their hands stacked together. “I'm sorry.”

Gabe blinked a few times, against the glassiness of his eyes. “When Steve told us you'd died, I didn't believe. I thought if you could survive the factory, you'd survive the fall too. I tried to explain it to Dugan, but he said there wasn't any place for wishful thinking in war. I should have made them understand.”

“Hey,” Bucky said, and shook their entangled hands. “It was a long way down, no one could've known.” He could have said more, he could have said that he would have died there if it hadn't been
for HYDRA, his brains would have leaked out of the cracks in his skull or he would have frozen to death. That would have been a cleaner end.

“Tell me about you,” he said instead, tipping his chin vaguely towards the hallway. “You got married.” He wasn't sure if he was jealous or not about that. The person he used to be, he definitely would have been, but this version of Bucky wasn't there yet.

Gabe smiled a little and swiped quickly at his eyes. “Carla. I met her in '46. She was Louisiana Creole, raised most of her life in Paris after her family emigrated. She had a hell of a temper, worse than yours, even. She was singing in a bar when I met her. We married in '51, after a lot of convincing on my part. Eventually we came back to the US, moved in here after Mama died.”

Bucky wished he'd met Gabe's mama. “Did Carla know about you and me?”

Gabe nodded and Bucky couldn't help the look of surprise that crossed over his face. Gabe laughed. “She was a cosmopolitan sort of girl. I remember her telling me she was known to appreciate a beautiful woman when the mood took her. It took me a while to come to terms with that. Hypocritical, I know.”

Bucky laughed in turn, but Gabe had already grown wistful again. “Is she...?”

“She passed a year ago,” Gabe said, bobbing his head a little. “Liver cancer.”

“I'm sorry,” he murmured.

“I'm gettin' through,” Gabe said. “No other choice with the kids.”

“Three, right?”

“Adele, Cecilia, and Nathan,” he said, “and seven grandchildren.”

“That's something,” Bucky said and, for some reason, that made Gabe smile. “One of them's called Antoine, right?”

“Yes... You saw him?”

“I was in the bushes across the road when he left.” He felt a little embarrassed to admit it, now, but Gabe's gaze was fond.

“Where have you been since the incident in DC?”

“Mainly California, been with my family. My sisters live out there and my brother came for Christmas. They treated me so good, I couldn't have asked for more. Becca passed on the 26th.”

“Bucky,” Gabe said, and Bucky abruptly felt the weight of loss on him from the soft way Gabe had said his name. He ducked his head and drew in a deep breath. “I remember how close you were to her.”

“It's okay,” he said, and lifted his head again. It hurt, but it wasn't the worst pain he'd ever felt, emotionally or physically. He used to feel things so intensely, but maybe now he wasn't capable of that depth any more. “She said you came to the house once.”

“I did. It was like a punch to the gut, her looking so much like you. Like you in a wig and a dress.”

“Hey,” Bucky said, and laughed, “don't insult my sister like that.”
Gabe shook his head. “I had something I wanted to give your parents, but...” He pulled his hand away and stood up. “I'll show you.”

He held his hand out again, and Bucky took it, this time in his right, carrying his bag with his left, and allowed himself to be led out of the living room and up the stairs. He eyed the photos and paintings as they went, the floral patterns and pastel walls that abounded, and found himself in a study that looked not unlike his grandfather's. He remembered that place, the dark walls, dark wooden furniture, and shelves of books. There had been a lot less books in Grandpa's study than Gabe's, since those were saved for the library and Grandpa wasn't a big reader, but the overall feeling was the same. Gabe leaned heavy on his cane but didn't let that stop him from taking out a small set of steps and using them to reach a case on top of one of the bookcases. He waved away any offers of help. The case looked like the kind of suitcase that Bucky had when he was a child, and maybe as old as that too; the hinges were dark with age and the leather was battered and worn.

Gabe stepped back down and lay the suitcase on the desk. There was a combination lock on each latch and he turned the dials until they opened. “I kept some things of yours,” he said, and stepped back to let Bucky look.

Inside was an assortment of items: a tattered copy of *There Was an Old Woman*, an issue of *Captain America*, a red and yellow cardboard box that said *Barnum's Animals* on the side, a packet of Pall Mall cigarettes, and a rectangular silver lighter. Bucky reached out and brushed his fingers against it.

"Can I pick it up?"

"It's your lighter," Gabe said, and Bucky lifted it out, turning it over in his hands. On the back was an inscription which read: *To Bucky, For the Man You Will Become – Grandpa, 1933*. He’d felt so grown up when his grandfather had given this to him.

“I went to your family's home to give it back,” Gabe said. Bucky looked at him as he spoke and Gabe's expression grew troubled. “After you fell and we were back at the camp, Steve disappeared for hours. I snuck into the tent you shared and went through your pack. There was no excuse for it, but I just wanted a few things to remember you by. After the war was over, I knew I should give them back, your lighter and the book – your sister had sent it to you and written a message on the inside cover – but once I was there, I couldn't do it. I went away with them and used your lighter for years, until I gave up smoking. Your family should have had it. You should have it.”

Bucky shook his head and put the lighter in Gabe's hand, then closed his fingers around it. “It's yours, has been a lot longer than it was ever mine.” He looked back at the case and saw, in the space where the lighter had rested, a scrap of blue fabric a few inches long, hemmed on two sides, with a button hole at the top. He pressed his fingers to it but couldn't bring himself to pick it up. It felt soft and thick, and he remembered the quilted lining of his jacket, how nice it was in the winter and how snazzy he felt in it.

He looked back to Gabe, who had tears in his eyes, and stepped closer, pulling him into a hug. Gabe pressed his hands on Bucky's back and rubbed.

“I think we would've made it,” Bucky said quietly. “Y’know, if things had been different.”

“You loved Steve,” Gabe said, his voice muffled in Bucky's shoulder.

He drew back and put his hands around Gabe's face. It felt strange, to be this intimate with someone. He had never got this close to a person as the Winter Soldier unless he was looking to snap the other's neck. Gabe, though, he brought it out in him, maybe even more so than his siblings had. “I did,” he said, “but that was... maybe obsession, with him. Complicated. With you... I loved you. You
made it easy and it was something real. I felt safe with you.”

“I felt safe with you too,” Gabe said, and wiped at his eyes. Bucky pulled him closer and kissed him. Gabe's lips were dry and thinner than he remembered, but it still felt good. It felt easy, like it always had with Gabe – he never felt anxious and confused about what they'd had. It didn't feel wrong that Gabe was old and Bucky was whatever he was now.

It was mostly chaste, just a memory of the past. They drew apart slowly. “Do you want to use my shower?”

Bucky let his hands slide from Gabe's face to his shoulders and smiled. “That bad?”

“You had a long trip,” he said magnanimously. “Do you need clean clothes?”

Bucky laughed. “I got some.”

Gabe showed him into a bathroom where everything was yellow and there was a cross between a doll and a doily on the back of the toilet with a roll of paper inside. Bucky didn't dwell on it and got in the shower. He spent a little while in there, washing off the last few days, and took his time drying off and getting dressed again. He folded his dirty clothes into a neat package and stowed them at the bottom of his bag. There was a hair dryer in the bathroom, which he expected had been Carla's; he wondered if it was out of line to use it since it had probably gone untouched since her death, but he picked it up anyway and gave his hair a quick blast. It was a foreign sensation and he thought that he had perhaps never used one before. He didn't think he would have used one when he was young, and doubtless HYDRA weren't concerned about such things. When he was done, he rewound the cord and put it back the way he'd found it, then shouldered his bag and left the bathroom.

As he came down the stairs, he could hear the TV running, and then Gabe's voice.

“Of course I'm safe, Adele.”

Bucky stepped into the room. Gabe was sitting in an armchair with a phone to his ear, his back turned to Bucky. Bucky's eyes fell on the TV and the story playing out in front of them. A man with a plaque behind him that read Department of Justice was talking, but it cut away quickly to a newsreader.

“For those just joining us, the head of the FBI has, in a stunning revelation, named former US Army Sergeant James Barnes as the HYDRA operative known as the 'Winter Soldier'—”

Bucky let out a loud breath and Gabe turned to look at him, his eyebrows scrunched together. “Why would he come here?” he said into the phone. He held his hand out to Bucky. “I'm sure he doesn't remember me.”

Bucky came to the chair and sat down on the floor. It was good that he had, since his legs felt a little numb. Gabe settled his hand in Bucky's hair.

“Trust me, pudding, I'm fine, but I'm due at the community centre soon, so we'll talk later, all right? All right, I love you too.”

He took the phone from his ear and lay it out on his knee, then looked down at Bucky, his hand still resting in Bucky's hair. Bucky sighed and watched it play out on screen; they cut back to the press conference, where the man was trying his best to explain how this unbelievable situation had come about. All he could say was that they'd confirmed Bucky's identity and had HYDRA agents in custody who were assisting the investigation.
“I have to go,” Bucky murmured. A month with his sisters and not even an hour with Gabe. He stayed where he was on the floor for a few more minutes, though, weighed down by it all.

“I have a car you can use,” Gabe said.

The car was housed in an outhouse around back, hidden from view of the road. It was a beat up old thing with a logo like a bowtie on the hood, which he knew somehow made it a Chevy. There were no cushions on the backseat.

“I can't take this,” Bucky said.

Gabe shook his head and lay his hand on Bucky's back. “Me and my grandson used to work restoring it, but it's been a good ten years since we've looked at it. He's busy and I'm old.”

“Still,” Bucky murmured.

“Buck, let me do this for you,” Gabe said. “There's no title on it, so you'll get arrested if the plates are run. It's not the safest option, but it's the best I can offer.”

“It's a lot,” he said, and turned his head towards Gabe. “If anyone comes looking for me...”

Gabe smiled. “I know how to stonewall a cop.”

“But you need to be safe,” Bucky said. “If it's someone from HYDRA, they won't be so easy to put off.”

“I've got my shotgun,” Gabe said, and when Bucky opened his mouth again he put his hands on Bucky's shoulders and squeezed. “I can take care of myself, even more now that I've seen you.”

“Okay,” Bucky said, and pressed his hands into his pockets. “Okay, thanks. Let's get this thing running.”

The engine turned over a few times before it spluttered to life, kicking out a few clouds of exhaust into the garage. Bucky put his bag in the backseat and put his ball cap back on.

“I'm sorry...” he said and cast about for a way to finish. “For everything. If I bring any trouble to your door and... for everything else.”

They hugged again, an intimacy that was easy to fall into with Gabe. It felt natural. Gabe pressed his hand to the back of Bucky's head again and kissed his cheek. “I've had a good life,” he said, “you will too.”

Bucky didn't think so, but he kept that to himself.

They said their goodbyes quickly, a kiss and held hand and then Bucky pulled out of the garage and started on his road north. His plan was to reach the border to Canada in North Dakota and find a truck to smuggle himself across in. He'd been smuggled into many countries that way and he hoped he'd be able to do it now without a handler to arrange things.

It was a twenty three hour drive to Pembina, North Dakota, in a car with no title and almost no suspension. He bounced his way out of Georgia and into Tennessee. Driving came back to him like muscle memory. He had rarely needed to drive as the Winter Soldier – he was held in the back of trucks and released like a rabid dog when needed – but he had no trouble with it now. He remembered always liking to drive; he was one of the only guys with a car in the neighbourhood, the first to get his license by years. He was happy to drive his friends around, to ferry his siblings here
and there, to shoot the shit with Steve in the passenger seat. He cruised around Brooklyn feeling like a king.

He drove carefully, keeping to speed limits, his eyes firmly on the road; everything he could do to keep the police's attention off him. The car itself could be enough to warrant being pulled over, the state it was in, but he reached Missouri near midnight and kept on driving. He drove through the night, passing through Iowa and Minnesota and hitting North Dakota in the early afternoon.

He rolled into the Pembina at one, abandoned the car outside of the town, and walked an hour towards the highway that led to the Pembina-Emerson crossing. As he walked, he saw signs outside that read, 'Captain America's WWII sidekick named Winter Soldier' and things to that effect. He hurried on.

Not far from the highway, he saw a long haul truck parked outside a gas station. The cab was empty and the truck had Oklahoma plates; he made an educated guess that it was heading north to Manitoba and picked the padlock, which was easy to do. He pulled the rolling door up far enough to slip in, then squeezed his metal hand out to put the padlock back on. He hadn't had enough forethought to pack a flashlight, but he did have the lighter from Macon and lit it to get a look at the interior of the truck. It was filled with appliances, mostly fridges and dishwashers. He extinguished the lighter and sat down against a fridge. It was pitch black besides a sliver of light bleeding in underneath the door and his chest felt tight. He couldn't recall if he'd been scared of the dark before, but now it made him decidedly uneasy.

The drivers returned a few minutes later and the engine hummed to life. They drove north, thankfully, pulling onto the highway and continuing for fifteen minutes before coming to a stop. Bucky heard the drivers complain about the extra security at the border and knew that was because of him. He sat in the dark for half an hour, breathing slow, before there was a rap on the side of the truck. A jolt went through him, but he kept his jaw clenched shut and heard a border officer tell the drivers he needed to look inside.

The truck was tightly packed with appliances, so he didn't expect that the officers would check each one. He hurried to the front of the truck, nearest the cab, and tore the cardboard packaging off a chest freezer. It was just big enough for him to squeeze into if he bent his knees almost to his chest. He closed the lid fully and held himself still as the door rolled open.

The walls of the freezer pressed in tight around him.

"Posadite yego v bak."

The first time they put him in the cryogenic tank, she was there. She was in so many of his memories, on the periphery, sometimes with blonde hair, sometimes black or brown or red. The called her Widow, not the one Steve buddied up with, but an older one, maybe the first. She aged while he remained young, she issued orders to him as she had orders issued to her. Each time he woke up, he didn't remember who she was, yet he always knew her. She sent him into the tanks and told him not to be weak.

There were other tanks, too, ones where it was dark and small and the techs would inject him with things that made him hum with energy, deny him a moment of rest in the coffin. And it would be his coffin if he didn't behave, she said.

The truck door closed again and he shoved the freezer lid open, leaning over the side to catch his breath. He stayed there for a minute, squeezed into that space that was too small for his body, staring into the darkness. The truck began to move and he pulled himself out of the freezer and found a better place to sit, or at least one that didn't make him think about the bone deep chill of the tank.
The truck drove for a few hours without stopping; the rumble of the engine and the occasional bumps lulled him into something close to sleep and the cold from outside leached in, sapping his motivation to stay awake. He jolted back to himself when the truck stopped moving and hurried to hide in case they opened up the back, but instead he heard the two drivers talk about getting food, followed by the twin slams of the cab doors closing. He gave it ten minutes before approaching the back of the truck. It was dusk now and there was little light coming in through the bottom of the door.

He knew he wouldn't be able to pick the padlock from inside the truck, but with his metal hand, he was able to push through the gap and hook his fingers around it, then tear it free like a fucking animal. He felt a little guilty about the trouble the drivers would get into for this, but he'd get a whole lot more trouble if he didn't keep moving.

The truck was parked in a parking lot and thankfully no one was around when he slid out. The cold air bit into him, ruffling his hair and sinking in through his too-thin layers. He estimated that it was minus four, cold enough to make him feel distinctly uncomfortable, despite his enhancements. He would need winter clothes, so he started walking in search of a store.

He was in Brandon, Manitoba, he discovered after a little while, and found a store that said it had all the winter essentials - Canadian Tire. He went in. There was a lot more than tires in there. He picked up a coat with a hood, a thick scarf, long johns, a thermal top, and a new pack that promised to be waterproof – his stolen one had got pretty beat up over the last couple of months. He did a couple of circuits around the store, picking up other incidentals like a compass, and found the place was almost empty, just white lino and tall shelves stretching on all around him. There was festive music, entreating him to have a merry Christmas, even though it was now January. He pushed his cart back to the front and loaded his items onto the conveyor belt. He kept his chin tipped down as the cashier beeped everything through, but she didn't seem interested in looking at his face anyway.

“Oh,” he said, when she was almost finished. “Do you take American?”

She sighed deeply and tapped a sign behind her. “Exchange rate’s ninety four cents to the dollar.”

He counted the money out and finished up. She still hadn't given him a second look but he felt that it was still prudent to get out of the store as quickly as possible. He crammed all his stuff in the new pack and left the store, scouting around outside for somewhere covered to get changed. The wind had only got worse and it stabbed at his skin as he got changed in an alleyway. He layered up, wrapping a scarf around his mouth and slipping on the new jacket, then transferred all his items from his old pack to his new one. He had picked up an atlas and flashlight in the store and clicked the flashlight on to read it.

There was a flying club on the outskirts of the city, a two hour walk from where he was. He didn't recall ever having flown a plane before, yet knew that he could. If he could get a plane, there was a possibility that he could get to Greenland and eventually to Europe, assuming he kept his wits about him and benefited from a healthy dose of luck. It was that or make his life in the tundra and he'd had enough cold to last him two lifetimes.

He lit a cigarette and started walking.

He arrived at the club by eight, but kept his distance until he felt that he could pass unseen. A four hour camp out was nothing to him, though the icy wind on his cheeks bothered him in a way it was never allowed to before. When the coast was clear, he slipped across the street and hopped the fence with ease. There were no guards, as far as he could tell, but there were a few security cameras. He didn't think he'd be recognised from the footage, but kept his head down anyway and found his way to the hangar. The door was alarmed, but he didn't have any trouble short-circuiting it and breaking
the lock open.

There were five planes inside, all light aircraft, three Cessnas and two Pipers. He chose the Cessna Caravan and loaded it up before breaking open the hangar bay doors. Once he was in the cockpit, it came like second nature to him, turning the engine on, checking the fuel reserves, and beginning his take off. The plane rattled and bounced as he hit rough patches and skidded on the icy ground.

Two thousand feet from the bay doors, he managed to pull up and into the air. The force of gravity pressing down on him and the lights disappearing behind him were exhilarating. He levelled out at five thousand feet to avoid radar detection. He thought what he was doing was called ‘terrain masking’, but another word came to mind: ‘hedgehopping’.

“Fuckers won't see us coming at these heights!” Stark's voice in his head, shouting back to him and Steve while they waited in the back of the plane.

Bucky smiled a little to himself.

He flew through the night, over Hudson Bay, across Nunavut, to Baffin Bay. The sun was nowhere to be seen even though it was coming up five am, but the sky was lit up with jagged green and pinkish lights. The Aurora Borealis, he thought; he had seen them before, in Siberia. A man had said sharp words to him and he had stopped looking.

Bucky gripped the controls harder and suppressed a shudder.

Low on fuel and feeling that he had pushed his luck far enough with the plane, he landed it on a small island off the coast of Greenland. Sisimiut, the map said. It was a bumpy landing, damaging the landing gear and sending the plane skidding to one side for a good few hundred feet. Eventually it stopped and he was able to extract himself without injury. It took close to an hour to negotiate the terrain and come upon the nearest town, which was already awake with early morning fishermen.

He walked further inland and found some shops with flyers outside advertising dog sledding, plane tours, and fishing expeditions for tourists. He consulted his atlas again – the distance from where he was to the other side of the country was six hundred and seventy four kilometres and he estimated that would take him four days of solid walking across the ice sheet to make it there. Stealing another plane seemed like too big a risk now and he didn't think he could bring himself to steal someone's dogs.

His stomach growled insistently as he thought about his options, so he stowed his atlas and went to change some money to get food. A hundred dollars got him five hundred and fifty krones. He walked a little while down the street until he came to a red hut that reminded him of the war, with the word ‘café’ on the front. Inside he found a few wooden tables with plastic table cloths. A waitress gestured for him to sit down, so he did and read the menu laid out in front of him. The words were in both Greenlandic and Danish; he couldn't read the Greenlandic, but Danish was no problem and the lady didn't bat an eyelid when he ordered his salami, toast, cheese, and pastries. He didn't even have to think about the words as he spoke, they flowed like his mother tongue.

He concentrated on eating, clearing the plate in a few minutes before he turned his attention to the window. Along with cars, a lot of people were riding snowmobiles. He was sure he could ride one of them though. He asked the waitress where he could buy a snowmobile and she directed him to a second hand store not far from the café. The signs in the window said a used one cost fifteen thousand krones. He changed more money and hoped this wasn't the kind of place where word of an American changing thousands of dollars would get around.

He bought the snowmobile and a couple extra tanks of gas, along with a pair of goggles and a hat at
the store owner's urging. At eighty miles per hour max speed, he could be in Isortoq by the early afternoon, assuming he could negotiate the terrain.

He set out at seven, wrapped up tighter than Steve in the winter when they were kids. The goggles were much bulkier than the kind he'd worn before, but his skin still prickled when he put them on.

It wasn't long before all the buildings fell away and all that was left was the endless white canvas of snow. He had spent so much of his life in white, the winters on the front, the blankets of snow in Leningrad, in Siberia, the white rooms and bright lights of the bases. It was a kind of torture, to be held in a blank, unforgiving room for days on end. The light would seep in everywhere, underneath his eyelids, into his brain. The world screamed its brightness at him, forced him to stay awake.

They did it to children, too. Little girls locked in individual rooms. Only the best were chosen, from the Red Room to the white room. The Widow showed him this once when she was feeling lonely. At those times, she would have him escort her around the base and she would talk to him, remarking on the new little girls, how they lacked the necessary skills and stamina for the work, on her past lives, on New York and the people populating it. Sometimes, if they were alone, she would take his face in her hands and gently scratch at his cheeks with her sharp nails.

"You are still so handsome," she would say in a wispy American accent.

Many of the girls would fail the white room test, unravelling as he and Widow watched behind one way glass, wilting away under the lights, but a splash of red drew his mind back from the machine's abyss. A girl with hair so antithetical to her prison and a face so proud, he thought they'd never break her.

He was so caught up in his memories that he missed a particular protrusion of rock and the snowmobile flipped sideways, gaining an impressive height from the momentum. He let go, hitting the ground hard, and put his left arm up to shield his face as the snowmobile came down on top of him. All five hundred pounds of it came down across his torso and legs and he felt a bone break.

"Fuck!" he screamed into the silence, and shoved the snowmobile off. His pants and long johns were torn on his right leg, and blood oozed out of the wound. His lower leg was bent inwards slightly, so he sat up and forced it straight again, shouting out again. He'd had injuries much worse than this and not expressed any pain at all. He shouted again, just to hear it, then scooted over to where his pack had fallen and retrieved a t-shirt from it to wrap the wound. It was a shame to ruin one of the shirts that Katie had bought him, but he didn't have much choice. When he stood, he walked with a limp.

The snowmobile was toast, and he was still fifteen miles out from Isortoq. That wasn't long on the snowmobile, but on foot, with a broken leg, that was several hours of walking.

"Goddamn," he muttered, and threw his pack over his shoulder.

His leg protested the weight he put on it, spikes of pain running up and down his bones. The cold wind froze the dried blood to his skin and his nose and cheeks tingled. He remembered walking like this before, limping through wet forests. He'd been sick then, pneumonia creeping up on him over weeks. The brass didn't care about his fever and his crippled leg, even his friends in the unit didn't notice – only Gabe. Gabe looked after him and kept him alive where he otherwise would have died.

Once, when he had an assignment in Chile, he was shot in the chest. He was left there, alone in a hotel room with blood filling up his mouth for hours before his handlers retrieved him. They made him walk back to the van and dug the bullet out from just below his heart, no anaesthetic.

What little sun there had receded a few hours into his trip and now he was left to slip and stumble in
He reached Isortoq in the evening. The gash on his leg had healed but he could feel his bone still knitting together, the intense ache of it. He staggered into the small town and walked towards the centre, where the streets were lit by street lamps. A glimpse of himself in a window revealed that his nose and his cheeks had turned blue from frostbite. He tugged the scarf up to cover it and went into a grocery store. There was a restroom at the back, which he headed straight towards.

He shed his goggles, gloves, hat and scarf and turned the hot water on, collecting some in his hands to dip his face in.

“Shit,” he hissed. His previously numb skin burned at the touch, even though the water wasn't close to scalding. He kept washing his face until the pain subsided, then lifted his head and looked in the mirror. Black and red blisters were forming in place of the blue; he dug his fingernails in and broke the skin, peeling patches of it off as it wept pus. The process took close to fifteen minutes of peeling and bleeding, but his skin started to heal even as he scratched at it, and by the time he left the restroom with his scarf around his face again, the redness was subsiding.

He walked towards the coast until he found a dozen fishing boats strung up along the docks. He was sure he could operate a boat even though, as always, he didn't recall ever having done so before.

A shout drew his attention away from the boats, towards a man approaching him with an irritable look on his face. Bucky didn't understand what he was saying, but gathered it had something to do with the boats.

“Taler du dansk?”

The man continued to look irritated, but nodded anyway. “Ja.”

Bucky told him that he needed to get to Norway and the man laughed and said he wouldn't get there in a fishing boat. The nearest airport was on Kulusuk, a small island on the coast, where he could get a flight to Reykjavik and then to Norway. He could take Bucky there, he said slyly, for a cost. It was a risk, but the cold had settled in his bones and he was losing the will to keep going. He'd spent too many years in the cold, he had to get somewhere where there was some sun and more than a few hours daylight. If he didn't make it to the continent soon, he wasn't sure he ever would.

He gave the man a thousand dollars, which the man took with surprise but didn't ask about. The trip was two hours and the man, Asassak, let Bucky lie down on the bed in the cabin and rest. It was another risky move, but he needed it.

Asassak woke Bucky when they reached Kulusuk and gave him a map of the area. The airport was small, just one terminal and a few planes. The place was still manned when he got there, but he'd come to the end of his patience and ploughed his way through the staff, laying each of them out with a chokehold and tying their hands and feet with zip ties. Somehow, it always ended up like this, him being victim of violence or the perpetrator. He guessed he always had been a perpetrator of violence.

He flew at a low altitude across the North Atlantic, bypassing Iceland altogether and heading straight
on to Bergen. It was an eight hour flight, pushing the limits of the engine. He wouldn't be able to land on the coast, he knew, because he'd be caught immediately, so there was only one other option, a move that might have informally been called, 'The Captain America'; putting the plane in the water and swimming the rest of the way.

He didn't relish the idea at all, but as Norway appeared in the distance, he girded his loins and stripped down to just his boxer shorts. There was a parachute and life jacket in the plane, thankfully, which he strapped on. He put everything in his pack and hoped it really was waterproof before forcing the controls down and setting the plane for a crash course with the water. He put his pack on and opened the plane door, jumping out without preamble.

Hitting the water sucked all the air out of his lungs; he couldn't even yell at the ice that filled his veins. He would have sunk like a stone if it hadn't been for the life jacket and he just floated there, shock rolling through him for a few minutes before his brain kicked in again.

He started to swim towards the coast; a few minutes after that the plane hit the water three hundred feet away, sending a huge shock wave rippling in all directions. Water washed over his head and propelled him forward. He held his breath for as long as he could, but still took several mouthfuls of water before he righted himself again. It was all so different to DC; then, he hadn't struggled or panicked or found the admittedly warmer water of the Potomac such a horror show. Maybe it was all in his head – when he was the soldier, he didn't care about how he felt – pain, pleasure or anything in between – but now he felt it all, even dulled as it was. Maybe he was human after all.

It took him nearly three hours to swim to shore; his body was numb but he kept going until he reached the cliffs of Lokøy. He led with his metal arm, grabbing the rock face like the claw of a carnival game. He couldn't feel the rough surface at all, and when he crawled onto level ground, he found that the soles of his feet and his flesh hand had been torn to shreds, but his immediate concern was vomiting copiously. His mouth and tongue were swollen and everything throbbed as the cold morning air brought his temperature up a few degrees. When his stomach finished spasming, he lay down on the rock and stared up at the sky. It was still dark, but when he closed his eyes, it was light all around him, a brilliant glare coming off the snow covered ravine. Steve was miles above him, alone, but he'd be okay. He'd be okay without Bucky.

He jolted, opening his eyes. Christ, he hoped to save the near-death hallucinations for later. He dragged himself up and pulled the pack over. Incredibly, it hadn't let the water in and his clothes were blessedly dry. He took out the bloodied t-shirt and used it to dry himself, then took off the wet boxers and dressed in as many layers as he could get on his body. He tore a second t-shirt apart and wrapped his cut feet, pulled on two pairs of socks, and put his boots on.

When he was finally done, he felt like the Michelin Man, but he was warm, at least. He threw the parachute, life jacket, and bloodied t-shirt back into the water and found east on his compass.

He still had a long way to go, but he'd come further than he ever thought he could.

Chapter End Notes

- Bucky wasn't the only one losing the will to live figuring out how to get him from North America to Europe.

- Shopping in an empty Canadian Tire = aesthetic.
- Bucky has been reunited with two great loves, Gabe and cigarettes!

Translations:
Posadite yego v bak - Put him back in the tank. (Russian)
Taler du dansk? - Do you speak Danish? (Danish)
Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to kd-heart for the Romanian translations in this chapter. You can hover over the text for the translation or find them in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When he reached the city of Bergen, he changed some more money, booked a room for a couple of nights, and slept for twenty four hours. When he woke again, he had a hot shower and several hot meals. The news here was less focused on the Winter Soldier, but he still saw grainy images of himself on newspapers and a smiling army portrait on the cover of Time Magazine - *From Purple Heart to Heart of Terror*.

Pithy.

The journey from Norway to mainland Europe took weeks; he worked his way down the country, into Sweden, through Denmark, and finally to Germany, smuggled by truck and on foot. In Hannover, he took a break and got another hotel room. It was nice enough, though it was in a desolate part of town; that was no bad thing, with him needing to lie low. He could speak and read German perfectly, and began to remember some of the missions he'd carried out here. In the war, the Commandos rarely snuck across the border into Germany, but as the Winter Soldier, Bucky recalled carrying out many assassinations. In a divided Germany, he killed enemies of HYDRA on both sides of the wall. Often, he was loaned out to other forces, the Soviet government and the American one.

Sometimes a handsome man with wheat blond hair and cold blue eyes would take him, speak in an accent that made Bucky – or the Soldier's – heart ache somehow. Sometimes this man would treat him kindly as he lay a rifle in the Soldier's hands; other times he would be cruel and rough.

When Bucky reached Leipzig, he realised the man was Pierce. He'd used his handsome face to tap into that part of the Soldier that still yearned for Steve, kept the Soldier docile in his confused loyalty to a man he couldn't remember but desperately missed.

