**Citius, Altius, Fortius (Faster, Higher, Stronger)**

by [MarcellaBianca](https://archiveofourown.org/users/MarcellaBianca)

### Summary

Steve Rogers. James Barnes.

One, an NHL star with dreams of finally capturing an Olympic gold medal. The other, a former World champion and Olympic silver medalist, now a current coach and choreographer for the top flight figure skaters in the Russian Federation.

But before all of that..they were Steve and Bucky.
Until they weren't.

Notes

This is all because of an AMAZING piece of AU fan art I saw on Tumblr by Goyath.

Here is the artwork.

So...yeah. Expect lots of geeking out about figure skating and hockey and PINING. SO MUCH PINING.

Note: I don't know much about hockey, so any information I get is exclusively because one of my besties is a huge hockey fan. So if I fuck up, I will defer to her knowledge of the sport! But I know a BUNCH about figure skating!

See the end of the work for more notes
“We are live at the Opening Ceremony of the 22\textsuperscript{nd} Games of the Winter Olympics, here in Sochi. The Parade of Nations is about to begin with the traditional entrance of the delegation from Greece as the inventor of the Modern Olympics, and Bob, this has been really an excellent showcase of Russia’s history.”

“It certainly has been, Matt, despite the little snafu with the snowflake display that refused to work correctly! But I hope everyone got a good laugh out of it. Of course, I know our audience at home in the States is looking forward to seeing our athletes on Team USA. Steve Rogers, captain of the hockey team and top scorer in the NHL’s Eastern Conference, was announced last week as the flag bearer for Team USA, and he was highly moved by the honor.”

“Definitely, Bob. His nickname back home in the States is ‘Captain America’ because of his Independence Day birthday, and I can’t think of anyone more deserving to carry the flag into the stadium. It’s his third Olympics, he’s an incredibly popular athlete in both the US and Canada, and he was instrumental in helping the US hockey team in their ultimate silver medal in Vancouver.”

“I’m sure everyone is looking forward to that. Of course, the Parade of Nations will go in accordance to the host country’s alphabet, so if there are some nations that look out of place to us, it’s because we are going by the Russian Cyrillic alphabet. As always, though, the host nation’s athletes will enter last, and we’ve got a rooting interest in Team Russia this year, Matt!”

“That’s right, Bob. Former Olympic silver medalist and World Champion James Barnes, who announced his retirement soon after his gold medal at the 2010 Worlds due to a now famous rotator cuff injury, is now a world-renowned coach who has made a home for himself in St. Petersburg. He was familiar with the city before starting his new career, isn’t that right?”

“Correct. Although he represented Team USA in both Games he competed in, Barnes spent a lot of time in Russia under the tutelage of Alexander Pierce, of course one of the more prominent figure skating mentors in the sport before the fall of his reputation. Now, James is here representing the Russian Federation with his athletes. He is the coach of Natasha Romanov, but he also choreographed the free dance for ice dance duo Wanda and Pietro Maximoff. He won’t be participating in the parade of nations, but we wish his athletes the best of luck!”

“It’s interesting that we should bring up James Barnes; he and Steve Rogers are from the same area of Brooklyn, New York, and in fact were childhood friends. We’ll probably hear more about that story in the coming weeks, as well as the other amazing and inspiring stories that will come
“You okay?”

Steve tears his eyes away from the flag in his grip. Sam’s eyeing him a little warily. The other man looks good in his Ralph Lauren-designed Team USA uniform, despite the fact that he’s complained it was like “if Bill Cosby barfed all over an Olympics sweater.” Behind him, Clint’s adjusting his video camera for the walk into the stadium, and Tony is on the phone with Pepper to make sure she gets their entrance on DVR.

“Yeah. I’m okay.” Steve adjusts his hold on the pole. “It’s just…man. It’s all kind of hitting me, you know?”

“Totally. But please don’t puke on live TV, ok? You’ll never hear the end of it. From me, I mean.” Sam grins and claps him on the shoulder. “Now get to the front of the line, Cap. I gotta go find everybody.” He jogs off to find the rest of the bobsledding team, leaving Steve feeling slightly out of place and like a sore thumb at the beginning of the pack. He can feel everyone’s eyes on him; the urge to do this well, to do it right, the sheer responsibility is like a hand on his windpipe.

Far too soon they get the go-ahead to start marching. When they enter the stadium, all fear and doubt flee from Steve’s head. Instead, a soaring pride causes him to wave the flag with glee as he hears the explosive cheers of “USA! USA! USA!” All around him, his teammates and friends are taking pictures and laughing with each other, waving to the crowd, and marveling at how many people are here to celebrate the beginning of the Olympics. The stadium is a cacophony of light and color.

Vancouver was absolutely nervewracking, but this time Steve plans to enjoy every single moment. Who knows if he’ll get asked back for Pyeongchang in 2018?

He makes it to the flag drop-off in one piece and thanks all of the volunteers profusely. He manages to find his phone in the overwhelming volume of his Ralph Lauren jacket to fire off a text to Sam, who got lost in the swell of people. Didn’t drop it. Thank Christ. Last thing I need is to get lambasted on Twitter.

His phone buzzes almost immediately. He laughs – serves Sam right to check his phone constantly during this amazing event.

Then he looks at his phone. His heart skips three beats.

Bucky: Nice job, Captain.

Steve nearly drops the phone in the fake snow blanketing the arena floor. All around him, lights and sound mesh into a swirl of indiscernible noise that dies into a dull roar. Everything distills into the text message on his phone.

“Everything okay, Cap?” Clint says, having to shout above the din as Team Russia is announced. Steve nods a touch too quickly, shoves the phone back into his pocket. “Yeah, everything’s fine,” he says, pitch slightly modulated.

Clint can tell. He always can. “He texted you, didn’t he.”

Steve lets out a puff of air and wills the tension in his jaw to settle down. “I haven’t heard from
him since after his accident.” Clint says nothing, just waits for Steve to continue. “I kept texting and calling but…” He shrugs. “I don’t know what to say now.”

“So don’t say anything. You don’t owe him shit. You poured your damn heart out to him and he gave you nothing. Let him sweat for a minute.”

A choked little laugh. “Yeah. Maybe that’s what I’ll do.”

Clint studies him, a muscle jumping in his neck like he’s trying to stop himself from smiling. “You can’t fool me, Rogers. Your poker face is bullshit.”

Steve looks around, quickly. Everyone is too preoccupied with the show. He nods. “Yeah. I can’t help it. I feel like there’s more to what happened. But unless he-“

His phone goes off again. He grabs it so quickly Clint snorts.

_Bucky: We need to talk._

Steve’s jaw drops. He shows the phone to Clint, who smiles. “Well. This should be a very interesting two weeks.”

Chapter End Notes

The 2014 Opening Ceremony uniforms for Team USA were ATROCIOUS.
Peux tu le Senpir? (Can You Feel It?)

Chapter Summary

“I swear to god, Steven Grant Rogers, you are going to put me into an early grave.” Sarah struggles to hold on to her unruly five year old son’s hand as they shuffle to the Lefrak Center at Lakeside. Located near their small apartment in Park Slope, the park to Sarah seemed a decent escape route for Steve’s boundless, pent-up energy. The doctors had told her fresh air in the winter wasn’t necessarily a bad thing; she would just have to watch his asthma. But before he’d left for work that morning, Joseph had advised “Sarah, you can’t be constantly worried about him. He’s clearly dying to go outside.” So here they are – headed to the park on a chilly February morning.

Chapter Notes

Teeny one today - just had to get the set up of how these kids met and their skating backgrounds.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


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“Can we skate, Mommy?” Steve calls out happily when he catches eye of the outside ice rink. Sarah’s heart doesn't necessarily plummet - she's an old hand at this by now, being a nurse and all - but it does do a casual, comfortable flip flop in her chest. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea, sweetie,” she says, trying to be as gentle as possible. It kills her to tell him no. "If you fall it’s gonna hurt. Remember what the doctor told you about how you can break bones?"

“Mommy, that’s silly. I won’t fall. I'll be weally good. Like Gwetzky!” Steve juts his chin out after finishing that last impedimented phrase. He looks so much like his father. That same stubborn streak. That same beautiful fire. Sarah falls for it every time.

“Okay. But if you fall and break your face, it’s your fault.” She gets a dirty look from another mother for saying that. Nobody has a sense of humor anymore. The smile that lights up Steve's face is like a delicate bird discovering flight.

The skates are only two dollars each for a rental – a total steal as far as Sarah’s concerned. The
little boy in front of them is yanking his mother’s hand so hard it’s like he wants to tear it off. “Mommmmmmyyyy,” he whines, “I forgot my He-Man at hooooooome.”

“Well, you’ll be able to play with him when you get back, James,” the mother says breezily. She’s dressed in Jordache jeans and the son has on those Freezy Freekies things that all of Steve’s little classmates have, but Sarah thinks they’re a complete waste of money. She has to admit they look adorable on the other kid, who clearly is going to be a heartbreaker once he gets old enough – beautiful curly brown hair and soulful gray eyes.

They pick up their skates and head to a bench to lace up. The other little boy, James, isn’t letting up. “Mooooooooomyyyy,” he says, his voice now pitching up to a level that Sarah recognizes is dangerously close to tears, “He-Man ith at hoooooooome!”

Before Sarah can shove the skates onto Steve, her son wrenches his hand out of her grip and toddles over to James and his mother. “He-Man is stupid,” he announces.

“You’re thtupid!” James shouts, dentalised lisp nearly making Sarah laugh because of how unexpected it is.

“James Buchanan Barnes!” the mother yelps. “I’m sorry,” she says to Sarah. “My son has no idea how manners work.”

“That’s okay. My son has no idea what boundaries are.” Sarah shrugs and holds out her hand. “Sarah Rogers. This is my son Steve.”

The other woman, a brunette with grey eyes and a firm, kind smile, returns the handshake. “So nice to meet you. We actually just moved here from Indiana so I’m trying to see what’s in the neighborhood for kids; haven’t had a lot of time to meet the neighbors. I’m Winnie.” Winnie darts her hand out to swat at James when he tries to grab a little girls’ French fries. “This little terror is James.”

“My name ith Bucky!” James whines.

“Ugh,” Winnie groans. “My husband, George…his father’s middle name is Buchanan so we gave James that middle name. A kid in James’s kindergarten class called him Bucky and James decided he liked it.”

“Aw I think it’s cute.” Sarah crouches down to James’s eye level. “It’s very nice to meet you, Bucky.”

A blaze of shyness streaks across Bucky’s storm-grey eyes. He turns, tries to hide behind Winnies’ pants. “Nooooo.”

“Oh, now you’re shy.” Winnie shakes her head. “Come on, honey, let’s go skate.”

“Come skate with us!” Steve shouts, like it's the absolute best idea he's had since the time he decided to run downstairs in the middle of the dinner Sarah and Joe had planned for the superintendent of the school district, stark naked, and reenact the opening credits of Thundercats.

“Steven! Let them do what they want to do,” Sarah tries. But Bucky is already striding forward, shockingly confident, on his skates. “Let’s go!” he commands. Sarah looks over to Winnie who just gestures in a helpless what can you do? way. “He’d make friends with Gorbachev if he asked nicely.”

So off they go to skate. Steve manages to fall on his bottom only once, but Bucky is a little bit more coordinated. “He’s been taking skating classes for about a year,” Winnie confides in Sarah.
“He saw kids at the park back in Indiana doing it and I thought it would be a good outlet.”

“I was thinking about getting Steve into classes,” Sarah admits. “His father is a local coach at the high school. He really, really likes hockey, but…” she looks down at her son, squeezes his hand. “He’s so small. He was a preemie, his lungs aren’t too great. I don’t know how much winter weather will help.”

Winnie’s mouth quirks up a little bit. “Granted I’m not you, and I’m not Steve’s mom, but it seems like he’s really liking it. I don’t know. Give it a shot?”

Sarah looks ahead at Bucky, already trying to move on his own in the center of the rink. Steve’s frantically tugging on her arm so they can get closer. She laughs. “I have a feeling my life is going to be dictated on how many times I can yank Steve away from trouble.”

The walk home is filled with the aroma of hot chocolate steaming off a paper cup and Steve chattering away in Sarah’s ear about when he can see Bucky again.

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Spring, 2013.

“It was a pretty fast friendship. My mom met Buc..James’s mom at a skating rink when we were five. Bucky had already been skating for about a year, and was already pretty good. I was terrible.”

Clint laughs. “And then what happened?”

Steve can feel the tension rising in his jaw but he knocks it back. He’s used to pushing down that tightness. That feeling of incompleteness. Things left unsaid. “Then we started having playdates a lot. Skated a lot at the park. Became inseparable. I mean, I’ve told you this all before, Clint. He was my best friend. More than that.” So much more. But Steve clamps his mouth shut.

“So….what happened?”

Don’t do this, Steve warned himself. “You know. Life happened.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure just ‘life’ leads to somebody being emotionally devastated and pretending everything is okay. Your goals went down a crazy amount right after this guy’s accident. Clearly this isn’t just ‘life.'” Clint sits back, folding his arms over his chest. “Spill it.”

So he does. He tells Clint everything. Things he’s only told his mother and Sam, and sometimes, barely even himself. Some of it he can barely utter above a whisper.

When he’s finished, Clint’s arms are hanging loosely at his sides. The beers in front of them are nearly gone. Clint eyes him, empathetic but still nonpartisan, like a therapist Steve can get hammered with.

“Well,” the other man says with a small sigh, “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

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Chapter End Notes

Every chapter title will be from a different Winter Olympic Games motto - this one is
clearly the one for the 1988 Calgary Games. (Can you tell every chapter will be taking place in a Winter Olympic Year?)

Also, the speech impediments Bucky and Steve has are based on the ones my nephews had and have. One of them still has the lisp. It is adorable.
Chapter 2: A La Pointe de la Performance (At the Peak of Performance)

Chapter Summary

Brooklyn, 1992. Bucky and Steve are close to ten years old, and they're the biggest skating nerds on planet earth. So obviously, they force their mothers to watch Albertville coverage with them.

Chapter Notes

TW: Ableist, homophobic language is in this chapter. More explanation in the end notes if you want to skip. Brock is a dick.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Steve, look!”

Bucky is sitting so close to the TV it almost looks like he wants to become one with it like the Terminator. Steve laughs, flicks popcorn at the back of Bucky’s head. “I am looking, dummy.”

“But are you really? I mean, he’s just so good,” Bucky sighs, voice a bare breath against the screen as Paul Wylie lands a triple jump, then into a jump combination and a spin. Steve can’t figure out what the names are for the life of him. He just learned what a camel spin was and Bucky was furious at how hard Steve had laughed. Now he feels almost dizzy as he watches the furious twists of the guy’s body. “How do you not barf?” he wonders.

“Shut up, punk. Paul was third after the original. If he scores well on this he’ll medal, and Petrenko gave him wiggle room. Do you know how major that is?! Nobody thought he would even get on the podium at all, or even get in the top ten!” Bucky bounces up and down on the floor as Paul makes his way to what Bucky has told Steve is called the ‘kiss and cry’ which again made Steve laugh until he was worried his asthma would get triggered. But this time he doesn’t laugh. Instead he sits back on the couch so he can stuff more popcorn in his mouth. “Who’d you say was going to win?”

“Petrenko, duh, even if Paul skates really well,” Bucky scoffs, like it’s the easiest and dumbest answer. “The Unified Team is going to win everything.” He picked a piece of popcorn out of his expander. “I can’t wait to start learning triples. Or quads! They might start to make those a required element.”

“Didn’t you just learn that one jump…uh…the Lindy?”

“The Lutz!” Bucky trembles with indignant rage as he whips around, shakes his Capri Sun in Steve’s face, as Paul Wylie lands the jump in question. “It’s the hardest one! And Brian Boitano does it like it’s nothing! With his hand in the air!”

Steve worries his lip between his teeth. “Uh. Which one is that again?”
“Oh my Goooooood, Steeeeeeve,” Bucky moans. “Have you learned nothing?!”

“Hey! I’m pretty sure you don’t know a single player on the Lake Placid 1980 hockey team!” Steve snaps. The tension in Bucky’s jaw tells Steve he’s correct. He huffs out a laugh, shakes his own juice box at the brunet.

They watch a few more skaters. After every skater, Bucky applauds like he’s actually in Albertville with Team USA. “Did you know that they had a figure skater take the oath at the Opening Ceremonies?” he chatters. “Surya Bonaly? She’s amazing.”

“Well, maybe that’s because the hockey team sucks,” Steve gripes, even though it’s not true. The French might have a real shot this year. Not like that’s going to happen.

After a few more moments of silence, he pipes up again. “I wish I got more playing time on Squirt. At least so they could see that I work hard.” It doesn’t have anything to do with what they’re talking about, but it’s been eating at his guts for the past few days.

“I think you’re lucky you’ve gotten any playing time at all, sweetie, considering what you did,” Sarah pipes in from her spot on the reclining chair near the corner of the living room.

“I didn’t do nothin’!” Steve squawks.

“Steve. You suckerpunched a goalie,” Bucky deadpans.

“He was saying bad stuff about Coach Hill, just ‘cause she’s a girl!” Steve can feel his jaw work in frustration. He doesn’t mean to lash out. People just need to not be so dumb and mean and stupid. Steve knows he’s got a bad temper. He’s talked about it with school counselors and his ma, and of course Bucky. But sometimes he just can’t help it.

“Then he was just a jerk. You know that. Brock Rumlow is a big fat jerk. The jerkiest.” Bucky’s face is solemn like he’s saying the Gospel. “But next time you try to start anything, make sure I’m around so I can yank him off you. Thought your head was gonna pop off. Now shut up, Petrenko is on!”

Steve looks at his mother with help me clearly drawn on his face. Sarah just laughs, the traitor. “You know you’re going to make him watch every hockey game with you next week, Steve. Let him have this.”

“Ugh, fine,” Steve says, giving up. But not before making fun of Bucky for actually crying when Paul Wylie ultimately takes the silver medal, shocking the figure skating world. "He should've gotten gold," he wails. "He was so good!” Bucky cries the next night, too, when Kristi Yamaguchi wins gold in ladies singles.

The following week, it’s Bucky’s turn to sit on the couch at the Barnes residence with a glazed expression while Steve screams at the TV so hard he’s briefly worried he’s gonna have a heart episode. “How do you miss that!” he howls, nearly upsetting his plate of pizza. “The goalie was out of the box! You just put it in!”

He eventually falls in a flump on the carpet, rage firing him up from the inside. “Ugh. We ain’t even gonna medal.”

“Would some of those cinnamon twists you got with the pizza make things better?” Winnie Barnes asks, clearly trying to just help.

“Ma, give it a second. He’s gotta get through the five stages of grief first.” The smirk is evident in
“Bucky’s tone. He dips his twist in cream cheese sauce. “Once he just lays there like roadkill, then he can have some.”

The righteous anger stays in Steve through the gold medal game the next night, when the Unified Team beats Canada. “This sucks,” he says with force, using the dirtiest word he knows that won’t get him slapped. “If I were bigger I’d get asked to go into Level A or B and then they’d have to take me at the international level.” He looks down at his fragile body, at the shirt with Bart Simpson on it. It hides the long scar that streaks the center of his chest. “I want to get bigger,” he sighs.

“Well, maybe you’ll have a growth spurt.” Sarah gives him a hug, ruffling his hair while she does it. Bucky nods sagely. “Totally. Plus, even if you can’t skate as well as the other kids, you work so hard. They don’t have what you’ve got! It’s all about what you’ve got in your heart.”

Steve will never admit how his heart is soothed by Bucky’s words. Sure, his ma can say whatever she wants to make him feel better, but it’s not the same. Bucky’s his best friend in the entire universe. In all the universes. They give each other crap all the time but that’s just what they do. Best friends forever, like they swore in the park last year. (Although Bucky wanted to make it a blood oath and Steve freaked out at the last second. Not because he was scared of blood, but because they’d just learned about AIDS at school and his anxiety wasn’t about to let him exchange bodily fluids with anybody, not even Bucky.)

“Well, I just gotta learn. I gotta learn how to skate without crashing into the boards or hurting myself,” he simply says in reply. “I’m too small for the skates.”

“Wait! I gotta go to the rink tomorrow morning to practice some figures and jumps. Want to come?” Bucky takes a long pull of his Mountain Dew. Steve turns to Sarah, ecstatic.

“Pleeeeeease?!”

“Yes, that’s fine! I can drop you off before my shift.”

“Yes!” Steve crows. He holds up a hand for Bucky to high-five. The sound echoes like a perfect slapshot.

Skating with Bucky is the most fun ever, even though sometimes it makes Steve feel even more clumsy. Bucky’s been skating much longer than Steve and he’s got a grace that lends itself to figure skating perfectly; Steve still shuffles around without much speed. His boots look like his feet have been swallowed up by blades.

He watches Bucky glide to the center of the rink to work on compulsory exercises – even though they’ve been cut from international competition, Bucky insists on practicing them. To Steve, it looks like boring circles. But he won’t judge. It’s Bucky’s passion.

He keeps to the end of the rink to practice shots and stopping on his own power. Steve’s been stuck on the lower levels of league hockey since he finally convinced his mom to let him sign up for Squirt level, two years ago. He was much more behind in his skills than the other kids, who had been playing since they were barely able to stand on skates. But Bucky’s right – what he lacks in skill he makes up for in passion, practice time, and an encyclopedic knowledge of the sport. Much like Bucky, who can name every US National champion since modern competition began.

Once Bucky starts doing jumps Steve stops to watch. He likes the jumps. They make sense to
him. Everything else just looks like skating around a rink backwards and doing spins that make him nauseated. He can’t even comprehend how Bucky can do the things he does, and Steve knows he’s not even done yet. When he starts doing triples, he’ll be amazing.

“This one is called a salchow!” Bucky calls as he completes a solid single and a very shaky double. Bucky’s already proving to be incredibly skilled at spins and artistry and musical interpretation, but his jumps are a tough spot, despite how much he wants them to be powerful. “And this one is a walley!” he shouts, moving with pretty good speed across the ice.

Steve gives him a round of applause that’s only slightly sarcastic. “Good work!”

“I want to do ‘Thriller’ for an exhibition piece one day. Like how Kurt Browning did that Terrence Trent D’arby thing!” He steps out of a single lutz. Steve cackles. “Yeah. Only if you wear a sequin glove!”

“Of course! What do you take me for?” Bucky grins so wide Steve can see his expander glinting through the gaps in his front teeth.

“Well, if it isn’t twinkletoes and the mighty midget,” A voice growls from the entryway. Steve’s heart sinks. He turns to see the older boy (well, he’s only a few months older than Steve, but he looks like he’s at least in sixth grade) flanked by two other kids. “Cool it, Brock,” he says, under his breath, but still loud enough for Buck to hear it.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did you just say you want me to ‘cool it’?” Brock sneers, while Sitwell and Rollins snicker behind him. “I think you guys have had enough time out here by yourselves. We’re gonna go do sprint drills. You know, for the good team. The one that don’t suck, you know?” He grins with less warmth than the ice beneath their skates.

“Come on, Steve, we can call my mom and she can bring us to get bagels.” Bucky’s already skating to the side to put on his skate covers. Steve can’t really move. Not while Brock’s being a jerk.

“We were using the ice. Wait your turn,” he says. Somewhere behind him, he can hear Bucky suck in a breath behind his teeth. Brock’s face goes from smirking to vengeful.

“You’re lucky my mom is outside, or else I would get you back right now for punching me the other day.”

“Well, don’t call my coach a ‘stupid girl’” Steve says diffidently. “What’s the matter, you afraid of a girl or somethin’?”

He knows he’s gone too far. Brock’s pupils blow up. “The only girls around here are you and your faggot boyfriend,” he hisses.

Steve knows those words. He’s heard the older kids at school say them. He knows they’re wrong, that they’re mean, but he’s not one hundred percent sure what they mean. All that matters is how furious he is that Brock called his best friend those words.

He gets in one good punch before things go fuzzy.

When he can figure out which way is up again, he feels the freezing ice under his cheek and a dripping feeling on his forehead. He looks up to see Bucky screaming at a surprised Brock and friends. “Don’t you ever, ever say that about me or Steve again, or I’ll kick the living daylights out of you! I’ll call my Mom, who works in the school district, and she’ll make sure all of ya get kicked out of school! Go pick on someone your own size!”
He yanks a still-dazed Steve to his feet. The lights in the rink suddenly seem like they’re standing on the sun. “Owww,” he moans. Brock and his buddies laugh. It lands with the clarity of mush in his head. “Come on, Steve,” Bucky growls, a tone Steve’s never heard him use before, and drags him off the ice to the locker room. He gets him situated on a bench and checks his face. “You okay, buddy?” he says quietly, voice raw from yelling. Steve manages a nod. “I think so. Head is a little bit funny.”

“You’re gonna have a bad headache tomorrow,” Bucky manages to crack a smile. He swings an arm around Steve’s shoulders, pulls him in. “Don’t listen to them, ok? You’ll show ‘em all.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Steve’s mouth feels big, like he’s chewing on Bazooka gum. “Did he punch me in the mouth?”

“No. Elbowed ya. But he got fat elbows.” Steve snickers. Bucky grabs some tissues from the bathroom, hands them off to him so he can plug up his nose. “Want me to call my mom?” he murmurs.

“Give it a second.” I don’t want anybody but you to see me like this.

They sit quietly, letting Steve’s breathing get back to normal and Bucky’s temper, which could rival Steve’s sometimes, calm down. “I’m sorry he said those things,” Steve breaks the silence, leaning his head on Bucky’s shoulder.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry too. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

The next day, while Sarah’s at work, Steve looks up that word Brock used in the dictionary. He calls Bucky. “Hey, I just looked up what that word meant. The one Brock said.”

“Yeah?” Bucky sounds a little hesitant.

“Yeah. It means you like boys. Like, like boys.”

“Like how you like girls?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.” There’s a long pause. Steve can tell Bucky’s running his tongue over his expander, the way he always does when he’s thinking hard. “Well, what does he know, right?”

“Yeah. What does he know.”

What does he know?

Chapter End Notes

Brock Rumlow uses an ableist and two homophobic slurs against Bucky and Steve; they aren't really sure what the homophobic ones mean, but they know it isn't good. Steve tries to retaliate and Bucky helps get him away from Brock, Rollins, and Sitwell. Later, Steve looks it up in the dictionary. Again, Brock is a dick.

Paul Wylie Albertville free skate
Kurt Browning 1989 Worlds Exhibition (SWOON) (He's my FAVORITE)
The Brian Boitano lutz, also known as a "Tano lutz", is when you put a hand in the air while completing the lutz jump. It's so, so pretty.

I will be skipping the Olympics in Lillehammer simply because I want to move their timeline up a bit more - the age of eligibility for the Olympic Games is 15, and Bucky will be 15 the July before the Olympics in Nagano. So....;)

Tumblr!
Chapter Summary

Bucky tries, Steve blushes a lot, bad news for both. And Peggy is a total badass.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


He notices the new girl as soon as they all sit down in homeroom. How could he not? She takes up the whole room with her light. A corona of dark hair set off by marbleized skin. Firmly set mouth. Wide, questioning eyes. And thanks to her sitting directly in front of Steve, he’s got a great view of her –

“Earth to Rogers,” Schmidt barks. Steve jerks his eyes up from a thorough examination of the new girls’ scapula to meet his German professor’s harsh eyes. “Sorry, Herr Schmidt,” he mumbles. Behind him, Bucky snorts.

“What I was saying, everyone,” Herr Schmidt continues, “is we have a new student with us. She joins us from year abroad program from London. Everyone, this is Margaret Carter.”

“Oh, please call me Peggy,” Peggy interrupts, and Steve can barely keep his tongue inside his mouth. The accent is just…

He gets a hard poke in his back from Bucky. Steve turns around, sees Bucky’s smirk. “Not a word or I swear to god I’m going to make you go first in Debate class,” he hisses. Bucky chokes back a laugh. “Little punk,” he grins.

“Herr Rogers, Herr Barnes!” booms Schmidt. “Pay attention!”

“Entschuldigung, Herr Schmidt,” Bucky and Steve chorus back, timed out, like it always is. This is the third time this week they’ve had to apologize for being bothersome in this class alone.

Steve can feel the heat of embarrassment snake up his neck. But he just barely hears a small exhale of what definitely sounds like amusement coming from Peggy. It makes his neck go hot but in a totally different way.

After class he manages to scrape past her without totally embarrassing himself but he hears Peggy’s small, “Excuse me, Rogers, was it?”

He turns, disbelieving. “Um. Yes?”

“I noticed you have Debate after lunch,” she says, confident but still slightly hushed. The tone of someone used to being strong, but unsure if this is the right environment to deploy it. “Do you mind walking with me so I can start to memorize where my classes are?”

Her voice rolls around the vowels like cream in iced coffee. Steve manages a nod. “Uh. Yes. I can
She smiles before pivoting so she avoids brushing into Bucky. They both watch her go. Steve shakes his shoulders like he’s coming out of a dream. “Did that happen?”

“Yep,” Bucky says. There’s a set to his jaw, one Steve’s never seen before. Almost as if he’s clenching it.

November.

“God, she’s so hot,” Victor groans. His head hits the locker next to Steve with a thud. “She’s like, Neve Campbell in Scream 2 hot.”

“How did you see Scream 2? Didn’t your mom flip out?” Steve wonders.

“My parents don’t care. Once I snuck some porn into the basement and nobody gave a shit.”

Steve adjusts his shoulder pads. “I don’t even want to know where you got porn.”

Victor gives his laces a final tug. “No big deal. I know a guy.”

Steve makes a face. “Okay, man, I don’t want to talk about porn and Peggy Carter in the same sentence.”

“I do!” Peter chirps from the back. The freshman is the youngest player on the varsity squad, and the only one scrawnier than Steve, who’s finally started to bulk up in the past few months.

“Parker, your virgin ears shouldn’t hear any of this.”

“How do you know I’m a –“

“Oh, boys, enough gossiping and let’s get on the ice!” barks Dugan, the senior defenseman with a body like a fridge. The younger guys quickly suit up and head out. Steve’s head is still full of Peggy. They’ve become good friends in the past two months; she actually has helped him make heads and tails of German grammar in their study sessions, which Steve keeps flatly denying are dates to the rest of the team. The only person it seems that isn’t too jazzed about this development is Bucky, which hurts Steve a little bit.

“I like her fine,” he reassures Steve one day at lunch. “I just want to make sure she’s good enough for our Stevie.” Erik snorts into his tuna sandwich. “Stevie? Really?”

“Yeah. Stevie. You got a problem with that, Von Doom?” Bucky fixes Erik with a glare.

“Okay, okay, easy!” Victor holds up his hands. “I guess people with weird nicknames shouldn’t throw stones.”

Bucky’s eyes narrow. “Bucky is a fantastic nickname, and I will never be persuaded out of it.”

“Yeah, don’t try it.” Steve fiddles with the wadded up foil to the side of his half-eaten turkey club, suddenly glad they’re off the topic of Peggy, if it will just get Bucky to stop whining about how she seems “hoity toity.”
Practice is brutal – Steve’s made huge improvements in his skating over the past few years but he’s got problems controlling his temper when things go wrong. At one point he misses an easy shot on goal and throws his stick down.

“Rogers! You pull that nonsense one more time and I swear to God I will bench you so hard tomorrow you’ll be spitting up wood chips for a week,” Coach Phillips barks. Steve grips his hands so hard he knows the nails are digging into the skin of his palms.

After practice he stays in the shower after the rest of the guys, putting his head against the wall. Letting the hot water run cold. Washing him clean.