By March, he was in Slovakia, and celebrated his ninety seventh birthday in the city of Košice. He wasn't sure how old he was physically, because he wasn't sure how much time he had spent out of cryo over the decades, but he estimated he looked to be around thirty years old, older with the hair and beard, younger if he was all clean cut the way he had been in the pictures in his book.

He decided to designate March 10, 2014 as his big three-oh and bought some ingredients and pastries for himself from a supermarket. He'd booked himself into a hotel that had self-contained apartments with kitchens, in the centre of town, so he could make himself a birthday dinner in private. The hotel had free wifi, but he didn't have any wifi devices, so he settled for watching a film dubbed into Slovak while he ate his beef stew and donuts. Happy birthday to him.

At the end of the month, there was a festival in the city, burning the effigy of the goddess Marzanna to herald the beginning of spring. Bucky watched it from afar as he made his way out of the city, too far away to feel the heat of the fire but hoping that the coming spring would keep him warm.

April, May, and most of June was spent in Hungary. The weather started to warm up to the point
where he was sweating in his coat and had to dress in thinner clothes. It looked a little peculiar to wear gloves in the summer, but he kept a low enough profile that he didn't think anyone put much thought to it.

At the end of June, he finally crossed into Romania. Dorohoi was twelve hours away by train and bus from where he'd arrived in Carei, and he set out on the journey against his better judgement. According to Florence, very few of their relatives lived in the city now, but it was still the place his father had been born and lived until he was thirteen. He remembered his father telling him hurriedly about his past on the way to the draft office, revealing a past life that Dad had tried his best to forget and that maybe he was a little ashamed of; as a young child, Bucky hadn't put much thought to the origins of his father. He hadn't truly considered the oddness of never hearing his father's mother tongue and not knowing stories of his grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Sometimes, when Sarah would say something in Gaelic to Steve and Steve would reply in stilted, foreign words, Bucky felt a pang of something, but it never lasted. Grandpa had dominated the house for all his formative years; Dad didn't get a look in.

In the barracks at Fort Hamilton, he'd thought a little about Dorohoi and what kind of place it was. Now, it was a city not immediately distinguishable from any other European city. It had grand old buildings that made him think of time spent in Moscow and austere modern high rises. He began to search for a library, finding one in a building that looked like a Dixie manor house.

For once, his ability to read, write, and speak like a local didn't feel wrong at all. He sat down at a computer and started reading up about the area. The Jewish population in the city now was very small, many having emigrated to Israel as his relatives had, but once over half the population was Jewish and there'd been many synagogues. There'd been a rich religious life here, that much was clear, one that he couldn't imagine his father participating in. Bucky didn't even know what part of the city his father's family had lived in; he should have asked Florence when he was in California, or he should have asked Dad those years ago, taken an interest. Of course, it had never occurred to him to do either.

There was a Jewish cemetery just down the road from the library, one of only a few in the city. He left the library and walked the few minutes to the somewhat hidden entrance and went inside. Gravestones ran in lines the same as a Catholic graveyard, but each stone was inscribed in Hebrew which, despite all the little tricks he had up his sleeve now, he couldn't read. He wouldn't be able to find the graves of his long gone relatives even if they were here, but he walked along the paths anyway. He didn't see many flowers other than what was growing from the ground, but many of the newer looking headstones had small stones placed along the top and on the ground in front.

There was a whole world, a whole religion and way of life, there that he never knew, and he couldn't change that by staying, much as he wanted to.

He left the cemetery and made his way out of the city, heading for south towards Botoşani, where the people in Florence's pictures lived. These relatives who lived there would know all about him and probably call the police if they saw him, but Florence had given him this address and he'd likely never see any of them in person again; he wouldn't approach, only watch from afar like the creep that he was. The bus took about an hour and he arrived as dusk began to settle in. The address put Elena and Mihai in a low rise apartment building in an area of the city called Griviţa, but he put that aside for the night and got himself a cheap room. Despite the low price, it was a nice room and the place had its own pool that he could see from his window. The thought of a swim was nice, but only a dream, so he retreated to the bed and watched TV until he fell asleep.

In the morning, he ate breakfast in a café and the waitress made eyes at him. It was a familiar sensation, now that he was experiencing it and made him feel both shy and pleased, but he still paid
up quick and left before he was looked at too closely. He spent the rest of the morning and the early afternoon in a museum that had the oldest human artefacts found this side of Europe, allegedly. Steve and Becca would have loved this place when they were kids.

In the later afternoon, he went to the street where Mihai and Elena lived. There was a gas station with a café nearby, so he went in and got a coffee and sandwich and sat at the window where he could see the situation on the street. It was quiet, like the rest of the city, relaxing. Only a few people came and went from the café, mainly people getting gas and a coffee to go. He was about twenty feet from the door, far enough that customers didn't glance at him automatically as they passed through. The door opened again when he was almost done with his coffee, and he only caught a glance: a young man with blond hair and a bag slung over his shoulder. He caught Bucky's eye briefly before approaching the counter, but stopped in his tracks before he ordered.

Neculai. Bucky got up smoothly and walked out the door as the boy called out, “Hei!”

He put his head down and kept going, turning down what he thought to be an alleyway, but was, in fact, part of someone's property; a rookie mistake and one that could cost him.

“Așteaptă!” Neculai called, only a few feet away and with Bucky now facing a chain link fence. He could scale it without trouble, but not without drawing more attention. He turned towards Neculai.

“Ce vrei?” he asked, keeping his head tipped down.

“Ești...” He cleared his throat. “You are Bucky Barnes.”

He squared his shoulders. Neculai looked lean under his hoodie, much slighter than Bucky and Bucky hoped this would be enough to scare him off. “Nu înțeleg ce vrei să spui.”

He didn't come any closer, but he didn't back off either. “Your accent is good, but... still.”

Bucky raised his head slowly. “What're you gonna do?”

Neculai's eyes widened, like he didn't truly believe it was Bucky until right then. “I'm... not going to do anything,” he said, “I'm your first cousin, removed three times... I think.” His voice reminded Bucky of his father, the way he spoke in a few softly accented words.

“I know,” he said. “You're Neculai.”

His eyes widened again. “How do you know? Have you been here a long time?”

“My sister showed me pictures of your family.”

“You've seen them?” Neculai asked, and Bucky nodded. “I am sorry about Rebecca.”

Bucky managed to flash a smile. “Thanks.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and Bucky took the opportunity to listen to their surroundings – it didn't sound like there was anyone nearby, thankfully, but that was still no guarantee he wouldn't get caught.

“Your sisters say I look like you,” Neculai piped up.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said. The general shape of Neculai's face and his eyes seemed about right, though Bucky only knew this from careful study of old pictures of himself – he couldn't visual what his own face looked like the way he thought most people could.
“They're saying on the news...” Neculai added, then trailed off.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” he said, “I shouldn't have come here, I don't know what I was trying to achieve.”

Neculai came a few steps closer. “Well, I'm glad you came. I read everything I could find about you – I'm studying American History at university now.”

Bucky smiled. At least someone was happy to find him skulking about like a mass murderer. “Thanks. I should still leave; I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone you saw me.”

Neculai bobbed his head earnestly. “I won't, you can trust me.” Bucky believed it, surprisingly. Neculai reached into his bag and pulled out his wallet. “Here, you should take this,” he said, pulling something out. Bucky opened his mouth to tell him he didn't need any money, but Neculai held out a card. Bucky stepped forward and took it.

It was an ID card that said Universitatea Ștefan cel Mare Suceava along the top and had a serious looking photo of Neculai on it. Bucky raised his eyes in question.

“In case you need ID,” Neculai said.

“No one's ever gonna believe I'm seventeen.”

“I am eighteen now,” Neculai said, and Bucky resisted an indulgent smile. “It can't hurt to have it. I can get a new one for free, you don't have to worry.”

Bucky looked back down at it for moment, then shrugged a shoulder. They clearly did not look enough alike to make this ID useful, but it was a nice gesture. He closed his fingers around it and slipped it into his pocket. “All right, thanks. I'm gonna go now, before my luck runs out.”

“Oh okay,” Neculai said, and held out his hand. Bucky smiled a little and shook it. “It's an honour to have met you,” he added.

Christ, there wasn't anyone else right now who'd find it an honour. “Honour's all mine, kid,” he said, and beat his path out of town before anyone less friendly caught sight of him.

He went south, spending a few days at a time in small towns along the way until he reached Bucharest. As the most populous city in the country, it seemed a safer place to blend into than the smaller cities and towns. Maybe it would have been more sensible to live completely off the grid, in a forest somewhere subsisting off the land. He'd done that before as the Soldier, months spent in mountainous regions or the wet heat of a jungle, eating plants and small animals to survive. He knew he could manage it physically, but mentally, he wasn't so sure. He needed the presence of others around him, even if he couldn't reach out to them.

He booked a few nights in a hotel. It was the first week of September and the city had emptied out as people headed back to work and school. American news was on the periphery here, but he still saw headlines in newspapers and on television about the international manhunt – Interpol had reason to believe that he was no longer in North America, though they didn't release any details. Bucky wondered if he'd been recognised in Canada or Greenland; maybe Asassak had called the authorities. Whatever the case was, no one in the city seemed concerned about his whereabouts and he felt reasonably comfortable in exploring the city.

He visited parks and museums, bought a guidebook and looked at buildings of architectural interest,
ate local food. He had a lot of money left and the exchange rate from US dollars to Romanian lei was favourable, but it still didn’t seem sensible to spend one hundred lei a night on a room to sleep in when he could rent a whole apartment for three hundred lei a month. He answered an ad he found in a shop window and was given the keys to a dive a few hours later. The place was well-located in Rahova, the top floor of an eight storey block with a nearby building half the size. The landlady's rules were as followed: no fighting, no shouting after eleven, infestations of any sort were his problem, and rent was due the first of the month no later than noon or he could expect to find his belongings on the street corner at twelve oh one pm.

Assuming he would have any belongings, anyway. The first night, he lay down on the splintering wooden floorboards and slept with his pack as a pillow and the sound of traffic washing over him. The next day he bought food and cleaning products and scrubbed the bathroom and kitchen until they shined.

The place was a bachelor apartment, just a living room with a kitchenette and a bathroom. It reminded him of the apartment Sarah passed away in, though this place was much lighter and airier, the windows east facing and getting the sun in the morning. Summers here didn’t have the thick, cloying heat of Brooklyn that you could practically reach out and touch. In a fit of paranoia on the third day, he covered all the windows with a layer of newspaper, thin enough to let the light in but opaque enough to obscure him from view.

After a week, he found a small couch in a nearby alleyway and dragged it back to the building. When he got it inside the lobby and checked that he was alone, he upended it and carried it up the seven flights of stairs to his apartment without any trouble. The couch wasn’t comfortable in the slightest, but he still took the cushions off and put them on the floor at night as a makeshift bed. He dreamt about jumping from cushion to cushion with Steve in his parents’ living room as a kid, the carpeted floor turning to shark-infested waters.

He bought mildewy paperbacks at a local bookstore – he couldn’t check things out at the library because they needed ID and proof of address in order to give him a library card. The utilities for the apartment were covered in the rent and, of course, he didn’t have any internet or television. He still used their computers and read books while he was in the library, but sometimes the librarians smiled at him when he came in and he thought he might be becoming too familiar to them, so he limited how often he went in.

In October, he found an old postcard of Steve from the forties in a junk shop. It was a reproduction – the back said it was for the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1995 – but Bucky had to buy it anyway, and slipped it into a new notebook he’d picked up from a convenience store. Every time he needed more money changed, he travelled to the other side of the city to a different Bureau de Change in the hopes that he wouldn’t out himself to his neighbours as anything other than a local. He limited what he spent as much as he could.

On the thirty first, people were out on the street in costumes before it even got dark. He saw little kids with Captain America shields and adults dressed up as vampires. He walked back from the market with a bag of candy and vegetables and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, dodging out of the way of squealing children. His landlady was standing outside the building, scowling at the fun on the street.

Camelia was somewhere in her sixties, he figured, and reached only to his shoulder. She had coarse brown hair shot through with white, high cheekbones, and wore carefully applied make up everyday – he bet she was a knock out when she was young. She squinted constantly and held things very close to her face to read; he’d never seen her wear glasses and thought she had trouble making out any details. He made a hopeful guess that she didn’t really know what he looked like beyond the
most basic attributes of his body. When he'd taken the apartment, he'd told her his name was Dmitri – that name again – and she'd demanded to know if he was Russian.

*My father*, he said.

She'd clicked her tongue. *Can't be helped.*

He hoped to get into the building without having to talk, but when he reached the door, she commented that American culture were seeping in everywhere, her critical eye still turned towards the street. He agreed mildly and she looked over at him and asked for a cigarette.

She told him that this area used to be nice. She had lived her whole life here and had fond memories of the place before these monstrous Communist Party blocks were built. He said he was sorry to hear that, and she shook her head, sucking on her cigarette.

The temperature started to go down as November wore on. He kept the windows closed and the heat up, though the heating was marginal at best. He bought a few sweaters and pants and tried to stay warm. He found a radio cheap in a market and listened to local shows and music in the evenings. A lot of the music stations played songs in English and when one played *The Beatles* greatest hits, he listened with rapt attention.

It snowed on and off – more on than off – and he bought a pair of snow boots to replace his old soldier boots. They were undoubtedly strong and sturdy, but he preferred the soft fur lining of his new pair. The city looked real storybook as Christmas drew closer, and he visited a Christmas market one day in mid-December, despite the crowds. He spent the day itself under a blanket, reading a book.

On New Year's Eve, he woke up and could see his breath when he breathed out.

“Christ,” he muttered, and drew his blanket around himself as he got up. He switched the radio on and went to the kitchen sink to run the water. Nothing came out.

The weather forecast on the radio said it was -11°C outside.

“Christ,” he repeated, and dressed in every layer he could find before leaving the apartment.

Other tenants were clustered angrily in the hallways, complaining that they had to get ready for work or had plans to celebrate today or just needed to warm up with a hot shower. He wasn't exactly pleased himself, but he wasn't looking to get drawn into neighbourly conversations either. He headed downstairs to go out and find a coffee shop to stay warm in until the water came back on, but found the ground floor flooded and an angry Camelia splashing around in rain boots.

“Dmitri!” she shouted as he tried to duck out.

She waved vaguely to a corner and said there were lots of spare pieces of pipe lying around – a previous tenant had been a plumber, but he'd unforgivably decided to move away. Bucky looked over them and the burst pipe, and picked out a couple of contenders. Splashing around in the garage,
he remembered being wedged under a sink and soaked with cold water while Arnie stood by. He remembered what happened after, too. Perhaps he knew more about plumbing than he thought.

It took him a couple of hours, but he managed to figure it out, and she gave him an additional hundred off the rent and insisted he come in and have a cup of coffee. Her apartment was much nicer than his, though it suffered from the same issues of damp and decay. Still, she had it warmly decorated with family photos, busy patterned rugs, and a much more comfortable couch than his. She asked him point blank why he always wore gloves and he told her he'd been in an accident that had mutilated his left hand. His left hand must have been pretty damn mutilated, so it wasn't exactly a lie. She squinted a little at him, but didn't pursue it.

A few days later, she came up to his apartment, stared hard at the interior, and told him, *I have a spare mattress, come down and get it.*

He passed his thirty first birthday in a movie theatre, watching a historical film set in Wallachia. He went home after and wrote down in his notebook what he remembered about going to the movies when he was young. He remembered being moved by almost nothing, though he always went back hoping for something more. Horror movies unsettled him and bombshells left him cold, dramas bored him and romance was duller than dull. He liked movies with aliens in them and comedies like Laurel and Hardy flicks. Steve liked anything with a pretty girl.

His hair had grown shaggy over the winter and though it made him less recognisable, he couldn't stand how it got tangled and how he looked like Bigfoot, so one day he took a pair of paper shears to it over the sink and trimmed it to his chin. It didn't look good, he certainly wasn't the handsome young man described in his biography any more, but it was passable.

In April, it started to warm up and he found a stack of wooden pallets discarded on the street corner. He'd seen similar over the winter, but the rain and the cold had rendered them damp and soft. These were in nice condition and he took a few to his apartment to use as a coffee table and whatever else came to mind. It was almost getting homey in there. Camelia had left a box of assorted and slightly broken kitchen things outside his door without a word and he found a lamp that worked dumped in the street.

At the end of the month, he was thrown out of his book by the sound of sirens outside the building. Sirens came and went all the time, like any city, but this one stayed and when he cracked the window and peered out, he saw police cars parked up out front. His heart thudded hard in his chest and he grabbed what he could, the book in his hand and his bag with his money in it and bolted, taking the fire escape steps two and three at a time. He'd been living here for six months, the longest he'd stayed still in decades, and he'd stretched his luck as thin as it could go. He wasn't being smart at all.

He made it to ground level in a minute flat, but when he burst out of the fire escape door, he heard nearby voices, Camelia and unfamiliar men. The back of the building was a mixture of dumpsters and haphazardly parked cars, walled in on three sides by adjacent properties. It was too late to go back inside, as the voices drew closer, so he dove for the cover of a dumpster and squeezed himself between it and a wall as he saw three pairs of shoes appear from around the corner. The cops split up and checked the area while Camelia's low pumps stayed where they were. One officer came right up to the dumpster and opened the lid, looking inside at length. Bucky held his breath until he felt light-headed; the lid closed again and the officers thanked Camelia for her time.

He stayed where he was, breathing slowly and deeply, waiting for the moment that he was sure the coast was clear, but before that happened, Camelia came back and said, in a casual tone, that he
could come out. The police were looking for discarded electronics from a nearby robbery. He didn't take the advice and stayed hidden; after a minute, she sighed and walked away.

When he returned to his apartment, he knew this was his cue to move on, but somehow he couldn't. He couldn't leave this damp building and his wooden pallets and his broken kitchen utensils. Instead, he packed a bag with everything he could conceivably need when the choice would be taken away from him and pried a few floorboards loose in the kitchen to stow it away. Then he started planning what he was going to make for supper.

Only a week later, the Avengers were all over the news again. An attack on the Avengers Tower in Manhattan, Hulk rampaging through Johannesburg, a battle through the streets of Seoul, and then on the sixth, while he was in the market buying fruit, a sudden chatter among the locals about something happening in Sokovia, a mass evacuation from Novi Grad, the capital city. He listened to the talk but didn't stop. He'd heard all the coverage of the last few days on the radio, he'd thought about Steve battling this fantastical machine man they were describing, but he couldn't dwell on it. Steve was more than capable.

He was in his favourite bookstore when he heard the first scream, a thin and hysterical sound. The sky, the sky, he heard people shout, and looked out of the window to the south, where in the distance there was something suspended in the sky, a city like Gulliver's Laputa. There was a mass exodus from shops out onto the street and he joined it, dropping the book he'd been browsing through. Novi Grad, someone shouted, it's Novi Grad.

It was, climbing higher, a city torn from the earth. He piled into a café with everyone else and listened to the news coverage on the television there. There was chaos and confusion in Sokovia, no one could get close enough to tell how many people had been evacuated, communication with the affected part of the city had been lost. The Avengers were on the scene.

That last part was met with derision from the locals around him.

The market and the surrounding area ground to a halt; cars drove up onto the sidewalk and parked, people stood in the road to watch, a shop brought their television outside and turned the sound up on the live broadcast. The city kept rising for an hour, steady and terrifying. At the hour mark, the news estimated that it was at an elevation of eight thousand feet – they weren't saying it, but Bucky knew that if the city fell, it would wipe out the continent at the very least. People were whispering and crying around him, interrupted by the occasional panicked shout.

There were a lot of ways Bucky could have died, but he didn't see this one coming; in the war he thought he and Steve might die at the same time, but not like this. I should be there with her, a man was crying plaintively, consoled by strangers. Bucky felt his eyes heat up – at the end, he should be with Steve, the end of the line. They were meant to be all in, but Steve had created something new for himself and Bucky was here with the damp and his wooden pallets and his broken kitchen utensils. It was fitting, somehow.

When the city started to lower again, they all cheered, him included, and when it was safely back down to earth, the relief was palpable. He went home as the sky grew hazy with the dusk and he couldn't stop his hands from shaking as he sat on the couch.

In the following days and weeks, the recriminations were brutal. One hundred and seventy seven dead in Novi Grad, hundreds more injured, close to two trillion in property damage, families displaced, homes and businesses destroyed forever, an emergency housing crisis in the towns and
cities receiving evacuees. The Sokovian government was demanding that the Avengers make restitutions, and the media all over was questioning if they really were a force for good. Stark Industries had already given millions of dollars in aid to Sokovia but that didn't soften the blow that Stark himself was responsible for this situation to begin with. Political commentators cried out for international oversight.

- In June, Camelia wanted him to help her lay new laminate flooring in her hallway. She retreated to her living room to watch television for the majority of the time he was working, coming back a few hours later when he was nearly finished to offer him a cup of tea. He said he'd like one and she left to make it while he finished. When she came back, she handed him the cup with a slight pursed expression.

“I know you are American,” she said.

He choked on a mouthful of tea for a moment and looked up at her.

“Let's leave the lies,” she said, and sipped from her cup.

He put his cup down on the floor and stood up. He loomed over her, but she didn't seem intimidated in the least. “How did you know?” Somehow, people always knew.

“You speak too well,” she said. “You are fluent but use words I haven't heard since childhood and you don't use words a man your age would. Sometimes your accent sounds strange too. I knew you certainly weren't from the city, but then I heard that American... twang in it.”

He clenched his jaw. Neculai had said his accent was fine.

“Don't worry,” she continued, “I only heard it after you spoke for a while. I'm sure others haven't noticed. You don't seem like a talker.”

“Okay,” he said, “uh...”

“I know you are hiding from something, too. That's okay, I won't ask you questions. You pay your rent and don't complain.” She smiled slightly. “Perfect tenant.”

“Thanks, that's really... understanding.”

She nodded. “I am very understanding, Dmitri. Cigarette?”

- It was hot on Steve's birthday and he spent it in Cișmigiu Gardens, watching ducks on the water and enjoying the sun on his face. Nothing was made of Independence Day here, of course, and that was nice – to him it had always been Steve's birthday, first and foremost. In Prospect Park, they would have gone to the zoo and looked at the animals – there were no lions or tigers back then, only woodland animals you could have seen for free if you went upstate, but they liked it anyway. Steve had never had a pet in his life, but he would have liked one, a dog or maybe a bird.

Sokovia had taken a lot heat off Bucky for the last couple of months. The news had forgotten about the Winter Soldier; now they asked if Captain America was really what he seemed. Was he the brave, patriotic, self-sacrificing hero the newsreels and comics had made him out to be, or was he in the pocket of Tony Stark, former weapons developer? Did he live to serve the public or was he looking to create a self-governing, super-powered police force? Bucky had to turn the radio over to
another station and look away from the news stands when they got onto this topic. Steve could never be the person that they were painting him to be; Steve knew who he was and what he believed in, he always had. Nothing and no one could sway him from what he knew to be right and sometimes that was the problem. He could be so stubborn and so inflexible; Bucky had tried to emulate the same level of righteousness, but he always failed. People used to say he was wilful and bull-headed, but they mistook aggression for moral fibre.

By the autumn, there was a new outrage – so-called 'Inhumans'. So far they seemed to be limited to North America, but there was panic all over, a public health crisis much more frightening than the Spanish flu. It went only to bolster the case against Steve and the Avengers – the backlash against undocumented, uncontrolled powered people was immense. Bucky kept an even lower profile, staying inside unless he needed food.

Camelia didn't appreciate his self-imposed exile, though, and demanded he do things around the building because her janitor was a lazy good-for-nothing. Most of these things were to be done in her apartment, like fixing taps or plastering the ceiling in her bedroom. He suspected these were just excuses to get him to come out of his apartment and maybe to justify charging him less rent, because he knew she was perfectly capable of doing these things herself and she always made him a cup of tea and had a couple of slices of cake on the counter. She wasn't exactly friendly, but she seemed unwilling to leave him be.

In October, he was changing the cabinet doors in her kitchen and she had her usual complaints about the upcoming Halloween.

“I suppose you miss these things, though,” she said.

He shook his head. “Not really. We didn't really celebrate when I was a kid.”

“You have family at home?”

“Uh.” He finished attaching a hinge and sat back on his haunches, looking up at her. “Yeah, some.”

“Are you visiting them for Christmas?”

He shook his head and she accepted that as an answer. “What do you think about these Inhumans?”

“I don't think about them much.”

She pursed her lips and picked up a cloth to clean the counter. “The things they're saying... Men fought a war over things like that.”

Bucky looked back at cupboard and sighed. “Yeah.”


Christmas came and went and Camelia left to spend it with her kids on the other side of the city. When she came back, she left a tub of leftovers outside his door with a note that she couldn't finish them all herself.

When he turned thirty two, the news on the radio was reporting that the EU was seriously considering imposing sanctions on the Avengers for their actions in Europe, and in the US Senate they were demanding to know why the Winter Soldier hadn't been brought to justice yet. Bucky sat on his couch and ate cake.
It all happened so fast. At the beginning of May, the international news reported that the Avengers were in talks over signing the 'Sokovia Accords'. There wasn't much made of it, American news never made much impression here, but people were generally in favour of it. The new Sokovian Avenger had killed twenty six people in Lagos and the news speculated that she was one of those freakish Inhumans. They also reported that the HYDRA operative alias 'Crossbones' had been killed at the same time. Bucky took bitter joy from that.

At the end of the month, he went out to buy fruit and discovered that he'd found the time to cross two borders into Austria to quickly plant a bomb and kill some royalty and had made it back without even himself finding out. He was on the front of the newspaper again and this time he was recognised.

He ran, keeping to back alleys and quiet streets. He evaded attention for a few hours, making an aimless journey around the city, not only to make himself harder to track, but also because he truly didn't know what to do. He'd always had back up in situations like this before; all he had to do was be the gun, the handlers would be the brains. He'd never had anything to lose before, either. Now he had a couch and an understanding landlady and some broken kitchen utensils.

A police officer stopped him for loitering in the late afternoon. He carefully asked to see Bucky's ID, his face already showing signs of recognition, and Bucky handed him Neculai's student card. That bought him about thirty seconds to get a good left hook in and take off. He hoped the guy was okay – his left arm could do a lot of damage, and somehow it always did, like he and it were cursed.

He had to go back to his apartment. He had leave the city as well, but he needed his bag. He needed his notebooks and his photographs and his money. He couldn't start from scratch a second time. He had to have something he wouldn't leave behind.

He circled the building a few times and saw no signs of surveillance; no cops, no Avengers. He hugged as many walls as he could, checked there was no one around when he slipped into the building. He had his foot on the stairs when a voice called out, soft and insistent, 

“Dmitri.”

Camelia was peering out from around her door and she beckoned him closer. “I saw a man go upstairs,” she said. “He had a star on his chest and a helmet.”

Bucky turned and looked up the stairwell. This was the closest they'd been in two years. He looked back at her. “You need to get away from here. For as long as you can.”

She wrinkled her nose. “This is my building.”

“And it isn't safe while I'm here. I'll be gone soon, but until then...”

“You are in a lot of trouble,” she said, not a question.

“Uh huh.” He took her hand and squeezed it. “Get away from here, okay?”

“All right.” She patted his hand and smiled. “I don't think you did what they're saying.”

He opened his mouth and stared at her. She raised her eyebrow and he settled on a, “thanks,” before turning to face the music.

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Steve was as beautiful as ever, his face aged without showing a single line. His voice made Bucky's
chest tighten and his presence felt almost devastating. It felt as if they were strangers to each other now. He may have lied to Steve about not knowing who he was, but the distance between them was vast.

He knew he wasn't worth this to Steve, all this suffering that he'd caused even when he was living the best life he could. He hadn't shaped the century, he'd deformed it. He'd killed Stark's parents and left an open wound on the child; with ten little words, he'd terrorised and brutalised and destroyed. He'd twisted Steve into this man who would fight like an animal and turn a shield into a weapon. What could a person do to break a spirit like Steve's? Turn him into a man like Bucky.

He'd tried to find some levity, tried to be the guy from his biography, but he wasn't him any more and though losing his arm again was agony, it felt right; it brought him closer to the centre. All he could think about was how he'd lost his pack and would never get it back now. Steve and the newly pacifist King T'Challa rushed him to Wakanda as he slid in and out of consciousness and brought him to somewhere that resembled a hospital room.

“We have an experimental anaesthetic we can use,” a doctor was saying. Bucky was coming around now, in this bright white room. The light stung his eyes for a moment, though nothing was painful enough to divert his attention from his arm. It felt as if there was a constant electrical current planted directly into his nervous system. Nearby, men and women were gathered together in lab coats, Steve a splash of blue among them.

He remembered a needle going into his neck and a mask being strapped over his face as that goggle-eyed doctor stood by and smiled. “No anaesthetic,” he said.

Steve jerked and looked over at him. His eyes were wide for a moment before he brought himself back under control. “Buck, the doctors have to close off the wiring in your arm – they're attached to your nerve endings...”

“No anaesthetic,” he repeated. “Just do it.”

The head doctor came to the bed he was lying on as Steve stood by, looking conflicted. “I'm Dr Itobo. We are going to tie off the wires as if they were blood vessels and fit a temporary casing to protect them. It will be extremely painful.”

“Just do it,” Bucky said, his voice growing quiet with exhaustion.

Itobo nodded and gestured for his colleagues to get to work.

“Bucky...” Steve murmured.

“Your friend will be fine, Captain,” Itobo said, his tone kind but a little dismissive.

At first touch, the pain was immense. His back locked up, lifting him off the bed slightly; he tried to stay still but couldn't stop himself from jerking when they closed off each wire and when their tools slipped, the pain was even worse. Itobo called them to stop after ten minutes and Bucky fell back to the mattress, panting like a dog.

“Sergeant Barnes, you must be still,” he said.

“I know,” he said, still breathing hard, and looked to Steve. “You gotta hold me down.”

“What?” Steve stepped closer. “Bucky, you really need the anaesthetic.”

“It's almost over,” Bucky said, and looked at Itobo for confirmation. He tipped his head. “We just
gotta get through.”


He lay his forearms across Bucky’s chest and pressed down as the doctors started working again. His face was inches from Bucky’s, so close that Bucky could smell the soap he’d used. This was the most intimate they had ever been, but he couldn’t even enjoy it because it felt like his nerves were being stripped out of his body, one by one. He kept a scream locked in his throat, baring his teeth and letting out only a thin growl.

When it was over and they let him up, he threw up in the pan that a doctor swiftly dropped into his lap. Steve helped him off the bed and half carried him to a sparse but comfortable room. He was so exhausted that he fell into the bed without a backward glance and slept like the dead. He dreamt about trains and coming home and his mother and the dawning light over Brooklyn. His past played out a hundred years ago with people long dead or dying.

He wasn’t meant to be here, in the world, any more. Something evil had interrupted his life, placed him in a time that should have long forgotten him and who he’d been: small time crook, asshole brother, spoilt son, ineffective Sergeant, lazy employee, obsessed best friend, closeted queer. He’d come so far, but he was still little better than a puppet, when played with by the right master. The decision to go back to the ice was an easy one.

Steve only gave token arguments against it. He had his team to think of, fathers separated from children, a young woman on the edge, and a new asshole friend. He had responsibilities and a new purpose. Steve needed a purpose, it drove him and he relished it. Bucky no longer looked for purpose in his life.

Steve hadn’t needed Bucky since 1943.

Chapter End Notes

- Get ready for Steve, he's a'coming!

Translations:

- Așteaptă! | Wait!

- Ce vrei? | What do you want?

- Ești... | You are...

- Nu înțeleg ce vrei să spui | I don't know what you're saying/what you mean
He heard soft voices. He was warm and comfortable and no one was prodding at him or making him move.

“He’s coming round,” someone said, and a hand pressed gently against his arm. “Sergeant Barnes, you’ll feel disoriented for a few minutes. You are safe here.”

Somehow, he already knew that. He kept his eyes closed for a while, listening to the sounds in the room. There was a quiet hum and some rustling, but no beeps, no sharp words.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine, Captain.”

Steve. Bucky opened his eyes and Steve was there, looking worried. Bucky smiled and Steve smiled back, but he didn’t stop looking worried.

“I’m okay,” Bucky said, and his throat felt fine, not sore and dry from disuse, but the sound of it did seem strange in the sparse room. Two doctors came and helped him out of the pod, and he listed to the right for moment, expecting the weight of his other arm. He looked down at the empty space and pressed his hand to the metal stump.

“Don’t worry, the doctors have been working on a new prosthetic,” Steve said.

Bucky nodded absently, rubbing his palm over the black plastic cap. The doctor – Itobo – told him to sit down and he dropped heavily into a hard chair that had been brought over for him. Stark, he thought, and remembered why he was there. He looked up at Steve.

“Did you find a way to fix my head?”

Steve opened his mouth for a second, his eyes cutting away then back. “Yeah.”

“Really?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah,” he said again, more firmly. “But we can talk about that after we get you something to eat and some new clothes.”

Bucky was still sluggish enough to let it all wash over him.

“We can get a wheelchair,” Itobo said, and Bucky shook his head, standing up again, feet planted firmly. Itobo smiled and gestured for them to leave. Steve led the way, out of the white and gun metal room and into a similarly sterile corridor. He remembered it from before cryo, of course, but he hadn’t really absorbed it; his nerves had been so frazzled, he’d just wanted to sleep. Steve saw him looking and smiled.
“Sam says it's like Star Trek here.”

“Is that like Star Wars?”

Steve laughed. “Don't let Scott hear you say that.”

“He's still here?”

Steve looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Yeah.”

Something clicked in Bucky's head. “What's the date today?”

“September 20th,” Steve said and turned all the way towards him. “2016.”

“2016?” Bucky repeated. “It's only been five months?”

“Uh huh.”

“And you've already figured out how to fix me?”

“Well--” Steve shrugged and smiled; a winning smile. “I can be pretty efficient sometimes.”

“I guess,” Bucky said and Steve laughed, rubbing his hand over his face. “Where are we going?”

“T’Challa gave me a suite here. I figured you'd stay with me – there’s two bedrooms – like old times. There's plenty of suites, though, if you'd rather--”

“I'm good. Hope you got some couch cushions for us.”

Steve looked at him for a long moment, then nodded, smiling a little. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah.”

Steve's suite was in another building in the compound – T’Challa's private royal compound. It was spacious, twentieth floor, with floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the city, and a wide open plan kitchen. It seemed even more spacious for the fact that there was hardly any signs of life, just a book on the coffee table and a few jars of food on the counters.

“Have you been here the whole time?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, the US isn't quite ready to let me back in without handcuffs and with the election coming up, I don't think Ellis wants to rock the boat just yet.” He gestured to a kitchen chair and Bucky sat, wondering if Steve was being oblivious or just evasive. “What do you feel like eating?”

“Whatever's good.”

Steve started opening cupboards. “It's all good, the food's great here.”

“I bet. On order of the king,” Bucky said. Christ, the king.

“I know,” Steve said. “I'll start you on a sandwich.”

Bucky agreed and got a ham sandwich and a glass of water, which he dutifully consumed, despite not being hungry or thirsty. The doctors had hydrated him with a drip before he went into cryo and he'd eaten beforehand as well. It'd been five months for Steve, but for Bucky it was five minutes ago. Maybe Steve didn't get that, because he moved around the apartment while Bucky ate, talking about hot showers and beds and clean clothes. Bucky let him, and allowed himself to be directed into the bathroom with these 'clean' clothes after he'd finished eating.
“Do you need help...?” Steve's eyes drifted to the stump.

Bucky shook his head and shut the door. It was an unsurprisingly large bathroom, with a big round tub and lots of mirrors. He looked at himself in one of them; he was an asymmetrical sight now, his arm stopping abruptly at the shoulder. It could have been worse – it could have been a festering, gangrenous chunk of skin and bone wrapped in dirty bandages, and his face could have been a Frankenstein-esque jigsaw puzzle. He was doing okay.

He hadn't had to change his clothes the last time he was an arm down, though, and it was difficult at first, like Steve obviously worried about, but he figured out he could get his pants on pretty easily if he sat down and took it one leg at a time, and his undershirt and button down were fine. The empty sleeve seemed a bit dumb, though. He left the bathroom ten minutes after entering and found Steve cleaning the kitchen. It looked clean already, to Bucky.

“So, are you gonna tell me what the big plan is?”

Steve looked over his shoulder and smiled, but it was tight on his face. “Yeah, sit down.”

Bucky took up his seat again and Steve joined him at the table. He looked at Bucky's left side and then took a breath.

“I looked into a lot of different things. T-- Stark has this program, BARF. I know,” he added, before Bucky could say anything. “It's kind of a virtual reality memory... thing, for therapeutic purposes, but he said it was years off being ready to use.”

Bucky had the time, he thought. “You spoke to Stark?”

“Yes. Well, he's the guy for that kind of thing, that didn't stop being true. I looked into medical therapies too, but...”

Bucky took a breath. “Well, don't leave me hangin'.”

Steve pressed his lips together and looked at him. “I talked to some psychiatrists and basically it's exposure therapy. I'm gonna say the words and you're gonna be... exposed, only Wanda's going to be there to sort of... manipulate them.”

“Manipulate my mind?”

Steve paused for a long couple of seconds, before he said, “Yeah.”

“Great.”

“There's no magic cure, Buck, I wish there was. It's conditioning, and you've got to be unconditioned.”

“I was really hoping for something more like brain surgery.”

“Well, they could lobotomise you, that'd probably do it,” Steve said sharply. He ran his hand over his face and sighed. “Do you want to go back to cryo instead?”

Honestly, Bucky didn't have a definite answer for that, but he knew definitely what Steve wanted to hear. “No, we can try your thing.”

The tightness in Steve's face loosened up a little. “All right. Tomorrow, I guess. I can show you around the joint today.”
The next day, Steve took him to another building in the compound, which was fitted out with the highest security and dozens of guards. He'd assembled his whole fugitive team: Wanda, Scott and Sam in their gear, and Clint. The air was tense.

“What're you here for?”

Clint lifted a sharp-tipped gun. “Tranquilliser duty.”

“Great.” They were all there in case he flipped his lid, but it was only a safety precaution; once he was ready to comply, he’d follow any order given by the speaker. He doubted a tranquilliser would have much effect on him, but Steve had put a lot of thought into this, he had to trust that.

Scott was staring.

“You want a picture?” he snapped.

Scott brightened. “Can I? I was kinda starstruck by big blond last time, but it's crazy to meet you.”

Bucky looked at Steve, who shrugged. “Maybe later.”


Bucky looked at the group; Scott had lightened the tone a little, but he was still drawing a lot of furtive looks, especially from Wanda. “So, what're we waiting for?”

“The guest of honour,” Sam said.

“I thought that was me.”

“Nah, that's him,” Sam replied, and pointed at the approaching King, dressed in his full armour. This was turning into a real party. T'Challa greeted them all and they entered the room, which had nothing in it besides two chairs; one was harsh and metal, with all the bells and whistles, and the other was a simple plastic chair.

“I guess that's for me,” he said, and tried to keep his tone light, but Steve's face had drawn tight again. He sat down and allowed himself to be strapped in by Steve and Sam. One strap was pulled tight around his chest, another for his right arm, one each for his legs, and his feet locked into metal vices.

“Comfortable?” Sam said, and flashed his teeth. Steve tensed even further, but Bucky laughed slightly.

“Bed of roses.”

They stepped back, leaving him trussed up like a turkey, and Wanda pulled the plastic chair up and sat beside him.

“What're you doing?”

“I have to be touching you to read your memories.”

He looked at Steve. “This is way too dangerous.”

“I understand the risks,” she said. He glanced at her, then back at Steve.
“Steve, this is crazy, she can’t be right next to me.”

Sam turned to Steve, raising his eyebrows – clearly this had come up before. Steve stood firm. “We’ve got enough protection.” Sam shook his head.

“I can protect myself,” Wanda said, “my powers extend beyond the mental.”

They sure did, she killed all those people in Lagos, he thought, but he guessed that was a sore subject for her. He should know. He sucked on his teeth for a second.

“I'll need something to bite down on, otherwise I might bite through my tongue.”

They got down to it once Scott brought a piece of hard plastic back. Steve fit it in his mouth gently and Bucky leant his head back against the cushioned head rest of the chair, breathing deep. Wanda leant in towards him; her fingers were cold on his temple.

“Okay,” she said.

Steve stood front and centre, feet spread in a defensive stance. It was an imposing scene, four men ready to take him down, but not an unfamiliar one. Steve held a piece of paper in his hands, and drummed his fingers against it for a moment before looking at Bucky a final time.

“Ready?”

Bucky nodded and offered a quick smile around the plastic.

Steve gestured to Wanda and cleared his throat. “Okay. Желание, ржавый.”

Bucky rolled his neck; it wouldn't start to hurt until number three, and then number four on would fucking suck. He closed his eyes. His head started to feel full already, though, and not from the words. A memory of lying on couch cushions, watching Steve sleep came unbidden to his mind.

“Семнадцать.”

His head throbbed once, insistent, and he tensed his jaw against the plastic. He was seventeen, with a cast on his leg and not a fucking care in the world, he was strapped into a chair with needles in his skin and images flashing too fast in front of his eyes.

“Рассвет.”

It was always dark, the only light he saw came from harsh lamps. They locked him in a cage, they gave him nothing, they gave him bricks to play with, they gave him newspapers. The smell of his arm filled his mouth.

Forget.

He couldn't forget. He couldn't forget the lives he'd ended, the friends he'd killed, the family he'd lost. He was nothing without his memories.

“Печь.”

He wished for the sun on his face. The words seared in his head, they burnt out his mother, Steve, the kids. *Once you understand that you cannot escape, you will be content.* He hadn't felt content since he was ten years old. He would never be content again without his brother--

*Forget this.*
“Девять.”

He was a blank slate, he would comply. They said he was doing a good things, they said they would make him strong so he could fight. He stalked his prey like an animal, he reached through the car window, he walked through the rioting streets, his face covered, he shot dissidents, there were children watching, there was a little girl, still and alone among the chaos.

“Steve--”

“добросердечный.”

He looked up at the soldier, a mile tall, a mask on his face, he walked through the streets, he shot her neighbours. Her brother found her hand, her mother wept with relief.

“возвращение на родину.”

Their parents died instantly. Her brother held her hand. The words burnt into her mind, Stark Industries. Stark knew him, called him a name he didn't know, you can never escape. The explosion blew the kid's face off, the knife slid into the soldier's throat like butter. The machine cracked his head open and sucked it dry. He wanted to go home.

“Steve!”

“Один.”

They cried, screamed, rage exploded outwards, they was alone in the world. They were stateless, orphaned. Kind words didn't help, she'd killed, he was tainted, cursed, monstrous.

“Stop!”

Bucky's eyes slammed open. His face was damp and there was something running into his mouth – it tasted like blood. Sam was dragging Wanda away as blood gushed from her nose; he opened the door and slammed it shut behind them. The piece of paper in Steve's hands was crumpled and torn around the edges. Bucky's chest heaved, up and down, up and down, but there was a heavy buzzing in his ears. Half of him was still in Russia or in an apartment in Sokovia.

“She's,” Scott said shakily. “That was like that scene from Scanners.”

Clint looked at him.

“Where the guy's head exploded?”

Steve dropped the paper suddenly, like it burnt. “Let's get you out of there.”

Bucky spat out the plastic – it had cracked down the middle – and shook his head. “Gimme a minute,” he ground out. “I'm not there yet.”

He shut his eyes and pressed his head back again. His body was shuddering as if from the cold, but he felt feverish and the memories that Wanda had drawn out of his mind rolled through. He hadn't remembered the conditioning until now, the brutal mix of machine and psychological torture. A lobotomy sounded pretty good.

It took ten minutes for the tremors to stop and everyone had cleared out except for Steve. He looked relieved to undo the straps, and put his hands on Bucky's sides to help him out. Bucky rested his hand on Steve's shoulder for a second while he got his bearings, then pulled away, and wiped his
nose with the back of his hand. It came away bloodied.

They walked back in silence, drawing surprised looks from people they passed in the hallways. That was probably because he had drying blood around his nose and mouth, and had turned several shades lighter than normal. Steve asked him if he needed any help, but all he needed was a shower and he was capable of doing so, even if Steve thought otherwise. He went to his room after, but didn't try to sleep. He knew that when he did, he'd have the worst dreams, and he wasn't ready for that. His wet hair soaked through the pillow while he lay there. He wished he had his notebooks or at least a pen and paper to make sense of all this with.

A while later, Steve let Sam into the apartment. Bucky came out of his room, to Steve's surprise.

“I thought you were asleep.”

He shook his head and wrapped his arm around his chest. “How's Wanda?” he asked Sam.

“She's had an EEG and everything looks okay, but they had to give her some heavy drugs for the migraine. She's sleeping now.”

“How long do you think she'll take to recover?” Steve asked.

Sam looked at him for a moment, then raised his eyebrows. “She can't do it again. Maybe if she had more control over her powers, but not now.”

“Of course,” Steve said, and he almost looked like he was okay with it, but Bucky could read him better than that. Bucky had all the time in the world for her to learn how to use her powers, there was no rush on this thing, but Steve didn't see it that way.

Sam nodded slowly, then made his excuses to leave. Steve followed him to the door and closed it behind him, while Bucky stayed where he was. Steve looked at the back of the door for a moment, then turned back.

“We'll have to do it without her.”

“Without her?”

Steve flashed a quick, unconvincing smile. “Well, that's how it normally goes. Most psychiatrists don't have a psychic on staff.”

“I guess not.”

“Are you okay with that?” Steve said. His tone was level, but his eyes were wide and ringed with worry.

“Yeah,” he said, “yeah, may as well try.”

Steve smiled quickly, his shoulders dropping a little. He looked around the apartment and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Great. And look at it this way, once this is all done and I've smoothed out the situation in the US, you can see Becca. And Florence and Eugene, of course.”

“Steve...” Steve started to frown as Bucky paused. “Becca died.”

Steve stared for a moment before opening his mouth. “Oh. How long ago?”

“December 26th, 2013.”
Steve's eyebrows drew together and his hands clenched at his sides. “I'm so sorry. I'm sorry you didn't get to see her at the end.”

The distance between them felt greater than ever. “I did.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I spent a month in Florence's house with them. I was holding Becca's hand when she died.”

Steve's gaze dropped to the ground, his lips growing thin. His face was otherwise slack, losing the tension Bucky had seen all day. Honestly, he would have preferred that right now.

“We couldn't find you,” he said quietly. “Me and Sam looked everywhere – we thought. He visited Eugene and Florence.”

“I know, he got there too early. I stayed in DC until things settled down. Took a train to New York, another one to California. Eugene gave me money and I pickpocketed. I stayed inside the house the whole time. Becca took death like she took everything: irritably, but it was peaceful. We could give her that.”

Steve's eyes had grown red-rimmed and he licked his lips quickly. “You see anyone else?”

“Gabe,” he said, and Steve twitched. “Just for an hour. I went all that way to Georgia and then my identity broke all over the news and I had to leave the country.”

Steve nodded slowly and blinked hard a couple of times. “You were busy,” he said evenly.

“I guess so.”

“No, it's good, I'm glad you had that time with Becca,” Steve said and turned away. “You deserved that. You want some dinner?”

The next session was predictably terrible. Bucky's muscles pulled tight as each word was inflicted on him, his tendons as taut as violin bows, his head aching. Steve stumbled over the last phrase, freight car, but as soon as it was out, Bucky's headache melted away; he complied. In compliance, he felt nothing, not happiness, sadness, fear, or confusion. In a way, compliance was like freedom. There was a freedom in having your choices taken away from you.

He was ready to comply and Steve told him he didn't need to, not ever again, but he knew, because Bucky had told him, that it would take several hours before the hypnotic effects of the words would wear off without physical intervention (i.e., a smack to the head). They hadn't programmed an off switch into him because he was always meant to comply.

His cognitive function while under the words' influence was low, so he remembered only snippets of time, locked in the chair, Steve talking to him about the past in a steady voice. He was all talked out by the time Bucky came back to himself and they passed the rest of the day in silence, though Bucky was too worn out to really care.

It was a gruelling two weeks for everyone, each session going to same way. They did it everyday, until Bucky had a permanent headache that was only relieved by compliance. He hadn't seen Wanda since the incident, and T'Challa couldn't be present at every session, not on Steve's punishing schedule. Sam, Clint, and Scott turned out, but Bucky could tell Steve and Sam had had words, and not good ones.
He begged off on Sunday and slipped out in the late afternoon to walk around the landscaped grounds of the compound. It was a futuristic looking place, enough concrete to put Fritz Lang to shame, but a lot of green, too. The country was an island nation, the capital city on the mainland and a spider web of smaller islands leading off from it, surrounded by mountains on all sides, on the northern end of Lake Turkana. It was completed hidden from beyond the mountains; anyone cresting the ridge would be in for a big surprise.

The compound was on a cliff, overlooking the water, and he leant against the railing, watching the water lap to the beach below. It felt good to be here, alone. He'd gone out while Steve was on the phone, mouthing 'I'll be back later' as Steve listened to the speaker with a blank look on his face. Steve had opened his mouth to say something, but then evidently it was his turn to speak on the phone and Bucky got out the door without another word. The only thing that could make this better was a cigarette.

“Sergeant Barnes,” someone called. He turned away from the railing and saw Dr Itobo coming towards him.

“Call me Bucky, I haven't been a sergeant in a long, long time.”

Itobo nodded and approached him. “How are you?”

“Oh, you know, being deprogrammed by my best friend. The usual.”

Itobo smiled and leant his side on the railing. “You'll be pleased to know that the king has agreed that once you've finished your treatment, we can begin the process of fitting you with a new prosthesis.”

Bucky squeezed the back of his neck with his hand. His back had stopped aching since he lost the arm again. “If I finish my treatment.”

“Have faith, Bucky. The captain certainly does.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He looked back at the water. “So, what d'you guys do for fun around here?”

“We have many museums and sights of natural beauty. Our beaches are always full, hiking and rock climbing are popular.” He gestured at the mountains surrounding them. Bucky looked, but he'd hiked and climbed enough to last him a lifetime. Itobo smiled again. “And there's quite a large rave scene in the city, I'm told.”

“What's a rave?”

“Loud music and frenetic dancing.”

“Like the Lindy Hop?”

Itobo laughed. “Maybe.”

“I used to be good at that,” he mused, and bit his lip. “I don't suppose you've got any cigarettes, huh?”

“I'm afraid not,” Itobo said and pulled away from the railing. “I should go back to work, I came out to decompress but I'll hear about it if I'm gone too long.”

He wasn't the only one. Bucky walked back with him, continuing to the residential building when Itobo went to work, and took his sweet time about it. Steve wouldn't be angry, because he didn't seem to be get angry now, not the way Bucky remembered, anyhow, but he wasn't going to be
happy either.

Steve was on his computer when Bucky returned, typing furiously. He was quick at it, a world away from his struggles with his mother's borrowed typewriters, but when he saw Bucky, he closed the lid.

“Sorry I took off.”

Steve stood up and shrugged. “I'm not your jailer, it's fine. Food's almost ready.”

He served roast beef and salad. It was dry and a little chewy, but good enough. Bucky's was pre-cut, which was thoughtful of Steve, he guessed. They ate for a few minutes in silence, Steve frowning as he chewed.

“I cooked this too long.”

Bucky shrugged. “It tastes good.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, without much conviction.

“It's really beautiful here,” Bucky said, for want of something better to say. “I've never seen a place like this before. The mountains are incredible.” It seemed a redundant thing to say, since Steve would know he'd never been anywhere like this, but then Bucky had been most places in the interim of them knowing each other, so maybe it wasn't.

Steve nodded slowly. “A meteor struck here a billion years ago; we're in the middle of the crater, that's where they get their vibranium from.”

“Wow, that's lucky.”

“Mnhm.” Steve speared the salad with his fork and left it raised halfway to his mouth. “We need to try harder with our sessions.”

Bucky knew what that meant. “You think I'm not trying?”

“No, that's not what I mean. We just need to be more active – I think you need to actively reject it.”

“I'm doing my best.”

Steve lay his fork down and sighed. “I know, but next time I think you should say 'I do not comply' after every trigger word.”

“All right.” Maybe the criticism was warranted; he took things too passively. That was kind of the whole idea. “Sure.”

Steve went back to his salad with a nod.

It went just as badly with Steve's new regime. Bucky would always lose track of what was going on halfway through and forget to say the words. Steve assured him it was fine, but he knew it wasn't and spent what time he could outside of the apartment. He saw the others on occasion, though only the briefest glimpses of Wanda. He was sure she was avoiding him and she had every right to. He found Scott easy enough to rub along with, and Clint was polite but distant. Sam was a dick, of course, but he didn't mind.

They reached the end of November without any progress. The wet season had begun in Wakanda
and it rained most days, though the temperature remained warm. Bucky didn't mind getting wet, even if it meant his hair getting knotted, so he never carried an umbrella. Steve didn't have anything to say about it – in fact, he was hardly ever in the apartment any more. As far as Bucky could figure, he was visiting T'Challa most days, but he was always there for their sessions, until he wasn't.

When he arrived for his session on a Monday afternoon, he was met with three worried faces.

“Where's Steve?” he asked. He'd been in the compound library for most of the morning. Steve had left while he was in the shower.

“Held up,” Sam said. He clicked his tongue. “I guess. Let's get ready.”

Sam strapped him into the chair, pulling the straps tight enough to knock the wind out of him. This had become routine now; Scott played on his phone most of the time and Clint stared, unmoving, into the middle distance. Bucky recognised the stance of a sniper – he'd gone hours sitting still with a rifle in his hands, for decades upon decades.

“How is it that when you do this, I'm always squeezed like a fella's putting the screws on me?”

Sam arched an eyebrow. “I'm just good at it.”

“Got a lot of experience with bondage, huh?”

Scott barked with laughter but quelled himself when Sam glanced around at him. “Sorry,” he muttered.

They passed ten minutes making awkward conversation about the weather before Steve marched into the room. “You ready?”

Bucky looked down at himself. “Uh, yeah.”

“Желание,” Steve said without preamble. He didn't need the piece of paper any more, he'd memorised the words.

“I do not comply.”

“Ржавый.”

“I do not comply.”

“Семнадцать.”

Bucky flinched. Steve was coming at him thick and fast, hardly taking a breath between words. His head gave a first, insistent throb. “I do not comply.”

“Рассвет.”

The words caught in his throat for a moment. “I do not comply,” he choked out.

Steve continued. Furnace, nine, benign. Bucky's jaw tightened to the point of locking and it was a struggle to force the words out. His eyes had begun to leak with tears; he remembered crying with the technicians, an involuntary reaction from his body, an echo of its former inhabitant. They had sneered or, perhaps worse, ignored it altogether. Here, Scott and Sam looked embarrassed and Clint remained blank faced. Steve was intent and unmoved by it all.

“возвращение на родину.”
Bucky's throat locked up, clicking uselessly.

“Say it,” Steve said, flat and toneless.

“I don't-- don't comply.”

“Один.”

Tears ran harder down his face, his constricted chest began to heave with sobs. Steve was Karpov, Zemo, Zola, standing before him, inflicting this on him. The technicians treating him as if he didn't exist. Pierce, his blue eyes, blond hair, his New York accent, a slap across the face, a punch to the gut. His head threatened to split open.

“Say it,” Steve intoned.

Bucky shouted wordlessly, straining his hand against the strap. “Don't-- comply,” he ground out.

There was a brief silence in the room; all he could hear was rushing blood in his ears. He dropped his head and continued to cry, snot and tears dripping onto his pants. He remembered sitting in dewy grass, crying over a piece of paper, his mother drying his face tenderly, always tender, Pierce laughing, always laughing.

“Товарный вагон.”

Every beating he'd ever taken, kids in alleyways, I ain't giving you nothin’, muzzled like a dog, the car spinning out of control, Pierce forcing his head back, help my wife, screaming, screaming, screaming.

“Say it.”

He had fought, he had nothing left but fight in him. In the cell, in the operating theatre, in the weapons factory. In Austria, France, Poland, Italy. He killed guards, soldiers, politicians, parents. They shoved him into the machine again and again and again; he'd fought it. He'd torn himself free, he'd woken up, he'd seen the sun, if only briefly. He'd survived everything: accidents, warfare, torture, mutilation, himself. He'd broken free, even when there was nowhere else to go.

“Say it.”

Say those words, say them, say you comply, say: 'yes, sir', say you understand, say you remember. Say you're happy, say you like it, say I love you, say you won't leave. Say every goddamn thing everyone else wanted to hear and nothing you wanted to say.

“Say it!” Steve yelled, his voice reverberating, echoing across the room.

Bucky's arm tore free from the chair and he slammed his hand back down onto the armrest, gripping the metal. Steve was still shouting, every word like a pickaxe in the back of his head. His breath came like the growl of a dog, hoarse and feral. They had muzzled him for that, metal clamped over his nose and mouth, sometimes his eyes and ears blocked too. Total deprivation. That was the easiest way to break his will; not with sound but with silence.

“Say it!” Steve screamed in his face.

He screamed back, spittle hitting Steve's face, though he didn't flinch from it. “I do not comply!”

The fight went out of him and he slumped in the chair. The chest strap held him up, but his head fell
forward and his hand relaxed on the armrest. He could taste salt in his mouth from the tears dripping down his face. The room was quiet again.

“Soldier,” Steve said softly. “Are you ready to comply?”

“Fuck off, Steve,” he mumbled.

There were a few quiet exclamations in the room and then hands were on him, skittering over his chest. He couldn't keep his eyes open, but he heard the chest strap snap and the foot vices crunch, and then he was being pulled up, up into Steve's arms. They encircled him and held him firm.

“You did it, man,” Steve said, “you did it.”

“Did anyone else shit themselves a little?” Scott wondered aloud.

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He slept for twenty four straight hours and woke disoriented. For a few seconds, he felt as if he was lying on Becca's bed, holding her hand, but then he remembered that it had been her deathbed. He rolled up and staggered out of bed, still dressed in yesterday's clothes. His face felt tight and crusty in places, around his nose and mouth especially. He rubbed it and stumbled out the door.

“Hey,” Steve said, too loud, and Bucky flinched. “Sorry. Hungry?”

It was bright in the living room and Steve had stacks of paperwork on the coffee table. Bucky shuffled over to the breakfast table and sat down.

“What do you want?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “Whatever's going.”

“Toast,” Steve decided, walking towards the kitchen, and Bucky shrugged again.

“What time is it?”

“Just after three,” Steve called.

Bucky fell silent after that, and ate the toast presented to him slowly. The glass of water went down quickly though, and Steve brought him a second and a third.

“You remember what happened yesterday?” he asked after a while.

“Uh huh. Broke through my programming.”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, that's right. How do you feel?”

“Okay.” He ran his fingernail up the side of his glass, letting the condensation collect. He felt tired and old and maybe hollowed out on the inside a little. It wasn't the first time he'd felt this way, he didn't think it would last.

“Good. Once you've got your strength up, we should go over the trigger words again.”

“Again? I thought it was over.”

The corners of Steve's mouth pulled together. “We're almost there, but to be fully desensitised to it, I think we've got to run through the triggers a few more times. We've already had the breakthrough,
it's smooth sailing from here, and once we're done we can get going on your arm. Are you okay with that?"

Bucky looked at the surface of the glass mottled with water droplets. “Sure.”

“Great,” Steve said, but he didn't look particularly happy. “You want anything else to eat?”

“Nah, I'm gonna have a shower, wash the snot off my face.” He pushed his chair back from the table and stood. “Thanks for... not giving up on me, you know?”

One side of Steve's mouth lifted. “I never give up, you know that.”

Bucky wasn't so sure about that any more, but he nodded and left the table.

- It was another gruelling week before he could hear those ten triggers with nothing more than a flinch. The chair's restraints had been repaired, but Steve stopped using them after a couple more sessions, and Bucky was given a clean bill of mental health from psychiatrist of T'Challa's choosing. He was ready to be fitted with a new left arm and a new lease on life, he guessed. Scott pronounced the whole experience 'fucking wild', which seemed like a good description of how Bucky was feeling.

Not two days after he was 'cured', Steve announced that he had to leave for a few weeks. He was going to the US with a Wakandan delegation, including the king, to see what strings he could pull to get them home. As part of the delegation, he would be granted temporary diplomatic immunity and wouldn't be subject to arrest. That was the idea, anyway.