When he gets out of the locker room he makes for the exit to head home.

“If you can’t learn to control your temper and put some of that drive into your overall skills, you won’t make it anywhere,” a lightly accented voice says, very calmly. Soothing.

Steve jerks his head to the left. Standing in the doorway of the rink is an older gentleman he’s never seen before. The man is slightly rumpled looking, but not in a way that would indicate cause for alarm. Instead, it makes him look odd. Endearingly so.

“I’m sorry, do you know me?” he says, wary. The man chuckles. “No, I suppose not. But I know you. My name is Abraham Erskine, I’m from Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.”

And then it all clicks.

Abraham Erskine, aka “The Doctor.” One of the top assistant coaches in the country. The guy Josten wouldn’t stop talking about the other day at their game against James Madison. Last year had been Steve’s first year to seriously consider that he could get looked at for a major college program spot; his asthma had been evening itself out with the help of some new medication, and he’d finally bulked up a little bit. Maybe things were going to work out in his favor? Quinnipiac was working its way up in the echelon of renowned hockey schools, and the location was pretty perfect. But…

“Is this a test?” he manages to eke out.

Erskine smiles. “Perhaps. Perhaps it’s also about seeing if you’d be interested in checking out the Quinnipiac Bobcats?”

*

“Holy shit!”

“JAMES BUCHANAN BARNES!”

“SORRY MA!” Bucky hollers past the closed door of his bedroom. “Steve,” he says, clapping his hands together. “This is amazing! I knew they’d be interested! You had such a good freshman year. Aside from the times you nearly punched people out. But you haven’t!” he added when he saw Steve’s face.

“I know. I know. It’s just all kind of overwhelming to think about.”

After their short talk, Erskine had agreed to come over to Steve’s apartment in a few days to speak to Sarah about the Quinnipiac program. He’d visit Hamden over the summer, talk to the head coach, Bruce Banner, and make a final decision by the end of junior year. It’s all so insane and stressful but incredible, like all of his hard work is paying off.
“Earth to Rogers,” Bucky cuts in. Steve whuffs out a small exhale that’s meant to be a laugh.
“Yeah. I know. One thing at a time, right?”

“Right. One thing at a time.” Bucky’s face was open, genuine. So honest it sometimes resulted in him getting the silent treatment from Steve because sometimes he didn’t want to hear the truth. But this wasn’t one of those times. Bucky was right.

“It’s gonna suck having to travel around and not get to come see you kick ass at Nationals, though,” he admits. He rearranges some of the cards in his Pokemon deck. Bucky nods. “That’s the way it is, though. I know you’re gonna watch though. Right? Word is Armin Zola is going to be there. He’s one of the best coaches in the country.” He smiles at Steve, teeth even and bright, fresh from two years of braces after the expander.
“We’re doing big things, Rogers. Better be ready for it.”

“Oh, I’m ready,” Steve replies wryly. “Let’s see if all of this can happen and I can ask Peggy out officially without making a total ass of myself.”

“Well, whatever makes you happy,” Bucky replies, and Steve notices he says it just a little too quickly, but he doesn’t bring it up.

*

“DAMMIT!”

“Steve, I know you’re mad, but can you please tone down the language?”

“But Ma! Bucky’s been practicing that jump for weeks and he…what was that word – he popped it!”

“That’s one of the required elements in this short program,” Dick Button intones from the TV. “Popping that axel, plus the double loop when he was supposed to do a triple and the ‘flutz’ on the other jump…all of this means he’s probably out of contention for placement on the podium here at the Rostelcom Cup. That means he won’t be considered for the Champion Series Final, Sandra.”

“It’s a shame, too, Dick, because no one works harder than James Barnes,” Sandra Bezic responds sorrowfully, that tone that always makes Steve want to kick the TV. “No one can touch him when it comes to artistry. He has the ability to make everyone watching feel the music.”

Sandra’s right, of course – Bucky’s still giving it his all in the program, feeling every single inch of the Glen Miller swing. It compliments his high energy skating style, flair for the dramatic, and captivating footwork. His two step sequences are consistently beautiful, highly intricate. It’s just…

“He needs to build muscle,” he says suddenly. His mother looks at him over her book. “For the jumps,” he explains. “If he got a little more power behind them he’d be better at sticking those landings. And he should work on his core.”

“Well, it sounds like someone’s been paying attention to Bucky when he talks about ballet!” Sarah clicks her tongue playfully at Steve, who ignores it.

Bucky finishes up the short program; Steve can tell by the set in his jaw he’s pissed. The Rostelcom Cup is one of the qualifying events for the Champion Series Final, one of the most prestigious annual skating tournaments after the World Championships. With a performance like this, Bucky won’t qualify for the Final, which doesn’t hurt his chances at Nationals or Worlds, but it doesn’t put him in the upper echelon of skaters like Ilia Kulik and Todd Eldredge (and no, Steve
hasn’t started learning the names of the star skaters, shut up). He’ll have another shot at the Nagano Olympics if he clears the top three at Nationals in January. Still.

“This is James’s second year at the Champions Series after moving up last year. He did very well at the junior level, winning one junior national championship and then going on to win bronze at junior Worlds, but unless he works on his consistency and athleticism, he might not parlay that success to the senior level.” continues Dick. Bucky makes his way to the kiss and cry accompanied by his coach, Charles Xavier. He bounces his legs, frustrated, before noticing the camera. With a flash, he turns on that Bucky Barnes charm. “Hi Mom, hi Dad, hi Becca!” he calls out, holding up a peace sign. “Steve, you better have my German notes!”

Steve feels a knot in his lower belly loosen; he didn’t remember any tension being there. The smile on Bucky’s face falters when the scores come in. He definitely won’t be medalizing. Good for fourth place, with a few more skaters to go.

“He’ll compete in the long program on Sunday but he won’t be going to the Series Final with those scores,” Sandra Bezic intones.

“Ugh, that’s a shame. But he’s still new!” Sarah says helpfully. “Once he gets a little older and works on those jumps, he’ll be amazing.”

“He already is amazing,” Steve murmurs. He looks at the slope of Bucky’s shoulders as Coach Charles whispers encouragement to him. Bucky’s got no poker face; he’s clearly gutted. Something in Steve’s chest hurts.


“I’m pretty sure this isn’t what Herr Schmidt had in mind when he asked us to find a study partner.”

“I think it’s perfectly acceptable. We’re eating German food, talking about his class, attempting to speak in German without getting slapped by the waiters.”

Peggy rolls her eyes. Steve is jubilant.

It’s their first official date. She’d finally cornered him after debate class, asked if he’d like to go out for dinner. Steve had looked over his shoulder before remembering Bucky was in Boston for Nationals that weekend. He was on his own.

He had quietly managed to stutter out “sure” before Peggy smiled. As she practically floated away, Erik slapped him on the back so hard it made Steve’s teeth chatter.

Bucky’s long program’s tonight – he’ll tell Bucky when it was all done. No need to bother him with his own stuff.

“So,” he says, after setting down his fork. “You’re only here for a year and then you go back to England, right?”

“Yes. It’s a major pain, because I really like it here. But it’s part of my study abroad program. I’m really invested in foreign languages. I think, one day, I’d like to work in politics back home.”

“You’d be great,” Steve says solemnly. He’s only known Peg for three months, but he’s pretty sure she’s the smartest person he’s ever met in his entire life. Apart from Ma. And Bucky, of course.
Peggy doesn’t respond verbally; just gives him a slow, shy smile that makes him sit up a little straighter in his seat.

“So, you think you’re going to go to Quinnipiac? How was your campus visit?”

“Maybe. It’s a great school. I really liked the campus. And it’s close by, so I can come back and visit my mom. But I’d really love to get on one of the farm teams for the NHL… it’s the teams they have players go to if they need extra time before they go fully pro,” he explains when Peggy raises an eyebrow. “I gotta keep working on my stamina, though, so I think going to college first is the way to go.” A quick glance down at his still-scranny bicep proves his argument correct. He’s come so far, but he’s got so much more to do before he can do anything but ride the bench for one of the big teams.

Peggy just smirks at him when he brings his eyes back up. “What?” he asks, defensive already. Peggy holds up the hand that isn’t holding a piece of stroopwafel. “You clearly just want to go to the pros and skip college, don’t you.” It isn’t a question.

“Well... yeah!” Steve laughs, the tension snapping. “But I don’t think that’s going to happen. Not unless there’s some kind of divine intervention.”

Peggy’s laugh is like church bells. “Well, I don’t know. You’re stronger than you think, Steve Rogers.”

And man, Steve has to try very hard to not blush at that.

He walks her home to her parent’s house in Flatbush; it’s close enough that he can catch a taxi back to Red Hook before his mom gets worried. Once they get there, Steve fiddles with the pockets of his jeans for a good ten seconds before the press of lips on his cheek makes his pulse skip. He looks up, stunned, but Peggy has already scooted inside.

Now there’s no hiding it – Steve is practically purple.

He races home just in time to catch the tail end of Nationals, right at the awards ceremony. “How did he do, Ma?” he hollers as he slams the door closed. Sarah holds up her hand, forbidding him from getting another inch into the apartment until he toes off his shoes into the mud room. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “How did he do?!”

“He’s getting pewter,” Sarah says.

Fourth place. Not bad for the general competition, but definitely not good enough to go on to the Olympics or Worlds. He gets that small tightness in his chest again as he watches Bucky receive the pewter medal. He waves to the crowd with a tiny smile that doesn’t do a thing to hide how much he’s probably hurting. Steve watches, the press of Peggy’s kiss forgotten in the urge to help his best friend get over the pain of missing out on his first Olympics as an eligible senior skater.

“I wonder if I should go over tomorrow when they come home.”

“I think that’s a lovely idea, but maybe wait until Monday? He might want to be by himself.” Sarah kisses the top of Steve’s head. “Now, how was your date with Peggy?”

“Oh, come on, Ma!”

“I’m going to assume that means it was good?”

*
“I’m fine, Steve, you don’t have to baby me around.”

“I’m not babying; I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I said I am, so drop it!”

Bucky’s teeth are gritted as he slams his locker door open. Steve throws up his hands, helpless. “Okay, so are we just going to ignore Nationals? Nagano? Worlds?”

“Yes, that would be preferable.” Bucky grabs his geometry notebook and ruler. The locker door is wide enough so Steve can see the pictures of Kurt Browning and Kristi Yamaguchi adorning the inside, along with his schedule for ballet classes. Steve opens his mouth to say more but Bucky closes his locker and marches off to Mrs. Munro’s class without a second glance.

He’d tried to call Bucky on Sunday, but he’d been greeted with an apologetic Winnie Barnes. “I’m sorry, Steve, Bucky doesn’t really want to talk about it.” When he finally saw Bucky at the beginning of the day, the harsh lines around Bucky’s eyes told him everything he needed to know. But he can’t help it. It’s Bucky.

Bucky avoids Steve for the rest of the day, which isn’t too difficult as they only have German and Debate together. He can feel Bucky’s glare on him when Peggy comes up to ask him if he’d like to get together this weekend; Steve just assumes it’s because he’s not making an effort to talk to him about what’s going on, but he’s not in the mood to have another fight with Bucky. There’s only one person more temperamental and stubborn than Steve Rogers, and that’s Bucky Barnes.

He’s throwing his sneakers into the locker at the rink for practice when he hears it: a soft whimper, trying to be silent, failing miserably.

“Bucky?”

The sound stops. That’s good enough for Steve.

He ventures into the bathroom. “Where are you?”

Silence.

“Man, don’t make me put my head under the stall. I’ll do it.”

The handicapped stall door slowly swings open. Bucky brackets the entryway, scrubbing his face to hide all evidence of his tears. His face is swollen, like he’s been in here for a long time. Any annoyance Steve had felt for the duration of the day rushes out of him in a second. “Buck…”

“I really wanted to go to the Olympics,” Bucky chokes out.

“I know,” Steve murmurs.

“That isn’t all,” Bucky says.

“What else?”

Bucky looks up at the ceiling, like he’s trying to will himself not to cry anymore. “Arnim Zola was at Nationals…and so was Alexander Pierce.”

Alexander Pierce is one of the most respected – and most controversial – names in the world of figure skating. His methods of training are brutal, but highly effective. Several of his former protégés have gone on to be Olympic and World champions. He’s currently based in Detroit,
Michigan.

“Did he not want to watch your routine or something?” Steve leans his hand on the bathroom wall, feeling a bit confused. Bucky shakes his head.

“No…after the event he came up to me and Mom. Wanted to know if I would be interested in getting coached by him.”

“…Bucky, that’s amazing!” Steve cries. “Coach Pierce is incredible, I mean, I don’t understand why you aren’t doing backflips right now.”

“Because if I start training with him, I have to switch to his club,” Bucky says. His voice is almost numb.

“Wait. Isn’t he-“

And then it hits him.

Bucky’s moving to Detroit.

A hole like a bottomless chasm opens in Steve’s stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Title of this chapter is the motto of the 1998 Winter Olympics, held in Nagano, Japan.

The Champion Series Final is now known as the Grand Prix Final - the medalists in the Champions Series Final in 1997 were Ilia Kulik, Elvis Stojko, and Todd Eldredge. Ilia and Elvis went on to win the gold and silver medals in Nagano (Philippe Candeloro of France won his second straight bronze).

Sandra Bezic and Dick Button used to do commentary a lot for figure skating in the United States - Scott Hamilton as well. They have since been replaced by Tara Lipinski and Johnny Weir; I personally think they are MUCH better, but that’s just me.

Quinnipiac is a VERY good hockey school in Hamden, Connecticut, and it's also a good school in general. I also am familiar with the area, so it's going to give me an opportunity to namedrop a bunch of Hamden businesses. :)

ALL ABOARD THE ANGST TRAIN EXPRESS.

tumblr!!
**Senior Year**

Chapter Summary

In which Steve is a total and utter idiot and a really bad boyfriend and UGH.

Chapter Notes

I'M SORRY.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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December, 1999.

**Local Hockey Star Signs with Bobcats**

Steven Rogers, senior left winger for the Abraham Lincoln Railsplitters, has officially signed committed to Quinnipiac University. The Bobcats have enjoyed a surge of success over the last few years after transferring to Division I; under new coach Bruce Banner, they’ve won the past two MAAC Regular Season Championships. Rogers would be a welcome addition to their offensive line.

“I greatly enjoyed my visits to Hamden over the summer, and look forward to getting started with Coach Banner,” Rogers said over the phone. “My goal is to help Quinnipiac get to the Frozen Four.”

Rogers led the team in goals scored during his junior year with the Railsplitters after getting some training with QU assistant coach and team trainer Abraham Erskine. “Coach Erskine has been instrumental in helping me with my stamina, skating skills, and overall fitness,” Steve added; since his sophomore year, Rogers has gained twenty pounds of muscle with the help of trainers and a change in his dietary regimen. He insisted to us that no alternative measures were taken to achieve his new physique: “I just worked really hard.”

We wish Rogers the best of luck with the Bobcats!

*

**Brooklyn Native Wins Grand Prix**

James Buchanan Barnes of Flatbush the Grand Prix Final on Sunday night. The event, one of the most important in the figure skating season, is the culmination of six separate qualifying events.

After not participating in the Grand Prix last year due to an arm injury after a hard fall in training, Barnes went on this year to win Skate Canada and proceeded to score two 6.0s for artistic impression.

“I could not have done any of this without the help of my coach, Alexander Pierce,” says Barnes in a prepared statement to the press; he moved to Detroit after his sophomore year of high school to train with the famous skating coach. “Alexander took a chance on me, and it has made all of
“the difference in my skating and jumping ability. I am a better skater due to his influence.”

“James is a superb artist,” Pierce says. “He’s a skilled interpreter of the music, and his jumps have gotten much better now that he’s working on his overall strength. I wouldn’t be surprised if he makes it to Salt Lake City in two years. Actually, I would be surprised if he didn’t!”

Barnes placed third in the US Nationals last year, just one shy of getting to participate in the 1999 World Figure Skating Championships. After his triumph in the Grand Prix tonight, he says, he’s got his eye on the top spot on the podium this year and a secure place at this year’s tournament in Nice, France, at the end of March.

“You were amazing!”

“Oh, come on, I totally fucked up that one jump.”

Steve vaguely hears Winnie Barnes sigh, “James…” to which Bucky hollers “Sorry!” near enough to the receiver to nearly make him deaf.

“Yeah, okay, you stepped out a teeny little bit on the axel. You had everyone on their feet during your step sequence at the end, and that last spin? Come on.” Steve kicks his feet up on his desk. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

He can hear Bucky smiling through the phone. “Yeah, I guess.”

“No, you know you crushed it, Buck, don’t even give me that shit.”

“Fine, okay. I crushed it.” Bucky chuckles. His voice has dropped a little bit in the last year and a half. It makes him sound older, but not in a bad way. It’s an easy, rumpled sound, like slipping into a plaid shirt Steve’s worn a dozen times. Now that he’s got his own Nokia phone, he and Bucky have been talking a least a few times a week when they’re not in training.

“So when am I gonna see you, huh?” he says. He drills a pencil against his desk as he surveys his Calculus homework. This is what they do now – Bucky and Steve, studying together over the phone, shooting the shit, procrastinating. It’s just over the phone instead of in person. Not good enough. But enough for now. “How long’s it been, since, like, that one week in July?”

“Yeah, you’re lucky I was able to get away for that one week, man, the summer is when I’m prisoner to Pierce, but I had to for your birthday!” Bucky sounds like he’s full of longing for home. That strange twist in Steve’s chest that he gets sometimes is there again. It’s not asthma; truth be told, Steve doesn’t really know what the fuck it is.

“So are you coming home for the holidays?”

Pause. When Bucky speaks again it sounds a little tight. “I don’t think so. I gotta get ready for Nationals and stuff.”

Bucky’s parents had obviously moved with him to Detroit once Pierce had convinced them it was an opportunity of a lifetime. That part hurt almost as much as just Bucky leaving; Steve saw Winifred and George Barnes as secondary parents, especially in the years after his Dad passed away. Of course, he still had Ma, and the team, and Peggy. But it wasn’t the same. They weren’t the Barnes family. They weren’t Bucky adjacent.

“Maybe you can come home for prom?” he teases, coughing a little to hide the sudden thickness in his throat. “I’m pretty sure Peggy’s gonna make me wear a penguin suit. Don’t know how I’ll find one that fits.” He pulls at his shirt. They’re all too tight now. Everything fits weird. Except for his hockey pads. Those finally fit like they were meant to.
“Oh. I thought you guys broke up?”

“Oh. Well, yeah. For a little bit over the summer when she went back home. And don't act like you weren't thrilled, you still call her 'Mary Poppins.'”

“What!?” Bucky acts offended. “I was perfectly nice to her when I came home for your birthday.”

That's true: Bucky had been very genial during his visit from Michigan. Steve makes a split decision to not tell Bucky exactly what led to the breakup, which occurred after Buck went back to Detroit.

(“I’m not saying you have to spend every single second with me, but Bucky comes home for a few days and I barely hear from you for nearly a week while you're over there, doing God knows what?” “What’s that supposed to mean?” “It means I’m tired of being the third wheel here.” “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” “You still don’t know a bloody thing about women.”)

During the two weeks Bucky was home Steve tried to get any information out of him that he could about the girls back in Michigan, but Bucky had merely laughed and waved it off with a "I'm a busy guy, Stevie!"

He clears his throat. “We talked it out though. Everything’s fine.” Not only that, Peggy had come back to Brooklyn with a decision to stay in Brooklyn for another two years and finish out her high school career at Abraham Lincoln. The news thrilled Steve and severely bothered Bucky. Buck had tried to put on a happy face, even offering up a hearty “Congrats!” when Steve had called him in September at 1 AM on a Sunday to tell him, breathlessly, he’d lost his virginity. Steve knew Peggy rubbed Bucky the wrong way. He just didn’t know why, and Bucky wouldn’t tell him. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No,” Bucky says, too quickly, “I mean, depending on when prom is, I might be able to make that happen. It’s just…the spring has a lot of stuff going on. Nationals and Worlds and a bunch of other things.”

“Yes, I know,” Steve says, suddenly feeling really tired. He doesn’t like arguing with Bucky. It makes him really angry, like there’s something in him just waiting to spiral out of control. “Just miss your stupid face, that’s all.” He tries to keep his voice light to hide the weariness.

There’s a long pause. “Also, uh, can we talk about how you’re getting huge?” Bucky says, finally. “That picture, man. You on steroids or something?” His voice is always a little higher when he’s amused or impressed. It crinkles up at the end of his sentences like a dissonant chord that shouldn’t work but it does.

Steve bursts out laughing. “No, I swear! I’m just on this diet that got recommended to me by Coach Phillips and Erskine. It’s kind of nuts. I’m eating all the damn time. But it’s working!”

Erskine had been pretty clear that if Steve wanted to get a lot of playing time, he had to take his fitness more seriously. With his asthma fading as he grew, Steve could finally work out the way he had always wanted to and took that singlemindedness that drove his Ma crazy to the practice of getting built. It was working.

“Clearly,” Bucky laughs. “I mean, you were getting bigger when I saw you this summer, but you look like I need to accuse you of being the guy who ate Steve Rogers.”

“Oh, shut up, you’ve been putting on muscle too.” It’s true. Bucky had been finally doing more lifting as well as flexibility training, and as a result, he’s incorporated more difficult footwork and jumps into his repertoire. He’s been landing quad salchows consistently in practice, but he’s not
Sure if he’ll do it at Nationals.

“Yeah, but I miss New York food. I miss bagels. The bagels out here suck, Steve. I want a real bagel. One that was made with the love and care of a bakery guy that knows my order because he’s been working there since before I was born.”

“Well then that’s all the reason for you to come home this spring!” Steve says. “We can go to Eli’s and I can give you a huge bag of them to take back with you to Detroit.”

“See, Steve?” Bucky sighs. “This is why you and I are friends.”

“Best friends.”


“Mom, what’s up? About to get into the locker room to suit up.”

“He did it.”

Steve’s legs go numb for a split second, unable to comprehend. “No way.”

“Yep.” There’s a rustling sound – Steve quickly realizes his mom’s putting the house phone up to the TV. Through the crackling static, he hears Dick Button say, “What wonderful moment for James, after his heartbreaking performance during the 1998 season, then moving to Detroit, going through his coaching changes, then getting Bronze last year, to finally having a breakthrough performance here in Cleveland. Your 2000 National Champion is James Barnes!”

Steve fistpumps so hard he almost hears his shoulder pop a little bit. Peter gives him an odd look as the younger guy moves into the locker room. Steve puts his hand over his phone to mute it. “Bucky won Nationals!”

“No friggin way, that’s awesome!” Peter gives him a high-five.

Steve says back into the phone, “Mom please tell me you’re taping it.”

“Of course, I’m not an idiot!”

“Never thought you were. Thanks, Ma.”


“Everything okay?” Peggy looks up at him.

“Yeah. Just…ah – give me a minute.”

He can’t stand it. Can’t stand Peggy’s patient eyes, limpid with a hint of an edge, watching him as he stares down the length of her body. She’s glorious – all curves and hips and breasts, the last remnants of red lipstick smeared across his own chest. His brain wants her. His heart adores her.

His dick couldn’t be less interested.
He takes himself in hand, gives himself a few lackluster pulls. “Fuck,” he murmurs.

“You’ve been having a lot of really long nights, Steve,” Peggy says, voice so soothing it makes Steve momentarily furious. “I’m sure you’re just tired.”

“Yeah. I bet that’s it.” Steve scrubs at his eyes with his left hand. His right hand still cupped around his balls, as if nudging them a little will get the entire system to work. Like a jumper cable on a car or something.

“Do you want me to – ” he motions to Peggy. He doesn’t want her to be unsatisfied. She doesn’t deserve anything less than spectacular.

“Well, if someone’s going to get an orgasm, I hope it’s me,” Peggy teases, but her eyes are incredibly fond. That rage burns up in Steve again, curling up the small of his back. He wonders if that alone would be enough to get him hard. No dice.

He presses kisses down her stomach. They’ve been sexually active for about a year, and at its best, it’s been great. But every once and a while this will happen, nights when Steve can’t get it up to save his life. He privately fears it’s because of his new weight training and nutrition plans – and although Steve loves Sarah Rogers more than anything on the planet, he’ll be damned if he’s going to talk about his dick with his mother.

He always makes it up to Peggy, though, and he’s gotten pretty good at figuring out what she likes. Soon, she’s panting heavily, threading her fingers through his hair as her hips cant upward towards his mouth. He tries to think just about her. He loves her. He does.

April, 2000.

“Steve, you’re gripping the couch. Any harder and you’re paying for repairs.”

“Sorry, Ma.” Steve puts his hands in his lap. Peggy’s curled up against his side, nibbling on some cruditées, while Bucky skates out to the center of the ice for his long program. He’s grown a few inches, and his outfit – a black suit with a hint of sparkle around the collar – is, a according to an interview with Pierce, “a decision to let James grow up a little bit on the ice. He’s no longer the skinny guy with the spins. He’s now eighteen and he’s matured into a true athlete as well as an artist.” The music choice, too, speaks to a newfound maturity. The opening strains of Bizet’s Carmen fill the Palais de Exposition Nice, and Steve leans forward onto the couch. Peggy lets out a small voiced wince; Steve realizes, a little late, that her hand was now squished in the closing space between his hip and quadricep. “Oh, sorry!” he exclaims. He presses a kiss to her fingers as he moves her hand out of the way. Peggy doesn’t really meet his gaze.

He stares at the TV, at Bucky’s lines. “He’s got a quad planned, I think,” he announces to no one in particular. "He didn't do one when he did this program at the Grand Prix." Steve’s right: the next jump, a quad salchow, goes off pretty well, but Bucky does have to do a three-point turn to avoid stepping out or falling off his skates. As long as he stays upright on the triple lutz and the triple-triple combinations he has planned, he’s got a shot at a medal.

Come on, Buck. You can do this. You can do this.

Triple toe, triple toe.

Step sequence.
Three more triples.

Flying camel.

Step out on the triple axel.

Cantilever.

Gorgeous Biellmann spin – “He’s one of the few men who can do that with regularity,” Sandra Bezic remarks. “It requires a lot of flexibility and it can be very hard on your back, but James has been working very hard with a dancer from the Mariinsky Ballet, and it shows in his skating. He’s made incredible strides the past year.”

Once the Toreador music starts up, Bucky’s jumps are done, and the entire rink comes to its feet with the artistry and passion of his final step sequence. He’s commanding the ice like he’s taming a bull, all sharp, clean choreography and a wicked grin. Steve’s smiling so wide it’s like he’s stretching his mouth out with a hanger.

When the routine finishes, he finally relaxes his body (when did he clench up like that?) and turns to his mom and girlfriend. “That was amazing. He’s bound to get something, right?”

“Definitely. He’s gotten so much better!” Sarah says it with a grin that rivals Steve’s. Peggy smiles too, but is silent.

“And look at who’s thrilled for him too,” Dick Button says, popping the celebratory mood as the camera swings to a gorgeous, muscular girl in the stands, jumping up and down and whistling. Her short blonde hair is cropped on the sides, giving her a powerful demeanor.

“Carol Danvers is expected to take home a medal tomorrow night during the ladies singles final night, and she and James have been quietly seeing each other, isn’t that right, Sandra?”

“Yes, they share Alexander Pierce as a coach, and they’ve apparently been spending a lot of time together. What a charming development – they might be the new it couple of skating!”

“Steve? You’re gripping the couch again.”

*

“Well, congratulations, Mr. Big Time Silver Medalist of the World!”

“Steve, come on.” But Steve can tell Bucky’s grinning. It makes his voice slur a little, like he’s drunk on his happiness. Steve pops a hard boiled egg into his mouth. While he chews, Bucky’s tone gets more thoughtful as he adds in “I mean, I gotta work on my triple axel. Pierce was pissed I stepped out of it.”

“But everything else was clean, and you were so good on your spins and stuff! Can’t he be happy with that?”

“Nope.” There’s a bite now in Bucky. He pops the plosive.

Steve quickly changes the subject. “So, uh, you gonna come home any time soon so I can give you a congratulatory hug in person?”

“Oh, actually, I was planning on telling you this anyway, but since you called to congratulate me on my fabulous performance” (Steve snorts) “I can come home the weekend of graduation!”
“No way!”

“No…way!”

“WAY!”

“Excellent!”

They both crack up.

“Okay, I gotta go get changed for the exhibition gala. Make sure you get your Mom to tape it, I know you’ll be at the Rangers game.” He laughs. "At some point we’re going to need to compare VHS tapes. I’m pretty sure I’ve got, like twenty of your damn games on the same two tapes.”

“Really?” Steve says, surprise filtering into his voice.

“Hell yes I do. I make Mom tape all of your games.”

And damn, if that doesn’t make Steve flush all the way down to his ankles.

“Oh yeah, uh, they showed that girl Carol. Good work, man. She’s gorgeous.”

“What?”

“They said on TV that you were dating that girl, Carol Danvers? She won the ladies event?”

There’s a long, strange silence. “No. We aren’t dating. We’re just really good friends.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, Steve.” Bucky’s got that hollow sound he gets when the conversation needs to end. “I gotta go.”

* 

When Steve gets back from the game (3-0 good guys), he goes straight for the VCR. He fast-forwards until Bucky’s two routines. The first one, a comedic one set to the “Skating” music from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, makes Steve laugh hysterically. Bucky’s all dressed up in a scarf and hat, and the performance is geared towards making fun of pompous figure skaters. His lines are exaggerated, his jump landings completely over the top. He ends with a flourish and a giant bow, blowing kisses until his USA teammate John Zimmerman has to yank him off the ice in an extended comic bit.

The next routine, done a little while later, completely catches Steve off guard. Bucky skates slowly onto the ice, dressed in skintight jeans and a combination mesh/leather tank top.

“This is a new exhibition piece for James, he’s debuting it tonight in Nice. He says it’s a song he’s wanted to skate to since he first heard it on the radio two years ago.”

*Boy, I’ve been watching you like a hawk in the sky*

*That fly, and you are my prey…*

There aren’t a lot of jumps in this exhibition piece. Steve remembers Bucky watching a tape of Kurt Browning’s "Johnny Guitar” exhibition piece on repeat a few years ago, and clearly this is meant to emulate that performance. It’s mainly focused on how hard Bucky can feel the music,
how much he can impersonate the dance moves of Aaliyah. His movements are a challenge, almost a plea. At one point he stands stock still and raises his hands to the sky, as if begging God for reprieve, before throwing a wink to some of the girls in the stands.

*Oh boy, see, I’m trustin’ you with my heart, my soul, I probably shouldn’t let you go*
*If I let this go, you can’t tell nobody, I’m talking about nobody*
*I hope you’re responsible,*
*Boy I gotta watch my back, ‘cause I’m not just anybody*

*Is it my goal, or is it your goal?*
*Sometimes I’m goody-goody, right now I’m naughty-naughty*
*Say yes or say no, ‘cause I really need somebody*
*Tell me are you that somebody?*

Steve hasn’t had an asthma attack in a very long time, but as Bucky moves, he finds it very difficult to breathe.

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**May, 2000.**

“This isn’t going to work, is it?”

“No. I’m so sorry, Steve. It’s just…I think there’s a lot here that hasn’t been said.”

“What are you talking about? I love you.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then what is it? I don’t get it.”

“No. You don’t. But you will. Someday. For your sake.”

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**June, 2000.**

“Hey, have you seen Bucky?”

“I think he’s in the bathroom. But if you find him somewhere else tell him I’m about to kick his ass at Mario Kart.”