Bucky knew he should be upset at Steve's sudden disappearance, and he was, but the morning after Steve left, it was a relief to get up and be alone. He showered, did his teeth, ate cereal, and did the washing up one handed. There was a machine to do it for him, but he didn't need it.

On his second day alone, he had an appointment with Itobo to begin fitting the new arm. He arrived in a long sleeved top that he promptly had to take off and was examined bare-chested by one of Itobo's colleagues, Dr. A'kane. They both specialised on biotechnology, blurring the lines between organic and inorganic, she explained. Bucky was more than familiar with the concept. They removed the plastic covering and hooked his stump up to their computers with wires, sending it commands to test how it was working after all the trauma.

“Jesus,” Bucky muttered as his left shoulder jerked up and down.

“Does it hurt?” A'kane asked.

“No, fuckin' weird, is all. Pardon the language.”

She laughed and tapped on her keyboard again. His shoulder tingled like the worst pins and needles he'd ever felt. “You've not heard vulgarity until you've heard it in Wakandan. Do you feel a tingling sensation?”

“Yes. My kinda place. Got any examples?”

“A'kane,” Itobo said with reproach before she could answer. She rolled her eyes where he couldn't see. She was young, maybe in her late twenties, with close cropped hair and brightly coloured earrings. Itobo, on the other hand, looked to be in his forties; his hair was on the longer side, brushed back and speckled grey.
“I know you're rolling your eyes,” he added, and she crossed them slightly, making Bucky laugh. “The functionality in what remains of your arm looks intact. Splicing the new arm on shouldn't be a problem.”

“Great,” he said.

Itobo paused for a moment, then removed the wires and moved onto the next stage, which was a full body scan. Bucky dimly remembered having one the day he arrived here. It took only a few minutes, and A'kane pronounced him to be in perfect physical condition.

“Would you like to see the prototype?” Itobo asked as Bucky got down off the table.

“Sure,” he said, and A'kane presented the arm with a flourish. It was in keeping with the design of his original prosthetic (as if Zola had considered aesthetics) in order to maintain continuity with his stump, she said. She didn't call it a stump, it was 'the base'. She let him pick it up and he found that it was much lighter than the original.

She hooked it up to the computer like she'd done with him and demonstrated its capabilities – it had significantly more fine motor control and he'd have a much increased level of touch sensation, she promised.

“We can begin testing it on you now,” she said with smile, gesturing to the uncovered wiring of his stump.

“Oh,” he said and touched the arm gently. “Uh, okay.”

“I think we have some more testing to do before that,” Itobo said from where he was stood nearby. She frowned and looked over at him, but he said something in Wakandan and she relented.

“Next time,” she told Bucky, and lovingly picked up the arm. Itobo gestured for him to sit at one of the tables and replaced the protective cover on his stump, then handed Bucky his shirt. He pulled it on without too much trouble. He'd got used to dressing one handed, it was inelegant but not insurmountable.

“Am I done, doc?” he asked, looking up at Itobo. His hair had gone awry at some point inside the neck of the shirt and he brushed it back down with his fingers.

Itobo looked pensive for a moment. “Yes,” he said, “but I think we should discuss the procedure.”

“Okay?” Bucky leant forward and found A'kane across the room, at one of the many unimaginably complicated machines in there. “You want to do more testing first, right?”

“It never hurts to do more testing, but I am wondering what your feelings on the prosthetic are.” Bucky shrugged. “It's a good looking arm, lot lighter than the old one.”

“Yes, it is less than half the weight of your previous one. I noted on your first scan that you were suffering from some curvature of the spine.”

“Scoliosis,” Bucky said.

Itobo nodded. “Exactly. Your scan today shows that your spine is well on its way to recovering.”

So that was why his back felt so much better now. “That's great news.”

“It is, and it leads me to believe that you might be happier as you are now.”
Bucky raised his eyebrows, then looked at the stump. “Maybe? Steve...” Steve had worked so hard to get Bucky to this point, to the laudable goal of fixing him. A normal person would want both arms. “Can I think about it?”

Itobo smiled. “Of course, the arm isn’t going anywhere.”

“Thanks.” He drummed his fingers against his thigh for a moment. “Don’t suppose you know where I could get some cigarettes?” He still wasn’t allowed to leave the compound because of concerns over being arrested. Wakanda didn’t have an extradition treaty with the US, but that didn’t preclude a black op kidnapping him, or any of them. In the compound, he was safe, allegedly.

Itobo raised his eyebrows in a way that seemed faintly judgemental. “We don’t produce tobacco or nicotine in Wakanda, but there are... herbs.”

“I’m not looking for reefer,” he said, and Itobo laughed a little. People didn’t call it that, he figured. He didn’t know what they called it in Wakanda, either. “Just something I can smoke.” He made a smoking motion with his fingers. “It’s a habit, I guess.”

Itobo tipped his head. “I’ll see what I can do.”

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Itobo came through on the cigarettes. They were a little shorter and slimmer than the usual and if anything, they tasted too good, but he’d never smoked for the delicacy of it.

He spent as much of his time as he could outside. It was truly a breathtaking country, even a mook like him could see that. The men and women who worked in the various buildings milled around the grounds at the usual break times, but they all got to leave at clocking off and Bucky could only imagine how much more beautiful the non-scientific compound areas of the city, and the country, were.

A few days into December, he found Wanda standing at his favourite spot overlooking the beach. He was at least twenty feet away from her, but she straightened up and looked over at him.

“How you doing?” Bucky asked.

“I’m fine,” she said in a distant way that suggested otherwise. She looked him over for a second. “You’ll have your new arm soon, won’t you?”

“Maybe,” he said, and took the cigarette packet out his pocket. “Do you mind?”

She shook her head. “May I have one?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and she raised her eyebrows. “About what you saw when... About what I did.”
She blew out a thin stream of smoke. “I don’t blame you.”

“But you didn’t need to be reminded of it.”

“It’s never far from my mind.”

He knew how that was. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, and she accepted it with a nod of her head.

They smoked in quiet camaraderie for a few minutes, before she sighed. “What happened between us shouldn’t have happened,” she said. “I’m sorry for that. Sometimes I think I’ll never be able to control my powers, all they do is cause more trouble.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t try so hard.”

She raised her eyebrows in response.

He smiled a little. “When I was young, I tried really hard, with everything, everything I wasn’t good at. I was good at school, you know, that was fine, but I wanted people to like me, or believe in me and I tried so hard to be what everyone else wanted. I tried so hard to be what... Steve wanted.” He sucked on his cigarette and let out the smoke. “It’s like digging a hole that never ends.”

“That sounds very profound.”

He laughed and took another draw; the cigarette had dwindled to almost nothing. “Well, I did go to university for a whole year.”

She stubbed out her cigarette on the edge of the railing and palmed it. He might have just flicked it over to the beach below, but that was an asshole thing to do. “I’m in the presence of greatness,” she said.

He grinned and stubbed his out too. “You sure are.”

He saw her more after that, around the building and the grounds. She didn’t hurry away like she used to and he didn’t sequester himself away like he once had. The building had a common area of sorts, a large living room with couches, chairs, and tables. He’d avoided the place in favour of his own apartment or the grounds, but solitude had its limits.

The common area spanned an entire floor of the building, and as he stepped out of the elevator, he heard a young girl’s voice talking excitedly. The place seemed empty as he scanned the place quickly, but the voice was still talking.

“Is someone here?” he called.

Scott’s head popped up from behind a couch. “Hey!”

“Hey... is there a kid here?”

Scott lifted his tablet high enough for Bucky to see. “Facetiming my daughter, super secure internet.”

“Oh, right, I’ll leave you to it.”

“Daddy, who’s that?” the little voice came from the tablet.

Scott look back down at it. “That’s Bucky, sweetheart.”
“Bucky?” she squealed. Bucky froze on his way out the doorway and looked back over at Scott. “Can I talk to him?”

“Uh.” Scott’s head popped back up over the couch and he smiled apologetically. “Do you mind?”

Bucky shook his head and came into the room. “What do I have to do?”

Scott held the tablet out over the back of the couch. “Just hold it up to your face.”

Bucky took it carefully and held it up. There was a little girl on screen, lit up with a smile, and a smaller video of himself in the corner. “Hi,” he said.

“Hi!” she said, and grinned with her teeth – she was missing one at the front.

“You're Cassie, right?”

“Yeah! Can I see your arm?”

“Cassie!” Scott said, leaning over the back of the couch. “You can't ask people to show you their amputated arms!”

Bucky shrugged. “It's okay. I mean, if it's okay with you?”

Scott raised his hands. “Hey, knock yourself out.”

Bucky gave him the tablet back and unzipped his hooded top a few inches. He was only wearing a t-shirt underneath, which made it pretty easy to roll the short sleeve back and reveal the metal and black plastic. Scott held the tablet in position and Cassie watched, fascinated.

“Cool! Does it hurt?”

“Not any more,” he said, and covered it up again.

“For Halloween, I was Ant-Man again, but a boy on my street dressed up as you and all the grown ups were angry about it.”

“I bet they were.” A real life assassin didn’t seem like the most appropriate costume for a kid.

Cassie hummed, clearly not convinced. “I saw Captain America on the news yesterday.”

Bucky took the tablet back and leant against the couch. Scott leant his front against the other side so that they were both caught by the camera. “Oh yeah? How's he doing?” He could have found out easily enough for himself – the TV in the apartment had channels from all over the world, but so far he’d eschewed news of any kind.

“He sounded really angry. He was on the, uh, floor of the Senate and the senators were trying to stop him talking but he kept talking over them.”

“How do you know so much about the Senate?” Scott asked.

She sighed. “They teach us about politics in school, Daddy. Captain America was talking about, um, crimes against humanity and that you were innocent and the... Bio-Force Project. Mom said that Tony Stark looked constipated.”

Scott's eyebrows shot up. “Mom said that in front of you?”
Cassie shook her head. “I was supposed to be asleep.”

“That's my girl.”

“Captain America was really mad. Madder than Mom when you mess up really bad, Daddy.”

Scott looked at him. “That's mad.”

Bucky smiled a little. He remembered Steve mad, alight with righteous anger, ranting Bucky's ear off. He hadn't seen him like that since before the serum, when it seemed like his body was too small to contain all of him. The serum had mellowed him out and healed him inside and out. At least, that's what Bucky used to think.

“Hey, I'll leave you to it now,” he said, and handed Scott the tablet back. “It was nice to meet you, Cassie.”

Cassie waved cheerfully at him as Scott sat back down on the couch but as Bucky left, he heard her voice pitch lower, asking when Scott was coming home.

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He was closing on his second week without Steve. He hadn't returned to Itobo and A'kane's lab, although he'd seen Itobo around a few times and received some more packets of cigarettes. He saw Wanda in the halls most days now and she let him in her suite a few times. T'Challa had gifted her a guitar, she said, and she could play well but didn't like to sing. Bucky remembered playing the piano in Paris and his parents' living room.

They still spent their days outside in the sun. The compound had a large seating area where people ate and tapped on their computers, and they spent some of their time there, though Wanda said she longed to go down to the beach and swim. Bucky only imagined swimming in a circle with his arm and made himself laugh.

Wanda had made Sokovian-style schnitzel, which was considerably nicer than any plain sandwich he would have thrown together, and they ate it in companionable silence until a shadow fell over the table.

“I hear you're the man to see about cigarettes,” Clint said. He and Sam were standing in front of the table, both with rings of sweat around the collars of their t-shirts.

“You smoke?”

Clint scowled for a moment. “No, but I can dream.” He sat down across the table, and Sam followed suit. “Can I have some of that?” he added, gesturing to Wanda's tub of food.

“Go ahead,” she said.

Clint and Sam both dived in, and Bucky snorted, dragging his plate a little closer. This was obviously the last he was going to see of his lunch.

“You were at the gym?” he asked.

Clint nodded, brushing crumbs from the corners of his mouth. “Gotta stave off cabin fever somehow. Surprised I never see you there.”

“Yeah, well, I'm... not anxious to train.”
“Clearly,” Sam said.

Bucky stared back for a moment. Sure, he'd filled out some since escaping HYDRA, but he could still literally bench press everyone at this table at the same time, with his one remaining arm. “Fuck you,” he flatly.

Sam laughed a little and shook his head, then glanced to the side. “Hey, look who it is.”

It was Scott, ambling over to them. “So, this is where the cool kids hang out,” he said when he reached the table.

“Cool kids?” Clint repeated.

“Trust me, you would have been the cool kids at my school. Can I sit?”

Clint and Sam didn't budge, so after a second, Bucky slid up the bench and Scott squeezed in next to him. He peered over at the empty tupperware box. “Any food still going?”

Sam looked steadily at Bucky, until he slid his plate over to Scott with a sigh.

“Thanks,” Scott said, and started eating. “Wow, this is really good!”

“Wanda made it.”

Scott leaned forward and looked at her. “This is really good.”

She smiled a little. “Thank you. I have a lot of spare time to practice my cooking.”

“Tell me about it. The guys in the engineering lab let me help them out, but I know they're just humouring me. They are so far advanced anything I've ever worked with, it's crazy. By the way—” He turned to Bucky. “Thanks for talking to Cassie, I'm a cool dad now.”

“You were already a superhero.”

Scott shrugged. “But I'm a dad first, and dads are never cool.”

“I guess,” Bucky said. “I never did appreciate my dad when I was a kid. I thought he wasn't a hero the way Steve's was.”

“My father was a son of a bitch,” Clint said. “And I mean that, his mother was just as bad. Me and my brother ended up in foster care.”

“I didn't know you had a brother,” Wanda said. Clint shrugged and his gaze went distant. Sore subject, Bucky figured. “My father was a carpenter,” she continued. “My mother worked in a shop. I thought that was so embarrassing, I wanted them to be lawyers or doctors or something. I was so concerned with what other people thought about us.”

“My dad's an asshole,” Scott said, and broke off another piece of schnitzel, chewing for a moment before continuing. “I mean, I love him, he's a good guy, but all we ever do is butt heads. My mom died when I was little... I did really well in school, when I wanted, but I've never been able to stop from getting myself into trouble. Dad didn't know what to do with me. My ex thinks I have ADHD.”

He trailed off and they looked at Sam, who raised his eyebrows and his hands. “Hey, I'm just a guy. My parents are pretty okay. Dad's a pastor, Mom's a teacher. I found all the crosses in the house kind of embarrassing, but other than that, it was all good.”
“That’s boring,” Scott said, and looked back at Bucky. “So, what’s your tragic back story? All the
greats have one.”

“I don’t. Sorry. I was rich and popular and handsome.” Sam muttered something under his breath;
Bucky found his foot under the table and stamped on it. Sam squawked and leant down, rubbing at
the spot. “I was extremely spoilt and Ma thought the sun shone out of my ass, even when I got in
trouble. Dad was always incredibly kind, let me be, and my siblings loved me. I guess I had a pretty
charmed life.”

Scott groaned. “So, no tragic back story at all?”

“Well…” He rubbed at his stubble for a second and cocked an eyebrow. “I guess my tragic back
story is that I was gay in the 1930s.”

It felt funny to say it out loud like that, just set it off like a bomb in the middle of this table, except he
hoped it wasn’t a bomb, not these days, with these people. Scott’s eyes widened and Clint let out a,
’huh’. Wanda didn’t look phased at all, but he guessed she’d rooted around in his head enough
already to know it all.

“So, does that mean that Steve's...?” Scott said slowly.

“Nah, he's straight as an arrow.”

“You sure about that?” Sam said. “The way he got after he saw you on the bridge... I mean, I was all
for killing you, but he didn't care that you were clearly a psychopath.”

“I bet,” Bucky said with a smile. “Far as I know, he's been obsessed with women ever since he saw
Jean Harlow in Red-Headed Woman.”

Scott cleared his throat. “So, you've never...?”

“Nope. I... had a relationship with one of the Commandos.”

Scott's face lit up. “Oh man, which one?”

Bucky glanced around the table; they were all looking attentive now, even Clint. “Gabriel Jones.”

“Jones?” Sam repeated. He looked sceptical. “He was my favourite Commando. I lived in Jones Hall
at Howard my first year.”

Bucky grinned. “Well, he was my favourite too. He was really good to me; I was beaten within an
inch of my life in Austria before the serum and he kept me alive. I liked that he was kind and smart,
and handsome too.”

Sam hummed. “So, what you're saying is: I'm your type.”

“You'd need to be at least two of those things to be my type.”

Scott laughed, unconcerned by the glare Sam threw his way. “So, does Steve know?”

“Yeah, I kept it a secret for a long time, but he knows.”

“Oh man,” Scott said for a second time. He looked thrilled at the turn of events. “Look at us, team
bonding!”

“Hearing what gets Bucky's dick wet isn't my idea of bonding,” Sam said, but he was smiling a little,
Christmas was approaching fast. It would hardly be an event of childhood proportions, seeing as Scott and Wanda were Jewish, and Wakanda wasn't a Christian country, but they decided to spend the day together anyway. Bucky would make Ma's bread dumplings, Wanda offered her stuffed bell peppers, Sam was roasting a turkey, and Scott and Clint were bringing the alcohol. Bucky invited Itobo and A'kane; Itobo said he would bring some Wakandan dishes and stay a while, and A'kane was happy to go anywhere there was alcohol.

They settled on Bucky's suite, since it was the biggest owing to Steve having requested two bedrooms, and Sam arrived at his door at nine am with a semi-defrosted turkey on a baking tray. Bucky was still in his pyjamas.

“Let me in,” Sam said.

“You woke me up.”

“I've been up since six.” He muscled past Bucky, holding the tray up higher as he came inside. “I've been in the gym for the last two hours.”

Bucky rubbed at his face, then closed the door and followed Sam to the kitchen. “Have you always been such an overachiever?”

Sam was inspecting the kitchen with quick movements; he brushed crumbs from yesterday's toast into the sink without comment. “Yes. Get dressed.”

“All right,” Bucky said, and turned towards his bedroom.

Wanda arrived at eleven with a cloth bag of food and a look of surprise at the activity already going on inside.

“He's been here two hours,” Bucky said, closing the door behind her. “He's a tyrant.”

“Bucky!” Sam yelled from the kitchen, “You've still gotta prepare your dumplings!”

“Oh my God,” Bucky muttered, and headed to the kitchen as Sam yelled for him again.

By noon, they were all there, aside from Itobo and A'kane. Scott was playing Christmas music on his tablet and Bucky knew that both he and Clint were waiting until they could call home; Wakanda was eleven hours ahead of San Francisco, where Cassie lived with her mother and stepfather, and nine hours ahead of Iowa, where Clint had eventually admitted his family lived. He'd been reluctant to tell them and Bucky wondered if he thought there was a part of Bucky that was still HYDRA, that would still report home. Bucky didn't blame him.

Bucky and Wanda forced Sam out of the kitchen by twelve thirty and started working on the bread dumplings and bell peppers, under strict instructions to baste the turkey every thirty minutes. They worked quietly, just exchanging words like pass the salt and hand me that spatula. Wanda stayed at the stove, stirring the meat and spices in the skillet. Heat and steam emanated from the stove and strands of her hair stuck to her face from perspiration. He took up another skillet and brought it to the stove to fry onions for the dumplings. They were shoulder to shoulder for a few minutes, companionably silent. It made him feel, for a moment, that he was home, in Brooklyn, in his kitchen, with his mother and his siblings and his dad. The image wavered for a moment, a girl with long brown hair sitting on the counter, not Flo or Becca, and he was young again, his body not his own.
Wanda flinched away. “I'm sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn't mean to--”

Bucky blinked, dizzy for a second, then shook his head to clear away the intrusion. Wanda was still talking, spilling apologies.

“I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to project, I just felt home and--”

“It's okay. Hey--” He rested the wooden spoon on the edge skillet and touched her shoulder; she was crying. “I mean it, I know you weren't trying to do anything to me.”

She nodded quickly, her eyes trained on the skillet as she stirred. “My parents...” she began. “They cooked together, side by side. My father cooked delicious food, my mother helped.” She smiled down at the stove. “Pietro and I would sit on the counter and Tata would let us taste the food. They knew, I think... We lived in the middle of a war zone, they were saving the money to move away from Novi Grad. We were there when...”

She tipped her head back, still crying, and looked at the ceiling. “It takes my breath away to think of. And when Pietro... He was the other half of my soul, I know I will never be whole again. When I see inside your mind, your sister almost a twin, Steve...I suppose I reach out to that.”

He nodded, his eyes warming in sympathy. “I don't think anyone's whole, soon as you're born life does its best to pick away at you. I think all you can do is try your best.”

She looked at him, finally, and smiled. “You remind me of my brother sometimes. Maybe it's just the hair.”

Bucky smiled and took up the spoon again.

“Has someone basted that turkey yet?” Sam yelled from the other room.

“Shit!” he muttered, and scrabbled to open the stove door as Wanda laughed.

Christmas lunch got under way at just past two, delayed by Bucky's poor time management skills in regards to the dumplings; Sam was smug. Itobo and A'kane arrived as they got down to eating, with a few plates of maandazi – sweet donuts that made Bucky's mouth water – and coconut and sweet potato pudding. They set themselves up on the couches, despite Bucky feeling the ghost of Ma's disapproval hanging over him. They shared stories of past Christmases, and Itobo told them about Wakanda and its history.

He and A'kane left after an hour, much to A'kane's chagrin. Bucky collected up empty plates, balancing them on his arm like a waiter.

“He need any help?” Itobo asked as he smoothed out his clothes.

“Nah, I'm good,” he said. He had a stack of four plates resting on his elbow and they were a little heavy, but nothing bad.

“I assume you've come to a decision about your arm?”

Bucky looked at the empty sleeve of his sweater; he was considering cutting the length of it off and pinning it up but it seemed a shame to cut up a nice piece of clothing. “Yeah, I think I'm good for now. This feels good.”
Itobo nodded. “I'll break the news to A'kane gently.”

Bucky smiled. “Thanks.”

At three thirty, Clint took his phone out onto the balcony and closed the door firmly behind him. They all tried not to look, but Bucky still saw the tense set of his shoulders and the way he hunched over his phone. He came back in at four and headed straight for the bathroom, where he remained for ten minutes. No one commented.

Scott seemed to take the distance in his stride. He had to wait until six to call Cassie and he let her say hello to the room before excusing himself to Steve's empty bedroom. He looked happy enough when he returned, if a little quiet as he sat down beside Bucky.

“How's Cassie doing?” he asked.

Scott bobbed his head. “She's good. They're spending Christmas with Jim's big Italian American family. She says they're all crazy, and Maggie can't deal with so many Catholics in one house. That's a direct quote, apparently.”

“You doing okay today?”

“I've been through worse.” He shrugged and smiled. “No Facetiming in San Quentin, you know?”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, although all he could remember was how devastating he found being away from his family in the war.

“It's my first Christmas away from Nathaniel,” Clint said quietly. He was sitting on one of the armchairs, more than a few beers deep but handling okay so far. “I missed years of Cooper and Lila's lives out on missions, didn't see Cooper's steps, Lila's first birthday, but I was retired, I was gonna do better...” He took a deep breath and took another drink.

“I'm sorry, man,” Sam said.

“I made my choices,” he murmured.

That didn't sound like much of a comfort.

Scott suggested – insisted – on playing charades. Bucky recalled playing it when he was young, Wanda had never played it but had seen it in a lot of American movies, Clint was apathetic at best, and Sam alleged that he was a champion charades player. The game sputtered to life.

Bucky couldn't guess a single one of the movies and no one guessed his turn at Steamboat Bill, Jr., even Sam. It was Buster Keaton – no one knew their classics any more. Scott played enthusiastically, if not well, and Clint didn't make much effort to participate. Wanda was doing the best after Sam and strongly denied cheating.

Bucky had long since given up trying to guess anything as he watched Scott flap his arms around like a lunatic and make flying motions. It was past seven now and getting dusky outside.

Sam studied him for a few minutes before saying, “It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman.”

“Yes!” Scott said, pointing his finger at Sam.

“Jeez, how'd you get that?” Bucky said. “That was pretty esoteric.”

“Esoteric?” Sam repeated.
“Abstract.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s a big word for such a dumbass.”

Bucky smiled. “Thanks.”

“It's all this team bonding,” Scott said, grinning. “We're totally on the same wavelength now.”

Sam looked back at him. “I'm not on any length with you.”

“Except how you are,” Clint muttered into his beer.

Wanda was eventually declared the winner after winning a tiebreaker against Sam with *The Thin Red Line*. Sam was outraged.

Between the six of them, the food had disappeared pretty quickly, but none made any moves to leave and by eight they’d found a Christmas movie to watch on Bucky’s mostly forgotten television. They put a second on at ten and talked while some kid tortured robbers on screen. They were all pretty tipsy, except for Bucky, and Wanda dozed off against his shoulder around eleven. Sam looked at them appraisingly and smiled a little. Bucky started the drift as well, thinking of all those happy Christmases of his past, Ma's red dresses and the bells of the Salvation Army on street corners and his father building snowmen. He had a lot of good memories to get him by, along with the bad ones.

He was roused after midnight by the click of the front door and turned to look over the back of the couch without jostling Wanda. Steve was standing at the door, dark circles under his eyes and a couple of bags over his shoulder.

“You're back,” he said.

“Yeah.” Steve's eyes flickered over the group.

Sam shoved Clint awake and stood up. “How'd it go?”

“Time off for good behaviour?” Scott asked.

Steve shook his head. “Not yet.”

Clint sighed and rubbed the heels of his hands over his face.

“You all right?” Bucky asked. His movement had woken Wanda now and she blinked around a little before raising her hand in a wave to Steve, who nodded back.

“Just tired. Don't mind me, I'm going to bed.”

“You want something to eat first?”

Steve flashed a quick, wholly unconvincing smile. “I ate on the plane. We'll talk tomorrow. All of us.”

Bucky let him go, and the five of them looked at each other in awkward silence for moment before calling it night. Sam said he'd come by in the morning to talk to Steve and they all shuffled out, leaving Bucky to tidy up the suite. He lingered by Steve's door for a while but, hearing nothing from inside, let him alone and went to bed after straightening the place up.
He woke at seven and got dressed. The door to Steve's room was still closed, but Bucky expected he wouldn't be asleep for much longer. He'd looked like hell last night, and coming back without the news they were desperately waiting for (some of them, anyway) couldn't have done anything but added to it.

He decided to make pancakes for breakfast, something nice. Having only the one arm didn't present much of a problem for him any more; the kitchen was kitted out with electric can openers, contraptions that could chop things automatically, and various adjustable devices that he could wedge things into to keep them from escaping him. He found that he could open most bottles and jars with his thumb at the right angle or, failing that, his teeth.

Pancakes were easy, because the flour and sugar were in jars he could spoon out of and the lid of the baking powder can popped off. Cracking eggs was a little messy, but nothing so bad, and although he had an electric mixer, the thing was noisy and he preferred doing it by hand any how. He took his cup of milk, mixing bowl, and whisk (separate trips) to the kitchen table and sat down, then held the bowl between his thighs and started whisking.

Steve came out a few minutes later, so quietly that Bucky didn't realise he was there until he caught movement in his periphery.

“Morning,” he said, “pancakes coming up in a few minutes.”

Steve stared back at him, his eyes flicking to Bucky's empty sleeve, then back to his face. Bucky regretted putting on a just t-shirt. “Let me do that.”

“Nah, I'm good,” he said. He ran the whisk through the runny mix and held it up. “I'm done, anyway.”

He got up and Steve came further into the room as he put the pan on to heat. He turned to the fridge and got out a carton of orange juice. “Want some?”

Steve stepped forward quickly. “I'll do it.”

“I'm fine. No pouring your own drinks at Chez Barnes.” He put the carton down on the counter and grabbed a couple of glasses, unscrewed the lid, and took hold of the carton around its middle, squeezing it tight enough that the cardboard bent inwards. Steve's face looked tense as Bucky poured, but there weren't any spills.

“Sit down,” Bucky said, handing him the glass. Steve murmured a thanks and pulled a chair out at the table to sit. Bucky put the juice away and went back to the pancakes. They were silent for a few minutes, as Bucky flipped pancakes like a pro, until Steve took a deep breath.

“I thought you would've got the new arm by now.”

Bucky glanced over at him as he lay the final pancake on the plate. “Oh, yeah...” He slid one plate up to his elbow and took the other in his hand, bringing them to the table, then went back and grabbed the butter and syrup. “I... decided not to have it,” he said as he sat down.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged and cut through his pancakes with the side of his fork. “I just think for now, I'm happier without a prosthetic.”

Steve stared back at him, not a flicker of interest in his breakfast. “Have you felt that way the whole time?”
“Well...” He took a mouthful of pancake and chewed. “I guess, yeah.”

“You didn't say.”

“I guess I didn't really know how I felt for a while.” He sighed and shook his head. “Eat your food or I'm gonna get offended.”

Steve nodded slowly and started to eat. “It's really good, thanks,” he said after a while.

Bucky smiled back and kept eating. They passed the next ten minutes in relative silence – despite Bucky's questions, Steve didn't have much to say on the matter of his Senate meetings – and Bucky shooed him away to have a shower once they were done. Steve looked like he didn't think Bucky could deal with washing the dishes on his own, but he didn't argue.

He spent a long time in the bathroom, upwards of half an hour, and by the time he got out the shower, red-faced from the steam and with a towel around his neck, Sam was knocking at the door.

“Up to a debrief?” he asked Steve.

Steve glanced at Bucky. “Sure.”

Bucky started towards the door. “I'll leave you guys to it.”

“You don't have to,” Steve said quickly.

“Nah, I need some fresh air, anyhow. Have fun.”

Both Steve and Sam's faces said they wouldn't, and Bucky was happy to grab his jacket and duck out of there. He walked around the grounds for a while, checked in with Itobo and A'kane to tell them Steve was back, though they already knew, and set him up at his usual spot to catch some morning sun. He should have brought a book to entertain himself with, but he had a fair capacity to pass the time doing nothing at all, so he stood at the railings and watched the waves for a while, until Wanda called out to him.

“You're here early today,” she said. He held his cigarette carton out to her and she took one with a smile. He pulled one out too and lit both.

“Steve and Sam are talking. I thought you'd be sleeping off a hangover.”

“Ah, if I ignore it, it doesn't exist,” she said with a smile.

He laughed. “I tried that one a few times too.”

“How's Steve?”