Steve laughs and high-fives Milo as he grabs another can of seltzer – Lensherr’s graduation party is dry due to the presence of adults all over the place. That’s not to say Erik didn’t sneak in booze, but Steve’s headed to Quinnipiac in a few days to meet the whole team, and he doesn’t want any trouble between now and then. Peggy isn’t here, either – she decided to forgo the party in order to get some packing done. She flies back to London right after graduation, on Monday. They’ve worked through the initial pain of their breakup to a place of just occasional extreme awkwardness.

Buck’s only back for a few days, but it’s felt like he’s never left. The second Steve picked him up at the airport they were inseparable again, especially after Bucky found out Steve and Peggy were done. It made Steve mad in a way he couldn’t quite explain, even though he knew deep down he and Peggy were never going to go to the distance.

The sound of heavy breathing draws him over to one of the guest bedrooms (Erik’s parents are
He pops open the door, guarded. “Everything okay in here -“

He stops with his hand on the door.

Bucky’s on the bed. He’s not alone.

He’s underneath someone.

They aren’t naked, but they’re both covered in a fine rose gold glow from a small lamp in the corner. Bucky’s shirt is off, tensile strength on full display. It takes a second for Steve to tear his eyes away from Bucky’s chest to recognize the other guy in the room.

Guy.

Kurt Wagner. A German transfer student this year, Kurt was well-known on campus for his artistic ability. He’s going to a Catholic college next year. The dim lamplight glances off the St. Christopher medal he always wears around his neck.

“I…” Steve starts, then quickly realizes he’s got nothing else to say. He’s only partially aware of his heart crashing down to the bottom of his stomach, sloshing around in there with the pulled chicken nachos he ate earlier.

His feet propel him away from the door, down the hall, past the groups of partiers, and out of the brownstone. Once in the air, Steve gulps down oxygen like he’s dying. For a moment he panics, wondering if he should have brought his inhaler, even though he hasn’t needed it since sophomore year.

He knows Bucky’s flying steps before any words are said, and he turns around to see Bucky come crashing out the front door. “Steve, wait!”

His nimble piano fingers smooth over his shirt; he clearly just put it back on. His hair is halfway flattened down, halfway sticking up, like he ran one hand over it while yanking his shirt on with the other. Steve notices, with a pull to his abdomen, that Bucky’s lips have the barest trace of teeth marks to them, as if Kurt were biting down. That pull turns into a full yanking feeling when Steve sees the barest purple blush of a hickey on Bucky’s neck.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were…” he gestures, frantically.

Bucky goes pale. “I…do you…is that not something you’d…”

“What?” Steve snaps, barely able to think. All he can see is red, and purple, and white, and bee-stung, bitten lips, and the bluish bruise of someone else’s mouth on Bucky’s skin, and, and, and…

He shuts his eyes to get rid of it all. When he opens them again, Bucky’s gone.

It isn’t until he gets home that Steve’s panic attack bursts from him like the little chest-burster in *Alien.*

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*Local World Medalist Forgoes College*

*James Barnes, reigning World silver medalist figure skater, announced on Monday that he is forgoing college and instead will be moving to St. Petersburg, Russia. The move comes in order*
for Barnes to continue training with his coach, Alexander Pierce, who has moved to St. Petersburg to train reigning bronze medalist Piotr Nikolaievitch Rasputin of Irkutsk. The move will also be fortuitous for Barnes’s cross-training; he will be taking classes at the Mariinsky Ballet, one of the top ballet schools and companies in the world.

Chapter End Notes

I SAID I'M SORRY BUT I SWEAR THIS WHOLE THING WILL HAVE A HAPPY ENDING I PROMISE YOU.

Song Bucky skated to, "Are You That Somebody" by Aaliyah.

Kurt Browning, "Johnny Guitar", aka the sexiest goddamn thing ever.

Tumblr!
Chapter Summary

“You know this is exactly why you didn’t get picked for Turin, right? First season playing for the league and you’re already notorious as the guy who punches everyone.” Sam’s voice on the other end of the line isn’t very judgmental, it’s more just the painful reminder that the guy is always right.

Chapter Notes

I’M BACK! So sorry this took so long, grading took forever. This was actually going to be a much longer chapter but I wanted to get at least something up before we devolve into FULL AND TOTAL EMOTIONAL MANPAIN in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


Steve sees nothing but blood.

Blood pouring from Dernier’s face, where Batroc bodychecked had bodychecked the defenseman into the Plexi. Blood roaring in front of Steve’s eyes. Blood pumping the chambers of his heart.

In college, Steve took anatomy/physiology and they got to dissect a pig heart. The professor talked about how pig hearts were the most similar to humans; there were even people out there who had received pig heart valve transplants. Steve had looked down at his chest, henley shirt obscuring the long scar like melted wax on his skin. He’d gotten life-saving surgery on his heart when he was young. A pig heart would have been interesting.

These are the types of facts Steve thinks about desperately so he won’t punch Batroc’s fucking lights out for punking Dernier like that. Batroc is already known as being a piece of shit, but normally Steve’s able to ignore it. Thankfully Rocket and Remy manage to yank him back. “You punch him you’re out for three games,” Remy, a giant enforcer, hisses in his Quebecois lilt. Steve goes lax. The crowd is screaming for Batroc’s head but the refs already have the situation in hand. He’s heading off to the box when he catches Steve’s glare, yells out in French “I thought you were more than just your pads!”

“On va voir,” Steve snarls, before Rocket slaps their sticks together. He meets the right winger's eyes, and takes a full step back; dark and hooded, they command don’t you fucking do this. You can’t afford to do this.

They’re right, of course. But the blood still drips behind Steve’s eyes and into his brain.

Final score: Senators 1, Flames 2. At least they win.

After the game, Dernier meets up with Steve as he’s headed out of the showers. His nose is still puffy, already turning a little bluish purple at the tip, but it doesn’t look like he broke it. “Thank
you,” he says quietly, thickly, in his accented English. “Batroc is such a…ah…” pushes his eyebrows together, chasing the word.


* 

“You know this is exactly why you didn’t get picked for Turin, right? First season playing for the league and you’re already notorious as the guy who punches everyone.” Sam’s voice on the other end of the line isn’t very judgmental, it’s more just the painful reminder that the guy is always fucking right.

Steve tries to curl up on his couch and fails miserably; he’s too big now. “Harsh, man.”

“Am I wrong? Kid, you’re got a fire like a bag full of TNT in the arms of a drunk baby.” That smooth voice. It always cuts straight to the chase. “You’ve always been a shit-stirrer, ever since the day I met you when you were gonna kill that frat guy for slapping America Chavez’s ass.”

“America punched the guy in the balls, clearly she didn’t need my help.”

“Don’t change the subject, Rogers,” Sam retorts, but it doesn’t have a lot of bite. “Now you’re just gonna fuck around with your rep on a national stage? The National Team isn’t stupid, Rogers. You’re a liability. You aren’t good for Team USA with your anger.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Steve scrubs his arm across his face. The moon is high and swollen in the sky. He looks back at the TV. He’s got the Grand Prix Final from last month saved on Tivo. He could watch it. He always tells himself he’ll watch one of them.

“So, are you finally going to tell me why you’re always so fucking agitated? Or am I gonna have to wait until you literally explode?” Sam is infinitely patient. It’s more than Steve deserves. Ever since they met at QU, Sam’s been a guiding force in Steve’s life, but only up to a point, because, in Sam’s words, “I got my own fuckin’ life, kid.”

Steve stares hard at the Tivo listings. They offer no answers, only more questions. “Only two people in my life that’ve ever been able to get me to calm down.”

He immediately changes the subject before he can get too much into that Pandora’s Box. “I should be congratulating you instead. Mr. ‘America’s Hope For The Future of Olympic Bobsleigh.’”

“Fuck off, man,” Sam says, good-naturedly. “You know that wasn’t about me. That was just a stupid article.”

“Yeah, and you look so annoyed by all of it on the cover of the damn magazine,” Steve smirks, looking over the special edition Olympics issue of ESPN on the end table. On the cover is Sam and his sledding partner, Riley, looking regal and five types of badass as they stand next to their sled. They’re suited up in their Team USA gear, ready to take on the world in Turin. “Good thing you guys made the team, or else that would have been a real embarrassing cover,” he chuckles.

“I did not call to get abused,” Sam says, primly. “I’ll talk to you later. You should read the whole issue, it’s really good. Unless you’re still bitter about not making the team.”

“Now who’s turn is it to fuck off?!” Steve exclaims.
“You don’t have to just run out,” the man says, louchiest of the louche. Steve gives himself a look in the mirror. He’s got a bruise on the base of his throat but he can excuse it. A playing injury. He’s sore, but not too sore that he can’t play later. “Got a game tomorrow. Tonight.”

“Well, this was fun,” the man, a giant named Drax, says. He stretches out on the purple and red sheets, mindful of the wet spot. Steve jerks out a nod. “Yep.”

“Huh. Not so much with the pillow talk.”

Steve gets his belt on. Avoiding the other man’s gaze. It burns the back of his skull. “Listen, ah, you can’t tell anyone about this. I’m-“

“Left-winger for the Flames. I’m gay, not an idiot.” Drax chuckles at the look of abashed guilt on Steve’s face. “Hey, you can relax. You think you’re the first hockey player that’s come through here? That league doesn’t exactly roll out the welcome mat for guys like us, even if they’re butch studs.” He rolls over to grab a carton of cigarettes. “Don’t worry about it,” he continues, wrapping his mouth around the end of a Camel. “Secret is safe with me.”

Steve’s completely lost. Adrift. He stares hard at his shoes as he shoves his feet inside them. He can feel Drax smirking as he blows a ring of smoke towards the window. As Steve slips out the door he can hear the other man call “Next time you play here let me know. I put my number in your phone.”

Sophomore year of college Steve met Peter Quill at a fraternity party. Tall, blond, brash. Sexy as hell. He looked at Steve in a way that shot sparks up his spine.

They had their first kiss in Peter’s parked car a few nights later, after going to see Ocean’s 11. A month later, Peter fucked him.

For so many years Steve didn’t know what these desires were inside of him, these unnamable feelings he couldn’t trace back to any source. Sure, he’d stuck up for friends of his who were gay or bi plenty of times. Applauded when Massachusetts and Connecticut legalized gay marriage. But this was inside of him. It wasn’t until Peter kissed him, put his hands on Steve’s naked body, put his mouth around Steve’s dick, that it clicked. Oh. Oh.

They continued to hook up until Peter graduated at the end of the year. They never put a name on what they were doing. “Fucking, I believe the kids call it. Hooking up. Doing the dirty. On the downlow,” Peter had said, mouthing his way up Steve’s spine as Howie Day droned on in the background.

It wasn’t that Steve didn’t like Peter. He did. Peter was funny and charismatic and was never cruel to him, and the break-up (or the “probably shouldn’t fuck after I graduate, I’m moving to Chicago for law school” discussion) was amicable enough. He just didn’t feel the need to make it into anything serious. Thankfully, neither did Peter.

The only person who found out about it was Sam, who merely raised an eyebrow and told him to get condoms from their RA, then dodged as Steve threw an empty beer can at him.

Since then, Steve’s dated a few people. Guys and girls. They were all fine. Serviceable.

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, we are not kidding you, Rogers.”

“I wish I were,” Nick Fury grumbles. Phil Coulson’s jaw quirks like he’s trying not to smile. “This wasn’t a decision we’ve made lightly, Steve,” he says, shooting Fury a look. “We’re in a real bind here. Rollins blew out his knee in practice two days ago and we’re short a man for Turin. And as the head coach and Team USA liaison, Coach Fury and I wanted to meet with you in person to talk about it.”

“Personally, I’m not really excited about this decision, considering you have a reputation of hitting every face you see,” Fury said, cutting right to the chase like a knife through bone. The head coach of the New York Rangers, Nick Fury is notorious throughout the league for his no-nonsense style and outrageously quotable pressers. Being in the same room with him was making Steve break into a flop sweat. The other man, Team USA hockey liaison Phil Coulson, was a more gentle presence, but no less commanding. His office was covered in memorabilia from Olympics past; Steve recognized all of it, of course, with his near-addictive knowledge of the game at an international level. In a place of honor behind Phil’s head was a photo of the 1980 Lake Placid Team, the ones that accomplished the Miracle on Ice.

Steve can’t really hear anything else they say – something about travel times and missing some games with Calgary and how they really want him to promise that he’ll be on his best behavior in Turin, and how it’s going to be a big deal to have him there because it’s his first year in the NHL but he was a stud at Quinnipiac, declaring for the draft after his junior year, getting his feet wet at the farm level before the Flames picked him up in 2004, working on his fitness during the lockout year, and now having the potential to be one of the greats in the league if he would only work on his goddamn temper or else he’d get drop-kicked back to the States (“Easy, Nick,” Phil soothes) –

But it’s all scrambling around in his brain, frying and sizzling, the only thing coming up with any clarity is the word Olympics rolling around the batter of his head –

All of the work, the blood, the sweat, the tears if he’s being honest with himself, the nights of extra work on the ice, the crazy diet Erskine put him on, the study halls in hotels during team trips, the years away from Brooklyn, his friends, his mom, the year off during the lockout when he thought he was going ballistic in the gym, wondering if any of it was worth it, now he’s going to get a chance to show that it was, it was –

“Earth to Rogers,” Fury intones.

“Fuck. Oh! Sorry. Shit. Ah!” Steve pushes his hands into his thighs so they’ll stop jittering.

“Keep your shorts on, Rogers. Do you want to go to the Olympics?” Nick’s face, threatening even under the best circumstances, presents with the barest hint of a smile.

“Yes. Yes yes yes,” Steve blusters. His hands shake so hard he worries he’ll rip Fury and Coulson’s hands off as he shakes their hands, signs the forms. They’ll announce it tomorrow morning on ESPN, and then he’ll fly out to train with the team in Colorado before heading out to Turin. He’s a late addition so he won’t have much time to bond with his teammates, Fury says, but that’s all right – “You’re a rookie, you won’t play very much.”
That might have popped a hole in Steve’s happiness at any other time but right now he’s too high to give a shit. He’s going to the fucking Olympics.

He barely makes it through the front door of his house before breaking down and dialing his ma. “Ma…Rollins got hurt. I got called up. I’m going to the Olympics.”

There’s a few minutes of screaming, crying, and expletives by all parties on the phone. When they both manage to calm down, Sarah eeks out “My goodness, this is such amazing timing. It’s almost kismet! You and Bucky, going to the Olympics together, oh God, wait until I get Winnie on the phone—“

“Back up, Ma. What?”

“Well, yeah. Bucky placed second at Nationals so he’s going to the Olympics, too! Didn’t you know that?”

No, Steve did not know that. Steve’s been deliberately avoiding any news about Bucky for two years, once he finally gave up on trying to contact him. It’s been relatively easy to not think about him. He just avoids any and all coverage on figure skating.

“No,” he manages. If his mother can hear the double meaning in that word, she doesn’t say anything.

“Yep. Thank goodness, too. He had that back injury, couldn’t go to Salt Lake City. Broke his heart, too, judging by what Winnie said. Poor thing’s constantly getting hurt, I don’t know what kind of training they do in Russia, but apparently it’s not good. When’s the last time you talked to him?”

He can’t lie. But he can’t tell the truth, either. “Not for a little while.”

“Well, call him or message him or something. He’d love to know you’re going to Italy!”

*Would he?* Steve wants to shout. But he doesn’t do that to his mom.

The last time Steve messaged Bucky, right after 2004 Worlds, the silence had been way too loud. He considers the comparison between the silence then and now as he flips a spoon with his free hand, observing the fridge he’d opened while Ma had talked. Now his appetite is ebbing.

If Steve’s really honest with himself, it’s been too much damn effort to not think about Bucky. Since giving up on contacting him, he thought he’d kept it together pretty nicely. But that’s not what Steve’s stomach seems to think. It roils with acid, sliding up his esophagus.

In the vague part of him located next to reality, he can hear Mom say she’s gotta get back to work. Bullshitting out a goodbye, Steve keeps the phone next to his ear for a little while, at least until he can sit down at his computer. His eyes bore into the email address he can’t bring himself to delete.

*Bucky,*

*Hi. I know it’s been a while. But I wanted to let you know I got called up. I’m going to the Olympics. Mom told me you’re going, too.*

Hands hesitating over the keys.

*I hope we can reconnect at some point during the next week weeks. It’s been a while.*

He types and deletes *I miss you* about five or six times, running his tongue over his teeth until he
nearly breaks muscle.

The letter ends up being more of a form letter than anything else.

I hope I see you in Italy. I'm really proud of you.

- Steve

What else was Steve supposed to say? “Hey, you’re a dick for ignoring me, but I’m also a dick for not realize that those fluttery feelings I had when I was around you when we were teenagers were because I wanted to make out with you, or hold you and cuddle while we watch stupid Sylvester Stallone movies from the 80s, but now it’s deeper than that, it’s something else, and it scares me Buck, it scares me real bad”? Hell no.

He presses send without expecting a reply. He doesn’t get one.

Chapter End Notes

There was a lockout in 2004 which ended up canceling the entire 2004-2005 NHL season, which according to our timeline would have been Steve's first year of eligibility in the league, so I had him drafted by the Calgary Flames and playing for a farm team during that year before getting called up in 2005. I'm sort of modeling Steve's behavior in the NHL after Alex Ovechkin, a very popular scorer but also someone who's known for getting into a lot of fights. I'm sick of "perfect sensitive angel human" Steve Rogers in the fanon. Steve Rogers can be a dick. I hope that comes across.

And trust me, all will be revealed re: Bucky. Stay tuned.
La Passione Vive Qui (Passion Lives Here)

Chapter Summary

The 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy. In which things don’t happen, and then, suddenly, things do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Turin, Italy. February, 2006.*

The town is like something out of a movie. All Alps and snow-covered villages, glorious sunsets beaming off the white caps of the mountains like fire meeting ice. Steve’s never been to Italy so he was expecting something a bit more…sundrenched? “That’s southern Italy, Rogers,” Fury had cracked when Steve had expressed his bemusement at the cold weather and the snow. “We’re in Piedmont. Right up next to the Alps. Practically in France.” So the weather was comparable to West Virginia around this time of year; cool, snowy at times, but not insufferably cold. Steve’s dealt with one too many Connecticut winters in his time, which differed greatly than the ones he endured in Brooklyn. At least there they didn’t have cars to shovel out, or salt and sand sprayed everywhere, making the warm winter glow of Hamden turn into brown sludge.

This place, however, is all vibrant shocks of color. Villaggio di Olimpico reflects the type of Italian architecture Steve read about in one of his general education art history courses at Quinnipiac. Stacked apartments, painted to match the flags of the competing nations. The room is pretty nice. It’ll do.

He only gets truly overwhelmed on the first day when he checks into his housing and is handed his clearance badge for the next night’s Opening Ceremony. His roommate for the Games, Tony Stark (defensemen for the Chicago Blackhawks and one of Steve’s good friends) had smiled with just a hint of mockery when he saw Steve’s face crumple up. Later on in the privacy of their room, he claps Steve on the back. “Had the exact same reaction in Nagano, buddy,” he smiles. “Pepper says I made a scene, but I beg to differ.”

“You did,” Pepper Potts, Tony’s wife and a representative for USA Hockey, says with a small yet pointed smile, as she lingers at the door. “I got a call from the front desk asking if I was in need of police assistance.”

“Yeah, they were pretty surprised when they found out it wasn’t a woman crying,” Tony snarks.

Pepper laughs. She gives Tony a brief kiss. “Call me later,okay? I want to make sure we’ve got everything figured out for tomorrow.”

“You did,” Pepper Potts,” Tony says, affection smoothing over his harsh edges like wild honey. When Pepper makes her exit, he kicks up his feet onto one of the desks. “So! We’ve got a whole day before this shindig kicks off. Wanna go hang out with the rest of the team in the Bar for Babies?” Tony had christened the Village cafeteria this name because while the place was designed to look like a bar out of any city in America, it was non-alcoholic. The most addictive substance they sold was coffee.
Steve swallows. Truth be told, he knows most of them already, but this is different. This was so much bigger. He wasn’t-

“If you don’t go I swear to God I’ll tell them about that time you came out with me and Rhodey in Chicago and that stripper literally smacked you in the face with her boob.”

“Oh, fine!” Steve works out a chuckle from somewhere behind his ribs, holding up his hands.

* 

The story ends up coming out later, as Steve had internally predicted.

“She didn’t hit me with it, you know that. You were there,” he sighs, interrupting Tony’s bloviating.

“Well, then, what did she do?” Clint Barton, right winger for the St. Louis Blues, watches him intently. Next to him, Thor Odinson, goalie for the Anaheim Ducks and the Swedish National Team, bites down on a smile.

Steve lets out a long, prolonged sigh. “She shook them around a little and one of them…may have hit me in the face. But it’s not like she grabbed it and punched me with it or something!”

“Yeah, I know, but it makes a funnier story.” Tony’s jaw jumps like he’s dying to laugh. Steve shakes his head, waves him off. “Okay, smartass, now they all know my most embarrassing story. You gonna go get me a drink to make up for it?”

“Oh, I’ll have them put extra syrup in the chocolate milk!” Tony cackles, while Thor lets out a mighty laugh that could probably break glass if they had any.

“Rogers,” he says, earnestly, once Tony heads off in search of more non-alcoholic delights, “I was so glad to see that you were joining the American team. Clint here was telling me all about what happened to Rollins. Such a shame.”

“Yeah, but not really. He’s a douche.” Clint breaks out one of his trademark sly grins he’s employed on pretty much every single girl in Missouri. He digs an elbow into Steve’s side. “Seriously, I’m so glad you’re here. The whole team is ecstatic.”

Steve ducks his head to avoid showing how totally tickled he is. The lights in here are dim, but his ma always says his blush can be seen from the moon.

“You’ve met the other guys, right?” Clint drags him away from an understanding Thor and over to another table in the back. Throughout the walk Steve tries to take in the vast array of different cultures and teams as they hang with each other. It’s probably not going to sink in until after the Games, how insane this all is.

It’s obvious where the hockey section is. Everyone’s huge. Friendly looking, but huge.

Steve knows most of them to varying degrees. Some, like Scott Lang from the Minnesota Wild, are from his own division. To his left, looking like he’d kill someone for a beer, is Logan “Wolf” Howlett from the Tampa Bay Lightning. A damn monster, and his personality off the ice is just as prickly. Next to him is Tony’s best friend James Rhodes, one of the assistant coaches of the team and head coach of the Boston Bruins, a star in the game in his own right before retiring after a round of concussions threatened to damage his brain. Fury isn’t here, since he’s staying in a hotel (the Village is reserved for athletes only), but he’d left each of them a written note on the door to their rooms. Don’t do anything fucking dumb, and if you do, wear a condom.
When Steve brings this up, Logan snorts. “I don’t plan on fucking anybody. God knows where these chicks have been.”

“Who said anything about chicks?” Wade Wilson, defenseman for Team Canada and the NHL’s “class clown,” retorts with a broad wink. “You’re looking good, Wolf.”

“Fuck off,” Logan snarls, but there’s hardly any snap to it. “You want to be a fairy, go do it on your own time.”

Steve laughs along with the rest of them, even though he really hates himself for it. There’s no way to soothe the hard pit of his stomach with alcohol, so he holds onto his Diet Coke and just… tries to fit in. Like he always has.

“So, can I trust you won’t kick a guy in a dick for causing trouble on the ice?” Clint says now to him, gently ribbing, and Steve breaks out of his own head and into a smile with the passion of watered down tea. “Ha. Ha. I already got the riot act read to me by Fury and Coulson. Trust me, I won’t be doing anything stupid.”

“You’ve been playing really well this year,” Wade drops in. “Loved that hat trick against Vancouver. That was legit. I don’t want to play against you during the next two weeks.

Steve can’t help but grin a little bigger. “That was definitely a breakout game for me,” he admits. “Probably could’ve gone for four if I hadn’t been called offsides near the end.”

“Which was such bullshit,” interjects Bobby Drake, a young sensation just out of college and leading his division in scoring, earning the nickname Iceman from his fans out in Colorado. “You were clearly onside.”

“Eh, I can’t really complain. I had already gotten my punches in,” Steve shrugs. Literally, too – pissed off at the offsides call, he’d gone home and nearly broken a boom box.

He’s debating bringing that side of the story into the conversation when the music shifts into deep, thumping rap. Clint laughs. “Oh boy, this is when the night gets a little weird.”

“What do you mean?” Steve has to shout now to make himself heard over the pulsing grind of Missy Elliot.

“I mean that the bar kind of turns into a club, but like, the most awkward club ever,” Clint yells back. “A hundred totally sober athletes looking to blow off steam? Cue the bad attempts at grinding.”

Oh God. Steve knows what this is going to look like. He’d been to enough dances in high school, enough clubs in downtown New Haven, to know what this was going to look like. At least with alcohol you have the ability to forget how dumb you looked. This was going to be stone cold sober and everyone was going to remember tomorrow everything that transpired. He manages to utter “Yikes,” and pushes back from the table to go get another soda.

His eye scans the bar for a space he could possibly squeeze in and order something, and nearly drops his empty bottle on Clint’s thumb. “Hey, easy,” Clint says, moving his hand just in time to catch the glass. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Steve? Hey. Earth to Rogers.”

The words come in like vague static over a bad trucker calling system. Because all Steve knows, all Steve can conceptualize in the known and unknown world and galaxies outside of it, is the long, lean profile of a boy – no, a man – he thought he’d never see again.

Bucky looks different, yet the same. He’s not even doing anything – just leaning up against the
bar, looking intense and yet bored simultaneously. His hair has gotten just a shade longer, but it’s still impeccably well kept; Bucky was always vain about his appearance. The gawky limbs of his youth have grown into what Steve knows is powerful, yet liquid muscle and grace under the lines of that Team USA jacket and track pants, projecting an air of grace and haughty power. He was always getting hit on by girls, especially once he got the braces off (although Steve always thought he looked great even with a mouth full of metal). But now, twenty-three and right there, Steve can feel a hole in his heart he’s been trying to fill with punching and goal-scoring and one to two-night stands start to tentatively offer up some kind of hope of filling.

Standing next to Bucky, he notices, is an impossibly beautiful girl barely out of her teens in a Team Russia jacket, all flaming red hair and terrifying stillness. She’s talking to him, quietly, but Bucky’s not responding, just stirring his straw around what Steve guesses to be seltzer with lime. There’s an arrogance to Bucky’s stance, a tipping point over from confidence. Like his time in Russia tilted the smartass from Brooklyn like a coffeepot and poured out the jokes.

Before Steve can even figure out what to do next, what to say, or how to move, or how to even make sense of the whirlwind of shocks making their way up his spine, Bucky turns his head and sees him looking.

The gaze Bucky gives Steve is unreadable. Whatever’s been happening in Russia, it’s certainly trained him to hide his emotions, but then again, Bucky was always really good at not letting on how he’s really thinking. Even if it meant hiding in a bathroom to cry it out. Except Steve can tell there’s just the slightest tightening in that sharp jaw. Bucky’s uncomfortable. Maybe even more than Steve can even tell. But he’s not looking away. In the haze their locked eyes Steve can still hear Missy Elliot exhorting everyone to *come on, get down, get-get on down, get on down*, but all he can see is Bucky. There’s a storm in his throat, striking lightning in his lungs.

His feet propel him forward before he can convince himself that this is a bad, bad, bad fucking idea, towards the bar, towards those eyes. His mouth opens. “Bucky?”

The ocean-storm eyes that had judged him for his terrible taste in early 90s action movies, that had comforted him when his father had passed away when he was seven years old, that had widened in fear on that last night, when all of Steve’s emotions had bubbled together without any kind of a name (but he knew now, oh he knew *now*), they look him up and down, impassively.

“Who the hell is Bucky?” he asks, calmly.

Something indecipherable, like tearing paper, settles into Steve’s chest. He bites the inside of his cheek hard enough that he could probably taste blood were it not for the rising bile in his throat. He manages a quick jerk of his head, pivots on his toe (*Bucky taught him to make fast turns on the ice, it definitely works on land, too*), and heads back to his teammates.

“Dude, everything okay?” Clint’s eyes watch him. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

“You look like you saw a ghost.”

“No shit. James Barnes was a friend of yours?” Scott breaks in with interest. “That guy is a badass. Everyone’s saying it’s his gold medal to lose.”

“Yeah?” Steve can’t help the guilty feeling as it rises up, hanging out in his throat along with the monsoon. He’s taped all of Bucky’s competitions but hasn’t found the guts to watch any of them. Plus, Steve knows Bucky was profiled in the issue of *ESPN* that featured Sam and Riley (the front cover blared “From Brooklyn With Love: The Unlikely Rise of a Figure Skating Star”). It’s why
he hasn’t read the issue yet.

“Yep. He’s got crazy amounts of talent but he keeps getting injured,” Scott rattles off. “Couldn’t go to Salt Lake City because he fucked up something in his back.”

“You sound like Scott Hamilton, Summers,” Logan grins.

“Hey, I like knowing about all the different sports,” Scott responds with a shrug. “That’s so cool you know him.”

“Yeah, well, I knew him. Not sure he’s interested in renewing the friendship.” Steve drums his fingers on the table. It’s good that he’s in a conversation; it’s keeping him from going back to his room and breaking some of Tony’s expensive equipment.

“Well, whatever’s going on with you guys, he’s clearly not over it,” Clint says then. “The guy’s been drilling holes into your back ever since you came back over here.”

“Wait. What?”

“Yeah. If looks could kill, we’d have been taking bets on who would hide your body, like, ten minutes ago.” Clint motions behind Steve.

When Steve turns around, he manages to just barely catch the look in Bucky’s eyes – pure bone-white anger, mixed with something almost like sadness? – before those ocean depths turn once again to the girl next to him. “Who’s the chick?” he says, desperate to get off this train before it throws him into a ditch.

“Natasha Romanov,” Scott says, almost like he’s reading from a dictionary. “She’s the favorite in the ladies program. It’s her first Olympics. She’s crazy talented. I think she’s won the last two Russian Nationals? I think she gets coached by the same guy as James.”

“Pierce?” The name makes Steve’s dinner rise in his throat. “I hear he’s…kind of a bad dude.”

“Yeah, he’s a dick,” Rhodey says, with all the nonchalance of someone running down a golf score. “But it works. His athletes get the job done. And hey, some kids need to get pushed. Russian skaters are trained for power, not longevity.”

“Not if it leads to people getting hurt,” Steve mutters under his breath. But he manages to steal another quick look over to the bar and sees Bucky looking his way. There’s a million emotions playing behind his gaze, jaw still tight. Natasha isn’t speaking anymore, and her face conveys some kind of strange understanding. Steve ducks before Bucky can notice he can see him looking over, and stands up, ready to call it a night.

When he gets back to his room, sleep is nearly impossible. He just sees those blue eyes, over and over again, the exact color he tried to paint a million times in art classes and could never get quite right, despite the teachers being insistent that he was nailing it, that he was a truly gifted artist, that he should really make a career out of it once he was done with hockey.

July, 1999

“You’re so great at that,” Bucky said, a convinced gleam behind his eyes. They were sitting out in the sun at Central Park, watching the skaters and runners pass by in shades of crazy colors and spandex. Sheep’s Meadow is slammed, but Steve loved it this way. More people to capture. His hand flew across his memo pad, sketching out a young girl with her family’s dog, trying to assess how to fully pin down the way her throat bobbed as she laughed. Bucky’s thoughts interrupted him, and he let out a small chuckle as he put down the pad.
“Well, I’m really into anatomy and physiology. Plus, I don’t know…I was thinking about maybe becoming a trainer if the league doesn’t take me?”

“BS,” Bucky swore, kicking back on his towel, letting the sun blind him for a moment. “You’ll get into the NHL. Then I’ll get into the Olympics and we can compete together. It’ll be so awesome.”

“You’re definitely getting into the Olympics some day, Buck,” Steve said back, with all of the sincerity his fixed heart can muster. He meant it, one hundred and fifty percent. Bucky had a talent you couldn’t teach, couldn’t train into somebody. Bucky just smiled and shook his head. “Yeah. Well. There’s a lot of things I want but can’t get. So I don’t want to get too worked up over it.”

“What have you ever wanted that you couldn’t have, Bucky?” Steve laughed, and poked Bucky in the side.

“Ow, you fuckin’ punk!” Bucky yelped. “There’s a lot of stuff! I just don’t make a big deal out of it!”

It never came up again, what Bucky had wanted but never got. In three days, Steve’s birthday came and went, and Bucky left for Detroit.

Steve mulls it over until he falls asleep.

The Opening Ceremony is completely overwhelming. Steve has to fight back a swell of tears as Team USA is announced and they get to walk into the Stadio Olimpico surrounded by screaming, joyous Italians. Watching Chris Witty wave the flag proudly, seeing all of the different teams representing their nations. It made him genuinely, hugely proud to be American in that moment. Once they got into the stadium, he thoroughly enjoys the presentation, including a huge art piece commemorating Italy’s Renaissance and Baroque periods. He eventually finds Sam in the huge swell of the crowd and Sam laughs at how clearly emotional the whole night is making Steve. “You’re such a teddy bear,” he says, before throwing his arms around Steve in a huge hug. “So glad you’re here,” he murmurs. It settles in Steve’s bones, easy, warm.

It takes them a long time to get back through security and back to the Villaggio, but once they do, Steve notices a lone figure in the bar, feet kicked up on the chairs. He leaves a yelling, jocular Tony and Thor at the door and heads in. He knows who it is.

“Bu…” he can’t. “James?”

Bucky’s shoulders contract. Steve can feel the sigh before he hears it. “Yeah?”

Steve dares it. “Didn’t want to come to the Ceremony? It was…it was pretty cool. You would’ve liked all the lights.”

He wants to smack himself in the damn face. You would’ve liked the lights? Like Bucky’s a damn two year old who only needs a ziplock bag of Cheerios and a juice box. Jesus Christ.

Bucky speaks again. It’s still a calm, detached tone. “I have my short program tomorrow. I need to get my rest.”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” Steve moves his mouth around a little bit like a mouse in search of a crumb. This definitely beats the post-breakup run-in he had with Peter out on the town in Cheshire in
terms of excruciating awkwardness. “I hope you do well. I mean, I know you’ll do well. You’ve always done well—"

“Yeah,” Bucky says, breezily. He holds up a hand, like he can tell Steve’s going to say something else. “I know you mean well. I have a lot to concentrate on right now.”

There’s a really specific moment where someone knows that they’ve totally blown it, and sometimes, if they’re really unlucky, it’s the exact same as the moment they know that they’ve blown it with someone they should have fought for, tooth and nail, every day of their lives. Years upon years. Thousands.

This is one of those moments for Steve Rogers.

So it’s not really a surprise that Steve Rogers, when faced with this situation, exhales our his hopes in a gust of hard Co2, and gives a short nod even though Bucky still hasn’t turned around, still hasn’t looked at him. “Okay. Um. Good luck this week.”

Silence.

Steve’s almost out the door when he thinks he hears a tiny sound coming from the vague direction of the bar. He doesn’t look back, assuming it’s just the sound of his own heart cracking down the middle, just a little bit.

February 16th, 2006. Torino Esposizioni. USA/Kazakhstan.

“Fuck yes!” Steve yells over the roar of the crowd as Iceman gathers the team in for a giant congratulatory hug. He’s just scored his second goal of the night, getting their lead over Kazakhstan at 4-1. Steve doesn’t even care that he hasn’t gotten any playing time yet during the games. This is such an improvement from the last game, when Latvia had shocked them with a 3-3 draw. Now’s the time to knuckle down and get shit done.

Seconds later, Fury points at him. “Rogers! Get Richards.”

“No way,” he murmurs under his breath.

“Yes way. Now get in there before I change my mind.” Can Steve detect a little bit of a smile at the corners of Fury’s mouth? He’s out on the ice before he can really figure out what the fuck is happening and then it all hits him

Holy shit I’m playing hockey in the Olympics holy shit holy shit holy shhiiiiiiit

It’s only for two minutes and the game’s fate has been decided well before he gets in the game, and he doesn’t even touch for puck that much, but they’re the best two goddamn minutes of Steve’s hockey career. His skates don’t even make a sound; they glide off the ice and into pure ecstasy. They are also the most well behaved two minutes he’s ever spent in a game. Not going to fuck this up.

After the game, a local reporter from New York’s ABC News affiliate pulls him aside. “I just wanted one quote from you as a last minute replacement since you’re from Brooklyn originally. How did it feel to get a chance to go out there?”

“Oh, it felt amazing,” Steve rambles, out of his mind with the high of competition and the joy of getting to be on this world stage. “I can’t really even think of anything better. I’m just glad I can
help the team in any way I can so we can bring a medal back home to the States.

“Oh!” Jumping ahead, before he can really convince himself not to. “I want to give a shoutout to, uh, James Barnes. He’s competing tonight in the long program for figure skating here in Turin, and he’s a shoo-in for a medal. He…he was a good friend of mine in high school. I’m super proud of him,” he says, quickly, so he doesn’t get too emotional as the was a friend of mine again crawls into his throat and hits him like that freight train again, carrying cargo he can’t name, but weighs a thousand pounds.

After the camera gets turned off, he asks the reporter if that interview was live. Upon confirmation, he nods and hightails it out of there to get his phone so Sam can give him any updates on the figure skating final.

Bucky’s short program the other day had been magnificent. A combination of several different instrumental themes by Puccini, the routine had been beautiful, complex, and highly romantic. In an interview after the routine, in which Bucky had scored second highest in the competition, Pierce had stood directly behind him while Bucky had talked about how he wanted to showcase a more “masculine” side of his skating, while also keeping the parts of his artistic expression that racked up more value in the new Code of Points. The entire answer sounded slightly canned to Steve, but it wasn’t like he could call and razz Bucky about it afterward. He tries not to think about that too much.

Once he gets hold of his phone he gives Sam a call. “How did Bucky do?”

“Well,” Sam pauses. “He fell. Twice.” Steve swallows hard. “But his artistic expression and point value from the first program were so good, he held on and got silver.”

“Well…that’s…that’s good!” Steve gulps out, once he can fucking breathe. “Man. Winnie and George are gonna be so proud of him. I’m proud of him, too.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line. “Steve, I’m coming over your place tonight.” Sam’s quiet, measured. “We gotta talk, kid.”

Dread creeps over Steve’s lungs like he’s back in sixth grade and his asthma is taking over whenever he tries to run more than a couple of feet.

*  

Sam is barely in the room before sitting down and putting his hands on his knees like he’s meeting with a trouble teenager. “You love him, don’t you.”

Steve’s gotten seriously body-checked. There was one in college that put him out for a solid week. What he wouldn’t give to get smashed into plexiglass, to feel his blood run down the sides, clear and cleansing, anything to avoid this conversation. But his direct stare down into the floor seems to be a direct enough answer for Sam. “Hey, buddy,” his friend exhorts. He leans forward a little bit in his chair, face still so damn open. “I knew about you and Quill back in school. It’s not like this is a surprise or anything.”

“This is different.” It comes out of Steve’s shoes, his voice is so quiet. “He doesn’t want anything with me, not after what I did.”

“What did you do?”

When Steve tells him, Sam lets out a long, exasperated sigh. “So this is all because you two were being idiots and couldn’t communicate to each other? Go get your boy, man!”
“I can’t,” Steve says, helplessly. He gestures to the TV. On it, Pierce is saying to reporters that he and James will be flying home immediately following the closing of the singles competition the next night. “And I can’t go talk to him now, he didn’t win gold. He’s probably devastated.”

“Yeah, and I bet being around that asswipe isn’t helping his mental health,” Sam says. “There’s been rumors floating around that guy at the IOC for years. Pepper was telling me about it. That woman knows everything. I’ve been wanting someone to stick it to him for a while, but now that I know about this, well…I’m emotionally invested, kid. I think Bucky’s trapped in a bad situation and I don’t know how he’s going to get out of it without help.”

“I don’t think he wants anything from me. He can’t even look at me.” Steve slumps back into a chair, suddenly feeling tired for reasons that have nothing to do with the game he just played in.

Sam sticks around for a little while – they order some pizza from a local place and watch some of the local coverage, attempting to understand the Italian. One of the channels replays Bucky’s long program, various pieces of music from the soundtrack to *Legends of the Fall*. His lines are as gorgeous as ever, his spins the best in the business, but Steve can’t help but agree with Sandra Bezic’s assessment that “something is off about James tonight. He doesn’t have that same fire, that same energy that won him so many National titles. Unless he gets that spark back, he won’t advance past second place.”

Sam switches the channel once Bucky gets back to the kiss and cry area with Pierce, but not before Steve can see how dead his former friend’s eyes look.

The rest of the Games are an unmitigated disaster. Steve doesn’t get any more playing time, and aside from how great he finds the guys on his team (Clint’s a total goof, Scott is a prima donna but not in a gross way, and Tony, well, Tony), they never gel on the ice, and they end up getting bounced from the medal round in the quarterfinals. Sweden ends up taking the gold, to the delight of Thor and the anger of Clint (“Fucking Swedes!” he says into a Stein of beer once they all finish up their games and can drink again).

The Closing Ceremony, while tempting, isn’t enough to get him to stay. Plus he has to get back to his team and the regular season. When Stark hugs him at JFK airport before Steve’s connecting flight to Calgary, the other man gives Steve a look like he could see right through his Nike jacket. "Anything you need to tell me?" Not stern. But concerned.

"What? Nah." Steve smiles, broad. "Wish we could've brought home a medal."

"Next time," Tony says, squeezing Steve's shoulder in a way that suggests he knows all of Steve’s secrets but won’t tell a soul. "You'll be on the team in a more official capacity next time. Just make sure you don't do anything dumb."

"Tony isn’t exactly the person to get comportment advice from," Pepper chimes in, shouldering a Louis Vuitton bag that probably costs more than Steve’s entire house back in Alberta. Tony rolls his eyes. "I know what I'm talking about! I was a total bastard my first few years in the league. I settled down, made important connections. Pretty sure Fury would've kicked me out on my ass eventually if I hadn't."

"Or I would've," Pepper rejoins, pressing a kiss to Tony's cheek. "Come on. I've got a car waiting outside."

"God you're the perfect woman," Tony grins, then nods at Steve. "Take care of yourself, Rogers. Go catch your flight back to the land of maple syrup and weird money."
"Really?"

"Seriously, Ma. He looked at me like he didn't even know who I am."

"Well, that's not true at all."

"Well I don't know what to say to that," Steve says. The fridge opens itself up, empty but for a couple protein shakes and a glass container with takeout from a local BBQ place. "I swear, he didn't look happy to see me."

"What I meant was, Steve, was that Winnie told me Bucky was the one that told her you were going to Italy. She already knew when I called her."

"Wait. What?" Something next door to hope curls up in Steve's sternum.

"Yes! Bucky heard about it on ESPN. Called Winnie. I don't know anything else, just that he knew you were coming."

"He heard about it on ESPN? But I..." none of this makes any fucking sense. He'd emailed Bucky. So either he didn't get it, or worse, Bucky was lying.

"What?"

"...Nothing. Thanks, Ma."

He chances a text. - Hey James. I heard from my mom that you told Winnie you knew I was coming to Turin. What's going on? Did I do something wrong?

Four hours later, after a practice that threatens to suck his guts out through his nostrils, Steve still hasn't gotten a reply. Anger, and something like heartbreak takes over.

The phone number is deleted from his contacts so fast he almost doesn't regret it. Almost.

March 26th, 2006.

"Get some sleep, Rogers!"

"Yep, do NOT call me for at least forty hours," Steve groans. He reaches for his suitcase and his back pops angrily. He's going to have to make a date with the team chiropractor.

Obviously Steve had road trips in college with the Bobcats, but this is different. This past two weeks were game stacked in top of game like a painful, frustrating human Jenga tournament that ultimately results in some glorifying moments on the ice but usually just contains nothing but lower back and SI pain. Steve gets some goals, doesn't punch anybody (although he REALLY wants to) and overall the sojourn across the US section of their division works out pretty well.

Aside from getting fucking decimated by the Preds. But whatever.
The flight home from Dallas was relatively smooth, but once Steve deplanes and heads to his taxi, he just wants one thing. Sleep. Lots and lots of sleep. And quality time with a foam roller, which he gets, much to the shock and pain of every muscle fiber in his upper quads and ass. He manages to suck down some leftovers from the flight and doesn’t even bother to get into bed – he falls asleep to SportsCenter droning on in the background, only hearing the briefest whisper about how Bucky placed third at Worlds in Calgary just two days before. There’s a brief hint of relief in Steve, to know that he just missed having Bucky in his now hometown for the first time since they parted ways after senior year. But that thought quickly gets overturned by the sweet release of sleep.

Until his doorbell buzzer goes off at around 11:30 at night, jerking Steve out of dreamless torpor.

What the fuck?

For a second he wonders if he forgot something on the team bus, or on the charter plane. Maybe that’s it. Nobody else would be knocking this late at night. Unless it was someone from the team looking to crash; Steve lives close to downtown, and the bars are close by. He’s kind of known on the Flames for having a halfway house of sorts, open to any teammate who needs to sleep off a long night of Pilsners.

He’s mentally preparing himself to deliver the joking, sleepy lecture about how he can’t be the headmistress of a hotel for wayward hockey drunks, but when he opens the door, all sense of thought, joking, or any kind of sentence construction at all goes right out the fucking window.

Standing in his doorway, of his apartment, in the middle of fucking Calgary, is Bucky.

Steve’s no stranger to getting the shit beaten out of him, but this is…he can’t mentally compare it to anything because it’s like nothing he’s ever felt before. “What the…what are you…” Words.

Words are difficult. Breathing is difficult. Everything to do with his body is so fucking difficult. Because Bucky is there, wild-eyed and furious, dressed in a parka and thick jeans (somewhere in the spinning vortex of total what the fuck, Steve manages to think, snarkily, that at least Bucky would be totally prepared for how fucking horrible Alberta winters are, the guy’s been living in Russia for fucks’ sake) and looking like he hasn’t slept in at least twenty-four hours.

Bucky pushes past Steve into the apartment, which is probably for the best, because he looks like a teapot ready to blow. A finger gets pointed in Steve’s face. “You called me your best friend.”

Steve blinks. “What?”

“That interview. That interview you gave after your game,” Bucky spits. “You said I was your best friend.”

It all comes together. Again, that rushing feeling like Steve could get pushed over with a fingertip. “Well, yeah, James.” It still hurts so fucking much, calling him that. That’s not his name. “You were my best friend. What else was I supposed to say?” His equilibrium is slowly starting to come back, although it’s mixed with a healthy dose of holy hell, did Bucky fucking Barnes stay an extra day in Canada after Worlds just to yell at me about a fucking TV interview?

“You were disgusted by me!” Bucky shouts, that finger still pointed in Steve’s face. “You saw me with…with that guy Kurt, and then you just…”

Oh, Jesus Christ.

“Bucky, no!” Steve thinks, frantically, spinning his wheels, trying to get anything to come out of his stupid mouth, totally blowing past the visible flinch Bucky gives off when his nickname is
used. “I just didn’t know how to respond, it was a huge shock, and I was a fucking idiot, I covered my backpack with *No Doubt* lyrics, for fuck’s sake, in white out paint, I couldn’t be trusted to have any kind of a valuable answer in a situation like that.” Although you could put a gun to Steve’s head and he’ll still insist *Tragic Kingdom* and *Return to Saturn* are fucking brilliant albums and no one can ever tell him otherwise.

“You don’t get to pretend like everything’s okay, just because you’re trying to be okay with me being gay now.” The finger is still pointed, but it starts to shake. “It isn’t okay, you just ignoring me like that and then not ever explaining why, and Jesus, Steve, if you had just told me you weren’t cool with me being gay I would’ve tried to understand but to not fucking say anything—”

“I tried to talk to you!” Steve explodes, unable to hold any of it in anymore. “I called you, I texted you once I got a phone that fucking had texting capabilities, I even sent you some emails and IMs and you never responded, not once, and I just fucking gave up because I couldn’t deal with you not saying anything back to me, but maybe I should’ve actually said in those emails and phone calls and texts that the reason I freaked out on you and didn’t say something back then was because *I didn’t fucking know I’m bi.*”

Bucky shuts his mouth, goes absolutely white.

The silence in the apartment is broken only by the soft ticking of the clock on Steve’s microwave. *Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.*

“What.” Bucky’s voice is so tiny it’s almost silent.

“I’m bisexual.” Steve coughs then draws himself up to his full height. “Came out in college. That’s why I didn’t know what to say. I don’t give a fuck about you being gay, Bucky. I…I’m the last person who would think it’s a bad thing.”

The amount of time that passes is unclear. Could be ten minutes, ten seconds, ten decades. What’s definitely certain is the distance between the two men suddenly closing as Bucky slams all 200+ pounds of hockey playing, All-American, one-time Olympian Steve Rogers against the wall of the apartment and crushes their lips together.

So many kisses before this one, and yet, this is the first kiss. The first of the entire world. The first there’s ever been. The last there ever will be. The only meeting of this kind. It’s desperate and painful (literally and metaphorically; Steve’s pretty sure there’s going to be a huge bruise on his lip tomorrow morning from the force of Bucky attacking it) and with so much attached to it that it’s almost too much for Steve to conceptualize. No, it’s definitely too much, because he doesn’t even think about it before letting his mouth open underneath Bucky’s yearning, searching touch. He goes, willingly, pinned against plaster, feeling every inch of elegant muscle scorching his own. Hands find Bucky’s face, framing it, pushing back the hair that’s always so neatly combed, now frazzled and still cold from the Alberta spring. His tongue splits Bucky’s lips, licks inside, tasting what he’s only dreamed about and considering his imagination super fucking faulty. And then Bucky’s tongue curls around his and this is it, this is how Steve Rogers dies, not from a major asthma attack, not from one too many hits on the ice, but from getting tongue-kissed by James Fucking Barnes.

Steve’s been kissed by many partners but this is the only time Steve’s ever felt like he could come from just someone’s mouth on his. The world could burn down around him and he’d happily self-immolate if it meant fusing this kiss into permanence. Bucky’s mouth is liquid fire, a soundbox bursting forth chords and progressions Steve didn’t even know existed.

He’s only just beginning to wrap his head around what’s going on here — *he’s kissing Bucky Barnes, holy fuck* — when Bucky rips away with a wet pop, eyes now panicked.
“Bucky?”

“I have to go,” Bucky whispers, voice choked with a fear Steve’s never heard from him before. The shorter man steps away from Steve and quickly heads towards the door. Steve pushes off from the wall, desperately willing down the sudden insistent ache between his legs. “That’s it? When am I going to see you again?”

Bucky stops at the door. When he speaks again, it’s quiet. Resigned. Broken. “I’m not worth any of that, Steve. Just forget this happened. It’s a bad idea.”

He’s gone before Steve can think of a response. If he had been quicker on his feet, it would have been along the lines of the best ideas I’ve ever had have all involved you.

Chapter End Notes

1. I KNOW. I’M SORRY.

2. I based a lot of Bucky’s skating style (and in particular his time in Turin) on the skating of Stephane Lambiel, the Swiss skater who actually took silver at the 2006 Games and ended up winning Worlds that year - he probably would’ve won the gold in Turin if he hadn’t fallen down once or twice in his long program. The actual winner in Turin was Victor Plushenko. We hate him.

3. The bronze medalist was Canadian delight Jeffrey Buttle, the first openly LGBTQ figure skater to win a medal in the Olympics! This is going to become a theme in the story, but unfortunately, the figure skating community as a whole isn’t very accepting of gay skaters. Another skater I based Bucky off of, Johnny Weir, was barred from performing with the tour Stars on Ice because it was deemed he wasn't "family friendly" (read: Scott Hamilton didn't want him on the tour because Johnny Weir is openly gay). It created a LOT of problems and is one of the reasons why Stars on Ice isn’t nearly as popular and doesn't hit as many big cities anymore. as you can see, this is a ripe scenario for maximum Steve/Bucky man pain.

4. That little detail about Steve writing on his backpack in whiteout pen? I totally did that, with a VERY nice monogrammed LL Bean backpack my parents gave me for my birthday. I covered the entire fucking thing in Nirvana and No Doubt lyrics. I thought I was such a little rebel. Mom and Dad were FURIOUS.

5. The 2006 Worlds were in fact at the Saddledome in Alberta, Canada! At the same time, the Calgary Flames were on a weeklong road trip to Minnesota, Nashville, and Dallas, amongst other places. They got fucking ANNIHILATED by the Nashville Predators.

6. Usually hockey players get to the Olympics slightly late; many of them play in the NHL and they want to avoid missing a lot of playing time. But, I wanted Steve to get there a little early, so I took creative license. :)

COMMENTS MAKE ME WRITE GOODER

Chapter Summary

Three Julys, three birthdays, three moments of maximum man pain - the "porn with feelings" edition!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


It’s all Sam’s fucking fault.

Steve gets a Facebook notification on his 24th birthday that Sam’s tagged him in a photo. It’s from back in college – Steve, decked out in a stars and stripes shirt, holding up a Summer Shandy, looking just north of sober. Happy birthday, Captain America! the caption shouts. Steve howls with laughter, closes the laptop.

Then, in an interview with a local Calgary affiliate in the preseason media blitz, Steve happens to mention that he was born on July 4th, a month early. It takes off with the Flames fanbase during the 2006-2007 season; fans start waving American flags any time Steve scores. The team finds it absolutely hysterical since Steve is playing in Canada, but the whole thing strikes Steve as wonderfully weird and charming. He loves Canada. Loves how friendly the people are, how diverse and interesting his city is, he can even love the oppressive, shitty winters.

The pull of NYC, though, starts to nip at his heels every time he sees that American flag go up in the air. He misses Brooklyn. Terribly.

Misses other things, too. Things he won’t name.

So he ends up going home for his 25th birthday as a favor to his mom, who’s been begging him to come home for a longer summer visit. “It'll be more than a week,” he assures her, after hugging her hello. “I don’t have any commitments for the summer. You can spoil me rotten.”

“Good,” Sara smiles. She gestures to the oven. “I’m pretty sure you’re going to be happy with dinner tonight.”

“Aw man, Ma,” Steve sighs as he peeks through the oven door to the mouthwatering sight of pot roast and vegetables dripping with all the trimmings. “You know exactly why I never want to leave when I visit.”

She kisses his cheek. “So good to have you home. I wonder if you can get a trade in your contract for somewhere closer than Calgary?”

“Yeah, that’s actually something I was going to tell you about.” Steve smiles. “I’m trying to get traded to the Rangers. Or the Islanders.” Despite the fact that he hates the Islanders – it’ll at least get him closer to home. He draws the line at the New Jersey Devils, though.

“Oooooh.” Sarah’s eyes go wildly blue like a beautiful summer storm. “That’s fantastic. I hope it
goes through.” She heads out to Steve’s bedroom to put new sheets on his bed. “Also, you should call Bucky. Winnie said he’s in town.”

Steve nearly walks straight into the wall connecting the kitchen to the living room. “You’re shitting me,” he says, soft enough that he hopes Sarah won’t hear.

“Language!” Sarah yells, pulling the fitted sheet around the corners of the bed, totally ignoring how Steve’s leaned himself up against the wall to will off a panic. “Yeah. He’s got some time off from training for the summer. I told Winnie she should let him know you’re town – would be nice if you two could get caught up and figure yourselves out.” She says that like she knows, which, knowing Sarah Rogers, is probably accurate. But all she tacks on is, “It’s a shame what happened in Italy last year, but maybe you two just need to get together and talk.”

“Yeah. Talk.” Steve’s been trying to push the memory of his last “talk” with Bucky out of his head for the past year and a half. Like any good masochist, he’s been thinking about it constantly. Has beaten off to it more than once if he’s being totally honest with himself (and he normally isn’t when it comes to Bucky Barnes).

Bucky’s routines, too, have seen an uptick in Steve’s viewership. They’re all the same: powerful, masculine, jump-heavy. Set to some sort of classical music. But the snap, the feeling of something coming alive, that had made Bucky such a shot of adrenaline to watch on the ice…all of that had dulled to a low flame. He always looked gorgeous, that was never in doubt. Just lacking in something behind the eyes.

Whatever’s going on in Russia isn’t good. But hell if Steve’s going to be the one to fix it. Hell, the kiss had only made everything break more.

*

“Steve!” Ben Grimm, Steve’s freshman year roommate and current accountant on Wall Street, slaps Steve into a hug that nearly has him reaching for his inhaler. “You big shot, how the fuck are you?”

“I’m pretty good, yourself?” Steve returns the embrace, then reaches up to adjust his glasses. “I heard Johnny and Sue are coming too?”

“Oh, totally. They wouldn’t miss it for the world. Speak of the devils…”

“STEEEEEEEVE!” Johnny Storm, quarterback for Quinnipiac’s football team and a recovering former douchebag, practically attacks Steve with the force of his welcome. Sue, his sister and a former fling of Steve’s, stands to the side with a smirk on her face. “He may have pregamed,” she intones, knowingly.

“Well, I might as well use this metabolism for something before I turn thirty and everything goes to shit,” Johnny shouts. Steve laughs before sliding into his seat at the bar. “Ten bucks says Storm ends up doing karaoke at the end of the night.”

It doesn’t even take him until the end of the night before Johnny’s scream singing “Love Song” by Sara Bareilles at the front of the bar while Steve, Sue, and Ben howl.


“One of these days we gotta find you a nice girl,” Alicia, Ben’s girlfriend, chimes in. She clinks her lager with Steve’s glass. Steve just smiles.
They’re heading out of Brother Jimmy’s when Steve’s phone buzzes. It’s from a number his phone doesn’t recognize, but Steve does, instantly. It’s the same one from back when they first got cell phones, those huge Nokia bricks, during their senior year of high school.

*Hydra. 88th and Amsterdam. Come alone.*


“Everything okay, dude?” asks Ben.

“Yeah. I’m good. Just...just got a text from a friend. He wants to meet up with me.” Spoken too fast, like a man with secrets. Accurate.

“Well, don’t stay up too late, we want to take you out for a birthday brunch tomorrow,” trills Sue. They all hug Steve and make their way to the subway, chatting and laughing in the summer heat. Steve feels like he’s freezing cold. A glimpse of himself in the cab on the way to Hydra doesn’t really assure him this is the right decision. He looks a little green around the gills, like he might puke. Not an off assessment of the nausea currently threatening to toss the four beers he had at the bar right up out of his gut and out the window of the taxi.

* *

When Steve gets his hand stamped at the entrance to Hydra, he takes a second to inspect the results on his hand. A furious-looking octopus in blood red ink. “You know this isn’t a real Hydra, right?” he jokes to the bouncer, who looks at him like he’s the thirtieth person tonight to make that observation, like Steve’s lucky the guy’s tired or else he’d get tossed out on his ass. Hydra is a beautifully lux, dangerous looking place, like something out of a pulpy novel about the joys of getting spanked. Everything drips with red and onyx. The long, wide bar, glossy and black, beckons behind a shield of thumping club beats and writhing bodies. Low, glowing red lights dot the ceiling like a celebration of Krampus. Thankfully they don’t throw much light, so it’s pretty dark on the dance floor. Steve probably won’t get recognized. He’s also got a little bit more beard growth than normal (to the chagrin of Sarah; Why can’t you just shave, you look homeless!), his glasses, and a hat pushed down over his face. He looks down at his clothes – red henley, dark wash jeans. Like a typical overgrown frat boy. Slightly out of place in here, where it seems like the only fabric anyone makes their clothing out of is leather or black denim.

No way is he going to mix with all those bodies. He already sticks out like a used Q-tip. Instead, he stands near the perimeter of the throng of humanity, near a darkened corner, drinking another beer, feeling completely out of place, wondering just how insane he has to be to follow a text message from a number he doesn’t keep in his phone anymore on the off chance that the guy he may or may not carry a strange, flickering torch for will show up. The thought This is ridiculous keeps bounding around Steve’s head like an anxious puppy. “Don’t Stop The Music” comes on and the entire club howls in collective approval.

He suddenly becomes very, very aware of body heat about four inches behind him. It doesn’t come any closer, but stays, observing. Meditating the next move. Like a panther about to pounce.

Steve stands, frozen in place. Unwilling to believe it’s real. Then the heat becomes more noticeable to the point that it nearly unmans Steve completely. A wall of fire against his back.

“Don’t say anything,” Bucky whispers into Steve’s ear, so close to the lobe he could probably stick his tongue out and trace it if he wanted to.

“Buck,” Steve breathes.
“Shut up.” Bucky presses himself against Steve’s back, almost unable to even go further without bending them both over. His hands slide up Steve’s lats and over his shoulders, down his arms, towards own fingers and hands.

Steve grabs, holds those beautiful hands so he can’t get away. Bucky immediately goes rigid.

Steve wants to turn around, to bury himself in Bucky’s arms. To ask him what the fuck happened to him in Russia to make him so skittish, so afraid, so permanently heartbroken. But before he can do anything, Bucky relaxes, twines his fingers with Steve’s. Jolts of electricity trigger up Steve’s arms like he and Bucky are firing off Molotov cocktails straight into his veins from locked fingers. Then, Steve feels that stifling, wonderful heat travel to his neck. Bucky’s put his forehead into the cradle between Steve’s jaw and shoulder. Mouth up against the fabric of Steve’s shirt. He’s not kissing the skin there, but Steve wouldn’t stop Bucky if he did. And Jesus fuck the thought of that makes Steve instantly, achingly hard (although to be totally honest his dick has been intensely interested in the proceedings since Bucky lined his body up against Steve’s back).

You hands around my waist

Just let the music play

We’re hand in hand, chest to chest

And now we’re face to face

Steve tips his head back so he’s resting on Bucky’s shoulder. It must look kind of weird, two men of certain height and muscle build doing not much but leaning on each other. Hell, Steve’s definitely done dirtier things in clubs. But this is Bucky. Which makes it the most erotic moment of Steve’s entire life.

No other person has made him so totally, utterly dizzy with want just from body temperature, just from sheer, incandescent presence.

Bucky lets go of Steve’s right hand to slide his fingers back up his bicep, spider walking across his chest. Clinging. Holding on tighter. Like he never wants to let go. Like this could be enough.

Steve feels Bucky’s body spasm once. It takes a second for him to process that Bucky’s trying not to cry.

“Buck, please,” he says, alarmed, going to move his head from Bucky’s shoulder. He can feel the other man shake his head. Bucky’s head lifts, and the hand that had been gently creeping across Steve’s chest finds his jaw, laying fingers across Steve’s cheek with an urgency that nearly undoes Steve right there on the dance floor. Before he can really process anything, he moves his head back, blinding searching for and finding Bucky’s lips with his.

This isn’t the urgent crash from last year. This is an attempt to start a conversation when words aren’t enough. Bucky responds instantly, curling his tongue forward to split Steve’s lips. Steve can’t hold in a soft moan, intensely aware of Bucky’s erection pressing up against his ass through their pants. The pressure causes Steve’s brain to fold in on itself. Light shows and sparkles and fireworks behind his eyes. He gets his right hand up behind Bucky’s head, pressing him closer, deepening the kiss.