He took a drag of his cigarette and blew it out. “I don't really know. Tense. Convinced I'm an invalid.”

“He'll get over that,” she said. “What happened with the Senate?”

“I don't really know that either. Nothing good, I guess.”

She hummed around her cigarette in response.

“You don't seem that concerned,” he said.
“I don't have anything to go back to.” Her gaze followed the birds flying overhead for a moment. “I suppose everything I have is here – the team, a roof over my head. Clint and Scott were upset last night, Clint especially, and I do want it for them, but it makes no difference to me.”

“Right,” he said. He wasn't sure that he felt much differently to her. Sure, he had Florence and Eugene, and Katie too, but he didn't feel an aching need to go back.

“This is where you got to,” Steve’s voice said behind them. The forced humour in it made it seem even more tense. “Wanda,” he said, as they both turned to greet him.

“Captain,” she said, then cleared her throat. “I'll leave you to it.”

“See ya,” Bucky said, and Steve nodded, watching her go for a moment before turning back to him.

“You're smoking again.”

“I never stopped.” Not by choice, anyway. “They don't have any of the bad stuff in them, so I'm not poisoning the planet or anything.”

Steve nodded. “So, uh... Are you and Wanda...?”

Bucky laughed on an inhale of his cigarette, coughing out a cloud of smoke. “I know we're technically senior citizens, but I'm pretty sure you haven't forgotten that I'm gay.”

“No,” Steve said slowly, “I just thought that... you did have relationships with women...”

Bucky cleared his throat. “We're just friends.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. How'd it go with Sam?”

Steve's face tensed up even more. “Not great.”

Bucky stubbed his cigarette out and tossed it in a nearby trash can, then gestured for Steve to walk back with him. “So, what happened back in the US? I've been reliably informed you got pretty mad on the floor of the Senate.”

Steve pressed his lips together. “Yeah, well. Ellis is leaning to our way of thinking, but Ross and his guys and making it difficult.”

“Think we'll get there?”

“I hope so,” Steve said, then cleared his throat and amended more firmly, “Yeah, we will.”

Bucky looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “That's good to hear. How'd Sam take it?”

Steve sighed. “He's worried about the team. Clint... Well, you probably already know.”

“He'll be okay, we've all got faith in you.”

Steve smiled a little and fell silent, keeping step with Bucky until they reached the suite. He hung back when Bucky walked inside, closing the door slowly. He took a deep breath in that Bucky could hear across the room and said, “hey, I've got something for you.”

He turned around and smiled. “Yeah? I didn't get you anything.”
Steve didn't really smile back, but went to his room and returned a moment later with a rucksack in his hand. Bucky looked at it for a minute, the chest straps and frayed stitching, and hurried forward.

“You got my bag back?” he said, grasping the back of it while it was still in Steve's hands. Steve let go. “How?”

“I asked Sharon to look the other way while I re-appropriated it from the Joint Counter Terrorism Centre archives.” This time he did smile, a little mischievously, something Bucky hadn't seen in a long time.

“This is amazing, thank you.” He went to the couch and sat down, then unzipped the bag and sifted through the contents. All his notebooks seemed to be accounted for, his biography in its state of semi disintegration, and there were a few changes of clothes that smelt musty like his apartment in Rahova. His money was gone, unsurprisingly, but his photos were still there and he pulled them out and put the bag aside.

“Steve,” he said, and looked around, but Steve wasn't there and after a moment he could hear him moving around in the kitchen. He went back to the photos, flicking through them, a lifetime passing by like a flipbook, and stopped every now and then to look closer at a photo; Becca at forty or sixty or eighty, his parents in their twilight years. At the back was the photo taken at Christmas with Katie's instant camera.

“Steve,” he called again, louder, and at length Steve came back in, drying his hands on his pants. “You should look at these. Look, this is a picture of all of us a couple of days before Christmas. Becca was, you know, near the end, but she was still happy. It was pretty incredible, how she was there right up to the end, being the same bitch as ever. I couldn't have asked for more.” He smiled and looked at Steve, but Steve hadn't moved at all, his eyebrows furrowed. “Steve?”

“I already saw them,” Steve said quietly. “I went through everything, all your notebooks, the pictures, all of it.”

“Oh.” Bucky returned the photos to their paper sleeve and took a breath. “Okay. That's okay, I don't mind.”

Steve nodded, his gaze a thousand miles away until it locked back on him. Bucky almost jolted with the intensity. “Why don't you want the prosthetic?”

“Like I said, I'm just happier without it.”

Steve drilled a hole in him with his stare and it was all he could do not to look away. “What happened after you fell from the train?”

Bucky glanced at the bag. He'd written about HYDRA and the prison, but not that extensively; memories of torture were easier to recover than specifics of his happy childhood. “Nothing good.”

“I wanna know what happened,” Steve said.

“You don't,” Bucky said firmly, “and I don't want to talk about it.”

Steve stepped closer, his hands curling to fists. Were they going to get into a bust up over this? “I need to hear it.”

Bucky ran his tongue along his bottom lip. Steve was resolute and coiled tighter than a spring; Bucky didn't know which way he was going to bounce off. “Okay. When I fell from the train I... hit the ground on my left side. My arm took the brunt, but my head was cracked open too, like an egg.”
Steve flinched and Bucky felt a bitter pleasure; if he wanted to hear the fucking story, he was gonna hear the fucking story. “I was blind in my left eye and I was paralysed. When I came round, there were two Russian soldiers. I don't know how long I was in the snow for, but one of them said my arm had got caught in between some rocks, so they'd chopped it off, right around here.” He made a gesture to his phantom limb, slightly above where his elbow would be. Steve looked, then met his eyes again. “One of the men was an ally, trying to help me, bring me home, but the other was HYDRA and he killed the good man and took me somewhere.”

He took a steadying breath and resettled himself. Steve looked like he wasn't breathing at all. “When I came round again, I was still paralysed. They didn't feed me, they didn't give me anything to drink, they left me in a cell to rot to death, and it took me a week to regain enough feeling to get up and reach the one cup of water and the plate of slop they'd ration me a day. They'd stitched my face back together with thick black stitches and I picked them out with my remaining hand. My stump rotted and stank and made me ill and they never spoke to me and they gave me newspapers that said that you'd died and they 'imprisoned' a girl near me but she was an agent and she betrayed me. They beat me and they muzzled me and they cut my arm off at the shoulder and I pissed myself and I vomited and I cried and they broke me down and they built me back up and they mutilated me with a hunk of metal that bent my spine and they took everything from me, every memory and emotion and thought until I was nothing! And that is why I don't want the goddamn fucking prosthetic!” He'd been steadily getting louder, to the point of screaming, pushing his body forward off the couch until he was almost standing. “Is this what you need to hear?”

There was an abrupt silence. Steve stood rooted to the spot, but his chest was rising and falling rapidly and his hands were quivering. He looked as pale as he ever had having an asthma attack as a child, and the fire went out of Bucky like someone had thrown a bucket of water over him. He stood up and gripped Steve's arm.

“Sit down,” he said, and tugged Steve towards the couch. Steve's eyes were wide and haunted, but he came easily and fell to sitting.

“I tortured you,” Steve murmured.

“Huh?”

Steve looked at him with those big eyes. “To break your conditioning.”

“That was therapy.”

Steve shook his head. “It was torture in everything but name. And I lied to you.”

Bucky reached out and put his hand over Steve's still quivering ones. “What do you mean?”

“I told you that it was the best option, the only one, but that wasn't true. I could have waited a few years for Tony, T'Challa's scientists were working on options. There were avenues, if I'd wait, but I wouldn't. Couldn't. Didn't you wonder why I was doing the 'therapy' and not a psychiatrist?”

“No,” Bucky said, quite honestly. It hadn't occurred to him that someone other than Steve should have been doing it; they'd always done everything together.

“The psychiatrists I talked to refused to do it. They said it was too dangerous, that it could fracture your mind. They said it could do irreparable damage to your psyche, but I did it anyway.”

“Well, you knew I was more resilient than that.”

“No, I didn’t,” Steve said, and Bucky bit back a sarcastic, 'thanks'. It wasn't the time for jokes. “I just
couldn't... be alone any more. When you fell--” His voice came out hoarse. “It was like my... heart
was torn open.” He swallowed heavily, wiping a hand over his face, though Bucky kept holding the
other.

To hear Steve say something like that, it made Bucky's own heart selfishly clench, to know that
Steve loved him to that degree. Of course there had always been love between the two of them, but it
had flowed more from Bucky to Steve than the reverse, he'd felt.

Steve dropped his hand back to his lap and took a deep breath. “When I woke up in 2012, I'd lost
everything. My whole life. And I didn't go see anyone because I was scared; Becca and the twins,
the Commandos, I couldn't face any of it. It took months for me to screw up the courage to see
Peggy and that was only because she was ill. The first time I saw her, she thought it was 1943 again
and it got her so upset the nurses made me leave. I almost didn't go back and sometimes I wish I
never had. Every time, it was like I lost another piece of myself. And now Becca's three years dead.
I'm a coward.”

“Hey,” Bucky said, and put his hand on the back of Steve's neck, “you've never been a coward.”

“Maybe not before,” Steve said, chewing on his lip. “I feel like I lost my humanity when I came out
of the ice, that I'm... not anyone any more. I just go from one fight to another, one more disaster, one
more massacre, one more fuckin' government that wants their pound of flesh outta me.”

Bucky smiled a little; it had been so long since he'd heard Steve speak like that, a little Brooklyn
Irish. “You know I know how that feels.”

“But you recovered, without my help. You broke free and you put yourself back together, and you
seem happy, happier than you did in the war. Are you happy?”

Bucky nodded. He was, he was happy; he was sad too, would never be whole again, like Wanda
said, but he tried his best. “The war was a definite low point in my life.”

“Zola,” Steve murmured. He was close, his head dipped towards Bucky's, Bucky's hand still on his
neck.

“Yeah. He gave me the serum and it made me crazy. It filled me with furious anger and pain, but it
made me a good soldier, great killing machine. I guess I was turning into the Winter Soldier even
then.”

“Why didn't you tell me what'd happened?”

“I dunno, I was scared and I didn't want to be different.” He laughed a little. “That's been my
problem my whole life – I didn't want to be different, but I already was.”

“Gabe tried to tell me, after you fell, but I was out of my head.”

“I know.”

Steve blinked slowly. He still had those long, girlish eyelashes. “Were you in love with him?”

Bucky looked at him for a long moment. They'd never really talked about his homosexuality, beyond
Steve's assurances that he didn't see him any differently, even though he did. “Yeah, and I still am, I
guess.”

“And you were always gay, even when you were with Connie.” His words hovered somewhere
between statement and question.
“Yep. I loved her, but I loved her like a friend. Back then, I was never going to be able to give anyone my full attention, man or woman...” He licked his lips quickly. “Because I always had you.”

Steve's eyebrows jumped up a little. “Me?”

Bucky couldn't help but laugh. “I didn't just admire your physique after the serum. Didn't you ever think I was a little intense for a best friend?”

“I...” Steve glanced away and shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. “I'd never had any other best friends, I just thought that was how it went. I mean, I didn't mind that you were intense. I liked it. I remember being pretty intense too.”

That was certainly true, but he'd been intense in a different way. Intense about the world and his place in it, not about a single person.

“So,” Steve continued. “You were always... in love with me?” He mumbled the last part, almost too fast to hear.

“Yes,” Bucky said simply.

“Even when I was scrawny.”

“Especially when you were scrawny.”

Steve blinked. “Wow.”

Bucky laughed; Steve sounded different. Younger. Like the boy and man he thought he'd loved and lost. He'd let his hand slip down from Steve's neck to the expanse of his shoulders, but they were still hunched towards each other, as if conspiring. Steve was looking at him without much humour, though, and then swayed towards him all of a sudden and pressed his dry lips against Bucky's, in a chaste, grandmotherly type of kiss. If this was how he'd kissed Sharon, he didn't have much to be pleased with himself about, Bucky thought hysterically, his eyes open while Steve's were closed. Of course, Sharon was a woman and Steve had kissed a few women, but Bucky was the only man, he was pretty sure.

He pulled away and Steve pulled back as well, straightening up. “You're not gay, Steve.”

Steve sighed, the breath blowing his cheeks out. “I don't know what I am.”

Bucky pressed his lips together – lips that had been kissed by Steve. “If you're tellin' me you've been queer this whole time, I'm gonna smack you in the face.”

Steve laughed and ran his hands over his face and into his hair, tugging at it so that it stood up in tufts when he let go. “No, I definitely wasn't queer when I was young, but now all I know is that--” He pressed his top teeth into his bottom lip for a second. “I need you, beyond anything else. I guess that sounds corny.”

Bucky laughed as well, but slightly off key. “You got that right. You never stop surprising me. Can we just... uh, table this?”

Steve didn't look upset at the idea at all. This wasn't the culmination of decades of his yearning they were dealing with here. Bucky knew he could take or leave the kissing, maybe more leave than take. He knew that it was comfort and not desire Steve was seeking. And Bucky wanted to give it, but he didn't want to go back down that rabbit hole.
“Sure,” Steve said, and twitched his eyebrows. “Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.”

“Nah, you didn't. I just got a small brain and only so much can fit in at a time.”

“No comment,” Steve said, and Bucky reached out and pressed the flat of his palm to Steve's forehead, pushing him away. Steve swayed back as if the light force had had any impact on him and grinned, lighter and happier than Bucky had seen in decades.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 100th Birthday, Bucky! Here, have some psychological torture from your best friend!

We're looking at one or two more chapters and then I think I can finally say that this Goliath is going to finally wrap up!
They spent the rest of the day inside, despite Steve’s promise that he would talk to the team. Sam was handling that, he said, and he was sure they wouldn’t want to see Steve right now.

“They’re not going to blame you,” Bucky said.

“You don’t know that,” Steve replied. He had a folder in his hands, drumming his fingers on the surface. He’d been fussing with it all afternoon but hadn’t shown Bucky the contents. To be fair, Bucky hadn’t asked, but he wasn’t sure Steve would have been open to sharing.

They went about their day as well as they could, and when it came time for dinner, Bucky went to the kitchen, Steve not far behind.

“What are you making?”

“Pork stew,” he said, pouring oil in the skillet and turning the stove top on. “My landlady used to make it in Bucharest. I don’t think I can make it like she did, though.”

“You spent time with your landlady?” Steve asked. “I would’ve thought you’d have kept a low profile.”

Bucky lay the pieces of pork down and took up the spatula. “Believe me, I tried.” He prodded the meat a little and started dicing an onion, with quick swipes of the knife. Steve watched the movements for a second. “She was pretty observant, figured me out fast enough. Figured I was American, too, even though I only ever spoke Romanian. She was always getting me to come round and fix something for her, then feeding me afterwards.” He smiled. “Why’d you think I put on so much weight?”

Steve smiled back a little. “I think I saw her. She slammed the door when she saw me coming.”

“Yeah, a man with a helmet and a star on his chest, she said.”

“You knew I was in your apartment when you came in? Why didn’t you just take off?”

Bucky shrugged, threw the onion in the skillet and started stirring again. “I wanted to see you. I didn’t want to run.”

Steve looked down at the table top; the muscle in his jaw jumped a little.

“What about you, you lived in DC?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. He looked distinctly unmoved by the memory of it.

“Didn’t like it? It must have been better than your old tenements.”

“Oh, the apartment was fine, nice. DC’s a great place, historic, beautiful...” He’d slipped into Captain America, the Public Figure mode. Bucky raised an eyebrow and Steve tipped his head. “But it ain’t Brooklyn.”

Bucky smiled, to hear Steve talk like that. Steve chuckled a little. “I was in New York at first.
SHIELD gave me a place to live in Manhattan, then they moved me to the apartment in DC.”

“Moved you? Like a piece of furniture?”

Steve pressed his lips together and looked down. “Felt like it sometimes. You know, they made me do fucking motivational videos for schools. Bad as those reels I did in the war. You remember those?”

“How could I forget them?” Bucky said.

Steve snorted and licked his lips. “So, after that, after HYDRA, I came back to New York, lived in Stark Tower with the team, then went to the new Avengers Facility upstate with the new team, then here. All these places were kitted for my arrival, I didn’t need to lift a finger, so I guess, really, the last time I had a real home was those tenements.”

Bucky lay down the spatula and went to the fridge to get the broth. “You didn’t go back to Brooklyn?”

“Couple times, had a couple of missions out there, but I didn’t stick around.”

Bucky took the broth from the fridge and poured it into the skillet, which spat and hissed superheated oil at him. “Shit,” he muttered, and put the carton aside to turn the stove down. Steve was half out of his chair to help, but stayed there, between sitting and standing. Bucky fought with the skillet for a couple of minutes to get it under control, then turned the stove off and moved it aside.

“Disaster averted,” he said, and Steve smiled quickly and sat back down. Bucky grabbed a cloth to clean up the mess. “Look, you don’t have to stay in here with me. I know it makes you uncomfortable, watching me cook.”

“Well, I’ve gotta get used to it,” Steve said, and sighed. “I was… I guess disabled, for so long and I was so desperate not to be, it’s hard to get my head around not wanting a prosthetic.”

Bucky left the mess and turned around, leaning against the stove. “If I could get my real arm back, Steve, trust me I would, but the prosthetic feels too much like a weapon right now for me to bear.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m not going to hassle you about it,” Steve said, and smiled. “I’m glad that we’re… talking again. I haven’t really felt like myself since the train.”

“Ditto,” Bucky said, and Steve rolled his eyes.

They ate Bucky’s middling efforts at tochiură and both went to bed early. Bucky felt pretty exhausted and he figured Steve was too. Before he turned the lights off, he leant the polaroid of him and the family against the lamp on his night stand and looked at it as he changed for bed. They did look happy, the five of them, it would be a nice thing to wake up to.

He woke up a little earlier than he hoped for, finding the clock reading just before five when he rolled over onto his side. There were noises coming from the living room, tapping and rustling, the occasional mutter. He got up and followed the sounds to Steve, sitting on the couch with his laptop on the coffee table, a folder in his hand, illuminated only by the lamp on the end table.

“How long have you been up?” Bucky asked from the door.

“About an hour,” he said. “I normally wake up this time.”
“Really?”

Steve looked up, closing the folder, and nodded. “Sometimes I just stay in bed until it gets light though.”

“That’s pretty pathetic.”

Steve shrugged. “I have so much energy. I can’t sleep for more than a few hours at a time, unless I’m really beat. I used to go running around the National Mall just for something to do in the mornings.”

Steve looked back at the computer and Bucky sucked on his teeth. He’d like to go back to bed; he was similar to Steve in that he didn’t need much sleep, but he still liked sleeping. Still, he couldn’t go back to sleep knowing Steve was sitting out here in the dark.

“You wanna go for a run now?”

Steve looked back, raising his eyebrows. Bucky figured he didn’t exactly look like he was in the mood for a run. “Really?”

“Sure. You’ll have to lend me some clothes, though, I don’t have any track pants.”

They were outside by five thirty. The sun wouldn’t rise for another hour and it was cool and breezy out.

“First to get tired buys breakfast?” Steve said.

“Buys? Doesn’t the king pay for everything around here?”

Steve turned, bouncing on his toes in front of Bucky. “If you can’t handle it,” he said, then took off running.

“Asshole!” Bucky yelled.

Steve still ran the same way he did as a kid: straight-backed, head up, knees coming up high. Bucky tipped his head down, racing to catch up with him. With only one arm, he was slightly less balanced than usual, but he still managed to overtake Steve after a few minutes. It was a brief victory, though, as Steve redoubled his efforts and pulled ahead. They completed the first lap around the compound in twenty minutes, a distance that Bucky estimated around five miles.

Bucky started to sweat somewhere around the third lap. At lap four, he saw sweat start to ring the collar of Steve’s t-shirt. They vied for first place fairly evenly, but any gain Bucky got on him was short-lived because Steve seemed to always be able to push himself a little harder. He was grinning as he pulled ahead again and again, red in the face and panting slightly.

The sun was in the sky by the time Bucky had had enough. As they passed through the park for what felt like the millionth time, he reached out and shoved Steve on the back. Steve twisted as he went down, sweeping his leg out and bringing Bucky down hard on his ass.

“Forfeit!” Steve cried, as Bucky lay down on the grass and stretched his arm over his head. “You’re a cheat, you forfeited.”

“So long as we can stop running,” he said.

Steve scooted over and lay down beside him. “The muscles in my thighs are twitching.”

Bucky looked sidelong at Steve’s legs and could see how his muscles were moving under the thin
material of his track pants. Bucky’s were too and his chest was heaving with the exertion.

Steve turned his head towards Bucky. “You remember when we first met?”

“Course I do.”

Steve smiled. “Those first few months, I used to show you all around Red Hook and we used to get in trouble with all the adults. I remember we ran like this, till I thought my chest would burst. I loved that. You didn’t do that with me for long.”

“Well, I didn’t understand about your asthma at first,” Bucky replied. He put his hand behind his head, threading his fingers through his hair. “When you had that attack at Becca’s party, it really scared me.”

Steve raised his eyebrows a little. “You remember that?”

“I remember everything,” Bucky said. Maybe not everything, but as much as anyone else remembered about their childhoods, he figured.

“I really liked feeling like a normal kid for a while,” Steve said. “I think at first I hung around with you because you weren’t from the neighbourhood and you didn’t know about me. Everyone else knew the poor little invalid Steve Rogers, but you didn’t. I figured once you realised how weedy I was, you’d lose interest in me, especially with how smart you were and how you spoke good.” He paused for a moment. “Well. But you never did.”

“I thought you were… interesting,” Bucky said. “You knew all those swear words, you lived with all these interesting sorts of people, you knew all about the streets and the people on them. You made me feel… different.” He smiled a little and Steve smiled back. “You made me see things in a different way: the world, my family. I think before I knew you I never appreciated who my father was. That day you had your attack was the first time I’d ever respected him. I think I realised that things I perceived as weaknesses didn’t always make a person weak.”

Steve sighed. “I always felt kinda guilty how your relationship went with your grandfather, felt like it was because of me. I read about how he died in prison.”

“It kind of was because of you,” Bucky replied, “but it wasn’t a bad thing. I still loved Grandpa, but I stopped worshipping him. I think it’s better not to worship people.”

Those were bold words, considering that for a long time, he’d just transferred his worship from his grandfather to Steve.

A shadow fell over them; Sam, standing above them, glaring. “I’ve been seeing you two assholes zooming around this compound like roadrunners for the last couple hours.”

“Roadrunner’s a cartoon character,” Steve told Bucky. “Hi, Sam.”

“Hey,” Sam said, and raised an eyebrow. “You’re feeling better today?”

“Yeah,” Steve said slowly and sat up. “Sorry about our argument.”

Sam shrugged like it was nothing, but Bucky thought it must have been something, even though Steve hadn’t told him anything about it. “It’s been a difficult time for everyone,” he said diplomatically.

“Some more than others,” Steve said, more to himself than them. He pressed his lips together and
looked at the grass in thought for a moment. “I think I have a new plan.”

“Yeah?” Sam said, as Bucky raised his eyebrows in question.

Steve nodded. “I’m gonna need Scott’s help, though. And… Natasha’s.”

“Right,” Sam said. “Sounds like a party.”

Steve stood up, dusted stray grass from his legs, and looked down at Bucky, where he was still lying down.

“I have to get up?” Bucky asked.

“I could carry you.”

“Go on, then.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m not carrying you, but I’ll drag you by the ankle.”

Bucky grunted and pulled himself up. They went back to the apartment first so Steve could collect his folder, then went down a couple of floors to Scott’s place. Steve knocked on the door and for a few minutes, there was no answer.

“He’s probably still in bed, like normal people,” Bucky said.

“Captain’s prerogative,” Steve said. “Sometimes you’ve gotta rouse the troops.”

Bucky pursed his lips. “I remember.”

After another knock and a few more minutes, the door opened and Scott squinted back at them, in just a t-shirt and boxer shorts. His eyes grew larger as he looked over all three of them.

“Hey, boss.”

“Sorry to wake you up,” Steve said, though he didn’t sound particularly sorry. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure,” Scott said, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

“I need you to hack into the DoD archives.”

Scott laughed, but quickly stopped when he saw he was the only one. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “can you do that?”

Scott stood a little straighter. “Of course I can, that’s kind of my thing.”

Steve smiled and pulled a leaf of paper out of the folder. “Good. I need you to find out everything you can about Royal Marine Captain Emil Blonsky, Secretary Ross, and anything on the Bio-Tech Force Enhancement Project.”

Scott took the paper and looked at it for a moment. “Wow, this guy got pretty fucked up. I better put on some pants.”

“Come up to my apartment at one,” Steve said, “we’re having a team meeting.”
They gathered in the apartment at one, all six of them plus T’Challa, though he was fashionably late.

“Thanks for coming,” Steve said, letting him in. Scott sat up straighter, depositing his laptop on the coffee table and tidying his t-shirt, while Clint rolled his eyes and Wanda smiled.

“My aide said you seemed to need me quite urgently.”

“Yeah.” Steve gestured for him to sit down beside Sam on the couch. “I’m working on a new plan to get us out of your hair.”

“Let’s hear it, then,” Clint said. He’d looked agitated since he arrived, shooting Steve irritable looks. Sam had talked to him quietly, but it didn’t seem like it’d helped that much. Steve had briefed Sam and Bucky on the general plan, and Bucky wasn’t sure Clint was going to think much of it.

Steve’s mouth tightened a little and he sat down on the armrest of one of the couches, beside Bucky, and stretched his legs out. “All right. First of all, I want to apologise. I know I’ve put you all in a terrible position. You put yourselves on the line for me, and you’ve been stuck out here away from your families since. I’m sorry.”

Bucky patted him on the knee.

“We forgive you,” Sam said.

Steve smiled gratefully and took a breath. “Anyway. I think we all know that the Sokovia Accords were championed by Secretary Ross, formerly a US Army Lieutenant General. Before he was Secretary, he had a pretty checkered past with the army. A lot of you here haven’t met Dr Banner—” Wanda glanced away at that. “—but Ross was in charge of the super soldier project Bruce worked on and which eventually led to him becoming the Hulk. The Bio-Tech Force Enhancement Project was yet another half-baked attempt to restart Project Rebirth that ended in tragedy. Bruce wasn’t the only one who was affected; three years later, Royal Marine Captain Emil Blonsky was exposed to the bastardised serum with much more horrific consequences than the Hulk. I brought this up at the Senate hearing but, surprisingly, they weren’t receptive to it. That’s why I’ve asked Scott to find out what he can, so I can… present it to the president.”

“Yeah, about that...” Scott said slowly. “Just for my information: we’re blackmailing the president?”

There was a pause; Steve let his hands rest loosely between his legs and looked over the group. “Yeah.”

“Pretty much,” Sam offered.

“Just so I’m clear,” Scott murmured, his eyes wide.

“What’ve you found out so far?” Steve asked.

“Not much, it’s slow going. They’ve buried this guy Blonsky, the US, the Royal Marines, everyone. I pulled out files on him from the SHIELD data dump, but that’s probably all the stuff you already know. Ross has done some serious work to clean up his own record, too.”

Steve nodded. “All right, well, we’ve just begun. I’ve asked Natasha to come help us, she said she’d be here tonight.”

“That’s quick,” Sam said. “Where is she?”

“In the area of Dubai, I figure, but I didn’t ask.” He shook his head briefly. “I really wish we could
find Bruce.”

“My people can find your doctor for you,” T’Challa said.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “We scoured everywhere for him. The US government have been searching for him, too.”

“Wakanda is not the United States government, Captain,” T’Challa said, with a slight smirk. “We can help you with this, though we can’t be involved in anything expressly illegal.” He gave a significant look to Scott. “However, we can’t constantly monitor what you do on your own.”

“Right,” Steve said. “I got it. If you could find Bruce, I’d be very grateful.”

“So basically,” Clint said, “there’s nothing for us to do, it’s all on Scott?”

Steve tipped his head in ascent. “Our fate is in your hands, Scott.”

Scott picked his head up from the coffee table and sank down into the couch. “No pressure, then.”

Natasha arrived in Wakanda at seven, and Steve, Bucky, and Clint went out to the gates of the compound to meet her. Her hair was shorter than he remembered from their last meeting, though his memories of those days were predictably hazy. She embraced Clint immediately, without a glance for Steve or Bucky.

“You took a big risk coming here,” Clint said, stepping back.

“Laura told me to bring you home anyway I could,” she said, and looked at Steve, smiling. “And Cap asked so nicely.”

“Natasha,” Steve said, and hugged her quickly. “Thanks for coming.”

Finally, she turned her attention to Bucky. She had a deceptively intense gaze; on first pass, she seemed disinterested and faintly amused, but there was steel underneath, an unwavering strength and pride that seemed unbreakable. Her eyes lingered for a moment on his left side.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello,” she said, and Steve shifted slightly beside him. “So, what should I call you?”

He held out his hand. “Bucky.”

She shook his hand briefly and smiled. “You can call me Agent Romanoff.” Steve made a disapproving sound and Natasha rolled her eyes. “I’m kidding. I’ve heard you’re cured now.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Bucky replied.

She smiled again, more sincerely, he thought. She turned back to Steve. “I’ve brought some files with me, mainly things I pulled from the data dump, in case I needed it. We should talk.”

“Yeah, come back to my apartment.”

Steve spent the rest of the evening with Natasha, going over her files. Bucky excused himself to bed.
early and woke up the next morning to find her still there at the coffee table.

“You work all night?” he asked.

“He did,” Natasha said, gesturing to Steve, hunched over a laptop. He looked up and waved, then went right back to it. “I catnapped.”

“I’m gonna make some breakfast, you guys want anything?”

She looked at him appraisingly and smiled. “Thanks. Whatever you’re making.”

“Steve?” Bucky asked, and then louder, when he didn’t answer. “Steve.”

Steve looked up over the lid of the laptop. “Nothing, thanks. I’m gonna have the team over again in a couple hours.”

“All right, I’ll clean myself up first.”

The second summit meeting began at eleven, half of them hidden behind computers. Scott looked worn out, and gratefully accepted a cup of coffee from Bucky. Despite any weariness, he still looked starstruck at the sight of Natasha.

“We never met properly,” Natasha said, holding her hand out to him. Scott juggled the laptop and cup to return the handshake. Steve watched the fumbling for a moment, then cleared his throat.