After a few moments (centuries?) he takes the leap, turns around in Bucky’s arms, puts his hands on Bucky’s waist. Bucky doesn’t freeze up, doesn’t move away. It’s as if the darkness of Hydra, the pulse of the music, the surrounding noise of bodies and sex, has finally emboldened both of them to act. Secrets coming alive in the dark and the beat and the sweat. He leans in and kisses
Bucky again, more thoroughly this time.

Bucky twists his hands into Steve shirt, pulling him forward. They move together, awkwardly, still fused at the mouth. Steve lets himself be guided blind. A shock of light hits his closed eyelids and he blinks them open to realize Bucky’s led them to Hydra’s bathroom. It’s pretty small – two stalls, two urinals, empty. He looks at Bucky, finally getting a good view of him. Bucky’s hair has been cut shorter, slicked back from his face. He’s dressed in a leather jacket, black jeans, and a white shirt with a deep V. There’s a bit of a tan to his already tawny skin, making him glow like he’s made out of gold. His eyes are a grey hurricane, face a little thinner than it was back in Turin. A ball of anxious, yearning energy. Steve has never seen anything more beautiful in his entire life.

“Buck,” he tries again, “Shouldn’t we-“

“Shut up,” Bucky whispers, desperate. Hands shove Steve into a stall, hard enough that Steve has to hold out his arms to brace himself. It takes him a second to figure out just what the hell is going on, and then he sees Bucky drop to his knees, go for the buckle on his pants.

“Shit – Bucky – you don’t – Buck….”

Bucky looks up at Steve, eyes filling with urgency amidst the tears. No words come out of Steve’s mouth. If he says no, don’t do this, that he didn’t want this, he’d be telling the biggest lie of his life. But if he says yes, it wouldn’t feel right, either.

So he opts for the third option. Silence. Consent.

He pushes his head against the wall of the bathroom stall as Bucky undoes his pants, yanking down his boxers along with them. A moment, then, hot wetness envelops the head of Steve’s cock before Bucky swallows him down to the root.

“Jesus fuck,” Steve swears, seriously hoping nobody comes into the bathroom while this is happening because he definitely doesn’t think he can be quiet, this is all too much, too much violent sensation in shocks of red and blue and gold. His feet wobble, before reminding his twitching body that if he collapses he’ll probably take out the entire stall and Bucky along with it. His knees struggle to stay locked.

With one hand, Bucky pushes up his cock so it lies more parallel to his stomach and tongues a line up the underside, near the thick vein, before working at Steve’s balls for a little bit in a move that seems designed to liquefy Steve’s insides. Bucky’s right hand then pumps the shaft before then that wide, indecent mouth takes over again, like there’s a time and a place for teasing, like this is just about seeing how fast he can make Steve go off.

Judging by the pressure building behind his balls, Steve thinks he’ll last, oh, another minute and a half, which is pathetic, he’s not a twelve year old jerking it for the first time, but this is, again, the first time with Bucky’s mouth on him, the first time Bucky’s cheeks are hollowing around his cock. Who would last long with that kind of incinerating heat? He frantically taps on the top of Bucky’s head to warn him, but Bucky shakes his head, keeps going, pushes Steve’s cock into the side of his mouth, and Steve looks down and sees the outline in Bucky’s cheek and that’s it, that’s all it takes, he’s coming in hot jerks and streams down Bucky’s throat, biting his own forearm to keep himself from shouting, other hand digging in and yanking up Bucky’s hair, messing it up, ruining the façade.

It takes him a little while to recover – doubly so when he looks down and sees a small remnant of pearlescent release on Bucky’s lips, making them look glossy. The expression on Bucky’s face is as if he’s been baptized. Blasphemous thought, definitely. Steve couldn’t give less of a shit if he
tried.

Steve yanks Bucky to his feet, gets his hands on Bucky’s own belt.

Bucky face goes from peaceful submission to total shock. “Steve –“

“You can’t possibly think I’m gonna let you suck my dick without returning the favor,” Steve states. Bucky looks like he’s been slapped. “I…“

“What – you think that’s not the way it works?” Steve demands, managing to unbuckle Bucky’s belt and unzip his pants while he speaks. “That’s not how this is gonna work, Bucky.” What the fuck is this and how does it work? His brain screams. But those are logical questions. Right now, the only thing doing Steve’s logical thinking is nowhere near his brain.

“You got me off,” he murmurs into Bucky’s ear, pulling him close, licking a broad stripe on his right hand before pushing it past the waistband of Bucky’s boxer briefs, nearly moaning at the sudden heat his fingers encounter, “and I’m going to get you off. I’m not doing this without you.”

And Bucky just fucking crumples into Steve’s hold, Steve’s left arm keeping him upright while Steve’s right hand curls inside, towards the heat at the apex of Bucky’s thighs. He looks down and even though Steve just came, there’s a sudden renewed ache in him, knowing that he’s looking at Bucky’s naked cock for the first time. It’s longer than Steve’s, but more blunt at the end and with a large, plummy head, weeping at the tip. He scratches his thumbnail, gently, over the slit. Bucky moans, pulses in Steve’s hand. Okay, so that’s something that works. Steve knows what’s worked on him, and what’s worked on the guys he’s fooled around with. But there’s a difference between what works on a hookup and what works on…this. Mainly the desire to do this for the rest of his fucking life.

He doesn’t mess around – his brain is too destroyed for that. Hand moves quickly, jerking Bucky hard and fast, wanting to feel him spasm and collapse around him. Bucky buries his head in Steve’s shoulder, mouth latching onto his neck, sucking down, leaving probably rings of bluish-purple proof of what they did tonight (Steve’s going to catch so much hell about this from the guys and girls at brunch tomorrow). It doesn’t take too long – only a few minutes of punishing strips of his hand up and down before Bucky twitches and freezes up in Steve’s arms, coming silently, shatteringly, teeth sinking down into Steve’s neck like a fucking vampire bite.

Thank god the door to their stall is closed, because someone bursts in and pukes in the stall right next to them. Steve, in all of his post-orgasm haze, has to try very, very hard to crack up. “Of all the ways I thought this was going to happen, this wasn’t on the list,” he murmurs into Bucky’s ear. Bucky says nothing in response. When he eventually pulls away and reaches for toilet paper to wipe himself up, Steve can see redness at the corners of his eyes.

“Bucky, what the fuck is going on?”

“I can’t,” Bucky whispers.

He cleans himself off, zips up his pants, and bolts.

*   *

July 4th, 2008.

It’s not like Steve came home for just this purpose. He’s trying to see his Mom more. Friends from Quinnipiac are always bugging him to come down to Hamden. The falafel sandwiches at Mamoun’s are calling his name.
To be fair he *does* take the train into Hamden to hit up some old haunts. But he’s catching a ride back to the station at New Haven early on a Friday morning when he gets another text.

*Tonight.*

Steve shouldn’t go. Bucky’s ignored him for the entire year. Refused to take his calls or his texts. Steve’s watched every single one of his competitions, where he’s slowly taking a backseat to the younger newcomers; Steve vaguely remembers Bucky telling him once that nineteen or twenty is usually the peak time for a male skater. For Bucky to keep going at twenty-six isn’t impossible, but it is unusual. Skaters tend to retire from amateur competition by this point to rest and perhaps do other forms of skating for money.

He’d read in the newspaper that Bucky’d said no to a position on the Stars of the Ice tour back in 2006, despite winning a silver medal. That struck Steve as fairly odd. But it’s not like he’s going to have time to talk to Buck about it. This kind of meetup is only positing one outcome.

He doesn’t have to wonder where to meet Bucky. It seemed pretty obvious.

When he puts the phone down Steve can feel Sam’s eyes watching him. “You’re meeting up with him, I assume?”

“Yeah.” Steve keeps his eyes down. Not wanting to see in Sam’s gaze the advice that he should clearly take.

*This time, Steve sees Bucky first. The other man is leaned up against the bar, not unlike when Steve saw him in Turin two years ago. He’s not as thin as he was last year but instead, it seems like he’s put on more muscle. Carrying himself tall in the leather jacket and dark jeans. Similar uniform to last year.*

This time, Steve settles himself next to him at the bar. Bucky doesn’t react for a moment. Then, he stands up, settles his bill, and walks away. Steve follows.

This time, Steve gets his mouth around Bucky, makes Bucky bite the inside of his arm hard enough to muffle his screams, as Kanye’s “Flashing Lights” drones on in the world outside the four walls of their bathroom getaway.

This time Steve grabs Bucky’s wrist when Buck tries to walk away, after jerking Steve off with his face buried in Steve’s shoulder, unable to make eye contact. “Talk to me, Bucky. Please. What’s going on?”

Bucky’s eyes are dry this time, but devoid of much passion. “There’s nothing to say, Steve. This is what it is.”

“What is it?” Steve retorts. Bucky offers up the saddest smile Steve’s ever seen.

“What I deserve.”

He’s gone before Steve can wrap his brain around what just happened.

*July 5th, 2009.*

“Bucky. Seriously.”
This time they aren’t at Hydra; the club was closed for some sort of private event. Bucky had texted Steve to meet him at Club Shield, a place co-owned by the same guy who opened Hydra. This club was all shocks of ice blue and white, lights illuminating under ice at the bar, cool elegance abounding. Not necessarily the type of place to get a handjob in. But Steve had learned to throw out what he’d normally do, when it came to Bucky.

Steve was trying to get out of his contract at Calgary. Fury wanted him on the Rangers, he told him so every time they got on the phone together. Steve was back in New York this weekend for two reasons – to see Bucky, and to get together with Fury about possibly figuring out how to get off the Flames. The risk of stirring up bad blood right before an Olympic year was definitely something Steve wanted to avoid, so that was playing around in his mind during the entire lunch with Fury that afternoon.

These meetings with Bucky, though? They were reckless, career-damaging if anyone found out. Steve didn’t care. But he wanted more.

“Please just talk to me, Bucky,” Steve pleaded, while Bucky grabbed some wipes from the sink to clean up his hands. They had stood together in the stall (a little bigger than the Hydra one, thankfully), Bucky mouthing at Steve’s neck while Steve took both their cocks in one hand and worked them together. The heated moan Bucky gave at the base of Steve’s neck vibrated into his fucking skull. In the background, Lady GaGa seduced unseen lover with promises of being their number one fan. *I’ll follow you until you love me.*

But now he’s in post-orgasm land, when the logic, and reality, begins to seep in.

“What do you want me to tell you?” Bucky’s voice is quiet, like it always is. There’s a little bit more soundproofing in Shield’s bathrooms, so the bass from the music outside doesn’t overpower his low tones.

“Anything. Like…how’s skating going, what’s Russia like-“

“I’m not fucking talking about Russia,” Bucky hisses, suddenly, a yowling cat.

Steve throws his hands up. “Okay, okay. We don’t have to talk about Russia. You can talk to me about whatever you want. I mean…” he gestures, helpless, “Do you still think pineapple pizza is an abomination and a blasphemy before God?”

Bucky stares at him, disbelievingly. “Uh. Yes. You…”

“Yes, I remembered that,” Steve says, tone suddenly growing heated. “I remember you like bacon when it isn’t crispy – mainly because I think that’s disgusting. I remember you saw *The Lion King* with me and agreed we would never watch it again because I was fucking traumatized when Mufasa died. I remember you always getting me conversation hearts that said *Best Friends* when no one would get me anything on Valentine’s Day because no one wanted to hang out with the nerdy sickly kid who got violent all the time. I remember every goddamn thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Bucky looks stricken. “Steve…”

“No. If you’re not going to talk to me, we aren’t doing this anymore. And it’s my turn to walk out, Buck.”

He doesn’t look back, again.

Ignores the cracking down the middle of his heart, again.
I loved writing the birthday fic for Bucky because there was zero angst and everything was beautiful and nothing hurt. This time, everything is beautiful and EVERYTHING hurts. :)

I swear I had to RESEARCH what was being played at the clubs in 2007-2009. I forgot. I'm old.

Also, Mamoun's Falafel in New Haven is the shizzle.

The Villaggio di Olimpico was a terraced set of appartments in an explosion of flag colors, Olympic pride bursting at the seams of every room.

The Vancouver Olympic Village is more sedate, with compartments that look more than any standard apartment building. “Just like the apartments back in Calgary,” cracks Alex Summers, the rookie of this years’ team and Steve’s teammate on the Flames. It does remind steve a lot of his “home” back in Alberta (his actual home is Brooklyn, always).

Due to his commitment to the NHL schedule Steve’s unable to go to the Opening Ceremony but he manages to watch some clips on YouTube. The pride and passion displayed by the Vancouver people for their country and their history has always impressed Steve, every time he comes to play the Canucks. He particularly likes the attention given to the Native nations throughout the evening. There’s something about the Canadian spirit and history that appeals to him. Still doesn’t beat New York, though no place on earth ever could.

When Bucky’s face appears on screen amongst the members of Team USA as they march into the stadium during the Parade of Nations, Steve can feel his heart pinch. It must show on his face because Sam immediately notices. “Man, you need to stop moaning and groaning. Yeah I know you haven’t said anything to me, but I can see it all over your face.” He flops down onto his bed (Tony opted out of the Village this year, choosing instead to get an off-site apartment with Pepper). “Just talk to him,” he says, face down in pillows.

“You know I told him I couldn’t deal with his shit anymore. He hasn’t contacted me since.” Steve’s reply is more to his phone than to Sam. The phone agrees, staring up at him with an impassive, glass eye. Steve doesn’t regret telling Bucky off like he did, not for one second. But there is a little, guilty nugget in the corner of his soul that wishes the conversation had led to Bucky getting his head out of his ass and actually talking out him about what was going on, what they were, what they wanted to be. Steve knew, but did Bucky?

Sam spins around on the bed and kicks his hands behind his head. “Well, as long as you don’t fuck this up for your team. Lord knows I’m terrible on the course when I’m having relationship problems.”

“Getting yelled at by Claire for getting home late on her birthday isn’t necessarily the same as what’s going on with me and Buck, Sam.”

“Yeah, but it’s still fuckin’ stressful!” Sam’s eyes are indignant, to the point that Steve can’t help but laugh. “I’m kidding, you know I love Claire.” And Steve does – Sam met Claire Temple right
before sophomore year and it was love at first sight. For Sam, anyway; it took Claire about a month to say yes to a date. They got married last year, with Steve serving as best man (and he only cried a little bit).

He checks over schedule for the first round games. His heart swoops. “Huh.”

“What?”

“I could go to Bucky’s events. All of our first round games are at noon on the days he has competitions.” Steve throws it out there, casually, but Sam reacts as though he’s just tossed a grenade into the room. “Dude. No!” he admonishes. “You’ll just hurt yourself, and you’ll probably distract the hell out of him. You just said you didn’t want him yanking your chain anymore. Well, you’ve been yanking each other’s chains for four years. And I mean that literally as well as figuratively.” Steve snorts, but Sam’s eyes are deadly serious. “Move on,” he says. “Get over it. And start sooner rather than later.” Sam’s words aren’t unkind but they are firm.

They stick like thumbtacks in Steve’s side. Holding domain there for the next twenty-four hours.

The goal horn sounds like church bells to Steve’s ears. Vaguely he remembers that time a few years back when he wanted to punch out Batroc for busting Dernier’s nose, and that same blood rushes in his ears, but this time, it’s fueled by pure, dizzying ecstasy. The team floods him in the corner of the rink for a giant hug. Somewhere in the huddle he can hear Clint scream, “Let’s hear it for Captain America!” Steve looks up and sees dozens of American flags held high and pumping hard throughout the crowd.

He’s done it. He’s scored a goal in the Olympics. Granted it isn’t a game winning play or anything – it’s near the end of the game and the outcome isn’t in doubt. But it’s the Olympics. The idea almost overwhelms him, even though they’ve still got two more minutes left to play; an eternity in hockey. They practically race by, Steve concentrating just enough on each play to keep them from royally fucking up. By the time the final buzzer sounds, the score is Team USA 3, Team Switzerland 1.

The locker room shower and celebration is just as much a blur as the final ticking moments of the game, and Steve enters the press conference on a total fucking high.

* *

“We go live to the presser for Team USA, after their conclusive victory over Switzerland in the opening round of the hockey competition. Team USA is a favorite to place high in this event, with their biggest rival, Team Canada, waiting in the wings in the next few days, but we’re sure they’ll play again in the medal rounds, right Bob?”

“Definitely, and the big news of the night was of course the final goal scored on a pretty pass from Clint Barton to Steve Rogers – his nickname in the NHL is Captain America, which is definitely funny considering he plays for a Canadian team! But Rogers was clearly thrilled to be donning the red, white, and blue for his home country. Let’s hear what he had to say in the press conference.”

SR: “It was absolutely incredible. Um. I’ve wanted to play in the Olympics ever since I was a little kid falling on my face at the ice rink in my hometown of Brooklyn, New York. My mom would take me to the rink every day because I loved it so much. I don’t even know what to say, really. I’m just…I’m just so grateful for the opportunity. And I want to say hello to my mom, really
He’s on his way out of the presser, feeling a little bit (okay, a lot), when he runs into Clint. “Hey, killer pass out there,” he says, admiringly, and high fives him.

“Hey, the pass is only good if you get the goal, and you did!” Clint replies warmly. “Hey. We’re gonna go out for dinner. You’ve played here before – know anywhere good?”

“Hell yes,” Steve grins. They end up going to a local watering hole called Howling Commandos, close enough to the village that they can walk back at the end of the night. Clint’s there, as are Scott and Alex, and Tony manages to talk Pepper into joining them too.

“I want to know when all of you started to skate,” Pepper offers, once she gets back to the table with the first round and Tony has stopped his grandiose praise of everything beautiful in the world being the property of Pepper Potts.

“Oh, you know this story already, obviously, Pep, but for those who don’t… I was two years old, and my Dad jammed skates on that were just a little too big, and sent me out on the rink to see if I could stand up,” Tony says around two giant bites of burger. None of that is any real surprise to the group: Tony’s father, Howard Stark, was one of the greatest to ever don an NFL jersey. Tony’s relationship with his father had always been slightly contentious, but they had managed to patch things up prior to Howard’s death from cancer in 2001.

“How come he put you on the ice that young?” Alex wonders.

Tony’s mouth turns up slightly at the corners as he licks away some barbecue sauce. “I think Dad wanted to convince my mother that hockey skills are genetic.”

“Let me guess – you fell flat on your face?” Scott asks.

“Har har. Of course not. At least, not right away. Managed to skate out a little bit, and then when Dad told me to try and turn around, I fell on my ass, not my face. Gotta protect this moneymaker.” Tony pouts. Pepper sighs. Really, Steve secretly thinks, Pepper should be canonized for the shit she puts up with.

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“Better than my story,” Clint asserts. He scoots his chair closer to the table. “I just begged my mom to let me play with my big brother. But I’ve got a better story that kind of deals with hockey: I was playing on a frozen pond in our backyard when I was about, like, twelve years old? Fell right through the ice on a soft patch. Almost bit it from hypothermia.”

“Damn,” Steve mutters. The entire table winces. But Clint in his affable manner just shrugs it off. “Just made my Mom finally take me to good skating rinks. Started practicing my slapshot.” That scoring ability got him noticed by the assistant coaches at Iowa, and Clint led the Hawkeyes in goal-scoring before turning pro after his sophomore year. His legendary status as a sniper on the wing was something Steve had always admired.

“What about you, Rogers?” Scott asks, pushing a basket of onion rings towards him. “Anything good?”

Steve coughs. “Oh, god. No, not really. Super dorky.” He dips an onion ring in ketchup while the table watches, waits. “I was really tiny as a kid. Glasses – well, still have those, clearly – “ Tony snorts, Pepper shushes him – “but I was a preemie, and had a lot of heart and lung problems. When I was five I watched a hockey game with my Dad and saw Gretzky. He was….” Steve pauses,
wrapped up in the memory of cuddling with his Dad on the couch, getting all the stats about the teams, losing himself in the fluid movements of The Greatest. “Well, you know,” he finishes off. “But I begged my mom to take me to our local rink in Brooklyn and she finally did it, and that was it. I was obsessed.” Clears his throat. “That’s actually where I met James Barnes, believe it or not. On that first day on the ice.”

“No way!” Scott laughs. “Was he a good skater back then?”

“Much better than me. Pretty sure my Mom was worried I’d break every bone in my body. But Bucky was a great teacher. Always made sure I was okay, always followed me around to check if I needed a spotter.”

“Bucky?” Pepper’s smile isn’t teasing, it’s just warm. Steve fights off the definite urge to flush red. “Yeah. When I met him, James insisted everyone call him Bucky. Someone in his class called him that; his middle name is Buchanan. The nickname stuck…although not anymore I guess. Now he’s James.”

“I like Bucky,” Pepper states to her burger. “It’s cute.”

“Yeah, and he had a lisp until the age of like eight, so I’m thinking he liked Bucky because he could actually pronounce it,” Steve cackles.

“I think the bar is playing the figure skating short programs tonight if you want to move into there?” Scott nods toward the doorway that leads from the main dining area to the giant sports bar, but the tightness descends back into Steve’s lungs. “No. I’m good. I’ll just watch it later on YouTube.”

The onion ring has a satisfying crunch, perfect to concentrate on while avoiding Tony’s raised eyebrow.

*Bucky places second in the short program. A pretty good achievement for someone much older than the rest of the competitors; the overwhelming favorite for gold, Shiro Yoshida of Japan, is an eighteen year old phenom with four quads. Buck’s jumps have never been his strongest suit, but his short program, set to the soundtrack to The Village, was haunting and full of intricate step sequences. “His lack of jumping power won’t translate into a gold medal here in Vancouver, but when he’s clicking on all cylinders in his artistic expression, there is no one that can touch James Barnes,” Scott Hamilton exults. When Steve watches the clip later on YouTube, he notices that Bucky’s happy. He’s smiling in a way that reaches his eyes, a noticeable change from the last time Steve saw him.

“He looks good,” he murmurs.

“Maybe he’s moving on, too,” Sam says quietly, like he’s working through a delicate math problem. Steve bites the inside of his cheek. He knows it’s for the best. There isn’t a “Bucky and Steve” anymore. That’s all in the past.

Just has to ignore the swoop in his gut.

*B

The McDonald’s at Vancouver Olympic Village is ostentatiously big. Steve detests the corporatization of the Olympics; it seems like such a cash grab for such a pure event. Then again, he’s done a lot of research on the various human rights issues that have plagued nearly every Games since their modern inception, but there are times he can squeeze that out of his head and
just enjoy the overall experience.

This McDonald’s, though. It’s just a behemoth. A heinously inappropriate symbol of economic hegemony.

Which is why he’s beating himself up for standing in line with a bunch of other athletes, early in the morning, at the goddamn McDonald’s.

So sue him. The cafeteria food wasn’t cutting it and he wants a $1 coffee.

While he waits Steve flicks through his YouTube and comes across a small fluff piece they showed during the part of figure skating coverage he didn’t watch. It’s a piece dedicated to what Bucky does while he’s not on the ice. Most of it is pretty standard – clips of Bucky reading at a local café in Russia, cooking dinner for himself at home, lifting weights. But it’s the small bit of footage taken inside a dance studio that has Steve rewinding the clip several times before he gets interrupted by the McDonald’s’ cashier. He stumbles through his order, goes back to his phone.

Bucky is dressed in a skintight tank top, something like Lycra bike shorts, tights, and ballet slippers. He’s going through what Steve assumes are standard warmups for ballet dancers. At his side stands Natasha Romanov, fellow student of Alexander Pierce and the reigning world and Olympic champion. While Bucky’s stock has gone down, Natasha’s has soared – that being said, she’s younger, still only 19, and therefore in her prime. In Turin she had become the youngest Olympic skating champion since Tara Lipinski took gold in Nagano. Her success made her somewhat of a superstar back home on Russia.

Their warmups complete, Bucky and Natasha go through several dance exercises while a rather severe-looking woman with a cane thumps out the rhythm. Bucky’s body is glorious, muscular and alive, gliding as if on air, while Natasha attacks the steps like a sniper. The narrator intones that Russian training can be incredibly hard on the body; it cuts to Natasha in a talking head saying, in perfect English, “I think the way we train is effective. Just look at how many medals Yasha and I have won. It’s really no surprise.” Her confidence is terrifying.

That night, Bucky gets silver and Yoshida gets gold. Not a surprise to anybody familiar with the athletes, but at the end of the competition Pierce is shown making an announcement that Bucky is strongly considering staying in amateur competition to make a go at the 2014 Games in Sochi. “James lives and trains in Russia, and it would be an honor for him to represent his home country in the country that has adopted him,” Pierce says, voice pouring over Steve’s bones like glue.

By 2014 Bucky will be thirty-two – young by regular standards, prime condition if you’re a hockey player (Steve’s probably got two more Olympic competitions in him before he’ll retire) but that’s ancient in figure skating world. Plus, Bucky’s mentioned in various interviews about how he pulled out of Salt Lake City because of a back injury, and he’s struggled with problems in his rotator cuff. Steve knows – knows – Bucky isn’t the primary driver of these decisions. But he pushes it all down. He’s got his own medal to fight for.

Two days before the gold medal game he literally runs into Bucky at the practice rink. Steve’s coming off the ice, not really paying attention to who’s in front of him, and his shoulder smacks into the scapula of someone in front of him. “Ah, sorry, sorry,” he shouts, steadying the person, and realizes the feel of the muscles is familiar under his thumbs. “Ah. Um. Buck?”

Bucky looks up at him, face straining to marshall itself into something other than panic. “Uh. Hi.”
He looks smaller than he did last summer. More spare. But the loss of that build doesn’t make him any less alluring to Steve. In fact, the fragility of Bucky’s body makes Steve burn with the desire to bring him back to his rooms, wrap him up in a blanket, and never let anything bad happen to him again.

Behind Bucky he can see Natasha watching their interaction closely. “Yasha, we have to get on the ice. Just come on when you’re ready.”

Steve looks back at Bucky. “You skate with her, too?”

“Yeah.” Bucky shrugs. “Pierce doesn’t to play favorites.”

“Well…that’s good.” Jesus. It’s like being in kindergarten. The avariciousness that plagued Steve when he last saw Bucky had been replaced by stilting fragments of interaction. “I…uh. I don’t want to keep you from practicing.” Then it hits him. “You’re still practicing? Didn’t you, like, win last week?”

“We have the gala the night before the final day of competition. Nat and I are doing a duo routine.” Bucky looks affable, breezy even. Like nothing about this is affecting him. He almost looks content. What the hell?

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it,” Steve eventually croaks, and moves to leave for the locker room before his stubborn, stupid brain makes him turn around.

“No time like the present. Steve looks around – Nat’s on the ice, warming up with some small jumps and spins. She’s probably not listening. Steve leans in. “What happened the last few summers. It was…it was just some hookups, okay?” He holds up his hands in a surrender motion. “So, you’re off the hook. Okay? I’ve done a lot of thinking and I mean, it’s kind of silly, me pining away for someone when I don’t really know much about him. It’s been so long. We barely know who the other is, now. I think it’s probably for the best that we just…not beat around the bush anymore and just let each other go. So we can move on.”

Steve’s not really looking at Bucky when he says this, and he definitely doesn’t look at him when he continues. “There was a time, yeah…that I really did think I loved you. But maybe I just loved the idea of you. This idealized person I had built up in my head. But you’re not an idea, Buck. You’re a real person, with your issues, like I definitely do.” He laughs, faintly. “I want you to be happy. And…I want you to be able to do the things you want to do. So, you’re off the hook.”

He manages to smile, broad, in a way that doesn’t feel terribly fake. “It’s okay. I need to get over you anyway.”

Once he’s done, Steve meets Bucky’s face. The other man is expressionless, with just a hint of color pinking his cheeks. But he gives a nod. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

Steve nods back. One little incline of the head. It hopefully effectively conveys a lack of an aching heart.

There’s a strange emptiness inside him when Steve steps into the shower. An airlessness. But he chalks it up to something letting go. The thing he’s been holding onto for so long finally dissolving. And now comes the process of getting over Bucky Barnes.

He’s never walked away from a fight before. It feels...odd. Wrong.
One stupid mistake left Wade open in overtime. In the gold medal game. Canada gets the prize.

Sure, USA gets silver, and part of Steve will eventually be happy as hell that he’s got his first Olympic medal. But the agony of defeat far eclipses any other feeling that might wash over Steve at this particular point.

He barely processes the awards ceremony, both from his own frustrations and the sound of the euphoric home crowd as Team Canada receives their gold medals. When the red maple leaf is hoisted high, the arena bursts into “O, Canada” and Steve can’t help but break through his own grief to offer up a tiny, trembling smile.

After the game, Steve sits in the shower for a long, long time. The water goes from hot to freezing cold. The knuckles on his left hand sting from the heavy punch he gave his own locker. He’ll be fined for that.

Steve’s flight home touches down in Calgary less than twenty-four hours later, and he spends the first day at home fielding calls and interview requests from local outlets. Despite the silver medal, it was a damn good personal Olympics for him, and his stock has risen considerably. Maybe now there’s a shot of getting to the New York teams. There’s always hope, that’s what his mom always tells him.

April 8th, 2010.

Steve’s stuffing lasagna into his mouth and catching up on the late-night sportscenter after the Flames lose to the Wild when he sees it.

“Sad news out of the skating world this morning - James Barnes, the reigning Olympic silver medalist and very recent World Champion, has announced his retirement from amateur competition after a CT scan revealed a stress fracture in his shoulder. His rotator cuff and labrum have been a problem for Barnes for several years, and of course, Barnes is no stranger to career injuries – he had to miss the Salt Lake City Games in 2002 due to a bulging disc in his lower back. The shoulder injury had not been detected until now, but it is suspected by the doctor examining Barnes that this is not a new fracture in Barnes’s shoulder.”

Sage Steele keeps talking, but Steve can’t hear her because his ear is crushed up against his phone, the ringing of the dial tone buzzing with the crash of his heartbeat in his chest, in his throat, between his eyes.

He’s so stupid. So fucking careless. The airlessness he felt when he walked away from Bucky wasn’t the newness of letting go, it was the lack of Bucky in his life tearing a hole in his goddamn gut.

“Bucky, are you okay?” he pants when the phone picks up, not even waiting for whoever picked up to say hello.

“Who is this?”

The voice on the other end is slick like oil. It oozes, thick and black, through Steve’s veins. “Oh. Um. I’m looking for James Barnes.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Pause. “Steve, is it? I saw the caller ID.”
Steve doesn’t process the second part of what the man says (Bucky still had Steve's number saved in his phone) and plows ahead, “I just wanted to make sure James is okay. Can you please leave him a message letting him know I called? Who is this?”

“This is Alexander Pierce, James’s coach.” Something is off in the way Pierce's says that. Almost like he's Bucky's handler rather than a mentor. “I will make sure he gets your message. We’re taking good care of him.” Pierce’s voice is soothing now, almost to the point where Steve believes him.

But there’s nothing much he can do now; Bucky’s on the other side of the world. Alone. In pain. And he just lost the one thing in this world he cares most about.

The thought of that bothers Steve so much he forgets to dig into what he would have said if Bucky had picked up. He doesn’t need to, it’s not like he doesn’t know. Can’t really forget the urgency you feel when you want to tell someone you love them.

2013.

“And you never heard back from him?”

“Nope.” Steve elongates the “oo” sound, pops the plosive. He leans his elbows forward on his knees with a small sigh. “Called back about forty times. Never heard from him. Even sent him this long, voicemail about how sorry I was that I walked away from him, how I would never have done it if I’d known what was going on with his injuries…and then the whole thing with Pierce came out, and I tried to contact him again but the line had been disconnected.”