“Scott, have you found anything yet?”

Scott jerked a little, then looked up from his computer. “Nothing so far.”

“All right, that’s fine, I have something myself.” Steve held up a few sheets of paper. “I’ve been looking into… Howard and Maria Stark’s murder.”

Bucky mostly suppressed a shudder; a little forewarning would have been nice, now the whole room was looking at him. He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth and looked straight ahead at Steve. Steve grimaced sympathetically.

“As we all know,” Steve continued, “the hit was carried out by HYDRA, but I’ve found evidence here that they had inside help: Obadiah Stane, Howard’s – and then Tony’s – business partner, arranged the… set up. Stane was part of Stark Industries for thirty five years, serving as the CEO while Tony was still a minor. Apparently, he was like a second father to Tony. He was also intimately involved with HYDRA, supplying them weapons, among other things. Officially, he died in a plane crash, but really, Tony killed him at an SI facility.”

There was a long pause in the room, which Bucky eventually broke. “And?”

“Well, Stark Industries was essentially a supplier of HYDRA weapons for years. Even after Tony took over as CEO, his lifestyle prevented him from taking an active role in the company. This all went on right under his nose, and he’s been very much a driving force behind the Sokovia Accords…” He trailed off, as Bucky stared at him hard.

“No,” Bucky said. “That’s too cruel.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty fucked up,” Sam said. “I mean, guy was like a father to him.”

Steve looked at Natasha, who shrugged. “Hey, you don’t come to me for moral guidance. I brought you something you could use, I didn’t say you should”
Steve cleared his throat and put the papers down. “All right, let’s move on, then.”

“I’m gonna go have a cigarette,” Bucky said, and got up. Wanda followed him, and Steve watched them leave with a pensive look on his face. Neither of them had much to contribute to the meeting, though, so it wasn’t like they’d be missed.

Bucky lit his cigarette and handed Wanda the packet when they got outside. “I guess you don’t disagree with Steve’s idea, huh?”

“I do not feel any sympathy for Stark, don’t try to make me.”

Bucky thought of the missile shell sitting on the kitchen floor, days of the twins lying under rubble, waiting to die like their parents. “Do you still hate him?”

She took a drag and pursed her lips. “I won’t forgive him, but the hatred has lessened.”

They walked a little further from the building, out into the sun. “Am I so different from him? I was actually there, killing people in the street, but here we are, being friends.”

“But you didn’t kill my parents,” she said. “That’s the difference.”

“But I killed his parents.” He drew in smoke, then let it back out. “I would’ve torn anyone who hurt my parents limb from limb, and that’s before my enhancements. I don’t blame him for what he did to me.” He looked down at his empty sleeve. If anything, Stark had done him a favour. “I don’t want Steve to punish him for it.”

“Steve feels guilty,” Wanda said. “It comes off him in waves, I don’t need to make any effort to read it.”

He nodded; you didn’t need to be psychic to feel that. They went back into the building when they were finished, but not to the apartment. Wanda found a movie on in the common area that she liked and they watched that together in relative silence. Clint passed by near the end and told them the meeting was over; Bucky stayed to the credits, then ventured back upstairs.

“Everyone’s gone,” Steve said, when he came through the door.

“Yeah, I saw Clint.”

Steve stood from the couch and put his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry about before. I think I went a little off the rails.”

“It’s all right,” Bucky said and came closer. “You’re just… not someone who uses the worst time in a person’s life against them and I don’t want you to start because of me.”

“It’s not because of you,” Steve said. He came around the couch so that they were facing each other. “I think you’re the one stopping me from going off the deep end sometimes.”

Bucky snorted. “Well, I’ve never been the voice of morality before.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Steve replied, smiling slightly, but with an expression open enough to show his anxiety. When Bucky leant in for a hug, he didn’t resist.

“We’ll get everyone home,” he said, patting Steve on the back.
The plan really did seem to all come down to Scott, so Steve didn’t call a meeting the next day and instead went out for a run with Sam. Bucky stayed back, telling Sam he didn’t need the embarrassment of losing to both of them. The constipated look on his face suggested that Bucky was right.

He sat down with a new book after they left, and was twenty pages in when there was a knock at the door. He got up and opened up. Natasha was on the other side, and smiled when she saw him.

“Steve’s out for a run,” he said.

“Oh right,” she said, and peered inside. “I can wait.”

“Oh,” he said. “Uh, come in.”

She breezed past and made a beeline for the couch. Bucky closed the door and followed her. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Do you have any lemonade?” she asked as she sat down. He came to a stop beside the couch.

“I don’t think so.”


“It’s just a pulp,” he said. “Ellery Queen. Used to be my one of my favourite series, I’m catching up.”

She looked up at him and handed the book back. “I read that book about the married couple who solve crime once.”

He sat down on the opposite end of the couch. “The Thin Man. It’s a good book.”

“I preferred the movie. Cute dog.”

He nodded slowly, and put the book back down on the coffee table. Natasha didn’t offer anything else in the way of conversation and he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Something about her put him on the back foot.

“Do you remember me, Bucky?” she said at last.

He looked at her for a long moment; his silence didn’t seem to faze her. “You don’t mean from earlier this year, do you?”

She shook her head. He looked at her again, concentrated on her face and the red of her hair until his mind started to drift. “There was a house,” he said. She nodded. “A manor.”

“The Academy,” she offered. “They’d bring you to the house sometimes, to spar with the girls. You always kicked my ass, as expected, but I never felt you took any pleasure from it, unlike the other men they brought. It never seemed as if you felt anything.”

“I didn’t,” he said. “I never felt a thing.”

She nodded. “I think that’s what we liked about you, you were a blank slate we could project ourselves onto. A lot of the girls felt their first flush of puberty looking at you.” She smiled, almost mischievously, and he smiled back. He remembered the groups of young girls, their faces turned up towards him. He never gave them any thought. “You also shot me once, but I forgive you.”
“Sorry,” he said, and she shrugged. “There was a woman, back then… I think she was a Widow.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down much, there’ve been a lot of Widows over the years.”

“She was…” He tried to think, but he hardly remembered anything about her; he couldn’t even conjure an image of her face. “I don’t know what she looked like, her hair colour always changed, but she used to take me places, to the Academy, sometimes she was there when I woke up from the ice.”

Natasha’s face lit with understanding. “The crazy one. She used to lead you around like a pet. They used her as a cautionary tale for us girls. She’d gone to New York on a mission and briefly defected. In fact, rumour had that your Agent Carter tried to bring her in, but her conditioning was too much and she came back. She was burned by then, though; she could never really return to the fold.”

Carter… “They planted her in the prison they kept me in after I fell, she was meant to break my spirit.” He could have been so close to being saved; if this woman – whoever she had been, whatever her name was – had switched allegiances like Natasha had, Carter would have discovered what had happened to him. She might have been able to save him.

Natasha pressed her lips together sympathetically. “Maybe she felt guilty for what she did to you. She was strange, harsh woman, but she was as tender with you as maybe she was able to muster.”

“What happened to her?”

“Well, bearing in mind I didn’t see her that often… An old Widow is a useless Widow, put out to pasture. Some found a new place, like Madame B., who trained me and the other girls, but your Widow never found her place. She was… pathetic, according to the Madame. Maybe they kept her around out of pity, maybe she had a deeper inner life than anything I can imagine. In the end, I think she killed herself before they could kill her.”

He wondered if that should make him happy; he didn’t think it did. They were all trapped there together, HYDRA’s little projects. “How did you get out?”

“Clint brought me in,” she said, and tipped her head, looking away for a second. “It wasn’t easy. SHIELD didn’t exactly treat me well at first and I followed all Madame B.’s little rituals, handcuffed myself to the bed at night, until Clint cut the metal with bolt cutters. He took me to his home with Laura. They had a baby and they still trusted me to be there. I guess I knew I couldn’t let them down.” There was a hint of emotion there, just a slight reddening of her eyes, but she cleared her throat and continued as normal. “You seem to getting along pretty well.”

“I guess. I had a lot of time to come to terms with things. I read this biography about myself, and all my family saw me like some kind of god or something. Someone with all these good traits, but I don’t think I ever felt that way about myself before. I figure that’s as good as anything to aspire to be.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, you seem like a very compassionate man. The girls at the Academy would be so pleased, we used to sigh over your ‘kind eyes’.”

He grimaced at the thought of that, and she laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m not hitting on you, I know you already have a girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” he repeated. “Wanda isn’t my girlfriend. I don’t… swing that way.”

Natasha’s eyebrows went high on her face. “Oh. Well, you’ve just broken all those little girls’ hearts now.”
He grimaced again and turned with relief to the front door as it opened. Sam burst in, sweaty and panting, and stumbled over to Natasha when he saw her.

“Save me,” he said, flopping against her side. “Steve is the hardest drill sergeant I’ve ever had.”

“Just ‘cause you can’t take a little light exercise,” Steve said, grinning. There wasn’t a drop of sweat on him.

“Light!” Sam cried, and Natasha put her arm around him.

“Be gentle, he’s delicate.”

Steve rolled his eyes and looked at Bucky. “What’ve you two been doing?”

“Discussing the finer points of pulp crime novels,” he said, and got up. “I tell you later,” he murmured as he passed Steve, and the both of them watched Sam bathe in Natasha’s amused fussing. Guy had it bad.

Scott spent five more days digging, blowing through New Year’s without surfacing, before he came up to the apartment and insisted Bucky come with him. Steve was worried and asked a lot of questions, but Scott would only say that he had a hunch and he’d check back in soon. He took Bucky to Itobo’s lab, where they took Bucky’s blood, and disappeared for a few minutes to confer with the doctors. Bucky stayed on the bed with a piece of cotton wool taped to his arm, though he didn’t think he really had to worry about things like bruising, until Scott called him over. Blown up on a wide screen computer monitor was two sets of vertical striped lines.

“So, what am I looking at?” Bucky asked.

Scott reached out and tapped the line on the left. “This is your DNA,” he said, then drew his finger across the screen to the one on the right. “And this is part of a breakdown of the Hulk serum.”

“And?”

Scott looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “It contains your DNA.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m no biologist, but I took some classes and I know what DNA looks like. Someone must have got a sample of your blood and used it to create the serum. That sounds like something Steve would want to know, right?”

Bucky looked back the screen and blinked. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

Scott grinned. “I’m calling a team meeting.”

Scott was more than right about Steve wanting to know. Steve wanted to know everything: how he’d found it, how sure he was, where the blood had come from, what the implications of this were. It was pretty clear Steve already knew the implications.

“And you’re sure it isn’t my blood?” Steve asked.

“I mean, we can check to against your blood too, but...” Scott glanced at Bucky and pulled a face.
“The DNA is kinda… fucked up. No offence, Bucky.”

“None taken.”

“I don’t think there were any samples of your blood left,” Natasha added. “I heard a rumour that Stark Sr. had a couple of vials once, but they were gone by the late forties. Someone got them from the only other source they had. Either they were HYDRA or they knew someone in HYDRA.”

Steve sucked on his bottom lip for a moment, then stood up abruptly, chest puffed up with purpose. “I need to talk to T’Challa.”

By the end of the day, Steve had a video call set up with Bruce Banner, located in an undisclosed location. Half the team – Sam, Clint, and Steve – looked worriedly towards Natasha, who had had an unreadable expression on her face since T’Challa brought them to a conference room in one of the other buildings in the compound.

“They dated,” Wanda whispered to Bucky. “Then he left without a word.”

“Where is he?” Natasha asked T’Challa. Her voice was steady, but it was no less a demand for it.

T’Challa tipped his head. “He agreed to speak with you all on the assurance that I wouldn’t reveal his location. I’m not inclined to break my promise.” He smiled, but it was clear he would brook no argument about this. Natasha nodded tersely, and looked towards the screen.

“I’ll leave you to it,” T’Challa said, and headed towards the door. “Push the button.”

Steve hit the button on a panel in the centre of the table. There was a long dialling sound that ran for a minute before a grainy picture flickered on the screen. A middle-aged man with dark hair blinked at them all around the conference room table – assuming he could see them the same as they could see him.

“Bruce, can you hear me?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, I can hear you,” Bruce said. His voice sounded distant and echoey. “It’s, uh, been a while.”

“A lot’s happened,” Steve agreed. He gestured towards where Bucky was sitting, Scott to one side of him, Wanda on the other. Wanda looked at her lap. “This is Scott Lang and Bucky Barnes.”

“Of course,” Bruce said, “it’s very nice to meet you.”

“He means you,” Scott said to Bucky, loud enough to be heard by everyone. Bucky smiled a little.

Bruce’s eyes turned towards Natasha, then quickly away again, while her expression remained unchanged.

“Okay,” Steve said firmly. “The reason we’re calling you is that we need to talk to you about the Bio-Tech Force Enhancement Project.”

“Uh huh,” Bruce said. It was hard to read tone through the slight interference of their connection, but Bucky thought he didn’t sound too pleased at the prospect. “Why do you need to know?”

“Well, you probably know that we’re currently fugitives, living in Wakanda.”

“I had heard,” Bruce said.

Steve lay his hands out on the table. “We’ve been looking for ways to encourage the president to
drop charges against us and we found something.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Blackmail?”

“Yes,” Steve replied, and Bruce’s eyebrows rose even further. “Scott?”

Scott jumped up from his seat and went closer to the screen. “Hi, Dr Banner, it’s an honour to meet you. Do you recognise this?” He held up a printout of one of the striped lines without preamble.

“It’s somebody’s DNA.”

Scott held up a second printout. “And this one?”

“It’s the chemical structure of… if I had to guess, I’d say it must be the serum we created in 2005.”

“Bingo,” Scott said and held them up side by side. “See any similarities?”

Bruce leant closer to the screen. “Yes,” he said at length.

Scott shook the paper in his right hand. “This one is Bucky’s DNA.”

Bruce looked at Bucky in surprise.

“Sorry, doc,” he said, “it’s probably why you got so fucked up. No offence.”

Bruce laughed a little, though he looked pensive too. “It’s quite the club to be a member of.”

“Any idea how your project got a sample of Bucky’s blood?” Steve said. His voice sounded hard, and Scott sat down in the nearest chair to him and rolled away.

“No,” Bruce said. “There were a lot of people working on the biology side of things.”

Steve nodded curtly. “Yes, including Dr Elizabeth Ross, a doctor of cellular biology and Thaddeus Ross’s daughter.” His accusation was clear.

“Betty didn’t have anything to do with that,” Bruce said sharply. “She hates her father more than anyone, she wouldn’t have been involved with HYDRA.”

“I didn’t say anything about HYDRA,” Steve said coolly. Bucky was under the impression that Steve had been friends – or at least friendly – with Banner, but now he was just baiting him.

“I have never had anything to do with HYDRA,” Bruce said, “I think you already know that.”

Silence stretched long in the room before Steve tipped his head in ascent. “Okay. We’ve been looking for Emil Blonsky, but there’s no sign of him.”

“SHIELD had custody of him after Harlem, but when it fell unknown parties took possession,” Natasha added. Bucky grimaced; no matter how much of a freak he was, he wasn’t something that could be ‘possessed’ by another person.

“I can’t tell you much about him, but we weren’t the first scientists on the project. Ross had had a lot of people, most of who quit. He got Betty involved and then I got involved too. Maybe they knew something we didn’t.”

“You think Ross was HYDRA?” Steve asked.
Bruce shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t… think so, he wasn’t all bad, much as I hate to admit it, but he absolutely ruthless. He wanted super soldiers, and he’d do anything to get them.”

“All right.” Steve nodded slowly and looked around the table. “I think that’s probably all we need to know. I appreciate you talking to us.”

“It’s fine,” Bruce said, his gaze turning to Natasha. Everyone else glanced at her too. She pursed her lips.

“Can we have the room?”

“Sure,” Steve said and they all hurriedly got up and left. Bucky expected there to be shouting as soon as they stepped out, but he only heard faint soft voices when they stood outside. Scott hung back to listen, but Clint shooed him away, though not without lingering for a second at the closed door.

Steve spent several days preparing what he was going to say to the president. Bucky had rarely seen Steve truly anxious when they were young, excepting anxiety over girls not liking him, but that was soon forgotten; Steve was simply too much like a steamroller to lend time to worrying. Now he was worried, poring over notes, writing and rewriting how he wanted to present the information, fretting if it was enough.

“This could make things a whole lot worse,” Steve muttered as they sat on the couch together. Bucky had made dinner, but Steve had hardly touched it.

“High risk, high reward,” Bucky said, repeating what Natasha had already told Steve. Of course she would be supportive of the plan, she opted to release a top secret organisation’s files to the internet. “But what if Ross really is HYDRA? There’s more at stake here than just our freedom.”

Steve ran a hand over his face. “One thing at a time.”

Bucky didn’t push and Steve didn’t have much else to say as he went back to his studying. He’d been the same in the war, Bucky remembered; it was a process.

T’Challa had his people arrange the video conference with the president. Steve would be alone in the room, while the team watched a live feed from another. The meeting was arranged for five pm Wakandan time, ten am DC. The six of them set up in the other room and watched Steve on the screen, pacing the floor.

“I’ve never seen Steve look nervous before,” Scott said. “It’s making me nervous.”

“He’ll be fine,” Natasha said, and glanced at Bucky. He shrugged.

The call started promptly at five. Steve planted himself in front of the screen, feet apart and arms held out from his sides, as President Ellis appeared.

“Captain Rogers,” he said.

“Mr President,” Steve said. “Thank you for speaking with me again.”

Ellis pursed his lips. “King T’Challa was very insistent.”

“The king has been very supportive of myself and the team,” Steve agreed.

“Yes, supportive to the point of possibly causing irreparable damage to diplomatic relations between
Wakanda and the United States.” Ellis looked off screen for a moment, then back. “Captain, what is it that’s so urgent?”

“Some alarming information has recently been brought to my attention, sir,” Steve said. “I’m sure you recall the Bio-Tech Force Enhancement Project?”

“I could hardly forget it after your performance in the Senate, Captain.”

Steve’s back was turned to the live feed, but Bucky knew that if he wasn’t outwardly smiling, he sure was on the inside. “Yes, sir,” he said, and turned around to tap on a computer on the conference room table. “I’m sending you our findings now.”

Ellis looked down and read something on the table in front of him. “Don’t be coy, what am I looking at here?” he asked without raising his head.

Steve cleared his throat and held his shoulders straighter. “Evidence that Sergeant Barnes’s blood was used in the creation of the Bio-Tech serum.”

Ellis raised his eyes to Steve. “And where did you obtain this information?”

“I can’t reveal my source, sir. Suffice it to say, I’ve had it verified by the scientists here, as I’m sure you’ll do as well.”

There was a long pause before Ellis spoke again. “And what does this mean?”

“I think we could both speculate over how, in 2005, an Army backed scientific program could have obtained a sample of Sergeant Barnes’s blood.”

There was another long pause. “Are you threatening me, Captain?”

“It’s not a threat,” Steve said. Scott sucked in a breath beside Bucky. “It would be… a pretty big scandal if the media found out a second Secretary of State was associated with HYDRA. Sir.”

Steve had always had a way of making ‘sir’ sound like an insult. “Damn,” Sam muttered. “He’s not fucking around.”

Steve rarely did, Bucky thought.

Ellis took a deep breath. “What is it that you want?”

“You know what I want,” Steve said. “All charges dropped against my team, with prejudice. I provided more than enough evidence that Sergeant Barnes wasn’t responsible for his actions, that he was a prisoner of war, and the rest of the team were only following my orders.”

Ellis regarded him for a long moment. “I’ll take this under advisement. Is there anything else?”

“No, that’s all,” Steve said. “Thank you for your time, Mr President.”

Ellis snorted derisively and cut the video without further comment. After a beat, Steve’s shoulders slumped forward and he ran his hands over his hair. “Fuck,” he muttered, caught on the audio.

“We’re either going home or we’re here forever,” Sam said. “Flip of the coin.”

The three days they had to wait looked like torture for Steve, and the others, to a lesser extent. It
didn’t have much affect on Bucky, but he tried to be supportive. Steve filled his time with runs, reading, and continuing to pore over his paperwork, in case he’d missed something. It was turning into an obsession.

They were eating dinner when Steve’s phone vibrated straight off the table and onto the floor. “TV,” he said, grabbing the phone, but Bucky was already halfway across the room, hitting the remote.

“It’s on all the US channels,” he said, settling on one at random.

“Breaking news: the Attorney General of New York has just announced that all charges have been dropped against Captain Steven Rogers, James Barnes, Samuel Wilson, Scott Lang, Clint Barton, and Wanda Maximoff, the so-called Wakanda Six.”

Steve collapsed against the couch. “Oh my God,” he groaned. “We did it.”

“You did it,” Bucky said.

“Scott did it,” Steve said, and Bucky tipped his head in agreement. Steve grabbed his hand and squeezed. “I’m so sorry for everything.”

Bucky pulled their clasped hands to his lap. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

Steve shook his head jerkily. “You know that’s not true. I’ve done a lot of things wrong recently.”

“That just makes you less infuriatingly perfect,” Bucky said and Steve laughed, the worried lines of his face smoothing out. “What do we do now?”

“Wait for official confirmation. I have a lawyer in New York, she’s going to look over the paperwork, make sure it’s all sewn up. Then we get on a flight and go home.”

“Easy as that?”

Steve looked at him, his gaze gentle. “Nothing about this has been easy.”

Bucky didn’t say anything; instead, they just sat peacefully, holding each other’s hand, until the team started hammering on the door, breaking the spell.

Chapter End Notes

- Steve has no fucking chill any more.
- You can go directly to hell, Secretary Ross.
- Just one more chapter to go!
Bucky, the One Hundred Years' War is finally at a close! Thank you to everyone who left lovely comments over these many months. I know I haven’t responded to all of them, but I will, I promise! When I started this fic, I was twenty five and living in Vancouver and now I’m twenty seven and living in London, so suffice to say there’s been a lot of change over the course of writing this fic. I loved every minute of writing it and I’m going to miss it a lot, though I do have some ideas for (hopefully much shorter) related fics.

One small spoiler for Spider-Man: Homecoming.

Packing began as soon as the celebrating ended, though the celebration didn’t end until well into the night. T’Challa had arranged for a plane to fly them back to the Avengers Facility upstate – the beauty of a private plane was that it could leave any time you wanted, but the team was ready to go, so Steve gave them two days to wrap things up. Bucky wasn’t anxious to leave and he wasn’t anxious to stay, but he felt a little sadness at the impending departure. He’d grown comfortable in the apartment, appreciated the feeling of safety that came from living in the complex, and enjoyed the small friendships he had with the team and Itobo and A’kane. Wakanda was unsullied by the crimes of his past, but the US hadn’t forgotten them.

He was looking forward to getting some real cigarettes, though.

Steve was absent a lot in those two days, conferring with T’Challa, his lawyer in New York, and filling in paperwork. Bucky packed up his small collection of things into a new, sturdier rucksack and cleaned the apartment up. He was sure that T’Challa had people who would sterilise the whole place once they were gone, but it still seemed like the polite thing to do.

The team were in and out of each other’s apartments, but Wanda held back, hardly participating at all. Once he was done cleaning the afternoon before they were set to leave, Bucky sought her out, going down to her apartment and knocking on the door.

“Wanna go for a walk?” he asked, holding up his packet of cigarettes.

It took some time before she spoke, as they looked out over their favourite beach. “I’m not coming back to the US with you.”

He smiled. “I figured as much.”

She looked at him and raised her eyebrows. “You’re the psychic now?”

“Maybe you rubbed off on me.”

She laughed softly and drew on her cigarette for a moment. “It won’t be forever, but there’s nothing for me to go back to right now.”
“You don’t have any other family in Sokovia?”

“I do,” she said. “Our grandmother raised us after our parents died, but she passed when we were nineteen. I have aunts and uncles, cousins, but they’re scared of me now. I went back to Novi Grad to bury Pietro and I could feel their fear, their disgust. How could a Jew submit to being experimented on? How could I have let that happen to our city?” She dropped her chin down and shook her head. “Perhaps one day I’ll be able to be near them again, but not yet.”

“Hey,” Bucky said, and pushed the cigarette to the corner of his mouth to put his arm around her. “We’ve all been experimented on.”

She swatted him lightly on the shoulder and shook her head.

“You know we’re all here for you if you need us,” he continued.

“I know. I think I’m going to explore the country, climb some of these mountains I’ve been staring at for months. I’ll come back eventually.”

“All right,” he said, and gave her squeeze.

She patted his hand on her shoulder. “You’re a good brother to have, Bucky.”

Steve wasn’t happy to hear about Wanda’s absence, but there was hardly any time to argue before it was time to go, and before Bucky knew it, the six of them were on a plane bound for New York. It was a fifteen hour flight, but the plane was like a lounge and set of bedrooms in the sky, so the trip didn’t seem that gruelling.

“This is what I’m talking about,” Sam said, and threw himself down on a couch. “This is the only way to fly.”

“Better keep on T’Challa’s good side, then,” Steve said, checking the fridge. Bucky peered over his shoulder at the array of food and raised his eyebrows. “No more cat jokes.”

“Hey, we got internet up here,” Scott called, then rushed on quickly. “Oh… Ross has resigned as Secretary of State.”

Clint switched the television on as Bucky and Steve came over. The news was indeed reporting the resignation of Secretary Ross, for ‘family’ reasons.

“Doesn’t his only daughter hate him?” Bucky asked.

“Passionately, according to Bruce,” Steve replied. “Go figure.”

Natasha sat at the far end of the plane, looking at her phone, and Bucky wondered if it stung, hearing them talk about Banner. He hadn’t seen much of her since the video conference and Steve had elected to stay out of it all, citing love life advice as not part of his wheelhouse. That was putting it mildly.

Bucky took a seat and pulled out a book. He had no desire to watch earnest newsreaders pondering on the reasons why Ross might have resigned. Steve sat down with his laptop and started reading something, and the cabin fell quiet.

There wasn’t much to do besides read or watch movies, which they did intermittently over the next
few hours. Steve talked to Natasha about the Inhuman woman that the ATCU was hunting and
Inhumans in general. Bucky could tell he felt guilty about not getting involved. Natasha said she
knew some good people working on the situation, but didn’t elaborate.

Scott went to his bunk just under ten hours in, followed shortly by Clint. It was only nine pm,
Wakanda time, but jetlag was ‘a bitch’ apparently, and they had more travelling to do on the other
end to get to their respective homes.

“You’re not going for catnap too?” Bucky asked Sam.

“Cat joke,” Steve murmured.

“Nah, I’m stopping off in Harlem, plenty of time for sleeping then.”

“You live in Harlem?” Bucky said.

“Used to, parents are still there. Dad moved us to New York to minister to all you heathens when I
was teenager. First stop is my old barbershop.” He ran a hand over his hair. “Wakandans just can’t
get it right.”

Bucky looked at him cockeyed but didn’t say anything. Steve closed the lid of his laptop over.
“Buck used to cut quite the rug in Harlem,” he said.

Sam raised a sceptical eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

Bucky shrugged. “I used to go to the Savoy Ballroom and do the Lindy hop with my girlfriend.”

“Show us,” Natasha called from her seat and he waved her off.

“Girlfriend, huh?” Sam said.

“The closet was very deep back then,” Bucky replied and Sam laughed. Steve smiled too, but looked
a little uncomfortable. “She ended up becoming a famous dancer, so I think she did an okay job
teaching me.”

“Anyone I’ve heard of?”

“Hazel Landale.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “Hazel Landale? No way, man. My grandpa was crazy for her, she was
right up there with Josephine Baker; no way she dated your dumb ass.”

“Well, to be fair,” Steve said, “she did dump him after a few weeks.”

Bucky pulled a face. “She took off to California without telling me, I found out from the bartender.”

Sam shook his head. “Nah, I don’t believe it.”

Bucky leant down to his bag and fished out his biography, then came over and sat down beside
Steve. The book had long seen better days, the pages were crumpled, stained, and water-damaged in
places. He flipped to the index and found where Hazel was mentioned, then opened to the page and
handed it over to Sam. Sam took the book between his thumb and forefinger on each side and read
with a vaguely offended look on his face before handing it back.

“I guess we all do stupid things when we’re young,” he said.
“Like your denim on high-waisted denim look?” Natasha said, and smiled at Sam’s wide-eyed stare. “Your mom should review her Facebook privacy settings.”

“Like Bucky’s Oliver Hardy moustache,” Steve added.

Bucky dug his fingers into Steve’s leg and pinched as hard as he could, but Steve only laughed. “Like Steve’s… face,” he said in frustration. He couldn’t remember anything embarrassing about Steve’s childhood, only sad things like his health problems or admirable things, like standing up to that kid with the face. He slumped down on the couch in defeat.

“Don’t worry, Buck,” Steve said, grinning widely, “you’re good at things other than talking.”

They started their descent a few hours later. Clint and Scott rejoined them and they all packed up their things. Bucky only had his pack and Steve had the most out of all them with a medium-sized suitcase, which he seemed embarrassed about. Natasha travelled in just what she was wearing.

They buckled in to land just after seven pm, local time, rolling a few hundred feet before finally stopping. It was a much smoother landing than any of the times Bucky’s had been at the controls.

Sam unbuckled his seatbelt first and looked out the window. He lingered there for a moment before saying, “Huh.”

“What is it?” Steve asked.

“Well.” Sam turned back and cleared his throat. “We have a welcoming committee.”

Steve grimaced. “Police?”

“Worse, depending on your perspective.”

Steve went to window and Bucky followed behind, peering out at the windy, wet New York evening. On the tarmac were several cars of varying sizes and a man and woman standing side by side under an umbrella. Tony Stark, wearing sunglasses at dusk. He looked up at the plane and saluted.

“Shit,” Steve muttered.

The rest of them had come over now, gathering around the windows. “What’re we going to do?” Scott asked.

“Turn around and fly back?” Bucky said.

“Not enough fuel,” Steve said. “They’re pulling up the stairs. We’re going.”

Sam pulled a face behind Steve’s back; Bucky replied in kind, but there really weren’t any other options. He guessed he always knew he’d need to face the music. He shouldered his pack and steeled himself as Steve set about opening the plane door.

Steve went out first, followed by Sam. Natasha gestured for Bucky to go next, a bored expression on her face at his hesitation. Light drops of rain hit his face and lightly dusted his jacket. On the ground, Stark stood with his feet spread, one hand in the woman’s, the other holding the umbrella. Bucky took up the space near Steve as they spread out on the tarmac. Steve eyed Stark and the woman and smiled slightly.