“Damn.” Clint runs his tongue over his teeth, mulling it all over. “So the whole thing with Pierce – he was overtraining his athletes, right?”

“Yeah. Bucky came out and did this whole interview with ESPN Magazine after he recovered from his injuries. It was really intense.” Bucky had been overworked to the point of exhaustion; Pierce was more than a hardass, he was a downright monster. Shortly after the interview came out in July 2012, Natasha Romanov announced she had dealt with abusive practices by Pierce as well, and Pierce had been banned from coaching by the International Skating Union.

“Have you tried to get in contact with him?”

“Yeah. Last I heard he was still in Russia, training Natasha and choreographing routines for some of Pierce’s old students. Try as I might, nobody wants to give me his number. I think I really blew it when I told him I wanted to let him go.” Steve furious ignores the rising lump in his throat. “If I’d known where to send anything, I would’ve figured out a way to get to him, to tell him how proud I was of him. How proud I am of him.”

He looks up to meet Clint’s eyes, his own burning with the urge to cry. “I’ve loved him since I was five, Clint. I just…didn’t want to see it, I guess.”

“Aw, buddy.” Clint pushes his roller-chair over, throws his arms around Steve. They sit there, the silence popped only by the sounds of Steve sniffling.

When Sam meets up with them later, Steve’s recovered somewhat, but Sam can tell he told Clint. “It’s not like you haven’t tried to date anyone else,” he reassures Steve, when Steve blanches at his earlier confession. “You went out with Sharon a few times before you found out she was
Peggy’s cousin and you freaked.”

“Well it was weird!” Steve says, indignantly. “And yeah, you’re right. I also dated that girl Raven for a little bit.”

“Oh, the chick with the lip piercing? She was hot as fuck.” Clint grins.

“You’re married, asshole,” Sam laughs.

“Hey, just because I’m shacked up doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy some beachfront property,” Clint retorts.

Steve raises an eyebrow. “I can’t tell if that was witty, or totally gross.”

“Both?” Sam asks. They all laugh, the knot in Steve’s chest getting a little easier to swallow around with every pull of his beer.

Moving on has been excruciating. But he’s got to do it. Steve’s been holding on to Bucky like a phantasm, an evanescent dream that slips from his fingers whenever he gets too close. The signs point to this being meant to happen. They were meant to find each other when they did. Perhaps they were meant to let each other go, too.

February, 2014

“Hello, James.”

The corners of Bucky’s mouth turn up. The sight of him smiling nearly brings Steve to his knees.

“Steve…” the brunet is quiet enough that his words, it seems, are only for Steve. "Call me Bucky.”

Chapter End Notes

It's all going down in the next chapter, guys. I can't wait. Just gotta write the damn thing. Communication will happen. I don't write stories that don't end happily.
Sochi

Chapter Summary

Team USA plays their first game of their 2014 Winter Olympics agenda.

Oh, and Steve and Bucky meet again.

Chapter Notes

TW: some homophobic practices and phrases are used by Bucky to describe his experiences with Pierce and Triskelion Skating Club. Just FYI.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


“Daddy!”

Steve stretches out his mittenèd hands as Joseph swoops by on his skates. His son is standing rinkside on the tiniest skates the place makes (still a little too big for Steve, they had to triple up his socks for them to fit). Practice just ended for the Railsplitters and as they make their way off the ice, some of the players high-five the tiny kid with the giant scarf wound around his head.

Finally big, strong palms slap into fine-boned ones. Joseph maneuvers so Steve is in between his legs, hands held tight. “Ready?”


They slowly skate off onto freshly Zamboni’d ice, the world laying huge and cold and sparkling before them. Since Joseph is holding onto his hands from above, and positioned behind him, Steve feels like he’s skating on his own power. It’s a tremendous, soaring sensation that lifts his chest up, makes him feel tall and strong, despite his heart fluttering away in his chest with the velocity of a small bird.


“Okay…and…” His hands release Steve’s with the slightest push forward against the knit covering his son’s fingers. For a second, Steve falters – he’s used to someone being there as a spotter. But he’s been working so hard with Bucky and Joseph on standing upright on his skates. He wants to do it. Like Gretzky.

He moves forward an inch, then another.

He doesn’t fall.

Steve keeps going all the way to the edge of the boards. When he turns around, Joseph is smiling,
clapping his hands. “Awesome job, buddy!”

“I did it, Daddy!” he calls. He would dance in celebration, but he doesn’t want to wipe out.

A faint sound of clapping from beyond the rink makes Steve look up. Bucky is in the stands with Winnie, looking like it’s Christmas morning and he just saw what’s under the tree.

“Go, Theteve!” he yells. Winnie shushes him, but Bucky shakes her off like a wet dog. His lisp gets thicker the more excited he is. “Thitop it, Mom, he’th doing it! He’th thkating!” He slams his hands together, gloves knocking in a resounding flump of applause. Yay, Theteve!”

It is in this moment that Steve Rogers is truly, gloriously happy.

February, 2014.

Sam hasn’t gotten more than a foot inside Steve’s apartment before Steve throws his phone at him. After waving his arms like a bird in flight to get Steve to settle (which is difficult; Steve’s heart rate is practically at tachycardia level), Sam positions himself on one of the beds and fixes Steve with a Gaze. Clint watches, perceptive, from the other bed. “What are you going to do about this, dude?”

“Aside from try not to throw up?” Steve jokes, but it’s feeble. After he’d gotten those texts he’d fought his way through the crowd of screaming athletes and nations until he’d gotten to the entrance tunnel, avoiding the concerned looks of security guards and his own team. Head met the wall, his body fighting off the urge to empty itself of everything he’d eaten that day. Steve had settled on dry-heaving until he slammed his hand into the brick, throat pulsing so he couldn’t breathe.

Now his eyes are back on Sam, tired and red-rimmed more from the exertion of his body’s peristalsis than any other emotion. “I’ve been in love with Bucky since I was five. I’ve spent the last three and a half years trying to get over him.”

Those years had included one terrible 2010-2011 season, culminating in contract dispute with the Flames that almost ended with getting traded to the Devils (“Seriously, Jersey?” his mother had sighed when Steve had called her to talk about it). Overall, the time between Vancouver and Sochi had transformed Steve into one of the most prominent figures in the NHL. Several Sports Illustrated covers, a stint in ESPN The Magazine’s Body Issue. He caught tons of hell from his teammates, Sam, and everybody on the Internet for those shots, himself clad in nothing but his skates, holding a carefully placed hockey stick. But it was the profile that got the most attention from pundits: ESPN had focused on his premature birth and heart surgery.

It seems almost funny to find out Rogers’s birthday falls on July 4th – it’s why his fans have nicknamed him Captain America despite his home base being in Calgary. The Brooklyn native sighs when I bring it up, but there’s a smile in his eyes. “Yeah. If I had a dollar for every time someone’s called me that on the street, I wouldn’t need a Nike deal.”

Born to Sarah and Joseph, Steven Grant Rogers was not the ideal candidate for an issue devoted to the ultimate in athletic skill and aesthetic. “Heart murmur, asthma, bad lungs, bad everything,” he jokes. “Got heart surgery when I was in second grade, repaired a leaky valve. The asthma I manage through medication and an inhaler. Hasn’t been bad in a while.”

The body, well, that’s something else. “I started out just trying to do it all myself.” Rogers says, drinking a protein shake that has the consistency of glue but Rogers laughs at my pulled face and insists it tastes “like peanut butter.”
“I would go into the gym and throw weights around but nothing really stuck until my junior year when I got noticed by Erskine and he put me on a regimen to get ready for Quinnipiac.”

Renowned QU assistant Abraham Erskine passed away in 2008 from congenital heart disease, but Bruce Banner, head coach of the Bobcats, issued a statement – “If Abe were around today I know he’d agree with me when I say no one worked harder and more diligently on their physical conditioning than Steve Rogers. The guy transformed. It was a privilege to watch him work every day. It just goes to show you that with dedication, you can do anything you put your mind to.”

When I tell Steve about this, the biggest goal scorer in the NHL fights back a deep blush. “That means a lot.” Perhaps there are layers to Steve Rogers the average fan doesn’t see, buried underneath the Olympian proportions.

Steve received thousands of letters from young fans around the world thanking him for being such a strong public figure for kids and heart health. The surge in support led Steve to found the Steve Rogers Foundation, and he runs several clinics a year for kids recovering from heart surgery. Working with the kids and giving back to pediatric hospitals has been the most rewarding thing of Steve’s life, worth more than any goal in any game.

His dating life had been up and down, with a few high-profile flings with female athletes (and the occasional late-night hookup with guys on the road; Drax included). The longest one had come in 2012 with Sharon Carter, a rising professional soccer player. They went out for several weeks, much to the thrill of American paparazzi, but broke it off when Sharon realized the same as all of Steve’s exes – the reality of her couldn’t compete with the dream of Bucky. Plus, when Steve put two and two together about Sharon being Peggy’s cousin it was just too weird, for both of them. They’re still friends, but that was weird.

After that, he’d tried harder to just get by on his own, and it was slowly improving. He’d gotten over his paralyzing fear of interviews and had a great time as a frequent guest on the late night circuit in Canada. The interviews with George Strombopolous usually went viral, mainly because he was at his most relaxed and Strombo tended to make him do stupid shit like try to slapshot a loaf of bread into a hockey net.

Life’s pretty good. Not perfect. But good.

Two text messages shouldn’t make Steve fucking dry-heave in the corner of Fisht Olympic Stadium.

Now Steve sets his elbows on his thighs, gaze drilling into the floor. “I need help, man.”

“Do you want to talk to him?” Sam’s eyes are in Steve’s forehead, he can practically feel the Gaze like a laser beam. It’s the same one Sam used to hit him with when he’d get into fights during games in college, or the time he hooked up with Quill when Peter came back to campus for a visit. The don’t be a moron look.

“Well. If I say yes, will you hit me?” Steve’s voice is at a pitch he didn’t think existed in his vocal cords.

“I won’t hit you, but I will seriously consider poking you in the stomach until you go ‘whoohoo’ like the Pillsbury Dough Boy, but in a way that hurts.”

“…Yeah. I do.”
“Then go talk to him,” and for a moment, Sam’s crow’s feet get a little more prominent, the whisper of a smile around his eyes, “but I swear to god, if you end up jerking each other off in a bathroom and then he leaves and you get all ‘No More I Love You’s’ on me, I’m going to kill both of you and bury your bodies next to the bobsled course.”

“I love our friendship,” Clint says dreamily.


The horn ricochets around the smaller of the two Olympic hockey venues as Steve and the rest of the team pile into the corner around Iceman. “Hell yes!” Steve screams. The crowd roars in approval. Final score: 7-1.

There’s positivity like firecrackers in the locker room. Steve expected this. After the heartbreak of Vancouver, there’s revenge floating through the air like sage smoke. Barely noticeable to the eye, but everyone on the team can smell it.

Steve comes back out of the shower with his towel around his waist, dancing to avoid the snaps of Lang’s own towel against his legs. “I need a burger, or something,” he groans. Lang laughs. “Good luck finding one, Rogers! Unless it’s got sour cream on it.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Clint calls out from the corner. “I could make that work.”

Iceman’s got a pack on his shoulder, rolling it back and forth, pain creasing his brows. Steve stops by his locker on the way to his own. ‘Everything okay, buddy?” he murmurs.

“Yeah, I’ve just been having rotator cuff issues,” Iceman nods. “Nothing to worry about. Might need surgery in the offseason but Fury says it’ll hold for now.”

Rotator cuff.

Steve still hasn’t texted Bucky.

“Well. Just make sure you get it looked at and fixed. I…I know people who haven’t gotten that stuff looked at and it really fucked with their rotation.”

“Yeah, like James Barnes?” Iceman snorts. “That wasn’t ‘cause of anything he was doing. Pierce overtrained him. Didn’t you read the expose?”

Calm down, Steve.

“Yeah. I did.”

“Well, then you know that Pierce is a human diaper who deserves to be in jail. I’m friends with some of those athletes – grew up in the same town as Carol Danvers. Remember when she blew out her knee in ‘05?”

It comes back to Steve, blurry, but it’s there. Carol Danvers. The girl everyone thought Bucky was dating. It had been all over the skating message boards at the time. Then, the December before the Turin Games, she’d been in a practice with Pierce and tore several ligaments in her knee. She immediately announced she would be withdrawing from Turin and after several months of failed surgeries to correct the problems, announced her retirement from amateur competition.

“…always thought something fucked up about that whole story, and when Bucky came out and talked about everything in that interview it made her come forward too, along with Natasha and
Wanda. So thankfully this isn’t because I’m getting, like, abused by Fury.” Bobby snickers. Steve can feel the points of his fingers dig into the palms. “Yeah. Good thing,” he utters, and continues on to his locker.

When he gets back to the dorms Steve looks at his phone. A text message from about an hour ago.

Bucky: Hey.

Dammit, dammit, shitting fuck –

Hey. Sorry I didn’t text back during the Opening Ceremony. Cell service wasn’t great in the arena. Lies, lies, lies. All Steve does is fucking lie to Bucky.

Huge breaths. Off the cliff.

You around tomorrow? We don’t play until the 15th.

Bucky: I know.

Steve can barely focus on his phone. His eyes are blurring but he’s not crying. It’s more like getting body checked but harder. Deeper.

The pause before Bucky replies is probably only a minute or so. Maybe.

Bucky: Wanda and Pietro don’t compete until the 16th. I have training with them and Tasha until around 2PM, and then I meet up with you?

Sounds good. I have practice tomorrow morning and then we have the rest of the day off to sightsee and stuff

(What the fuuuuuuuuuuuuck, his brain screams)

Maybe we can meet at the entrance to the Village? I know coaches usually aren’t allowed into the dorms and stuff

(could you say “and stuff” any more times, Jesus Christ, Steve, you have a fucking Bachelors’ Degree in Liberal Arts Education)

Bucky: Good. And Steve…good job today.

What.

WHAT.

When Steve finally tears his eyes away from his phone he realizes he’s back in his room (when did he get in the elevator?) and Sam is sitting in front of him, smirking like a fucking asshole. “Soooooo?” he croons.

“Shut up.”

“Oh ho!” Sam claps his hands together, rolls his shoulders like he’s Fat Joe. “It is ON for my boy. Time for you to use all those condoms they gave us in the welcome package.”

“Sam!” Steve splutters. “That’s…that’s not…” but maybe it is what Bucky’s thinking, and it makes Sam laugh very hard when that realization makes Steve immediately head to the bathroom
and slam the door.

He doesn’t jerk off, but his dick makes some very convincing arguments.

The Olympic Village is designed like a ski chalet. Hilarious to Steve and the rest of his teammates, since Sochi is actually a resort town that barely qualifies as a Winter Olympics destination. But the actual Village is cozy enough that he can pretend it’s colder outside than it is.

When he wakes up the following morning to the alarm blaring from his phone, there’s a moment of peace in the distance between waking and sleeping, and then what he’s going to do this afternoon hits him square in the face, along with a pillow from the other bed. “Augh, why did you keep your alarm on?” Sam groans.

“Hey man, rise and shine,” Steve grunts, wiping the sleep out of his eyes. “I got practice and then…” he shrugs.

Sam is instantly awake. “Oh reaaaaaaally?”

“Fuck you.”

“No, fuck you, with any luck!”

“Shut up!” Steve roars.

Practice is a mess. Sure, Steve goes through the paces, does what is expected. Captain Steve Rogers doesn’t do anything by halves.

Steve sees Bucky today, Steve sees Bucky today–

The scratch of his skates on the ice. The slap of his stick against the puck. The crash of his body into the boards.

I see Bucky today, I see Bucky today –

High-fiving Iceman. Laughing at a joke Clint tells. Listening to Fury talk about the game plan for the next night.

Bucky Bucky Bucky Bucky –

He decides on a grey sweater and dark jeans, as well as his Team USA jacket because if he knows Bucky, he’s going to be in some kind of Team Russia gear, and Steve is nothing if not a prick when it comes to national pride.

When Bucky comes around the corner, up the through the parking lot, Steve has to press his back hard into the wall to keep from pitching forward – into a faint, into Bucky’s arms, something. A vise settles around his heart. There wasn’t really anything he was expecting about Bucky’s
appearance per se; the last time he saw Buck, it was in Vancouver, and Bucky was definitely not himself. He looked harsh. Afraid. Brittle.

Now? Bucky looks incredible.

He always looked gorgeous, that was never an issue – even when he was in so much pain and suffering under Pierce’s fist, Bucky never allowed his appearance to be anything less than dapper. But this is a relaxed, casual side of Bucky’s wardrobe. Dark jeans, tight but not so much they’d make him look like a hipster, with a gentle boot cut. Team Russia jacket, white with red lettering, and a hood pulled up over his head to block out the chill so Steve can’t make out if he’s put it in a new style or not. Sunglasses to hide from the sun and any possible fans who might want the famous James Barnes mega-watt gaze or a possible selfie. But even from behind the dark lenses Steve can see those gunmetal eyes that shoot him dead in the gut, and they’re fixed directly on him.

A flipflop in Steve’s chest brings him back to himself as he gives a small nod of greeting. It’s the same tumbling pass he’s recognized over years of knowing Bucky, of loving Bucky. It’s fainter, but it’s still there, a routine choreographed in the valves of his properly-working, strong heart.

Bucky hasn’t looked at him directly in the eye since that horrible night all those years ago, panicked and sweating and covered in another guy’s cologne. Steve was confused and angry and so fucking scared. Like he is right now. Terror doesn’t begin to cover this, they should teach people how to handle this emotion in school, because nothing makes any fucking -

“Hi, James,” is all he can strangle out. The other man stops dead in his tracks, looks Steve up and down, but not in a predatory way, like Steve’s seen a few times before now. No, this is just checking to see if he’s safe. A reflex from years of manipulation. Fucking Christ.

Then, Bucky smiles. It's a smile like Steve hasn’t seen the guy do in decades and oh god, the vise gets tighter but his heart gets bigger, too, so it might explode, the world ending and being remade in the corners of Bucky’s upturned mouth.

“Steve…call me Bucky.”

Steve blinks.

“What.”

“Yeah.” Bucky’s posture slouches a little. His hands find their way to his pockets, a thirty-one year old man looking like a twelve year old called up to the principal’s office. “Please?

*I’ll call you whatever you want. Anything. Just keep close to me.*

“Okay.”

*Good lord.*

They stand there, like a couple of schmucks. The snow crunches under Steve’s shoes as he shifts his weight. “So. Uh.”

*Smooth.*

“Wanna go get some coffee?”

Bucky does two things at the same time – he huffs out a small noise, like a small dog sneezing, and he nods. “Yeah.”
“How was your morning?”

“Good. Natasha looks solid. The twins are young. Still can’t get their twizzlies to line up.”

“Twiz…”

“Those spinning side by side things that ice dancers do.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. But they’ve got a lot of potential. Pietro’s got a lot of style…he reminds me a lot of me, from before…”

Christ, Steve’s heart hurts.

“You grew your hair out.”

“Ah. Yeah.” Bucky looks self-conscious now as he pats down a flyaway strand. Once they’d entered the cafeteria Bucky had pulled back his hoodie, exposing longer hair curling softly at the edges, just skimming the back of his neck. “Just needed a change.” His eyes flicker. “Pierce wanted it military short for a while. Managed to convince him to let me grow it a little bit. I’ve had it like this for about a year.”

Ah. That explains it. Steve had seen the photos Bucky had done in the expose, but those were more photos of Bucky’s old competitions. The most recent one in the interview was of Bucky’s profile, staring out over his old rink in Detroit. Triskelion Skating Club. His hair hadn’t been this long.

Bucky notices the silence and seeks to break it. “I might end up cutting it, I don’t know—“

“I like it,” Steve murmurs, before he can stop himself.

And Bucky, Jesus god, Bucky goes pink.

“I need to explain things.”

Bucky’s got a calm around him Steve’s never seen, even when he was young. It radiates off him, a kind of contentment. An ease. It should make Steve practically come out of his skin with joy to see Bucky looking so relaxed, but it just makes a weird fist-like grip around his heart squeeze tighter.

“Ohay,” he says. Why the fuck can’t he talk? He knows why. But fuck.

“Ohay.” Bucky puts down his mug. He’s drinking coffee, black, but he dumped at least four sugars in it, which makes Steve’s stomach plunge like that time he went on Kingda Ka at Six Flags Great Adventure because Bucky always put too much sugar in his coffee, ever since they were sixteen and he insisted only on drinking Dunkaccinos.

Bucky takes a deep breath, and Steve hears a shake to that inhale. His fingers grip the table to prepare himself. “When it started, it was fine. Pierce was a hardass but not anything I hadn’t been prepared for. Carol had told me about him a little bit. We became pretty good friends.”
Steve nods. This is all stuff he’d read in the article. Nothing new here. This was good. Easy.

“Pierce caught me with a guy in my dorm room. This kid, uh…fuck.” Bucky scratches at the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Miles, I think his name was. We met at a party and started hooking up. Pierce came to wake me up when I missed an alarm for early practice and…yeah. Anyway. That’s why he told everyone I was dating Carol. Everyone bought it. Carol was a great sport about it, I think she knew I was terrified of getting outed. Got called ‘faggot’ too many times in college at MSU, that shit sticks with you.” He smiles but it’s tight.

It takes a lot for Steve to see actual blood behind his eyes. He closes them so tight he can see cells rush by in a mad dance, a dervish of plasma.

“He…he didn’t want you to be gay?”

“Oh, you didn’t know homophobia was a major problem in figure skating? I’m not surprised, it’s such a butch sport.” Bucky sounds like he wants to be sarcastic but it comes out too feeble to be sharp. “Basically started out with Scott Hamilton in the 80s. Didn’t want gay guys in the sport. Wanted to keep it masculine. It’s why he kicked Johnny Weir off Stars on Ice. Said Johnny wasn’t ‘family friendly.’ Family friendly my ass; everyone loves that guy, he’s one of the biggest names in skating. It was because Johnny came out. Pierce told me if I came out too, he would take away my own ability to tour during the off-season. Although to be honest, he didn’t have to worry about that. I declined every tour they offered anyway.”

*Bucky had said no to touring with Stars on Ice right after his silver medal in Turin...*

“How come?”

“Aside from being terrified everyone would find out I liked guys…my body, man. My body felt like glass.” Bucky takes another sip of his coffee. “I was skating on borrowed time. Everyone knew it. I’m not build to handle quads at that volume, but in order to compete at that level I had to get them in my program. Whatever Pierce couldn’t explain away as training injuries he just marked off as exhaustion to the press. That’s why I didn’t compete in a bunch of Grand Prix events, why I didn’t go to Salt Lake. Although part of that was definitely my back.”

“How many things have you hurt, Buck?”

“Sprained knee, bulging disc in my lower back, mild concussion from when I collided with another skater during warmups in ’08, and the fucked up left shoulder that still hurts sometimes when it rains.” Bucky cracks a watery smile. “It was the shoulder that did it.”

Steve hears his jaw make a *snikt.*

Bucky doesn’t notice.

Most of this was from the magazine profile, but the stuff about Pierce actively suppressing Bucky’s sexuality? This was nowhere to be found.

“What else?”

“Pierce picked out all of my music for my competition pieces. Wanted me to look like the picture of masculinity. At the very beginning, just to be a douchebag, I told him I wanted to do an exhibition piece to ‘If’ by Janet Jackson and you would’ve thought I’d just punched his mother.” Bucky shakes his head

“So yeah. Acting super butch. Pretending to date Carol off and on. Meanwhile I was picking guys
up in clubs, and not just you.” For the first time, Bucky looks genuinely ashamed. “Lots of guys. Needed to…get the edge off.” His hands curl tighter around the hot drink.

“Hey…” Steve finally figures out what he needs to say, and he says it around the growing knot in his throat. “I get it. Trust me, I do. You needed an outlet you weren’t getting. I understand. We’ve all done it.” His fingers want to reach out and touch Bucky’s so much they itch, but he keeps them plastered to his own chai tea.

You’re not the only one he’s touched a voice like a grim reaper sings in his ear, a siren call to his own destruction. He doesn’t want to think it but it’s there. Maybe he’s moved on. Like Steve was trying to do. And how dare Steve even think that – he’s been hooking up with everybody. Grief does things to you. Pulls you open. Makes you bleed.

“I hated all of the music he made me skate to. The commentators were right – I didn’t have any fire in me. None of the stuff I performed was hitting me in the gut, and that’s the whole point of it. It’s gotta stoke a fire in you, or else you’ll have nothing to perform.” Another slow sip. “I was going to change coaches after Vancouver. I wanted to try again for Sochi, I really did, if only because I wanted to prove I could still compete and win.” Another sip, calmer this time. “Maybe because I hated Pierce so much I thought changing coaches and then winning a gold medal would be a great way to tell him I could do it on my own. And that he could go eat a dick.”

Steve lets out a gasping sort of laugh, like a dying fish discovering something funny before it suffocates. Bucky grins, and it’s like staring into the surface of a supernova.

“When I got hurt…Pierce paid for all of my medical bills,” Bucky goes on, his grin fading. “Took care of me in the hospital. It was really hard to get away from him then. Even retiring from amateur competition was hard, although necessary because doing jumps is kind of hard now. I can’t really pull in my arms as tightly as before.” For a moment Bucky looks wistful. “I still get a lot of solo ice time. I still love the sport. I just…"

“Yeah.” The amount of bravery in this man standing in front of him. If Steve weren’t already sitting he’d fall to his knees. He’s not worthy. He never has been.

“So.” Bucky spreads his hands out on the countertop. “I came into PT one day and saw Pierce leaning over Wanda on the ice. Wanda was screaming, crying, holding her knee. Reminded me of when I saw Carol do the same thing. And Pierce is just…staring at her. Telling her over and over to stop crying, to get back up. That giving up won’t get her a medal in Sochi.

“I just…I snapped. I walked right back out of the practice rink, got in my car, and booked a ticket back home. Well, to my parent’s house in Detroit,” he corrects himself. “Not home, home.”

Steve raises an eyebrow. A question. Bucky sees it. “Steve. Don’t be a moron.”

“Ah. Brooklyn.”

Bucky’s jaw works a little, and there’s a slight pause before he nods. “Yeah. Brooklyn.”

The moment passes before Steve can even realize there’s been one.

“So what happened after you got back to Detroit?”

“Then, I went through my rehab at home with a doctor local to Detroit. Started thinking about what I wanted to do outside of my own skating, and I realized I really wanted to coach. Not just because I liked it, and because I’m such a fucking nerd about skating.” Bucky cocks his head and pushes his tongue into the side of his mouth in a reflexive attempt at being self-deprecating but it just makes Steve remember what his dick looked like when it was pouch in Bucky’s cheek just
Thankfully Bucky doesn’t really notice the blood rushing from Steve’s extremities to his crotch. “I just wanted to be a positive mentor for someone…in a way that I didn’t get with Pierce.” He runs his tongue along the top row of teeth. Either he’s compartmentalized his anger, or he’s repressing it. But he offers up another smile. “Natasha left and signed with me. Then the twins asked me to choreograph their routines, so I did. I have a few others expressing interest too. So far it’s been fantastic. They’re such hard workers. I think Nat’s gonna repeat. At her best, she’s like if Oksana Baiul had kept skating.” There’s that glow Bucky used to get whenever he waxed on and on about the sport he loves.

**He’s moved on.**

It hits Steve like thunderclaps, little hurricanes in his sternum.

“That’s…that’s so amazing, Buck. I can’t even, like, that’s incredible.” Steve blinks hard.

“Yeah.” Bucky looks around, like he’s still worried Pierce is going to swoop in like a vulture and snap him away. “And I treated you like shit.”

“Oh, Buck –”

“No, let me say this. I didn’t know which way was up. After I broke away from Pierce I got into therapy and…I was really fucked up for a long time. A long time.” For the first time since they sat down Bucky’s eyes cloud over. “And I didn’t know how to deal with anything, so I had been taking it out on you. I was…I was really scared, and holding on to things from the past, and you were such a huge part of that…and I don’t know. I just didn’t know how to handle the things I felt.”

When Steve can find the ability to speak, he says, slowly, “Well, you were traumatized. Plus it probably didn’t help having me around to remind you of Brooklyn and when things were…better.”

“Yeah. Better.” Bucky laces his fingers around his cup.

“I read the interview,” Steve pushes ahead, changing tacks. “The one about Pierce. Why didn’t you come out?” His voice drops on that last part. They’ve been having an in-depth conversation, in English, but this is still Russia, and the government’s recent rulings criminalizing LGBTQ activity has Steve both on edge and damn furious. He almost boycotted the Games as a result, but he would have had to come out if that were the case. And while Steve Rogers might be an American hero, he’s sure a cowardly one.

Bucky, on the other hand…

Bucky shrugs. “Wasn’t the right time. When it’s the right time, I’ll do it. Johnny did it while he was still competing and yeah, he’s got a great career now in the broadcast booth. But he got ostracized from the community for a while. And Brian Boitano didn’t come out until recently and…I mean. We were all stunned.” Bucky says this last bit with such total deadpan that it smacks Steve in the face with how much he’s missed this. Snarky, wise-cracking Bucky is back. Maybe wounded, definitely still fragile, but he’s here.

“I’m sure it sent shockwaves throughout the skating world.”

“Oh, totally. It’s like when we all found out Liberace was gay.”

Bucky throws his head back and laughs, fully-throated and real, and Steve knows in that instant that this is *it*, that Bucky is *it*, that’s he’s always been that for Steve, and he opens his mouth -

“You were right, you know.”

“Right.”

“What you said, back in Vancouver,” and for the first time Bucky looks away from Steve, down into what’s probably just sugar water now, ”you said we don’t really know each other anymore. It would be foolish to…think anything more could come of what we were doing when…I don’t really know you now, if that makes sense. But I want to.” Bucky’s still staring hard into the coffee. “I want to be friends.”

The fist in Steve’s chest disappears, replaced by a hollow cavity of air where once beat a proper heart.

Since it can’t talk anymore, Steve only nods. “I would really like that, Bucky.”

Bucky rolls his shoulders, as if to release tension he didn’t himself know was there. “Thank you.”

They talk more, but Steve’s working around the curious gaping chasm in his chest. *Maybe this is what I needed. Finally. Permission to move on.*

Funny. It’s got the same airless feeling it did when he pushed Bucky away the first time. And the second time. Only this time, he’s not doing the pushing.

Chapter End Notes

whoo hooooo!!! COMMENTS GIVE ME LIFE.
Chapter 11: Quarterfinals

Chapter Summary

The Iceberg Skating Palace shimmers in blue and silver in the morning light. Steve doesn’t know if he’s going to be able to get in, even if Bucky said it would be fine. He feels bulky and out of place here, with the smooth slide of figure skates scraping along the ice.

Steve catches a glimpse of Bucky at the gate and gives a little whistle. When Bucky turns around, his pale eyes light up. “Steve.” He waves to the security guard. “He can come in. He’s a friend.”

Steve’s stomach twists.

Chapter Notes

Note: The Maximoffs and Lensherr are based on the real life ice dance brother/sister duo the Shibutanis, who did a short dance to Michael Jackson in the Sochi Olympics and I'm obsessed with them. Lensherr is based on their real-life mom, who's a bit of a tiger mom as described.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

February 16th, 2014.

Team USA manages to beat Russia on home ice. It’s a fantastic moment. Steve doesn’t score, but that’s fine with him. They silence the home crowd.

When he gets back into the locker room, there are a few texts from Bucky.