“Ms. Potts,” he said.
“Captain,” she said shortly.

“Rogers,” Stark said, and jerked his chin towards Bucky. “Barnes, skulking slightly behind you.”

Bucky stepped up beside Steve, perfectly in line, and Stark’s eyes drifted to the empty sleeve of his jacket. “Wakandan scientists couldn’t fix you up?”

“I didn’t want it,” Bucky said, and his voice came out quiet, betraying his anxiety. Stark narrowed his eyes.

“I hear you’re cured nowadays.” At Bucky’s nod, his face hardened. “So if I started saying random Russian words, you’d be cool?”

“Tony,” Steve said sharply. Potts, Bucky noticed, was squeezing Stark’s hand tightly. “That’s enough.”

“It’s not nearly enough, Rogers,” Stark said, and Steve dropped his gaze. “No Wanda?”

“She decided to stay in Wakanda a while longer,” Sam said.

Stark clicked his tongue. “Vision wanted to apologise.”

“She’ll come back when she’s ready,” Steve said, his voice tense.

Stark quirked an eyebrow. “So, I hear you blackmailed the president.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I rubbed off on you.”

Steve smiled slightly in response to that, but otherwise didn’t react. Stark, Bucky realised, must have hardly known Steve at all to think that he wouldn’t have always been all over blackmailing someone for the greater good. The old Steve, anyhow; Steve had stumbled into this world and become someone else, reduced and removed from everyone around him. No wonder they didn’t know him.

“Hey,” Scott said, stepping forward and breaking the uncomfortable moment of silence. “I know we didn’t meet under the best circumstances last time, but it’s great to meet you now.” He stuck out his hand and Stark looked at it for a moment before letting go Potts’s hand to shake it.

“It was very cool how you turned yourself into a giant,” Stark said.

“Yeah,” Scott said and grinned. “It felt pretty rad.”

“So, Tony, what are you doing here?” Steve asked, always so polite.

“I was in the area. Training new recruits, you remember how it goes.” Stark turned and gestured to the cars. “Brought you some cars if you have somewhere to go. Arranged another plane to dropped off Clint and Giant-boy back at their homes. You know, Avengers stuff.”

“Well, thank you,” Steve said. His phone buzzed in his pocket, as did Potts’s, Stark’s, and Scott’s.

Bucky looked over his shoulder as he pulled it out and swiped it on. He tapped around for a moment before bringing up a page that read, ‘SECRETARY ROSS, HYDRA? SHOCKING EVIDENCE LEAKED ON WHIH’. Bucky didn’t miss the glance that passed between Steve and Scott.

“Huh, you really destroyed him,” Stark said, looking up from his own phone. “Remind me not to get
on the wrong side of you.” He flashed a quick, humourless smile. “Oh, wait…”

“I did what I had to do,” Steve said and Tony’s mouth pressed to a flat line. He looked away, the muscle in his jaw jumping.

“You can take the car if you want to go into the city,” he said.

“Thanks. I’ll drop it back at the tower when we’re there.”

Stark shrugged, still leaving his gaze distant. “Tower’s not mine any more. Just keep it.”

Steve hummed a little and pushed his hands into his pockets. Another uncomfortable silence stretched out, until Natasha cheerfully said that Laura was expecting Clint home.

Steve nodded and looked back to Tony. “Congratulations, by the way,” he said, and gestured to Potts’s hand. An engagement ring glinted on her finger, Bucky saw now, and the team murmured awkward congratulations as well.

Tony smiled brittlely and Potts answered for him. “Thank you, Captain,” she said, her tone just a touch cold. “Your car is ready.”

They split after that, Clint and Scott heading to their next plane, while Steve, Bucky, Sam, and Natasha went to one of the cars. They could drop her in Midtown, she said.

Steve claimed the driver’s seat, despite groans from Bucky and Sam both, and Bucky called shotgun. Unfortunately, the car was a lot bigger than the Bug had been and he wouldn’t be able to give Sam a little payback.

Stark and Potts retreated to their own car and started getting in when Sam popped his head back out of the back seat.

“Hey, how’s Rhodey?” he called.

Stark paused for a moment getting into the car and from the passenger seat, Bucky could see Potts gesture for Stark to go over as she sat down. He straightened and approached them.

“He’s doing all right. Physical therapy’s a bitch, but he’s a stalwart kind of guy, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Sam said. He looked relieved, yet it didn’t seem to alleviate his anxiety. “Give him my best.”

“I will.” He seemed softer now, when talking about this guy who Bucky guessed must be a very close friend. He remembered how upset Steve and Sam had been about what happened. It seemed to Bucky that it wasn’t their fault, and certainly not Sam’s, but he wasn’t about to have a heart to heart with the guy.

Steve got out of the driver's seat and came around the car to Stark. He held his hand out decisively; Stark let it hang there for a moment before taking it.

“I’m glad that you and Pepper patched things up,” he said quietly, but loud enough for Bucky to hear.

“Thanks,” Stark said, and lifted his chin. “She got me and Rhodey through a hard time.”

Steve dipped his head in acknowledgement and let go of Stark’s hand. “I’ll see you around, Tony.”
“Maybe,” Stark said, and turned away.

It was a three hour drive from the Catskills to Manhattan and Bucky spent a while watching the scenery go by. He vaguely recalled coming here when he was little – he must have been very little, because he didn’t think they went on many vacations after he met Steve. He took one of his notebooks and a pen out of his pack and opened it on his knees. Steve glanced sidelong at him, but didn’t comment, and Bucky wrote a few impressions down. Ma’s wide brimmed straw hat, the rumble of the car’s engine, the vast mountains in the distance and the clean country air. He remembered a resort and a glittering blue pool that was too deep for him to swim in.

He flipped back to the early pages of the book and scanned his writing. He’d been disjointed then, his handwriting jagged and sharp, his words short and confused. Caramels. Woman with chicken feathers. Red hair. Blue plate. It’s you I’m thinking of. He smiled, remembering the days at the movies clearly now; the memory of the lady in *Freaks* being tarred and feathered had definitely given him some trouble.

“So, where are you guys staying?” Sam asked from the back. Bucky closed the notebook and turned his head towards him.

“I have business in Manhattan,” Natasha said. Sam arched an eyebrow at her and she smiled back.

“Steve?” Sam prompted. “Mom’ll put you up if you need it.” He gestured to Bucky. “You’ll have to sleep out back.”

“No one’s sleeping out back,” Steve said. “I have a place.”

“You ‘have’ a place?” Sam repeated. Bucky turned back to Steve with similar interest.

“Yeah,” he said and checked the mirrors. “A house in Brooklyn.”

“A whole house in Brooklyn?” Sam said. “Jesus.”

Steve shrugged and reached up to fiddle with the rearview mirror. To a guy who had never owned much more than a set of paintbrushes, it must have felt pretty strange to own a house. “I had a lot of back pay and apparently you don’t get anything from letting it sit in the bank. Pepper told me I needed to invest it. I also have a ‘diversified stock portfolio’ and a lot of shares in Stark Industries. I thought they’d want to buy them back, but they haven’t so far.” His cheeks had turned faintly pink now.

“Where in Brooklyn?” Bucky asked.

“East New York. Eldert Lane.”

Bucky snorted. “Eldert Lane ain’t Brooklyn.”

Steve looked over at him. “It’s on the west side of the street, it’s within the boundary.”

“I mean… Tell yourself what you like, Steve, but it’s still not Brooklyn.”

“Spoken like a true New York hipster,” Sam said with a laugh.

“I’m still right,” he said, and Steve shook his head slightly without taking his eyes off the road. “How long have you had it?”

“I bought in 2012, but I never got to live in it. I rented it out cheap, but the tenants left last year and I
didn’t get round to re-renting it. Kinda convenient now.”

“Steve...” Natasha said slowly. “You know a house can’t just sit empty, right?”

“I pay all the bills,” Steve said.

“Yeah, but the plumbing and everything is going to get messed up if it’s left,” Sam added. “You know?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Steve said quickly. “I have a... guy who comes in.”

“Steve,” Natasha said.

“It’s fine,” he said firmly.

It wasn’t fine. The house smelt musty and when Bucky tried the water in the kitchen it sputtered and spat out sediment, running brown for a few minutes. In the living room, a window had been left open a crack and there were little flies in the air and ants along the skirting boards; not the superhero kind. The house had a yard out back that looked as overgrown and unkempt as the front, though after dropping off Sam and Natasha, it was close to midnight and Bucky suspected the yards couldn't be fully experienced in the dark.

There was a mop, bucket, and some spray bottles left behind which Steve took up with a sigh.

“You hungry?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah... Don’t open the fridge.”

Bucky laughed. “I’ll go out and get something.”

Steve pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped at it for a minute. “There’s a pizza place a few blocks east of here on Rockaway. Closes at midnight, better hurry.”

Bucky leant over and looked at the map on the phone. “So, Queens, then?”

Steve looked at him irritably. “Yes. Get two larges, I’ll give you the money.”

Bucky took the forty Steve gave him, still amazed at how much food cost these days, and headed out as Steve went upstairs to check out the bathroom.

“Oh, come on,” he heard Steve say in utter exasperation as he went out the door.

There were no beds in the house, though it had three fair sized bedrooms upstairs, and all that was left behind by the tenants was a rickety kitchen table and a suspect looking couch. They ate their pizzas on it, then took all four couch cushions off and made makeshift beds like old times.

“You got any good scary stories?” Bucky asked. Steve’s scary stories had been the best when they were kids; slow and almost boring at the start, alarmingly brutal at the end. He got them out of Weird Tales, a magazine Ma wouldn’t let Bucky read, but Steve always put his own blood-thirsty spin on the ending.

“The government,” Steve said.

Bucky snorted and closed his eyes. “Night, Steve.”
They woke early the next day and found a diner for breakfast, a real old-fashioned looking place; Bucky half expected Steve’s steak and eggs to come out on a blue plate. Bucky got waffles and an egg cream, since that was the closest thing he could find to a malt on the menu. He absently blew bubbles as he read about the dessert specials and Steve watched with narrowed eyes before calling the waitress back to get one of his own.

Bucky still blew better bubbles.

They went to the store after, stocked up on food and cleaning supplies. So far, Bucky didn’t think anyone had recognised them, though he got a few looks. That was more to do with his empty jacket sleeve, he figured. When they returned to the house, Steve got out his laptop and started ordering furniture to be delivered the next day. He’d paid all the bills for the property since buying it, including the internet, so they didn’t have anything to set up.

“I just wanted to help someone out a little,” he said when Bucky asked why. “It’s never been easy being poor in New York.”

They spent the rest of the day cleaning and the next day putting together furniture, though Steve did the majority of it while Bucky tried to explain the confounding instructions to him.

“It’s very convenient that you can’t help me with this,” Steve said, twisted up like a pretzel as he forced a screw into a bedpost.

“It’s convenient that I only have one arm?” Bucky asked.

Steve scowled up at him and brushed his hair back. “For you it is.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows as Steve pressed harder and the post split from top to bottom. He growled under his breath and held his hand out for the glue. All the furniture he’d put together so far had a liberal coating of wood glue.

“God, why didn’t I go to a nice antique store?” he muttered.

“‘cause you said it’d be quicker and cheaper to get everything online.”

Steve hummed irritably and Bucky bit back a laugh. They were in the back bedroom, overlooking the yard which, as expected, looked terrible in the daylight. “What’re you gonna do with the backyard?”

“I was thinking I’d like to plant a vegetable garden. Mam used to say we’d have one of our own when we had a place with a patch of dirt. I kinda want to get some chickens, too, like Mr Adamczyk had.”

“Chickens?” Bucky repeated. “Who are you?”

Steve laughed and shook his head. “Apparently it’s the in-thing these days, anyhow, being self-sufficient. I like to stay relevant.”

“Uh huh,” Bucky muttered and helped Steve set the finished bed frame down.

“Better leave that till the glue dries,” Steve said, and started to peel said glue from his skin. “Let’s get something to eat.”
They spent the next few days like this, building furniture and cleaning, until they had two beds, some bookcases, a couple of chest of drawers, and a new, less spongy, couch. Bucky mailed a short note to Eugene’s church, unsigned with no return address, to tell him that he’d be in touch as soon as he could. Despite the charges being dropped, he still felt uneasy about his status and the risks he posed to his family. Steve seemed to feel the same, and it drove him to avoid going out much further than the local grocery store or a couple of restaurants on Rockaway that reminded him of the past.

Over breakfast, Bucky floated the idea that they go out and reacquaint themselves with Brooklyn.

“I never did go see the old house; it got converted into apartments in eighties.”

Steve made a face into his cereal. “The yard,” he started.

“Will still be there when we get back. Anyway, it’s winter, you can’t plant anything out yet.”

Steve glanced around the kitchen. The house certainly needed a lot of work done to it – every wall needed painting, for a start, but none of that meant they had to be shut-ins for the duration. Bucky had spent too much time apart from society, he wasn’t about to go back to that.

Steve relented. “All right, yeah, yeah, it’d be nice to get out.”

They got on the A train to Inwood around nine. There were no free seats, so Bucky hung onto the top bar and Steve leant against the vertical one.

“I miss streetcars,” Bucky said.

“Mm,” Steve murmured, “they’re talking about bringing them back.”

“Yeah?” Bucky watched as the train rolled into Utica and stopped. He shuffled closer to the seats to let people pass. “Well, it gets my vote.”

A guy bumped past Steve and whipped into an empty seat before anyone else got there, opening a newspaper across his knees. Steve raised his eyebrows irritably and sighed.

The train rattled on, sending Bucky swaying slightly. After a few minutes, they pulled into Nostrand and Steve pushed off from his bar. “Let’s get off here.”

“We can get closer than this,” Bucky said.

Steve inclined his head to the guy with the newspaper, who had it open to a double spread with the headline, *Captain America and the Winter Soldier Return to New York, Sources Say*, with a grainy image of Steve and Bucky from the airport fight. The man lifted his eyes slightly towards them and Bucky turned his face away.

“Yeah, this is a good stop,” he said, and followed Steve out.

They left the station and headed west down Atlantic, walking for a few minutes with their heads down before passing a convenience store.

“Hey, you mind if I get some smokes?”

“You mean, do I mind paying for your smokes?” Steve said.

“Yeah.”

Steve sighed and gestured to the door. “Sure.”
There were a few people in the store, but nine thirty on a Tuesday morning in Brooklyn wasn’t a busy time for buying cigarettes and chips, so they moved around the aisles unfettered. Steve picked up a few candy bars and a can of coke and brought them up to the front.

“Pack of Lucky Strikes, please,” Bucky said. The guy turned to the cabinet and Bucky looked down at Steve’s selection.

“Hershey’s don’t taste the way they used to,” he said, gesturing to the bar.

“Nothing does,” Steve replied. “Not always a bad thing.”

The guy turned back and started ringing them up. On the magazine display on the front of the cash desk, there was an array of headlines - Winter Soldier Back For More, Terrorist Pardoned!, Lock Him Up! The last was in reference to Steve and used an unflattering picture of Steve hiding his face from photographers, it looked like.

The cashier looked up at them and Bucky could see it on his face, that he recognised them. He held the guy’s gaze while Steve kept his head tipped down.

“That’s sixteen dollars ten cents,” the guy said carefully. Steve pulled a twenty out of his wallet quickly and handed it over without raising his eyes. Bucky kept on watching the guy until they had change, candy, and cigarettes in hand.

“You’re not keeping a very low profile, Buck,” Steve said when they stepped out onto the street.

“I’m not trying to,” he said and took the cigarettes, flipping the lid open and taking a cigarette out with his teeth. Steve watched as he stowed them in his pocket and got his lighter out. He lit and took a deep drag.

“How is it?” Steve asked.

Bucky blew out smoke rings and smiled. “Disgusting, thanks.”

They started walking again. It was about half an hour to his old house on 2nd Street at the pace they walked, and they passed around the perimeter of Grand Army Plaza. It had started snowing and Bucky gathered a little in his hand. He’d been so anxious to get away from the cold after escaping HYDRA, but now it brought back good memories of winters in Brooklyn.

They arrived on his old street past ten. For the most part, it looked the same, a few houses had been knocked down and replaced with new ones, but he saw houses from his memory; the Lipshitz’s house on the corner, Pam’s house where he had once stood on the doorstep and half-heartedly asked her out on a date.

Then they were at the house. The frontyard was different, different trees, different plants, gone were Ma’s beloved pink petunias; in fact the small flowerbed area had been covered over with concrete. The front of the house looked the same, the red brick and fussy detailing of the columns on either side of the front door. Through the window above the door, he could see a chandelier, though it obviously wasn’t theirs, which had grown dull and dated over the course of his childhood. He looked up at the second floor window that had been his bedroom’s. There were a couple of flower boxes hung from the windowsill there – definitely not something he had had.

“You want to ring one of the bells?” Steve asked, gesturing at the row of doorbells to the side of the front door.

Bucky shook his head. “I don’t think anyone is anxious to let a known terrorist look around their
apartment for old time’s sake.” He brushed snow from his hair and looked at Steve. “You been back to your old places?”

“No. The place with the walkways was demolished in the seventies.”

“What about the boarding house?”

“That got converted into apartments like this place,” Steve said.

“Let’s go see it.”

“I don’t know,” Steve murmured, turning away from the house and rubbing at his face.

“Just to stand outside like this. It’s only a forty minute walk from here.” He jostled Steve’s arm. “Come on.”

Steve glanced at him pensively, then sighed. “Okay.”

The snow got heavier as they walked, following a path that Bucky remembered clearly, though he had normally been in a car when he travelled it: down 9th, under the Gowanus Parkway good old Robert Moses had built in 1941, around Coffey Park, past the corner where Steve’s news stand had stood – though the area was unrecognisable now – and finally to Dikeman. It didn’t seem as if much had changed here, the same houses remained, not in a much better state than Bucky remembered, litter still collected in corners of the sidewalk.

“There it is,” Bucky said, pointing to Steve’s old home from the intersection. Steve stood beside him, his hands dug into his pockets and nodded. “Come on.”

He wrapped his hand around Steve’s elbow and guided him over. Steve didn’t seem thrilled, but he didn’t put the brakes on, so Bucky figured he wasn’t that opposed. They came to a stop outside the low wrought iron fence that enclosed the front of the building and looked at it.

“Hey, look,” Bucky said, and pointed towards the door. “There’s a plaque.”

He opened the rickety gate and gestured for Steve to go ahead. Steve glanced around, but they were alone on the street so he reluctantly went through.

“This building was the residence of Captain Steven Grant Rogers from 1919 to 1934. As Captain America, he fought in World War II and died in 1945,” Steve read.

“Needs updating,” Bucky said.

“Yeah,” Steve said and they both looked up as the front door opened. A woman stepped out, wrapped up in a scarf and coat. She nodded politely, then stopped in her tracks and looked again. Her mouth opened.

“Your plaque’s wrong,” Steve said.

“I--” She peered around and looked at it. “The condo board keeps putting off changing it.”

“Ma’am, can we come in?” Bucky said, and her eyes widened as she looked at him.

“Sure,” she said slowly, eyeing them as though they were aliens just landed here on her doorstep. He guessed they were aliens, of a sort. She stepped back into the building, and let them pass by her, then closed the door behind them. Bucky’s immediate thought was that it no longer smelt like piss and the floors were nice hardwood, not spongy carpet.
“We aren’t keeping you, are we?” Steve said, shedding some of his stiffness.

“Oh, no,” she said, and shook her head as if she was shaking off cobwebs. “Only grocery shopping.” She removed a glove and held out her hand. “I’m Prasha.”

“Steve,” he said, and smiled self-deprecatingly as he returned the handshake.

Bucky waited until she turned to him to offer his hand, which she took, though she was clearly more anxious of him than Steve. No shit. Prasha was a small woman with curly, greying hair, dark skin, and small silver stud in her nose, forty years old or thereabouts.

“Bucky,” he said in introduction. “Do you mind if we look around?”

“No, no, of course not,” she said, withdrawing her hand. She crossed her arms over her chest, then uncrossed them again and cleared her throat. “Do you mind if I ask you some questions. I moved into this building partially because of the history and...”

She trailed off and Steve smiled. “Yeah, that’s no problem,” he said, and looked around. He nodded to the door on their left. “That was Dot’s door,” he said. “The landlady.”

“She eyeballed me every time I came in or out,” Bucky added. He looked around the lobby, which seemed so much smaller than he remembered. He pointed to the wall beneath the stairs. “The telephone was over there. She used to hover around it like a hawk.”

“She helped my mother deliver me,” Steve said to Prasha. “Your plaque says 1919, but I was born in this building in 1918. Dot had been a contract nurse in the Philippine-American War in 1899, she spent two years in the Philippines. I was born at twenty seven weeks, which these days isn’t so much of a problem, but back then it was practically a death sentence. Dot knew about a guy in Coney Island who looked after premature babies, so they took me there. I spent two months in one of his incubators.”

“The baby incubator exhibit at Coney Island?” Bucky asked. He remembered that place, though he’d always thought it was kind of ghoulish to go in. “You were a sideshow baby?”

Steve pulled a face. “Yeah.”

“You never told me that,” he said. How many times had they been to the Island? And it never came up?

Steve shrugged. “It was embarrassing. I didn’t want to be a carnival attraction.”

“Right,” Bucky said.

Prasha cleared her throat. “Which room was yours?”

“Upstairs,” Steve said, and looked to the stairs. “Can I?”

Her face lit up. “Of course!”

They climbed the stairs to the second floor landing. Bucky remembered this hallway having a door every ten feet, but now there were only a few doors. Steve approached the wall where their main door used to be and pressed his hand against it.

“They gutted most of the building in the eighties,” Prasha offered.

Steve nodded. “We had two rooms here. There were a couple of other rooms connected to ours but
Mam couldn’t afford to rent those so Dot locked the adjoined doors and let them to other people. A lot of people rented by the room here.” He turned and looked across the hall. “Eva lived over there.”

Bucky looked over and smiled. There was a door in the approximate place where hers had been. “She was a prostitute,” he told Prasha.

“She used to babysit me,” Steve said, and laughed a little at the look on Prasha’s face. “She moved in here when she was seventeen. Mam was only twenty but she felt protective over her. Reading between the lines, Eva left something pretty bad behind in Colorado to come to New York.”

“What happened to her?” Prasha asked. Bucky felt a little sad that he hadn’t thought to ask that already.

“It’s hard to tell, really,” Steve said. “I found a death record for her from 1977, but she never filled out the census and she never got famous like she wanted, so there’s almost no trace of her.”

“Shit,” Bucky murmured, then glanced at Prasha. “Sorry.”

She laughed and shook her head. “It’s fine. There are a lot of questions I could ask you, too.”

“I’m not really in the habit of answering questions,” he said. “But I’ll tell you that I spent a lot of time in this building, and it was happy.” He glanced over at Steve, who was smiling softly. “Eva used to play her music, Dot would let us play with her little dogs occasionally, some neighbours always had some cookies for us to eat. I loved coming here, despite the stink.”

Prasha asked more questions, most of which Steve strove to answer, though he demurred on a couple, and looked like he might be getting upset over some questions about Sarah. Bucky took a picture of the two of them together and then she insisted on a picture of all three of them, a ‘selfie’.

Steve groaned about the press, but she promised she wouldn’t go talking to any papers. Bucky thought she was sincere, but he didn’t care too much if she wasn’t; for Steve’s sake, though, he hoped for the former to be true. She said she didn’t believe the garbage the press was peddling about them and that she was glad that the charges had been dropped. She promised the plaque would get updated.

They left the building a couple of hours later, into even heavier snow. Steve popped his collar up against the flurry and they started walking.

“Hey, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the incubator thing,” he said.

Bucky shook his head. “Nah, it’s not like it was some big, important secret or anything.”

Steve nodded. “Kids in the neighbourhood knew, used to hassle me about it. I didn’t want you to think I was a freak too.” Oof, Bucky wished he hadn’t used the phrase, ‘sideshow baby’ now. This certainly put a new light on why Steve had liked *Freaks* so much.

“I wouldn’t have.”

“Yeah, I figured that pretty quick, but then it seemed like a strange thing to bring up.” He looked up at the sky, squinting against the falling snow. “Thanks for making me come out here. It felt really good to be back.”

“No problem.” He jostled Steve’s side and grinned. “Wanna go to the docks and look for treasure?”
They spent the next couple weeks decorating the place. Steve had very firm ideas about how the place should look – yellow in the kitchen, pale green for the hallway, dark stain on the bannisters – and Bucky just did as he was told. Steve did eventually get some much desired furniture from a local antiques store, a leather armchair and a Sears Silvertone console radio.

“Does it even still work?” Bucky asked when Steve came home with it.

Steve set it down in the hallway and fussed over it. “No, but I don’t really listen to the radio any more, anyway.” He cleared his throat and looked a little embarrassed. “I just really wanted it. The guy said it could be fixed up, if I wanted to invest money in that.”

Bucky thought about him and Steve and Becca sat around his family’s Radiola, listening to *The Palmolive Hour* and Jack Benny cutting it up, and smiled.

“Looks good,” he said.

By the end of January, the joint was coming together pretty well. Freshly decorated and only housing the occasional ant, there wasn’t much left to occupy Steve’s time with. Bucky had heard him have some tense and even overtly hostile phone calls over the last few weeks.

The rest of the team had settled back in to their lives and it felt, to Bucky, like time they do the same.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he said as he cleared away the breakfast dishes. Steve murmured something as he faded from the kitchen. Bucky stuck the dishes in the dishwasher – what an invention – and followed him out. “Steve, come on.”

“Yeah, yeah, let me just check my emails.”

It took twenty minutes to pry Steve out of the house and Bucky set their path towards Flatbush. They stopped a few times along the way, got an early lunch at a hole in the wall, and headed further in. The area reminded Steve of living with the Burnsides, and he talked about that for a while, wondering aloud at what had happened to Willy, remembering with a groan the conditions of the living room he slept in, woken up at the crack of dawn everyday by the whistle of Mrs Burnside’s kettle, the smell of Mr Burnside’s clothes after a day labouring. He was so distracted by the memories that he didn’t notice where they were until Bucky stopped walking and nodded to the building in front of them.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been in a church?” Bucky asked.

“Bucky,” Steve said warningly, and looked at the brick building. “I know where we are. This is Eugene’s church.”

Bucky shrugged. “He probably won’t be there, he’s ninety,” he said, even though he’d called yesterday to make certain his brother would be there.

Steve looked at him for a moment, his mouth a straight line, before his eyes drifted back to the church. “Fine,” he muttered.

He walked slightly behind Bucky as they pushed the doors open and passed through the lobby. He stopped as they entered the hall itself, his eyes lifting up to the crucifix. There were only a few worshippers scattered among the pews.

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“Have you been here before?” Bucky murmured.

Steve shook his head. “I went to St. Catherine’s a few times, on the other side of the cemetery,” he
They went further in, kneeling to genuflect at the end of the aisle. Bucky slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out Eugene’s rosary that he had taken from his nightstand drawer this morning, then pressed it into Steve’s hand. Steve’s eyebrows went up for a moment, but he closed his fingers around the beads tightly and crossed himself before standing again. They chose a pew halfway up and Steve tangled the beads between his fingers as he laced his hands together, closed his eyes, and bent his head.

Bucky prayed for a minute beside him, his hand spread out on his leg, but he’d never had the concentration for it and opened his eyes again, looking around. A woman stepped out of the confessional across the hall and he watched for a moment but no one took her place. He pressed his hand to Steve’s shoulder and murmured he’d be back, to little reaction.

He took up the familiar position in the confessional and peered through the latticework.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen,” Eugene said.

Bucky smiled to himself. “Amen,” he said, and saw Eugene’s head moving towards him. “Bless me, brother, for I have sinned. It’s been three years, give or take, since my last confession.”

“Ah, well, none of us without sin,” Eugene said, the smile evident in his voice. “Especially you.”

“Hey…!” Bucky murmured. “How are you?”

“Old,” Eugene said. “We weren’t sure we’d hear from you again.”

“I just had to make sure things had settled down.” He sighed. “As much as they ever will. I’ve got Steve with me. I tricked him into coming here, but I’m pretty sure he’s figured out my game.”

“Is that right,” Eugene said, “to force him to come here before he’s ready?”

“What kind of best friend would I be if I didn’t make him do things that make him uncomfortable?” He smiled to himself, but there was some truth to that. “He needs to get himself right; for me, if not for him.”

Eugene hummed in a way that wasn’t really agreement or disagreement – Bucky remembered the sound well from his childhood visits to Father Joseph. “If I come out to see him, will he leave?”

“I don’t think so. He knows I can run as fast as he can.”

Eugene laughed a little and opened his door, stepping out carefully. Bucky followed suit. The three years showed on Eugene, in his movements, even stiffer than before, and the sudden thinness of his hands and his face. They took each other in for a moment before hugging and Eugene’s hand pressed against the space where Bucky’s arm used to be.

“What happened?” he asked, worry evident in his voice.

Bucky pulled away and smiled. “Long story, don’t worry about it.”

Eugene looked sceptical and Bucky figured it was pretty hard not to worry about someone turning up with one less arm than usual, but he tipped his head to Steve on his pew and Eugene followed him over. Steve kept his head bowed, hands clasped, but he’d gone still in a way Bucky knew meant he was aware of what was coming next.
“Hey,” Bucky said, “don’t freak out.”

Steve lifted his head and raised his eyes to Eugene.

“Steve,” Eugene said, and Steve stood up, holding Bucky’s gaze for a moment before he held out his hand.

“Eugene,” he said, clasping his hand tight. “I’m sorry it took me so long to come here.”

“We come to places in our own time, but maybe you’ll come back to my office now?”

Steve smiled and told Eugene to lead the way. As they followed him, Steve leant in to Bucky and whispered, “You’re a manipulative piece of shit, Buck,” without much force.

Bucky winked back at him.

- 

Steve seemed more relaxed after seeing Eugene, even if he was annoyed with Bucky. They’d stayed for over an hour, shooting the shit – if a Catholic priest could shoot shit – and Steve lost some of the tension in his shoulders after a while, though it came back briefly when Eugene asked where they were living.

“Eldert Lane,” he said.

“Ah,” said Eugene. “Queens.”

Steve did not appreciate Bucky’s muffled laughter.