Bucky: That guy who beat me in Vancouver fell down about forty times in his long program. It was ridiculous. A guy from Kazakhstan got the gold. Crazy.
Bucky: Good work, btw. Just saw the game score
Bucky: Want to come to the Iceberg tomorrow? I’m training the Maximoff twins in the morning, we can grab lunch or something?

A warning shot peals in his brain. He wants to be friends. Don’t fuck this up, Rogers.

Hey sorry just got back to my phone – that would be awesome.

Bucky: :) See you tomorrow!

His sleep is marked by memories. Club Hydra. Club Shield. Blues and reds and brilliant whites and Bucky’s salty mouth, the taste of his own come on Steve’s tongue, his hand wrapped around Bucky’s length. Bucky’s eyes, hissing and afraid, refusing to even talk to him or look him in the face.
Steve jerks awake in the pre-dawn glow with those eyes burning into the back of his own and an ache between his legs.

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Watching Bucky coach the Maximoffs is like nothing he’s ever seen before.

While Fury’s practices are full of raging sarcasm, piss and vinegar (with the occasional “Get your head out of your ass, Rogers!”), Bucky is gentleness infused with good humor. Probably everything Pierce wasn’t. His Russian is smooth and unforced. Steve has absolutely no idea what he’s saying, but every once and a while he hears *spasibo* and knows that’s the Russian word for “thank you.” It’s repeated over and over again, any time Wanda does a proper spin or Pietro holds her arm correctly. Bucky is fully engaged in each part of their routine, and at one point, sits both of them down and demonstrates some of the side-by-side moves himself. Although it’s clear his arm is still compromised from multiple surgeries, the magic that had been missing from Bucky’s skating in recent years is back. At one point Bucky looks over at Steve, checking in, and the apples of his cheeks go pink. Steve immediately schools his expression to something more neutral. He was probably gaping. Swooning. Something horribly inappropriate.

At one point there’s a lot of whistling and clapping from on end of the practice rink – it’s Erik Lensherr, Wanda and Pietro’s father and coach. He and his partner, Charles Xavier, adopted them from Russia a few years ago, and Lensherr is a bit of a “tiger mom” according to Bucky after they head out of the arena for lunch.

“He’s constantly around when I’m designing the routines, asking me how they can improve their choreo. I’m like, I’m not their coach - you are! I’m just the person who did their routines.” Bucky shrugs over a bowl of vegetable soup and thick crusty bread at a local café. “I just smile and talk at him in German.”

“Oh, he’s German? And more to the point, you remember the German from high school?” Steve smirks. “Thought we were too busy throwing spitballs and punching each other to get any of it in our heads.”

Bucky purses his lips, gives Steve a disapproving look. “*Ich spreche Deutsch sehr gut.*”

Steve snorts, mainly to hide the rush of blood to his groin at the perfect German accent coming from Bucky’s mouth. “Well, I didn’t really ingest any of it. But living in Canada, I picked up French.” He stirs his tea. “Lived with some Quebecois for a while. Dated a guy from Montreal.”

“Yeah?” Bucky’s jaw goes a little tight. “Cool.”

This conversation is slowly headed towards a dead end for some reason. Steve switches tacks. “Are you planning on doing any touring now that you’re retired?”

“Maybe once I come out. I’m planning on doing that fairly soon.”
“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, I can. Figure skating is becoming a bit more welcoming since I was a major competitor, as is the rest of the world. Russia excluded. I got out just in time, apparently.” Bucky stares down into his hunk of bread. “I’d love to get back out there on the ice. Do some of my old programs. The ones I actually enjoyed.”

“Yeah.” Steve sits back in his chair, tapping on the table as a nervous tic. “I remember when I was in college I got sidelined pretty hard with a concussion for a week. I was dying to get back on the ice, and Banner wouldn’t let me.”

“Oh yes, that’s right,” Bucky says, and then immediately snaps his jaw shut.

“…Eh?” Bucky said that like he remembered Steve being hurt. “Did you…did you watch my games in college?”

“No…my mom told me about it.” Bucky’s jaw isn’t tight anymore, but his neck is getting a little red, like he’s lying. This isn’t the right time to confront Bucky about the things he might be keeping from Steve, so Steve pushes right past it. “Yeah. Anyway. I understand what it’s like to want to do something you love and not being allowed to do it.”

“Yeah.” Bucky takes another bite of soup.

“But I think you should do it.” Steve leans forward again, voice now full of intent. “I think it would be really, really smart of you to do that. It would be a kind of comeback. And it would get even more fans on your side.”

“I don’t know. My arm is…” Bucky shrugs, and for the first time, Steve sees the Bucky that he hooked up with all of those times. The fear. The uncertainty. The conviction that something isn’t enough. “I can’t really jump. At least, not yet. They’re saying I might be able to in about a year.”

“But nobody really watched you for the jumps.”

“Thanks?”

“No! I mean…anybody can jump, Buck.” Steve lets out a smile, one he hopes reassures his friend. “You were…you are an artist. Your spins and the way you just poured yourself out onto the ice. That’s why people watched you. Why I watched you.”

Bucky blinks several times, like he’s either trying to comprehend what Steve just said, or because he’s trying to stop himself from crying. “Wow. That might be the nicest thing someone’s said to me in a while.”

*You deserve nice things said to you all the time, who told you you’re anything else than totally perfect,* Steve’s brain screams. But he just shrugs and lets out a little laugh. “Well, I said enough shitty things to you when we were growing up, I think I owe you.”

“Punk.”

“Jerk.”

They sit, smiling at each other, for a little while, before Bucky pushes away. “I gotta get back to the Iceberg. Short Dance is tonight. I’m not their coach so I don’t have to be there, but Tasha wanted to make it a night. Plus I’m livetweeting the event.”
“Stop it. Really?”

“Yeah! I just started doing it.” Bucky’s voice goes up like he’s bashful, and it might be the most perfect thing Steve’s ever seen. “It’s really fun. Sometimes I’ve done it when I’ve been drinking a little bit, which is…not something I advise. But hey, I’m not under the thumb of the ISU so, screw it.”

“By the way…” Steve has to ask. “How come Natasha knows perfect English?”

“Oh, she was born in Simsbury, Connecticut, funnily enough. Her parents are Russian expats. Moved back to train with Pierce when she was thirteen.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. She’s been so much better since getting away from him. Trust me. She’s great. A little terrifying. But she’s great.” Bucky’s voice gets a little wistful. “I wish she’d gotten away from Pierce sooner. But hey…hindsight’s 20/20.”

“Yeah, shit,” Steve laughs, scratching the back of his head. “If I had a dime for every time I wish I could go back and change something…” he stops himself. “Well. I’d have a lot of dimes.”

He doesn’t see Bucky’s face fall, but when Steve looks back up, his friend is all smiles. “I’ll talk to you later?”

“Yep. Sounds good.”

Steve’s able to catch the last few routines of the night in ice dance’s short program after the US destroys Slovenia in their second game at Shayba. He’s got a livestream of the event on his phone, and Sam makes fun of him for scrunching his face up at some of the weirder lifts and spins. “I thought regular ice skating was weird,” he smiles. “Plus, when are we gonna meet this guy you keep mooning over?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? You don’t trust us to not be weird?” Clint shoves a slice of pizza into his mouth. “We won’t be!” he mumbles.

“No, that’s not it…” Steve picks a random piece of K-tape off his shoulder. “I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable.”

“Then we won’t make him uncomfortable…ahhh…!” Sam groans as he pulls one of his legs over the foam roller. He and Riley compete for gold tomorrow, and his quads aren’t necessarily happy with the amount of running around he’s been doing. “I want to see all of the events I can. This might be my last Olympics,” he tells Steve.

“Okay. Fine.”

“Yessss!” Clint shakes mozzarella and sausage in the air. “We get to meet the boyfriend!”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Steve hisses. If anybody found out, his career would be over. Despite the overall increase in tolerance for the LGBTQ community, there’s still a huge stigma about gay pro athletes. No one has come out in hockey, ever. And while Steve is brave…he’s not that brave. Not yet.

Not as brave as Bucky, anyway.
When Sam and Clint head out to grab some ice Steve checks Bucky’s twitter account. Aside from lots of skater jargon he doesn't know, it's funny quips and easy banter about the Games themselves. Bucky is so well-adjusted, so smooth, it should make Steve feel completely happy when instead his heart is just cracking further.

*Steve: Those tweets were great.*

*Bucky: Oh god*
*Bucky: So embarrassing, right? But the fans love it*
*Bucky: Fourth overall in the short dance. Not too bad. They could still medal. If the top flight teams all fall down. Multiple times.*

*LOL*
*I have the next three days off. Clint and Sam want to meet you.*

*Bucky: Oh*
*Bucky: Ok*

*Is that okay?*

*Bucky: Yeah*
*Bucky: That’s ok*

*I can tell them you’re too busy*

*Bucky: No it’s ok, don’t worry about it.*

When Clint and Sam round the corner of the cafeteria, Steve can see Bucky stiffen up just a little bit. But at the sight of their smiles, Bucky instantly relaxes. “You were Steve’s roommate at Quinnipiac, right?” he inquires, shaking Sam’s hand. Sam grins even wider. “You bet. I’ve heard a lot about you!”

“Oh god. Only good things, I hope?” Bucky says it like it’s a joke, but Steve can hear the hinge in his voice grind down.

“Of course.” Clint’s voice is gentle. “Nothing but good.”

Bucky melts, Steve along with him.

They eat lunch together, laughing and talking, Sam making Bucky throw his head back and laugh multiple times. At one point Steve has to excuse himself so he doesn’t openly weep in front of everyone.

So much happiness at once, and not a clue where to put it.

When he comes back, Sam gives him a look like he knows what Steve was up to, but his friend just offers a sly wink and pats him on the shoulder. Clint nods in his general direction before continuing to listen to Bucky talk about how the various modes of skating combine together to show different modes of artistry.

When they leave, Sam looks at Clint. They grin at each other, sharing an unnamed secret. A whole hour’s worth of conversation in two seconds.
“What?” Steve looks at both of them.

“Dude.”

“Sam.”

“Just tell me!” Steve explodes.

“Okay,” Sam exhales. “Aside from the fact that we both love him and we’d marry him if we weren’t already married—”

“To women—” Clint interjects.

“To women,” Sam acknowledges. He stirs his Diet Coke around with the straw. “I mean…it’s clear that the guy is totally in love with you.”

Steve feels his entire body drain of blood. “Stop.”

“…Oookay, we won’t say anything else if you don’t want us to, but you’re being willfully obtuse if you don’t see it,” Clint says.

“Obtuse,” interjects Sam, “very nice.”

“Why thank you, Wilson. I got an English degree.”

“You went to college?”

“Fuck you.”

Sam and Clint head off, laughing, to dump their trays on the cafeteria conveyor belt, leaving Steve not knowing which way is up.

Guys you’re wrong, he just wants to be friends.

Sam: It’s been five hours, where are you

Steve: With Thor and Wade

Clint: Oh god don’t listen to them on women they wouldn’t know anything

“Hey!” interrupts Wade, looking over Steve’s shoulder as he texts. “That’s grossly unfair. I have a girlfriend!”

“Yes, and you break up with her every other week,” Thor intones, solemnly.

“I said I have a girlfriend, I never said I was smart, which is why I have Vanessa, because I managed to convince a woman smarter than me that I’m worth keeping around,” Wade deadpans.

Steve huddles away from them at the table, staring at his phone, being a horrible dinner guest and not really mad about it.

Sam: Do you not see the way he looks at you? Guy wants you for breakfast lunch and dinner.


Sam: Clint. We talked about the fuckin’ lord of the rings references
Clint: Go eat a dirk
Clint: DICK
Clint: GO EAT A DICK
Clint: Fucking autocorrect

Sam: LOLLLLL
Sam: Did we lose Cap?
Sam: Steve?

Yeah

Sam: We aren’t kidding around

Clint: Not really anyway

Sam: Seriously he likes you a lot, kid, he was makin’ goo goo eyes at you all during lunch, so what are you waiting for?

He just wants to be friends

Sam: Is that you just telling yourself that so you don’t have to put yourself out there?

Clint: Ooooooooooo

Sam: BA in Psychology, motherfucker

February 17th, 2014.

The cafeteria the morning of Steve’s second day off before the elimination round is bustling with activity. Thor and Wade jostle each other for room at the small table before getting told off by their respective coaches. Then, a thoroughly bashful young star from Team Sokovia asks Steve for an autograph before shuffling off. It’s fun, being the old hat with the newbies. There’s a comfort level that didn’t exist at either of the other games. Turin was pure nerves. Vancouver was more about trying to win. Steve obviously wants gold, but this time is more about enjoyment of the moment instead of trying to be the best.

He tells this to Bucky on the phone (Bucky’s at the Iceberg, going through the final preparations for the Maximoff free dance). Bucky responds with a string of laugh emojis.

What?!

Bucky: You? Not concerned about winning? Did you get hit too hard in the Slovenia game?


Bucky: Well, you might not be bothered, but I want you to win. You’ve been working for it for so long. You deserve it. It’s all you’ve ever wanted

Steve looks at that message for about ten minutes, blinking hard.

Fuck.

What the fuck is he doing?

The last serious relationship Steve had was with Peggy, and throughout that entire two years he never once felt what he’s felt for Bucky over the past few days. While he cared about Peggy, still
does (they talk from time to time), the fire that fills his gut whenever Bucky’s in his presence is all Steve can think about, all he can dream about when he goes to sleep.

And Bucky wants him to go after his dreams of Olympic gold, hell, wants him to get what he couldn’t because he was going through hell in a handbasket under the thumb of Pierce, and all Bucky wants to know is whether or not Steve’s going to succeed.

Steve could live a million and a half lifetimes, more, and he’d never deserve someone like Bucky.

If he really thinks about it for too long, all he’s ever wanted is Bucky.

But he’s a coward, so he can only respond with yeah, def, before putting his phone in his pocket and pinching the space between his eyebrows.

He spends the day touring the Sochi countryside with Clint and Sam, celebrating Sam’s gold medal in the two-man bobsleigh a few days before. It’s a day off from practice and games, so Steve gets to drink a little.

Okay, a lot.

By the end of the day, he’s laughing and smacking Clint and Sam on the shoulders as they stumble out of a bar in the nightlife district of Sochi. There are a couple of pictures snapped, but nothing too bad. Mainly selfies and Steve laughing hysterically.

“Who do you guys play in the quarterfinals?” Sam asks, checking his watch.

“Czech Republic. Cake Republic,” Steve slurs. Sam explodes with laughter. “I haven’t seen you this drunk since you got called up to the NHL and had that last rager at the house in Hamden. You wanted us to drive you to the IHop on Dixwell and punched a wall when no one would take you.”

“It deserved it,” Steve responds, emphatic and hammered.

“Yep, thankfully Mr. I Can’t Hold My Russian Liquor has another bye day tomorrow so he can rest the giant hangover that’s about to come crashing down,” Clint snickers.

“Shuddup.” But Steve’s nothing but smiles, vodka and good friends warming him from the inside out. Silvery and smooth in his throat.

It takes him a second to realize his phone is buzzing in his pocket, but when it hits, it makes Steve jump. “Oooooh, phone!” Clint cracks up into his seltzer.

Bucky: They came in fourth. No big deal, they’re young. They’ll medal in Pyeongchang. But ugh, Erik’s pissed.

BOOOOOOO HE SCKS

Bucky: You’ve been drinking?

I BEEN DRINKIN
WATERMELON

Bucky: That’s a yes

SURFBOART

Bucky: Oh my god
“Bucky: I cannot wait to show you this conversation tomorrow
Bucky: You’re lucky I like you

U lIKE me? Awwwww Borky
Y didn’t u txt me bck when I texts’d u

Bucky: ?

I txted you so many times
Like a thousand times
For wks
Im’d you too
Back before Turin
After u got hrt too
WTF Buck
What the fuck Buck
HAAAAAAAAAA

The phone gets shoved back into his pocket, where it dies from low battery before Steve gets back to the dorms and passes out face down in his pillows.

The next day he wakes up with a vicious hangover and zero recollection of texting anyone, let alone Bucky, until he powers up his phone and sees the string of text messages he sent the previous night. No response from Bucky.

His stomach turns over, and he runs to the bathroom to vomit.

February 19th, 2014.

The morning of the Czech Republic game dawns clear and cold. Steve's huddled up in the corner of the cafeteria over a giant mug of coffee. Wade, Thor, Clint, and Sam have all tried to sit with him but he’s waved them off, making an excuse about studying game clips but really he’s nursing the last vestiges of his drinking mess from two nights before. Not to mention the searing guilt in his chest over what he said to Bucky, who hasn’t contacted him at all since those drunken texts. Not even one response, which of course is a response in itself. It certainly stabs like a response would, right in the heart.

There’s a soft, barely perceptible sound of a squeaky chair next to him. Steve looks up to see bright red hair and piercing green eyes perched alongside him like a butterfly landing on a stick. “Can I help you,” he starts.

“Yasha can’t meet with you today for coffee,” Natasha Romanov announces. She curls up in her seat, managing to look terrifying even though she’s about as tiny as the average figure skater. “He needs to meet with the ISU about Pierce.”

“Everything okay?” Every cell in Steve’s body snaps to attention.

“Yes. He’s fine. Or he will be.” She watches him, her voice slightly raspy. Either that’s her natural timbre, or she’s worn her vocal cords out from hours of interviews; she’s the golden girl of the Russian figure skating world. Of course she’d have people around all the time. Natasha doesn’t search anyone out unless it’s important.

“…Sounds good?” Steve looks down at his game plan, avoiding Natasha’s eyes. They stare at him like lasers. Steve knows that look. He’s seen it on Bucky’s face before.
“He talked about you all the time.”

Steve jerks up. “What?”

“At times I wondered what kind of person you could possibly be, to grab Yasha’s attention like that.” Natasha’s eyes, once penetrating, now dance a little. A ballet in emerald. “Of course I don’t know you. But I see how Yasha is when he’s been around you, or after he’s seen you. He’s happier than I’ve ever seen him. So you must be as good as advertised.” She doesn’t seem to notice Steve’s heartbeat kicking up like a storm in his chest. “Yasha is laughing, and it goes to his eyes. So thank you for that.”

A little winter wind licks into the cafeteria from a propped open door. It combines with the chill settling over Steve’s bones as Natasha talks. “He-“

“You ever watch some of his new pieces?”

Steve doesn’t know much about Natasha Romanov aside from her legacy as one of the greatest ladies skaters to ever represent Russia, but the woman is also a master of startling non-sequiturs. “I…what?” He drops his sandwich, which bounces with zero answers. “Didn’t Pierce make him skate to butch music?”

Natasha laughs, low and throaty. It would be sexy if Steve wasn’t so freaked out. “I mean the ones I’ve posted on YouTube,” she asserts. “The ones he does during practice? The viral ones?”

“Uh.” Steve bites his lip. “I don’t really go on social media unless it’s to watch game tape.” That’s the truth. Steve has a Twitter account, but it’s managed by his publicist because it gives him too much anxiety. Instagram is for random pictures of Calgary winters and the New York skyline when he comes home to visit. Facebook is for the random political rant and the occasional fight with Sam over some embarrassing photo he’s posted as a throwback. YouTube? YouTube makes him feel old as hell.

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Natasha pushes away from her seat. “My username is BlackWidow89. I’d check it out.”

She’s gone in a whirl of scarlet and white to join the Maximoffs at a separate table, who immediately descend upon her like carrier pigeons.

It takes Steve all of ten minutes to get back to his room, snap open his laptop, and find Natasha’s channel. Most of the videos are cutesy vlogs in Russian with English subtitles. Several of them are on a playlist titled “Yasha Fun!” Steve takes a deep breath. Clicks.

The camera is pointed on Natasha, like she’s holding the phone directly in front of her face. “Coach doesn’t know I’m filming this, but he always does this right after practice, and it’s so awesome. You have to see this.” Her face is bright, conspiratorial. The camera swings to the rink, where Bucky is going through some improvised dance. The music is hard to hear until the chorus, when someone kicks up the volume. It makes Steve jolt back like he’s been struck.

I’m your biggest fan, I’ll follow you until you love me
Papa-
paparazzi
Baby there’s no other superstar you know that I’ll be
Your papa
paparazzi
Promise I’ll be kind, but I won’t stop until that boy is mine
Baby you’ll be famous, chase you down until you love me
The song that was playing the last time Steve hooked up with Bucky. The passion of the song is conveyed exactly in Bucky’s movements. It’s almost like Steve is watching a time capsule video from the brilliant, heart-tripping performances Bucky used to give. Before Russia. Before Pierce sank his teeth into him, ripped all of the soul out.

No, not all of it. He’s back. Alive. Vital. This shows it.

Bucky spins, changes edge, even does a few jumps that are slightly off-balance – that shoulder doesn’t let him pull his arms in as tightly as before – but the artistry, the sheer beauty and love Bucky has for skating, all of it is there. It’s as if nothing bad has ever happened to him.

Steve clicks on another one. And another. “Flashing Lights” by Kanye West. “Don’t Stop the Music” by Rihanna. All the songs he and Steve had heard while they were frantically taking each other to pieces in club bathrooms.

At the end of the Rihanna one, Bucky looks up and sees Natasha recording him. “Oh, you’re going to put this up on YouTube?!?” he shouts, then bursts out laughing. “Fine, okay, at least I didn’t fall on my ass this time.” He flicks a piece of ice at Natasha, then uses a towel to wipe off his sweaty face.

God, Steve can practically taste the salt on Bucky’s skin. Wants to know if it tastes the same, or perhaps leaving Pierce has changed even his entire body chemistry. Made it sweeter. Made it gentle.

Steve could make it gentle for him. Make it so good. Take care of him, forever. Fall to his knees and put his mouth on every part of Bucky’s beautiful-

His phone buzzes.

*Clint:* Game dayyyyyyy, you hungover still?

Steve laughs like he’s crying.

*You bet your ass.*

They crush Czech Republic. Steve scores. It registers like a barely buzzing fly.

He never hears from Bucky.

*February 20th, 2014.*

When he gets back to his room after a day of interviews and press, Sam’s waiting for him. His eyes are conspiratorial, but also serious. “You need to watch ESPN, right now.” Thumb jerks to the TV like he’s hitching a ride.

Confused, Steve puts his bag down and looks over.

“Huge news in the skating world this morning: Nearly two years ago, figure skating was shaken by the revelation of Alexander Pierce’s abusive training tactics, according to the testimony of
several of his former athletes. This morning, in a meeting with the International Skating Union, more information about Pierce’s practices have been disclosed by former Olympian and World Champion James Barnes. Barnes, who was forced into an earlier than planned retirement due to several untreated injuries in his left shoulder, revealed to the ISU that Pierce had apparently tampered with his phone, cutting him off from contact with friends trying to reach out to him. We now go to Alison Blaire at the ISU Headquarters in Sochi, who has a prepared statement.”

“Today in a private meeting with the ISU, James Barnes expressed concerns that his phone had been tampered with during the time he was coached by Alexander Pierce. After a friend had mentioned he had attempted to contact James over a period of several months, James reached out to us in order to figure out if Pierce was the perpetrator. This morning, Pierce confessed to having his assistant intercept James’s cell phone and Instant Messenger accounts so some of James’s texts and messages were rerouted to Pierce’s phone instead. I would like to read a statement from James Barnes, who is unable to be present at the moment, as he is attending the ladies short program on behalf of his athlete, Natasha Romanov.”

She unfolds a piece of paper, reads, “Over the past several weeks, it has come to my attention that Alexander Pierce was not only trying to hamper my athletic ability by overtraining my body, but he was also trying to stifle who I am as a human being. During the time I was coached by Alexander Pierce, he repeatedly attempted to frighten me into a version of myself that was palatable for mainstream audiences. I have discovered that this tampering extended into his assistant hacking into my cell phone and AOL accounts in order to hide text messages, emails, and instant messages from friends and significant others. This behavior by Pierce has caused me to believe several close friendships and possible relationships to fall apart. I can now state, due to Pierce’s confession, that I was manipulated into hiding my identity as a gay man, because I thought I wasn’t receiving support from the people who mattered most. I know now that this was false, and that I simply never received their messages. In addition to this manipulation, Pierce also barred me from accepting invitations to Stars on Ice and other touring companies due to my status as an LGBTQ individual.

“I did not expect to come out this way, but it seems appropriate, given the circumstances. My identity as a gay man has been severely compromised by Pierce’s homophobic, abusive behavior, and it has cost me not only a few more good years of elite skating, but also several friendships along the way. I am very grateful to my family, my athletes, and the friends who have stuck around. You know who you are.”

She closes up the piece of paper, keeps talking, but Steve doesn’t hear her. Doesn’t remember when he sat down on the floor, but his ass hurts, so it must have been a hard crash. Sam’s sitting on the chair next to the TV, studying him. “Well. Now you’ve got an answer to why he wasn’t answering your texts. He wasn’t getting them at all.”

When Steve can finally figure out how to talk again, he guts out, “I gotta…I gotta talk to him.”

Jell-O legs manage to work their way up to a standing position and head for the door, but there’s a knock before he can open it. Opens it.

It’s Bucky.

Before Steve can even say a word, Sam just uses that bobsledder speed and slips past both of them. “Put a sock on the door,” he murmurs, before taking off for the elevator.

They’re alone.
DUM DUM DUMMMMMMMMM!

Comments and kudos make me write faster. It's scientific fact.
Over the past few days, every time Steve’s seen him Bucky’s been the epitome of well dressed. Not a hair out of place, beautifully tailored clothes – even if it’s just the practice gear he’s thrown on to work with his athletes. There’s a perfection to his appearance.

The Bucky standing in front of Steve now, backlit by the fluorescence of the hallway lights, still looks elegant (dark wash jeans, grey henley, black jacket) but his face is thoroughly unschooled. Anxiety pulls his cheeks taut. It’s the same look Bucky had when he showed up at Steve’s door that night in Calgary.

“What-“ Steve starts, then has absolutely no idea how that sentence would end. It flops like a bad pass that crashes into the boards. “I saw the ESPN story,” he manages.

“How long?”

Bucky says it quietly, the tone of his voice in drastic contrast with the panic on his face. “How long, Steve?”

Steve presses the heel of his left hand into one eye, then the other. He presses his body against the open door to hold himself up. “I… I instant messaged you after the thing with Kurt to apologize about how I acted. I wasn’t… supportive – to say the least.”

“Yea. I saw those.” Bucky’s still immobile just inside the doorway. “Was still scared. Didn’t want to get back to you. When Pierce caught Victor and I – he got hold of my phone to get all my contacts.”

Bucky’s eyes lock on Steve’s. They’re focused with a tinge of wildness. “That was in February of 2001, I think. So… how long?”

Steve knows what Bucky means but God, he can’t go there. Not yet.

“I texted you. Instant messaged you. A few times a week, until the fall of 2003.”

There’s a small noise. Steve looks down – Bucky’s squeezing the door knob until the mechanism rattles. “Why did you stop,” Bucky asks.

“I… I wasn’t getting a response? So – I figured our friendship was – can you come inside the room please?“ He reaches for Bucky, but Bucky just edges past him into the room, one step ahead of Steve’s touch.

“Anything after that?” Bucky’s looking out the window now, out into the glitter of the soft lights in the village. Steve aches. Oh, how he aches.

“When I found out you got into Turin I sent you an email. Didn’t get a response. So I stopped until you got hurt. Then I sent you texts for… a while after that.” Every single word feels like gravel in Steve’s mouth.

“What did you say?” Bucky’s voice is so soft now.

“I sent just… dumb shit,” Steve says, helplessly. “Shit like I hoped you were doing okay. Stupid
gifs. Pictures of pineapple pizza.”

Bucky chokes out a gasping sort of laugh.

Steve continues, “I thought you…well. I stopped. I let you go. Moved on. Or tried to.” He desperately ignores the flicker of some dead optimism in his heart.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, Steve.” Bucky turns to face him and Steve feels his heart constrict under that vise. Bucky’s face is vibrating with the effort to batten the doors of a hurricane. “How long.”

“Bucky-” Steve sounds broken, probably because he is. “For so long.”

Bucky sways.

Before Steve can reach out to steady him Bucky’s already launching himself into Steve’s arms, shaking uncontrollably. It makes Bucky’s body roll and pitch and Steve just…grabs on. Rides the wave.

They end up in a little huddle on Steve’s bed, still upright but tightly locked together. When Bucky can coax his teeth to stop chattering, he looks at Steve in the face. “When you told me what ‘faggot’ meant I felt like someone had given me a mirror. That’s what it was. What I am. When I realized it…I knew I had to hide it. Kept it from everyone except my mom. Treated Peggy like garbage.”

“Peggy knew,” Steve says, gently. Of course she knew. It all makes sense, now.

“And then when I saw how successful you were getting and how much everyone in the NHL loved you and how much you were clearly born to…I figured I had to let you go.” Bucky’s voice comes and goes in a shuddering breath of air. “So when Mom said you were back in Brooklyn for that visit, I wanted to see you at Hydra so I could tell you that it was okay. That we could both move on. And…” Bucky squeezes his eyes tight. “Then I saw you.”

Steve closes his own eyes.

“I didn’t know what to do after that but I knew I could count on you being there in July, at least for a little while.” Bucky holds on to Steve a little tighter. “It was the thing keeping me together with everything going on with Pierce. Sometimes the only thing.” His shoulders press together in shame.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Steve holds Bucky a little closer, mindful of that bad shoulder.

“Couldn’t. I mean, your’e Captain America. The hero of little kids. I know how that league works.” Bucky doesn’t pull away, but Steve can feel his entire body tense up like a violin string with frustration. “I couldn’t ruin your career like that.”

“Hold up,” Steve says, slowly, trying to keep his voice even, “you don’t think I’m capable of making my own decisions? I mean, Jesus, Buck, I don’t care about any of this-“

“Bullshit, Steve,” Bucky shouts. He stands up like he’s been stung. “You know you care,” he says, making his voice a deadly hush. “I was there when you were yelling at the TV, memorizing every damn hockey player that’s ever put on a Team USA uniform. I don’t think getting caught getting sucked off by a guy with a misplaced crush in a bar bathroom is worth throwing away everything you’ve worked for.”

Steve feels his heart shatter a little – misplaced? – even thought he knows, inherently, that most of
Bucky’s anger is coming from the programming drilled into him by Pierce. So he might as well shatter back.

“Yeah. This stuff matters, okay? It matters a lot. I love this sport. Love getting to represent my country. And if that’s all you saw that time as, a guy hooking up with someone in a club, then yeah, I can move on and really focus on my career. But that’s going to be pretty damn difficult, Buck, and I hope it wasn’t just a misplaced crush. Because that guy in that club? I’m was in love with him.”

The tension in Bucky’s jaw relaxes as it drops. “What.”

“You heard me. And-“ Steve swallows, hard. “I never stopped being in love with him. With you. You are…Jesus – Bucky – “ Steve clenches his hands to stop them from shaking. He’s up off the bed now, but won’t move forward another inch. “I’m so in love with you I don’t know what to do with myself half the time – you’re the bravest, funniest, kindest person I’ve ever met – when I’m not with you I’m…I’m not good.” He shakes his head a little to keep the tears back. Doesn’t quite work. “So. That’s where I’m at. Okay? That’s where I’m at. I love you. And, shit, man, I can’t just keep chasing down some kind of dream, I’m fucking going crazy here – you’re all I think about, everything I’ve ever wanted-”

Steve’s prepared to keep going until something, anything shuts him up, so it’s a relief in more ways than one when Bucky steps into his space, cups Steve’s face in his trembling hands, and kisses him.

It centers Steve’s focus down to forgetting anything that isn’t Bucky. The kiss the liquid, ice and fire. Bucky whimpers. Steve wraps his arms around Bucky’s waist, pulls him close. Secure. Warm.