Still, it was a pleasant afternoon; it felt good to see Eugene again and it dealt with one of the elephants in the room that him and Steve were currently living with. He rang Florence in the evening and they filled each other in on all the news since they’d last parted. Katie had got a job in marketing and moved out to an apartment in Excelsior with a room mate, so Florence was alone in the house now. She didn’t sound particularly upset about it, but it gave Bucky a pang of regret.

Steve decided to start clearing up the yards, going hard at it with shovels, hedge shears, and lawn mowers – most of which ended up mangled by the end of the day. February was a good time to start preparing for a herb garden, apparently, and Steve sectioned off part of the backyard to dedicate to it. Bucky helped, sometimes, but couldn’t muster any sort of enthusiasm. It just reminded him of army busywork. He didn’t mind doing stuff in the house and futzed around with the plumbing when faucets got especially leaky, but the yards were Steve’s thing, and Steve worked them like it was his job. Today, for instance, Steve had been out back from nine, breaking up the hard ground

“I’m going out for smokes,” Bucky yelled from the back door at three. “Want anything?”

Steve straightened up from where he’d been digging and stretched his arms. He was wearing one of those undershirts that didn’t fit him right, streaked with dirt, looking like he was ready to set hearts racing. “Can you get a reuben from that deli I like?” he called back.

Bucky sighed. “I wasn’t planning on going that way,” he said.

Steve stared back at him until Bucky sighed again. “Large?”

“Thanks,” Steve said, and smiled. “My wallet’s in my leather jacket.”

Bucky really needed to figure out what to do about his money situation, but he took some cash out of
Steve’s wallet with only a little embarrassment and headed out. It was pretty frigid today, though he wouldn’t have been able to tell by looking at Steve. For his part, Bucky had a jacket on over his hoodie, and a scarf hanging loose around his neck.

He walked the twenty minutes to the deli and the nearby drugstore that sold cigarettes. He went in there first and got his Lucky Strikes, then crossed the road to the deli. School had just let out, it looked like, and there was a line of teenagers up to the counter. He joined the back and shuffled forward every couple of minutes until he reached the front.

“A reuben and a pastrami on rye, big as they come,” he said.

“Coming up,” the guy said, and Bucky moved up the counter to wait. There was a cat lounging between the napkins and the plastic cutlery.

“Hey, cat,” Bucky said, and stroked it.

“Isn’t that…”? he heard someone whisper behind him. He leant his side against the counter and angled his body slightly towards the voice, but didn’t turn his head. In his periphery, he could just make out two kids, both wearing the kind of dumb t-shirts he saw kids wearing these days, clutching greasy sandwiches to their chests.

“Don’t point!” the other boy hissed.

“Didn’t you--” the first boy started, but was swiftly hushed. Bucky rubbed at his nose, trying to keep a straight face. “Maybe we should--”

“Ned, no!” the lanky kid whispered urgently and pulled Ned back, hard enough that his feet slid along the linoleum.


“Eighteen dollars,” the guy called out, and roused Bucky from his eavesdropping.

Bucky handed the money over. “Keep the change.” It was just Steve’s money, after all. “Can I get that in a bag?”

By the time he got the paper bag of sandwiches around his wrist and turned to leave, the kids had disappeared, and he dug his cigarettes as he made it to the door. It didn’t take long to spot them again, loitering by a lamp post, pretending to be engrossed in the lanky kid’s phone when Bucky stepped out onto the sidewalk. He pulled a cigarette from the carton and lit it, then leant against a wall, bracing one foot on it.

“He’s smoking,” Ned said. He sounded betrayed. “What happened to the kickass arm?”

The lanky kid shrugged.

Bucky sucked in a lungful of smoke and blew it out in a long, thin stream. “Don’t you kids have homework, or something?” he said, without looking at them.

One or both of them squeaked and when Bucky flicked his eyes towards them, they were already disappearing around the corner. He laughed to himself and went back to the cigarette.

The front and back yards came along really well, even Bucky had to admit. Steve had cleared away all the overgrown shrubbery, broken up the hard earth, placed low wooden fences around future vegetable patches, and spread woodchips all around. It reminded Bucky of those victory gardens he
saw in London in the war. Steve finally manage to arrange for someone to take Stark’s car back and in its place, a motorbike was delivered along with a note that read, ‘it was taking up room in the garage’. Steve happily bought a parking permit and cover for it.

The second week of February, Sam came over with beer and pizza to christen the house.

“Well, this place is okay, isn’t it?” he said, unashamedly checking out the place as soon as he stepped through the door.

The place was pretty okay, now; the walls were all freshly painted and decorated with pictures Steve had picked up from local thrift stores and there was enough furniture to make the place feel pretty homey and inviting. Every decision about the house had been made by Steve, not a single item given or imposed on him. There was no uniform colour scheme or matching pieces of furniture. This was in every inch Steve’s home.

Steve took the pizza boxes from him and smiled. “Thanks.”

“The yard looks good,” Sam continued.

Bucky groaned. “Don’t get him started on that.”

Sam grinned and followed them into the kitchen. “Oh, I’m definitely going to get him started on that now.”

The yard talk went on for much longer than Bucky had hoped, because Sam’s mom was a ‘back to nature’ kind of woman since his childhood and they’d always had vegetable gardens, so he had a lot of advice.

“You should come over,” he said. They’d set up in the living room, the pizza boxes open on the coffee table, beers in hand, rain coming down in sheets outside. “She might let you take cuttings. Maybe.”

“Your mom’s probably not my biggest fan,” Steve said.

Sam shrugged. “She’ll forgive you, she’s a child of God, after all.”

Steve snorted into his can. “I’m getting forgiven by a lot of holy people at the moment.” At Sam’s raised eyebrows, he gestured to Bucky. “Bucky’s brother, he’s a priest.”

“Right,” Sam said, and looked at Bucky, sitting across from them in an armchair. Steve and Sam had done most of the talking so far, which was fine. Steve was comfortable with Sam in a way that maybe he never had been with Bucky; maybe that charged atmosphere Bucky created between them had prevented it. “I met him. So, what happened to you, if he decided to become a priest?”

“I was the cautionary tale,” Bucky said, and smiled a little.

“Nah,” Steve said, “Eugene idolised you, even if you weren’t always on the same wavelength. You always wanted him to be the best he could be. Him and your sisters, and me.”

Bucky twisted his mouth and glanced away at the sudden earnestness of Steve’s words. “Yeah.”

A beat passed before Sam cleared his throat. “So, your one hundredth birthday is coming up soon.”

“I guess.”

Sam grinned. “How old do you think you are, really?”
“Coming up thirty three.”

“How do you figure that?”

He shrugged. “Just decided I looked thirty back in 2014. I guess I’m a few months short, though, with the cryo.”

“How,” Steve said. “I figure I’m coming up thirty two.”

Bucky smiled. “Well, see, I’ll always be a year older than you, Steve, just how it is.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, looking pleased at the thought of it.

-

Florence called again near the end of the month. She’d been out to dinner with Michael, Arnie’s widower, who was newly married to a man fifteen years his junior.

“Cradle robber,” Bucky said with a laugh.

“And what about you, old man,” she said. “It’s your birthday soon.”

He sighed and leant back in Steve’s squasy leather chair. “So I’ve been told.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking,” she said, and he thought oh oh... “I’m going to come over to New York and help you celebrate.”

“You’re going to come all the way to New York,” he repeated, stretching his legs out in front of him until they touched the coffee table. “That’s a long flight.”

Florence hummed sternly down the phone, if a hum could be stern. “I remember when you still had to dress up to get on a plane,” she said. “I have thousands of frequent flyer miles, may as well use them while I can.”

He felt a pang at that, the thought that his little sister would one day not be there to use them, but he knew better than to argue. There wasn’t a woman in his family that could have been dissuaded from a decision. “Okay,” he said. “You can stay here, we’ve got a spare room.”

“Shouldn’t you ask Steve first?”

“Nah,” he said, “he’ll be fine.”

He wasn’t. He scowled a little, said that the flight was too long for a ninety year old, that they didn’t have a bed in the third bedroom, that Bucky should have asked first, but inevitably admitted defeat and opened up his laptop to look on furniture sites.

Florence’s flight was getting into JFK the afternoon of the 5th and they both agreed that they should pick her up in a car and not subject her to the subway, but Steve was reluctant to get a taxi or rent a car and endure the scrutiny of the great New York public. Instead, he asked Sam, who said he wouldn’t lend Steve his mother’s car but was happy to drive them. Too happy, maybe.

He rolled up at the house in the late morning, in a car with a long bonnet and trunk that he referred to with some embarrassment as ‘Mom’s old station wagon’, although Bucky thought it was fine – that was what cars were meant to look like, not those funny little snub-nosed compact things he saw these days. They picked Eugene up from his parish rectory and got to the airport with forty minutes to spare. They set up at the terminal, next to the baggage claim, Steve and Bucky both wearing baseball
caps, Eugene in his collar and frock coat.

“This doesn’t look strange at all,” Sam muttered.

Steve tried to stay inconspicuous by keeping his head in a pamphlet he’d picked up from a sightseeing display, but Bucky was pretty sure he was just making it weirder. To be fair, though, the last time they’d gone to an airport together hadn’t worked out very well.

Florence’s plane landed on time at twelve forty five and Bucky hopped up immediately to look for the people coming out the doors.

“It’ll be at least twenty minutes till she’s out,” Sam said, “chill.”

Steve continued to scrutinise the bus tour of Atlantic City pamphlet.

At ten past one, a new wave of people starting arriving and Bucky craned his neck to study the faces of the passengers until he caught a glimpse of Florence’s face, her white hair shorter than the last time he’d seen her. He hurried forward again, pushing through the crowds, and hugged her right there, in the middle of it all.

“Bucky,” she said warmly, and pulled his empty left sleeve from where he tucked it into his pocket. “Eugene said something about this.”

“We’ll talk,” he said. “Come on.”

Steve stood at ease, his chin tipped up as if in defiance, but Bucky knew he was just trying to appear confident.

“Steve,” she said, and held her hands out. He took them and hugged her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come see you before,” he murmured.

She waved her hand, dismissing the idea, and turned to Eugene, kissing him on the cheek. They had both shrunk with age, but she was still taller than him. Finally, she turned to Sam and smiled.

“It’s nice to see you again, Mr Wilson.”

“Oh, please, call me Sam, Ms. Barnes,” he said, with a voice as smooth as butter.

“Florence,” she said, and shook his hand.

Bucky gagged. “I’ll get your bag, shall I?”

After an interminable wait at the baggage carousel, they piled into the station wagon, Bucky, Florence, and Eugene in the back, Steve and Sam in the front.

“You all buckled up back there, kids?” Sam called, the glee evident in his tone. Bucky kicked the back of his seat and he started the car. The journey out of the airport was a little hairy, all five of them bouncing around as Sam took an alarmingly sharp turn to get back on the road. Maybe Steve should have driven them.

“I hope you’re keeping these two out of trouble,” Florence said to Sam once they were on the Van Wyck.

“Oh, I’m doing my best,” Sam called back.
“We’re not getting into trouble,” Steve said, then paused for a beat. “Any more.”

She laughed. “Ma always used to say you were a bad influence, Steve.”

“Steve, a bad influence?” Sam said with unconvincing disbelief. “I won’t believe it.”

Steve turned his head slightly towards them, his face studiously blank, and didn’t respond.

“Not in an unkind way, of course,” Eugene added, and a look passed between him and Florence.

“No, of course not. She thought you were a good boy,” Florence said, “just a little too full of Irish fire, perhaps.”

“And I was just full of shit,” Bucky said. Steve grinned, relaxing back into his seat, and Sam smacked him on the arm.

“There is a priest in this car!”

Eugene sighed deeply. “I’ve heard much worse from everyone in this car besides you, Sam.”

Bucky grinned and glanced out at the scenery racing past them. “Can I smoke?”

“Don’t you dare—” Sam’s voice went up a pitch, “—light one of those cancer sticks in my mother’s car.”

They settled Florence in when they got home and ordered food. Sam stuck around to eat and to drive Eugene home, allegedly, and the five of them passed a pleasant evening together before Sam and Eugene left. Once they were gone, Florence cleared her throat seriously and asked Bucky to bring her one of her bags, a cloth one with what seemed to be a box inside it.

“Steve,” she said, and lifted the box out, “this is for you. I wanted to wait until things were a little more settled before I gave it to you.”

It was a simple cardboard, grey with nothing adorning it. Steve frowned and took it from her, lifting the lid. He paused, his hand raised with the lid, and stared down at the contents.

“These are… my things,” he said softly.

Bucky got up and joined him. The box had a stack of photos, some jewellery, and papers in it.

“After Becca passed,” Florence said, “we cleared out the attic properly. It had been hidden away for years, the things you left behind in Becca’s apartment when you enlisted.”

Lying on top was a photo of a young woman, heartbreakingly young, holding an impossibly tiny swaddled baby in front of what looked like a metal cupboard. Sideshow baby, Bucky thought; Sarah looking like a child with babe in arms. He gestured to it and Steve nodded stiffly, letting him pick it up. Underneath it was a photo of an old man in small round glasses holding a baby up that fit into the palm of his hand.

“That’s the doctor,” Steve said, his voice rough. “Dr Couney. He was the one that… saved my life the first time around.” He looked back down and reached out slowly for a ring, a tarnished silver band with a speck of a sapphire winking dully at them. Bucky had vague memories of Sarah wearing such a ring and that it had always seemed so little in comparison to Ma’s ostentatious rock. It looked tiny against Steve’s fingers, wouldn’t even reach the first knuckle of his pinky.
“Mam’s engagement ring,” Steve said quietly. “She pawned it so many times. Eventually the guy just… just held it, even if she was late coming back for it.” He cleared his throat quickly and put it back gently. Bucky followed his lead with the picture and Steve placed the box down on the coffee table. “I’m gonna clean up,” he said, and hurried out.

Bucky watched him go, then turned back to Florence. “That was a nice thing to do,” he said, “he’s grateful, just…”

“It’s fine,” Florence said and patted the couch cushion next to her. He sat down and she took his hand. “You have a nice home here,” she said.

“It’s not really mine.”

“Aren’t you planning to stay?”

He lifted his shoulders, turning his body towards her. “I dunno. It’s, uh, complicated with me and Steve and I’m not exactly pulling my weight, financially. It’s not like I can just go out and get a job at the local deli, you know?”

“Mm,” she said, and nodded. “And what’s so complicated with you and Steve?”

He looked at her and she smiled like she knew he didn’t want to talk about it but was going to dig anyway; the privilege of age, he guessed. “Just the… the way he feels about me.”

“You mean…?” she murmured, giving him a significant look.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“How do you feel about him?”

He shrugged again. “I have to take care of myself first.”

She nodded and took his hand, squeezing it hard as Steve returned to the room. He looked at them with a slight frown.

“Everything okay?” he asked softly.

Bucky smiled up at him. “Yeah, everything’s good.”

It was nice, having Florence around. Steve came out of his shell a little, if only for politeness’s sake, and stopped tilling the damn fields all the time, though Florence was interested in the herb garden.

“Jimmy used to grow ‘herbs’,” she said with a smile.

“Oh yeah, did he cook a lot?” Bucky asked, and Steve burst into laughter.

“She means reefer, Buck,” he said, when the laughter had subsided.

Florence smiled mischievously and Bucky squirmed, trying not to let old feelings of embarrassment take hold of him like he used to. “Oh,” he said. “Well, man after your own heart, then, Steve.”

“Sure is,” Steve said cheerfully and ran his hand over his hair. He looked at Florence and sobered. “Is it okay to talk about him like this?”
“It’s good,” she said, still smiling, though her eyes were a little watery. “He’s still a part of us.”

“He always will be,” Bucky said, and put his arm around her.

The days ticked by until his birthday. He wasn’t necessarily excited about it, though he was looking forward to spending it with family after so long, but it was a comfortable feeling: his birthday, which he was going to celebrate like any other guy off the street.

If any other guy had Captain America and the Falcon messing around in the kitchen, rattling plates and cutlery.

“Hand me the flame thrower,” Sam said loudly, and got a laugh from Steve in response.

Bucky sighed and looked at Florence on the couch beside him. “How bad is it?”

She just smiled and a look to Eugene confirmed that it was bad and they weren’t talking.

“Close your eyes!” Steve called and Bucky did just that, listening to the twin sounds of Steve and Sam’s footsteps coming up the hall.

When they made it to the room, he could feel the heat of the candles and laughed to himself. Sam told him to open his eyes again and he beheld a cake that looked to be on fire. There probably wasn’t time for singing, Steve said – very conveniently for him – because the whole cake might melt under the intensity of the candles.

It took a few goes to put them all out, Bucky holding his hair back with his hand, and then Steve had the task of pulling out all the candles and picking off the globs of dried wax.

“Hey,” Sam said with an unrepentant shrug. “How often do you get to put one hundred candles on a cake?”

“Too often for my liking,” Bucky said, and accepted a mashed up slice of the cake from Steve. It tasted good, at least, and that was what mattered. “So, what did you get me?”

Sam didn’t get him anything, as he had firmly stated when he arrived; Steve had got him some books, ones he thought Bucky would like; and Florence and Eugene gave him a photo album like Steve’s but thicker, filled with photos Bucky hadn’t seen when he visited. He spread it out over his knees and looked through it. There was Ma and Dad, Grandpa, grainy photos from Bucky’s time on the stage at Trinity, and Steve on almost every page.

“Look at those freckles on you, Steve,” Sam said with a laugh, and took the album eagerly when Bucky handed it to him. Steve groaned.

“There’s something else,” Florence said. She glanced at Eugene, who nodded. “Before you came back, Bucky, me and Eugene, we were thinking that he would move out to California to live with me.”

“And leave the parish?”

Eugene smiled. “Even priests get put out to pasture eventually.” He said it cheerfully, but the thinness of his face, the dulled eyes, made Bucky’s heart clench in his chest.

“But,” Florence continued, “now that this has happened… I’ve decided that I’m going to sell the
house and move back to New York.”

Bucky blinked. “Really? You’ve been living out there so long.”

Florence shrugged. “You never leave New York in your heart,” she said, and Sam muttered something about New Yorkers which made her smile. “I’m knocking around in that house all on my own, and I’d like for us to all be in one city, back home. Now I’ve already consulted a realtor and she thinks I can get three million for house, half of which I’m giving to you.”

Bucky’s mouth dropped open as Sam whistled and Steve shifted in surprise. “Three million... dollars?”

Florence laughed. “I certainly hope so. Becca wanted to put you in her will, but of course... Ma and Dad would always have wanted you to have a share of the inheritance.”

“But...” He looked up at Steve, who looked almost as shocked as Bucky felt. He looked back. “But... why half?” He gestured to Eugene. “What about you?”

Eugene raised his hands. “Vow of poverty, my child.”

“But he’ll be living in my million dollar apartment for free,” Florence added and Eugene pursed his lips at the back of her head. She leaned forward and took Bucky’s hand. “This is what we all want. This is what we do for family.”

He looked down at her frail little hand resting in his. Over a million dollars sounded like an out of this world amount of money to just be given. Even when he was young, when there was money all around him, he never saw amounts like that in hand; that was how much skyscrapers cost to build.

He felt his eyes heat up. “Well, uh, thanks,” he muttered.

“Is that the best you can do?” Sam said behind him, tutting, but Steve shushed him.

Eugene was staying the night, and Bucky was happy to give up his room and sleep on the couch, but Steve vetoed the idea firmly.

“You can bunk with me,” he said, “like old times. Top and tail it.”

Bucky wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure that they could sleep in a bed together without the weird atmosphere becoming too much, but Steve was insistent. Bucky wondered if he’d sleep at all with that million and half dollars knocking around in his head, so maybe it didn’t matter.

Eugene went to bed early, eight pm, and Florence headed up at ten. Bucky and Steve knocked around the house for a while, Sam long gone, before Steve excused himself to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Bucky did his teeth in the kitchen and dressed for bed in a t-shirt and pants while Steve had a shower, then came up to his room. He sat against the baseboard of Steve’s bed with a pillow behind him for comfort, reading one of the books Steve had given him, using his thumb and pinky to hold the stiff paperback open.

When Steve came in, his hair curling a little at the ends from the shower, he stopped and looked at him. It was the arm, still, Bucky realised. Steve had done his best to act normal about it, and Bucky had helped with that by wearing sweaters and long sleeved tops in the day, but his t-shirt only highlighted the abruptness of his amputation, the capped off metal stark and unavoidable.
“I can still sleep downstairs, if you want,” he said.

Steve twitched and shook his head. “No, it’s your birthday, you’re not sleeping on the couch.”

Bucky looked over at the clock. “It’s after midnight.”

Steve shrugged and came over to the bed, sitting down carefully. “It’s fine.”

“All right,” Bucky said, and went back to his book as Steve stuck his nose in his phone.

Steve turned the lights out half an hour later and they both scooted down to sleep. Steve shifted around for a while, sighing every now and then, then stilled, lying on his back with his arms at his sides like rigor mortis had set in. Bucky rolled onto his left side towards Steve and wedged the pillow under his head and shoulder.

An hour passed and Steve didn’t sleep, Bucky could tell by the cadence of his breathing, the odd twitch and smack of his lips, which in turn stopped him from dozing off, hyper aware of every movement Steve made, as always.

“Steve,” he said, when the illuminated numbers of the clock ticked over to one forty five.

“Yeah?” Steve said quickly.

“Wanna talk?”

“About what?”

“The huge elephant in the room?”

Steve didn’t respond for a moment, staring up at the ceiling, then said, “Don’t call me an elephant.”

Bucky snorted and sat up. Steve did too, and switched on the lamp beside him. He looked tired, the soft light making his skin look almost translucent, the blue of his veins visible like they had been when he was young and sickly. He was smiling a little, but it didn’t last long when Bucky cleared his throat.

“Look,” he said, “you kissed me a few months ago.”

“I remember,” Steve replied softly.

“Yeah, well, I know I didn’t want to talk about it then, but can we talk about it now? You’re kinda messin’ with my head here, Steve.”

Steve widened his eyes, then frowned. “I didn’t mean to,” he said, and of course Bucky already knew that. He knew Steve had never intended to make his life harder. “I just...” He bit his lip and sighed. “I don’t know.”

“What about you and... Sharon?” He’d heard Steve on the phone to her a couple of times and the conversations were always stiff and stilted, but she hadn’t been by and he knew Steve hadn’t seen her because he hardly went out without Bucky.

Steve groaned. “I definitely don’t know about that.”

“It’s a bit weird that she’s Peggy’s niece and you still...”

“I know. In my defence, I didn’t found out about that until the funeral.”
Bucky’s raised his eyebrows. “That’s pretty fucked up.”

“I know,” Steve sighed.

“So, what about me? How do you feel about me?”

Steve folded his hands in his lap and picked at the quilt. “You’re… When I realised you were still alive, it was like… I was alive again. I’d been drifting for so long and then you–” He spread his hand out, pushing it into the mattress, not meeting Bucky’s gaze. “I love you, Buck, you’re my home.”

Bucky sat up on his knees and shifted closer, until his knees were touching Steve’s stretched out leg. Steve lifted his head and his eyes were red, though he wasn’t crying. He leant in when Bucky did, his eyes dropped to Bucky’s mouth.

Bucky rested his hand on Steve’s shoulder carefully and pressed his lips to Steve’s, as chaste as Steve’s kiss had been in Wakanda. Steve opened his mouth on a breath and Bucky kissed his bottom lip, Steve moving in tandem with him until the little moment passed. He pulled back slowly and Steve smiled.

“Did you like that?” Bucky asked.

Steve pressed his lips together. “I didn’t not like it.”

Bucky nodded, watching him. Steve was blushing slightly, looking surprised but not upset or panicked. As for Bucky, he felt… good. Not wildly passionate, but happy. Happy to be here, alive.

“What, now?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, why not?”

“It’s almost two am.”

“It’ll be an adventure.”

“Not much of one. What about the-- kids.” He laughed and shook his head. “Florence and Eugene.”

“I think they’re old enough to take care of themselves now. Come on, put some shoes on and we’ll take the bike.” He shuffled to the edge of the bed and got up, Steve watching him with confusion written all over his face. “Come on.”

“I’ll have to get changed.”

“People wear worse these days, come on.”

Steve fussed a while longer, but acquiesced, like Bucky knew he would. They left a note for the kids and got out the door at two, shoes and jackets on over their bed clothes. Steve started his bike as quietly as he could, commenting that the revving his engine wouldn’t win him any friends in his neighbours, and they were off. Steve pushed the speed, yelling over the wind that if he got a speeding ticket, Bucky would be paying. Bucky said he was good for it, and wrapped his arm tighter around Steve’s waist. This was perhaps the closest they’d ever been, physically, and it felt good.

They made it there in fifteen minutes. Steve found a place to park and looked around.

“Now what? Nothing’s even open until April.”
“Let’s just look around,” Bucky said, and Steve sighed but agreed.

They walked down Surf Avenue, taking in all the store fronts, half of which Bucky recognised – the place really hadn’t changed that much in seventy plus years. Nathan’s was in the same place, though it was closed.

“Well, now I’m hungry,” Steve complained.

Almost nothing was open except an ice cream parlour, which Steve grumbled about but still ordered a triple scoop of chocolate chip cookie dough. Bucky got a strawberry milkshake, large, and started on it before Steve had even paid the sleep-deprived server. Steve clicked his tongue and Bucky stamped on his foot; Steve gave him a shove and Bucky stumbled back, still holding his milkshake, grinning around the straw.

The server eyed them tiredly. “We don’t want any trouble in here,” she said.

“We’re no trouble, miss,” Steve said and Bucky laughed. Steve accepted his change and smiled politely. “We’re going.”

He turned back around and clapped his hand on Bucky’s shoulder, pushing him out the door. Bucky went willingly, but fell a step behind Steve when they got outside and pressed his milkshake to the back of Steve’s neck. Steve cringed away and struck out at him as Bucky danced out of reach. Bucky kept his distance for a minute, sucking hard on his straw, before they fell back into step.

Steve turned to him and grinned. “One of us, one of us--”

“I swear to God, Steve!” Bucky yelled, his shout reverberating around the empty streets.

They both burst into a fit of laughter which eventually subsided, lapsing into comfortable silence as they walked down towards the boardwalk.

“Hold this,” Bucky said, when they walked out onto the deck, and handed his milkshake to Steve. Steve held it with a sigh and Bucky took his cigarettes out, lighting one and taking a couple of drags before taking the milkshake back. He pushed the cigarette to the corner of his mouth and slotted the straw between his lips, taking another sip.

“Don’t you think that could’ve waited?” Steve asked.

Bucky shook his head and gestured to the beach with his foot.

“It’s too cold to go down there,” Steve said.

Bucky swallowed and lowered the cup. “Don’t be a chicken.”

“I’m not chicken, I’m--” He sighed and shook his head. “Fine, c’mon.”

They left the boardwalk and went out onto the sand, their heavy shoes sinking in and making it hard to walk. The tide was low and Bucky went as close to the water as he could, his shoes leaving deep prints in the wet sand.

“If you think we’re taking our shoes off and wading in that,” Steve said, a little way behind him, “you’re more screwy than you look.”

Bucky set his mostly empty milkshake down in the sand and took his cigarette between his fingers again. “Nah, I know you’re too delicate for that.”
Steve came up beside him, wind whipping his hair forward over his forehead, and started eating his ice cream cone, the rest of it already demolished. At length, he said, “This was a good idea.”

Bucky looked at him and smiled. “I do have ‘em occasionally.”

Steve smiled back, wide and genuine. “Yeah, you always do. It feels good to be here, with you. Being together. How are you...” He trailed off, watching Bucky carefully.

“We’ll just take it as it comes, no pressure,” Bucky said. He lifted his cigarette and took another drag. “I think I’m gonna visit Gabe again, though.”

Steve nodded, the smile still on his face. “I think that’s a good idea. You know, Morita’s grandson only lives in Queens, maybe we should go see him.”

“You can talk about how great it is to be Queens’ boys.”

Steve let out a breath of irritation but didn’t take the bait. He sniffed and ran his fingers through his hair, pressing it back off his face. “I think I might grow a beard.”

“You’d look terrible,” Bucky said. “Can you even grow facial hair?”

“Yes,” he said firmly, and reached out, grabbing Bucky’s chin. “You haven’t cornered the market on ‘mountain man’.”

Bucky pushed him away, cigarette ash falling on Steve’s jacket. “It looks good on me.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Buck,” Steve said, pulling back to brush his jacket off.

The cigarette rapidly crumbling away in his hand, Bucky bent down and picked up his milkshake cup, popped the lid off and dropped the butt in. A hard wind blew against them, his hair tangling in front of his face. He pushed it back with the inside of his arm and turned, looking back at the boardwalk, the Wonder Wheel lit up in red and yellow. It was like going right back in time to 1935, like nothing had changed at all, Steve still by his side. But everything had changed, and everything would continue to change and he’d always be a step behind the world, trying to catch up.

And that was okay.

He looked back to Steve and Steve smiled softly at him.

“Hey,” Bucky said, “you know what?”

“What?”

He grinned and shuffled closer to Steve. “We’re living in the future.”

Chapter End Notes

SOME TIME LATER

Steve was sat at the kitchen table going through a stack of pancakes when Bucky came in, tablet in hand. He’d got pretty used to the things and had splurged on one of his own now that he was a millionaire.
"Have you seen this?" he asked.

"What?" Steve asked around a mouthful of pancake.

Bucky put the tablet down on the table in front of him. "It's all over the news. Some kind of... tumour thing burst out of the ground in a town in Missouri and ate, like, half the town."

Steve frowned, tipping his head to the side at the peculiar picture on the screen. "Is it still growing?"

He shook his head. "They think it's stopped now, but aren't you guys supposed to get involved in this kind of stuff?"

Steve pushed the tablet. "Let's not go looking for trouble, it'll find us on its own, sure as shit."

"I guess," Bucky said, and took the fork out of Steve's hand to get a bite of pancake for himself.

- By my estimation, there have been twelve cameos in this fic, with varying levels of subtlety.

- At the final count, the LibreOffice file for this fic took thirty five seconds to save. That might not sound like much, but it was maddening when it autosaved in the middle of typing.

- Here's an interesting piece about Dr Couney's Coney Island sideshow.

- And that is - finally - all she wrote!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!