The kiss in Calgary was a gnash of teeth and repressed emotion. The kisses in the clubs were about getting off, about trying to find a way to connect. This? This is bone-deep tenderness. There’s no mission here, no next step. There’s just the touch. Breathing in, and out.

When they finally break apart, Bucky presses his forehead to Steve’s. When he speaks, it’s in a deep sigh. “You goddamn fucking punk. I’ve been in love with you since the second I saw you.”

“You were five, and you said I was stupid,” Steve rasps, not knowing when he totally started crying but not caring very much at all.

“So?” Bucky tries to throw that signature Bucky Barnes sass but it’s got so much joy it threatens to explode the light bulbs in the room. “Little boys make fun of people they like.”

They both laugh a little, then Bucky shakes his head as if to center himself back into a more serious discussion. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” he murmurs, prayerful. “Loved you every time we sat on your couch and you made fun of me for being way too invested in a random figure skater no one had heard of. Loved you every time I poked you in the back of the head in German class.” He knocks away the tears on Steve’s cheeks before scrubbing his own off. “Loved you when you were with Peggy and I loved you when I had to move-”

“Okay, I get it,” Steve laughs through a cry. He presses a kiss to Bucky’s forehead. “You love me.”

“And you love me..” Bucky says it almost like a child. Full wonder.

“Don’t even act like you can’t believe it,” Steve breaks in, seeing the lift in Bucky’s brown he gets when he’s about to ask a question. “You’re the bravest person I know. I just…I get so damn angry
“when you’re not in my life.”

“Oh, I keep you in line?” Bucky jokes.

“You keep me level, Buck.” Steve’s voice is serious. “And I know it’s crazy soon and all…and I’ve still got games to play.” Steve’s voice dips off at the end, but before he can keep going, Bucky kisses him again. Still gentle. Tentative.

“Stop,” he murmurs against Steve’s lips. “Now that we’ve managed to talk, like goddamn adults, we’ve got nothing but time.” He pulls away a little, and the smile on Bucky’s face inspires galaxies to shine brighter. “You have anywhere to be for the next forty-five minutes?”

The vise around Steve’s heart falls off.

---

Don’t come back for the next 45 mins

Sam: BOIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

Shut up

;)

Sam: I AM WITH CLINT HE’S GOTTA TEXT YOU

Clint: AHHHH PICS OR IT DIDN’T HAPPEN

“Our friends are weird,” Bucky says, lounging on Steve’s bed like a panther sunning itself. Steve takes a hopefully stealth picture and sends it to Clint and Sam. He cracks up when he sees the response, a string of champagne and eggplant emojis.

“What’s up?” Bucky asks.

“Nothing. My friends are idiots.”

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At one point, Steve just kisses Bucky. Not just on the mouth. He trails his lips over Bucky’s cheeks, jaw, throat. His right earlobe. His temple. There’s no agenda to them, he just wants to give and take.

Bucky winds the fingers on his right hand into Steve’s hair, gently, and massages his scalp. At one point he giggles when Steve’s mouth finds the underside of his jaw, right at the connection point of his neck. Steve files away that information for later because making Bucky Barnes laugh is a very, very high priority.

“It was this guy in college. Peter. He was a little loud and fun, and I liked being around him. And then he kissed me…it was like my whole body went, oh, duh, this is what it is.” Steve nuzzles further into Bucky’s chest, giving him a chance to hold on for a bit. “I didn’t realize that’s what all those weird feelings I had for you were. Not that they were weird-“

“I get it,” Bucky says, quietly. “I was pretty good at shoving down how I felt about you for a long time…until Peggy. And you liked her so much. I had to let you go after her.”
“And I did care about her,” Steve murmurs, letting his leg droop over Bucky’s to intertwine with them. “I just...I never felt how I felt with her the way I feel about you.”

“Yeah. I never felt that way about anyone else, either.”

“Good,” Steve says, before he can stop himself. Bucky laughs, loud and long. “Didn’t know you were so possessive,” he jokes.

_No, just in love, and just going to make sure no one will ever hurt you again_, Steve vows, fiercely, in his head. But he just curls his head upwards to find Bucky’s mouth again.

Surprisingly it takes more than half an hour for Bucky to end up on top of Steve, the kisses becoming deeper. Bucky’s kisses are exploratory. They promise more. They’re a tease, is what they are. Steve craves them like a drug.

He moans a little as Bucky slowly grinds his hips downward; the denim of his pants a rough friction against the soft cotton of Steve’s sweatpants. He’s not hard just yet but if they keep going he’ll get there.

“Buck,” he says, almost a whisper against the full wetness of Bucky’s mouth.

“Yeah?” Bucky’s voice is a pant, _Jesus Christ._

“...I have my final game on Saturday or Sunday, depending on what happens with the Canada game.” In his heart Steve knows they probably won’t make it to the gold medal rounds, but hopefully they can shoot for a bronze medal. Canada is just too damn good. “After that...” he blinks a little.

“Why...Steve Rogers, are you asking me out on a date?” Bucky grins. Steve laughs hard, and pops a kiss to the tip of Bucky’s nose. “Yes, I am. An actual, proper date. One that doesn’t involve club bathrooms.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Bucky smirks, his eyes turning positively feral as he grinds down a little harder. “Play your cards right...”

“Shit. You can’t do that right now, Bucky.”

“Why not?”

“You’ve got Nat’s long program tonight and I’ve got a game plan and...I can’t think about the things I want to do to you if I’m gonna keep my focus.”

The corner of Bucky’s mouth curls up with delicious intent. "That better be a promise, Stevie."

"Oh, God," Steve groans, kissing Bucky deeply. "It’s signed, sealed, and delivered."

After breaking off the kiss Bucky just stares down at him for a few seconds. “What?” Steve whispers.

“...I just love you.” Bucky says, reverently. “Fuck, I love you. Love you too much.”

"Not possible," Steve smiles.
Bucky smiles too, but it's watery. "And all that time we could've been doing—"

“But now we are,” Steve interrupts, pulling Bucky down to rest against him. “Now we are. And that’s what matters.”

When Bucky leaves Steve manages to get one more beautiful sledgehammer of a kiss before they both have to get ready for their respective events. Steve’s head is total mush, but what a mush to be in.

When he turns his phone on again there are twenty messages from Sam and Clint. They are mostly in all caps.

Chapter End Notes

Sam's reaction is my reaction.

The next chapter is going to bump the rating up a smidge. And by a smidge I mean a lot.
Ladies Singles Final, Sochi.

Chapter Summary

The ladies final, and the US plays Canada in the Olympic Semifinals.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve ends up going down to meet Sam when he gets back from his round of post-competition interviews. They get into the elevator in silence before Sam turns to Steve, looking like a kid on Christmas morning. “So?”

Steve looks down at the floor. It’s impossible to hide the grin.


“Oh quit being a baby,” Sam smiles. “Is the room going to smell like sex when we get back?”

“No!” Steve shouts, then immediately lowers his voice. They are in an elevator, after all. “No… We just talked it out.”

“Hard?”

“Stop it,” Steve responds through clenched teeth. But Sam laughs, because Steve’s purple and the teeth bite back a bigger smile.

“You going to the ladies final tonight?”

“ Probably.” There is a cordoned off section at every single Olympics venue for participating athletes. Steve’s utilized it for Team Canada and Sweden games to watch Thor and Wade play, and he also got to see nearly all of Sam’s runs. There may or may not be video of him freaking the hell out about Sam’s gold medal winning run that went viral all over Instagram and Twitter.

“I might come with. Maybe Clint will come.” Sam gets a glint in his eye.

“Okay, but don’t make it into a thing, okay?”

“I would never.”

“Seriously?” Steve asks weakly.

“I figured Bucky and Natasha would want a good cheering section,” Sam says primly. Behind
him, Wade, Scott Lang, Clint, and Thor wave like a tourist group at the Eiffel Tower.

On the ice is a girl from Canada, much to the enjoyment of Wade.

“She’s hot,” Clint says around a mouthful of nachos.

“She’s too young for you,” Steve fires back.

“You’re shittin’ me. Too young? For Clint?” Wade flicks popcorn at Steve.

“Gross.” Steve picks the piece of popcorn off his jacket and leans forward. He’s not really watching the skater, although she’s doing a workmanlike job. His eye is trained on the small TV at the edge of the ice, showing the offstage activities of the top skaters in the next group. Natasha’s group.

On the satellite feed (easily accessed by the NBC affiliates once this skater is done, so they can preview the groups to come), Steve can see Bucky talking to Natasha as she does some complicated stretches next to a ballet barre. His hands reflexively steeple underneath this chin as if he’s listening to a professor; never mind he can’t hear a damn word Bucky’s saying to Nat. The music the current skater is performing to, a medley by Chopin, swirls around him like a soundtrack.


“How do you hate Bambi, you fuckin’ Neanderthal?” Sam cries. The rest of the section tries to ignore the slow-burning fight breaking out in their midst.

“The mom dies, you unfeeling asshole!” Wade retorts.

“Are we seriously arguing about Bambi? Shut the fuck up!” Clint smacks Wade on the shoulder. Steve just stares ahead. Scott silently shakes with laughter.

“I like this movie,” Scott whispers, halfway through Natasha’s near-flawless program scored to the soundtrack to Moulin Rouge! Natasha’s hair, costume, and overall demeanor are a perfect vehicle for the character of Satine. Coquettish and flirty at one minute, cold and domineering the next, vulnerable and wilting to wrap it all up. Bucky told Steve he’d worked with her on the choreography not only to tell the story of the film, but to sell how passionately she cares about the sport of skating and how much of an ambassador she is not only for the sport, but for Russia as a whole, despite moving back to Detroit to train with Bucky two years ago. The rhythm of her jumps is textbook Bucky Barnes – each one is timed perfectly with the music to paint a bigger picture. It’s as if the songs are coming through Natasha’s bones rather than the Iceberg sound system. Scott’s transfixed. Sam looks a little bored. Steve keeps his eyes on Natasha while flicking them to Bucky every once and a while.

Bucky is standing rinkside, hands and upper body twitching in time to the music. It’s as if he’s performing the routine along with Natasha, but in miniature. It’s a master class in passion and restraint, and it shows just how badly Bucky wants this for his student and friend. It’s also, Steve
knows, another sign of how much Bucky misses being out on the ice. He hasn’t done any skating, either for a tour or for pro competition, since he got hurt.

*You’re too cute,* he texts. He knows Bucky won’t answer it, but it’s worth sending.

Natasha ends her routine with a powerful combination spin that shows off her flexibility and speed. Bucky jumps up and down, whistling like he’s summoning the hounds of Hell. Steve and the guys stand up and applaud, loudly, as Natasha bows and waves to the crowd. They’re all screaming in delight for their native daughter. “You think they know she’s from Simsbury?” Scott murmurs through the adulation.

“Would they care? Her last name is Romanov,” Steve laughs. He keeps on clapping. Not really for Natasha.

His eyes fix on Bucky as he hugs Natasha so hard her skates lift off the ground. Steve squints behind his glasses to see what Bucky’s saying to her. “Spasibo.” Thank you. Over and over.

When the two of them make their way over to the kiss and cry Bucky finally checks his phone and his head jerks up in shock. Steve bursts out laughing. *Three rows up across,* he texts. Bucky looks back down at his phone, snaps back up. Thor, Sam, Clint, and Wade start howling “WOOOOO HOOO” and waving like they’re at a One Direction concert. Bucky goes peach pink and waves a little bit, then Natasha murmurs something to Bucky. Without taking his eyes off Steve, Bucky nods. His gaze is incredulous, like *how are you here?*

*Because I love you,* Steve tries to say with his own look back.

The air is thick as the crowd waits for Natasha’s scores. There’s one skater left, Kitty Pryde from the US, a talented competitor but probably not able to beat Natasha after a perfect skate like that.

“The scores, please, for Natasha Romanov of the Russian Federation,” the announcer politely blares.

Steve holds his breath. Despite all of the time they spent making fun of the sport, the guys hold theirs too.

Total free skate score: 149.95, bringing her entire Games total to 224.59. Unless Kitty Pryde transformed into Michelle Kwan between warmup and free skate, Natasha’s got the gold.

Unsurprisingly, the Black Widow doesn’t cry. Instead, she fist pumps and latches both arms around Bucky’s neck in a bear hug. Bucky’s face when they pull away from each other is indescribable. Joy, sunlight, rainbows, the pot of gold underneath it.

The only time he’s ever seen Bucky look like that off the ice was this afternoon. When Bucky looked at Steve, brushed a lock of hair away from his own eyes, and said he loved him.

Love. Victory.

It brings Steve to his knees.

Or at least it would, but Sam’s got an arm thrown around his shoulders; that keeps him upright. “You seeing him tonight?”

“Oh, probably not,” Steve says. “I’ve got my game tomorrow and he knows –“

His phone buzzes.
**Bucky:** I can’t believe you’re here, oh my god

**Bucky:** my stomach feels like it’s going to fall out of my butt

**Bucky:** (Please tell me you watched *Mean Girls* in college or we’re going to have a serious problem I can’t date someone who didn’t watch that movie)

...We’re dating?

**Bucky:** Yes, you punk. Unless you just want me for my body.

“Steve? You’re bright red, kid.”

Now that Natasha is past the competing part of her Olympics she’s a lot more relaxed and fun. Particularly when it comes to hearing stories about Bucky in Brooklyn.

“Did you really try to punch out a guy for making fun of Steve?” she asks. Bucky tries to hide a grin and utterly fails. Steve has literally never been happier in his entire life.

“Well, yeah. He was so tiny. Didn’t like to see him hurt. Plus he had a bum heart.”

“That got fixed when I was seven, Bucky.”

“Still felt like protecting it.”

Steve grips his mug tighter. The side of Natasha’s mouth goes up. “Well, Yasha used to make me listen to him talk about all of your college game stats, so this is a little bit more interesting.”

“My stats?” The world goes still.

“Oh. Yeah.” Bucky’s face falls a little. He almost looks…embarrassed? “I tried to watch your games. What I couldn’t find, I looked up statistics for.’”

“When you were in Russia?” Steve can practically hear his heart pound.

“Yeah.”

Natasha just sits there, smiling placidly, stirring her latte. Bucky mutters under his breath in what Steve can only assume is Russian.

They manage to get back to Steve’s dorm and check the room for Sam’s presence (Sam is, thankfully, gone with Claire for the day) before Steve crowds Bucky up against the inside wall. “You watched…my games…” he breathes, pressing his forehead into Bucky’s chest, listening to his breath rise and fall.

“Every one I could.” Bucky pulls Steve’s face up to his, fits his mouth against Steve’s delicately. Like he still can’t believe his good luck. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”
“I…I can’t do this right now, you understand,” Steve whispers.

“I know. You have a game tonight.” Bucky kisses Steve again and every nerve ending in Steve’s body fires at the same time. Liquid heat. Every muscle in him yearns. Keens. There’s a gravitation pull to Bucky he can’t explain, could never explain, but kisses help it make a lot more sense.

“When’s the last time you…” Bucky trails off.

Steve knows. “A few months ago. I topped,” he adds, on reflex,


“Okay.” Bucky nods. “I want to. When you’re done.”

And fuck, Steve’s been waiting for an opportunity to get to the gold medal round of the Olympic Games since the heartbreak in Vancouver, but he’d willingly throw all of it away and pull Bucky into his bed and not let him out for four days. Instead, he just makes a small sound that has Bucky throwing his arms around him and kissing him so deeply it almost makes Steve’s knees buckle.

“Want you,” he manages.

Bucky nods, a ghost of breath against Steve’s lips. “I want you too. So bad.” And Christ it sounds like he’s physically pained by the want. Good to know he and Steve are on the same page, Steve thinks.

“Wanted you since I saw you with Kurt at that house party.” It just falls out of him, unbidden.

“Stop.”

“No, I did. Every time he kissed me I imagined it was you.” Bucky’s voice gets raspy. “Every time he touched me. When we were at that house party and we were in that bed it was…it was easier to pretend it was you with the lights off.” He leans in, kisses Steve again. “I want the lights on this time.”

“Okay, now I mean stop like quit making me want to fuck you, I have a game tonight.”

Bucky laughs, exuberant, and God Steve can feel Brooklyn in that sound. “Okay. You go win tonight, and then…yeah.” He nuzzles Steve’s collarbone. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Steve comes back into the locker room with his shirt pulled up over his head. Totally unprofessional and immature of course. But he’s pissed. Might as well let everyone know it.

1-0, Canada. Thank God it wasn’t Wade this time with the winning goal, but they lost to Canada. Again. Steve would’ve punched the ice hard enough to crack if it was Wade again.
For so long Steve’s wanted the gold. Then that goal became entwined with wanting Bucky. Now he has one but not the other, when before he didn’t have either. While he meant every word of what he had said to Bucky yesterday – that the game didn’t matter to him nearly as much as Bucky did – he still reserves the right to be sad.

Okay, a lot sad. The game doesn’t matter as much as Bucky, but it still matters a fucking lot.

There’s a text message from Bucky waiting for him, but Steve doesn’t have time to look at it – he’s got to put himself back together for post-game interviews, and consoling his teammates. Clint is livid (the obscenities make a harsh echo against the adjacent shower walls), Drake is heartbroken, Alex is sitting numb in the corner until Fury gently pokes him to get up and get cleaned off. The new guys tend to take it harder. Feels like it’s their fault when it’s a team effort to lose, same as it is when you win.

Steve goes through postgame with a placid expression, all the usual lines. *Fell apart on the defensive end – As captain it’s my job to make the team come together – No decision yet on how we’ll handle the bronze medal game – No decision yet on Pyeongchang 2018 –*

When he finally gets back to the locker room, feeling like he’s gone through a particularly aggressive meat grinder, Clint’s putting the finishing touches on his shoelaces. “You okay, buddy?” he murmurs, his voice hoarse.”

“Yeah. You?”

“I will be.” Clint shrugs.

Steve grabs his phone. Everything caves in.

*Bucky: Go Team USA!*

*Bucky: We’re all here to cheer you on!*

With a photo attachment of Bucky and Natasha in a selfie. In the stands of Bolshoy Ice Dome. Bucky is radiant, the cold air of the Dome making his cheeks flush. He looks ten years younger, positively sparkling with love.

All for Steve. All to watch Steve play.

Any lingering annoyance about the game outcome goes clattering to the floor along with Steve’s gear.

After the fastest shower he’s ever taken, Steve’s running through the tunnel to the cavernous emptiness of the Ice Dome rink. Of course Bucky’s not there anymore. Security would’ve kicked him out.

Steve’s phone goes off again. It’s a number he doesn’t recognize.

*He’s at your dorm waiting for you. – BW*

Damn, Natasha’s scary.

When Steve finally makes it back to the Village, he sees Bucky waiting out in the lobby of his
building. Every single molecule wants to push forward, envelop Bucky’s body, sink into an embrace that could be a home for his lonely, sore bones. But he can’t. He’s Steve Rogers. Captain America. Captain America of the NHL, no less. No kissing guys in public.

Some day, there needs to be a press conference. An announcement. Truth.

But not today.

Bucky looks up from the ground as Steve approaches. The look on his face makes Steve ache all over in fresh ways. The best type of beating.

They ride up to Steve’s floor in silence, but thankfully there isn’t anyone else in the elevator. So Steve takes Bucky’s hand. Laces their fingers together. Foreshadowing.

The anxiety of this moment grows as they make their way to Steve’s room. “Natasha has my number,” Steve manages to say.

“Yes. I gave it to her.”

“That’s dangerous. Who knows what she’ll send me next.”

“You should only be concerned about what I’ll send you.” Bucky’s voice is low, at a register Steve’s never heard before, and it makes him instantly rock hard.

“I swear to God, if Sam is here,” he whispers, but Bucky just laughs. “He isn’t. I texted him.”

“How-“

“Natasha isn’t the only sneaky one.”

Once they get inside there’s nothing to do for Steve but reach out, and Bucky practically falls into his arms.

There’s an excruciating urge to bend Bucky over and fuck him stupid, but there is plenty of time for that. Time to make track marks in that perfect skin with Steve’s fingernails. For now, Steve wants to enjoy this.

They kiss slowly. Lazily, even. Steve keeps his mouth working quiet and soft to mask how utterly fucking desperate he is. “Can I-“ he practically begs, but Bucky’s hands are already on the buttons of Steve’s shirt. A silent yes.

When he gets Steve’s shirt and A-front off Bucky doesn’t hesitate to press his mouth to the long scar on Steve’s chest. “Fuck, this fucking heart.” His voice vibrates against Steve’s skin and the world keeps on melting into puddles of sparkling, perfect light. “You’re so good, Steve. So good to me. Even when I didn’t deserve it. When I treated you like shit… “ Bucky chokes on a sob.

Steve yanks Bucky’s face up to his. “I’m here now.” A strong, hard kiss. Grounding. “I’m here.”

“And you won’t leave,” Bucky says, almost like it’s by accident.

“Are you fucking kidding – fuck – “ and Steve’s got Bucky’s shirt in his hands, lifting it up over Bucky’s head, and then everything really collapses and the lights get brighter because he hasn’t
seen Bucky shirtless since they were in high school and holy shit.

“See something you like?” Bucky tries to be jokingly seductive, but the air in the room is so heavy it registers like sludge.

“Yes. You.” Steve feels like he’s falling, falling. Bucky’s a little bigger from his competing days but now he’s all muscle, all strength. He’s pale but it’s because of the seasons, not the bags under the eyes and sadness that used to permeate his every move when Steve met up with him at Hydra and Shield. Instead, it’s transcendent. Luminous.

Bucky’s face contorts into impossible contours of lust. “Yes. Please.”

Eventually they make it to the bed, pushing pants and boxers out of the way so Steve can feel every single inch of Bucky’s glorious body against his, hot and ready. Steve would honestly be totally fine just spending the entire night kissing him everywhere. Bucky seems to read his mind, like he always has. “I just want my mouth all over you,” he hums against the crook in Steve’s neck.

Then the bottom drops out of everything. “Buck? Please tell me you have lube.”

“…I mean, I do, but please don’t make fun of me for being prepared.”

Steve pulls away to stare at Bucky for one long, lingering moment. Then, he practically combusts with laughter. Bucky starts to smack him on the shoulders, back, and hips in retaliation. “Don’t you fucking make fun of me, I wasn’t coming up here to play fucking Game Boy, you fucking punk-“

Steve just keeps laughing and trying to evade Bucky’s playfully violent hands before finally grabbing Bucky’s wrists and pinning them on either side of his head. The hitting – and laughter – immediately stops once they both realize three very important things.

One: They’re both totally naked.
Two: Their hips are pressed together, allowing Steve’s hard cock to hang with gravity and gently brush against Bucky’s.
Three: Steve has Bucky’s hands pinned to the bed.

“Hi,” Bucky drawls, fuzzy already. Steve rubs his nose against Bucky’s like they’re puppies. “Hi.”

Bucky slowly grinds his hips up, sensitive flesh sliding against Steve’s. Already slick. Already dripping. Steve’s seen that cock before but it was always so quick, wreathed in shadow and shame. Now he can look at it any old time he wants, and isn’t that an aphrodisiac.

He dips his head down to knock into Bucky’s shoulder, completely incapable of any rational thought and they haven’t even really done anything yet.

“You sure you want to?”

Bucky’s legs open underneath him. “Is that a good enough answer, Stevie?”

Stevie.
Steve jumps off Bucky for two seconds to grab the lube out of Bucky’s discarded jeans. Bucky waits, hands exactly where Steve put them. Almost like he was told not to move. The thought of that makes Steve get on the bed and back on top of Bucky pretty goddamn quick.

He coats his shaking fingers with lube (God, he feels like he’s in high school again) and slides them down to the tight, pink ring of furled muscle. Bucky arches his back, makes a sound that has Steve grabbing his own cock at the base to stop from going off. “If you keep making those noises this isn’t gonna happen,” he breathes. Bucky smiles through a bitten lower lip. “Well make it not feel so fucking good, then.”

“Not gonna happen.” Steve works his index finger in up to the first knuckle. “Fuck, you’re tight. When’s the last time you did this?”

“Doesn’t matter – doing it now with you - and that’s all that matters-” Bucky gasps as Steve slips his middle finger in alongside, and then he fucking whimpers.

That shouldn’t be so goddamn erotic, but it is.

Steve preps Bucky slowly, thoroughly, until Bucky’s whining underneath him. “Stevie, Stevie, please,” Bucky moans when Steve wraps his free hand around Bucky’s dick. “Fuck…”

“Fuck what?”

“You asshole,” Bucky seethes.

“You asshole,” Steve grins, and crooks his fingers upward to make his point emphatically clear.

“Fuck!” Bucky hisses. “Steve, please – want to come with you in me…”

And joking and teasing is instantly replaced by raging firestorms of pent up want.

Twenty damn years of wanting without a name, and now he finally has it. It almost makes Steve’s eyes tear up. He’s not alone; Bucky’s lashes are wet as Steve removes his hand from Bucky’s ass and hands Bucky the condom. His heart skips as Bucky slowly slides it on, but not before placing a kiss directly to the head of his cock.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he murmurs.

“Not perfect,” Bucky whispers, before pulling Steve on top of him, skin to skin. “Yours.”

When Steve finally slides into Bucky it’s with a deep sigh and a kiss to Bucky’s lips; for a moment he just sits, totally bottomed out, knowing the second he starts to move it will barrel both of them toward orgasm and then the night will be over. But then Steve knows – this is just the beginning for them. Now comes the part he’s been wanting for years. Now comes forever.

They move slowly, trying to make it go on forever (and Steve suddenly hates the NHL for making him stay in the closet, making him bite off those sounds he wants to make, knows Bucky wants to make), but it doesn’t last long. Both of them are too pent up, and Steve isn’t necessarily operating on all cylinders – he just played an entire hockey game, after all. But it’s beautiful, and emotional, and damn overdue.

When Bucky comes he bites down into Steve’s shoulder to stifle the sound; Steve follows shortly after, kissing Bucky hard, moaning into it because he just can’t help it.

Afterwards, he collapses into Bucky’s chest, not minding the stickiness between their chests. Bucky seems to read his mind, like always. “I love you,” he says, dropping kisses on Steve’s hair.
“Always have.”

“I have to go back to Canada after the Games,” Steve says carefully. He traces circles around Bucky’s left shoulder, mindful of the scars. “My contract just got renewed.”

“I know. I should probably go back to Detroit, too. I’ve been teaching skating lessons at the rink Pierce taught me.” Bucky’s voice is soft but it isn’t sad. Just conciliatory. “I really like teaching. And coaching.”

“Then we’ll work it out.” Steve pulls his head up to look at Bucky in the face. “You me. This is it. Okay? No games, or messing around, or not telling each other how we’re feeling. We’re in this together. Even if we have to live apart for a while, which will suck, I know…but I don’t care. I want to be with you.”

Bucky blinks, hard, and Steve realizes with a shock that he’s about to cry. “Nooo, what did I do?”

“No – happy tears!” Bucky wraps both of his legs around Steve’s, locking him into place. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. All I’ve wanted since I was five years old. Just want to be with you. So… yeah. I’m in.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Stevie.”

Bucky threads his fingers through Steve’s hair. “Unless Wade breaks up with that girlfriend. Then we’ll have to re-discuss.”

The look on Steve’s face sends Bucky into gales of laughter.

Chapter End Notes

YAAAAAAAAAAAAAS.

This is the end of the actual story, but there's gonna be an epilogue up at some point next week. This has been SUCH a fun story to write. Thank you all for coming along with me!
“Stay tuned: during the Opening Ceremony, we’ll have a special piece with two of the most popular Olympians to compete for the United States, James Barnes and Steve Rogers. Best friends from childhood who drifted apart, these two Brooklyn natives will talk about what brought them back together – a little bit of luck, some Olympics magic, and love. Robin Roberts will have that story when we come back.

“Yes, Bob, it’s an absolutely incredible story, culminating in the decision by Steve Rogers in 2016 to become the first out active NHL player. His bisexuality has been a huge story in the NHL ever since, but we’re focusing on the reason why Rogers made that choice – his love for his childhood best friend and now life partner, James Barnes. You’re going to want to stick around for this.”

“Man, I’m glad you had to skip this,” Bucky says, muffled into the side of the couch. He’s always curled up like a cat no matter where he is – team buses, hotel beds, their window seat back home in Red Hook. It’s a comfort and a blessing to Steve – he’s even taken to calling Bucky “kitten,” much to Bucky’s chagrin (although there have been a few jokes about getting him a collar with a bell on it that might have triggered a bunch of very sexually satisfying evenings).

Bucky flips a potato chip to Steve who catches it with his mouth, then continues, “You would have been texting me the whole time about how much your feet hurt.”

“Erroneous,” Steve counters, “you would be texting me about how ugly the Team USA outfits are.”

“Well, yeah! They always make you guys look like weird ski chalet hookers” Bucky twists around on the couch so he can nuzzle into Steve’s chest. Steve welcomes the heat – Bucky always runs a little warmer, so he’s constantly cuddling into Steve so they both can warm up. Steve never minds; he’s always glad for a reason to touch Bucky.

He lets the hand that isn’t holding the last bits of his bibimbap sandwich graze through Bucky’s hair. They don’t share this room, unfortunately; Steve finally got his own as a veteran member of the team, and Bucky, as a coach for Team USA’s younger skaters, is staying at a hotel offsite since he’s not an athlete. But he’s got a Family lanyard that he’s planning to “abuse the fuck out of.” Steve couldn’t be more thrilled.
They watch Robin’s piece on their relationship, moving from their childhood in Brooklyn, to Bucky’s move to Detroit, Steve’s experiences with the Calgary Flames, culminating in their ultimate reunion in Sochi and their new life together. Of course, Bucky’s got plenty to say. “They had to pick the worst pictures of me with my fuckin’ bowl cut,” he moans. Steve digs his fingers into Bucky’s side to make him giggle into submission. Nothing they show of Bucky could be more embarrassing than the one they picked of Steve – eight years old, barely sixty pounds, wearing huge secondhand hockey pads. Bucky howls. Steve puts his head in his hand. “I’m going to kill Ma.”

“Awww, but you were so damn cute,” Bucky pleads, peppering the underside of Steve’s jaw with kisses. “Still are.”

“Easy, tiger, I’ve got a game tomorrow afternoon. No nookie until after.”


Steve’s already gone into hysterics, to the point where Bucky has to pause the TV. “We’ll wait until you’re done pissing your pants,” he says, eyebrows raised.

“Okay, okay,” Steve wheezes, catching his breath. “You remember what I told you the other day?”

“Yeah…you said the second you were done with the first game you were going to ‘ride that dick like you were getting paid.’”

“Still holds up,” Steve says with a big, drag queen wink. “So down, boy.”

Bucky pulls his face into an exaggerated frown. “Okaaaay.” And honestly, Steve loves these moments. They remind him so much of how he and Bucky used to be, back when they were kids, pushing the couch cushions on the floor, geeking out about comics and He-Man and Power Rangers, Although now they do that with making out added. It’s fantastic.

He switches back on the live TV feed. It’s near the end of the interview, when Steve and Bucky were asked separately what they love about each other.

TV Steve laughs. “I honestly couldn’t tell you just one thing. It’s everything. I think I’ve always loved everything about him. He was always special. More than special. He’s such…he’s such an amazing person.” He begins to get slightly hoarse. Steve can tell he’s starting to blush, just as his counterpart onscreen starts to get pink around the ears. “Not only is he so good to me, he just cares about everything and everyone so much. It’s so inspiring, how deeply he loves. I can’t really imagine life without him. Actually – I can. I was without him for a while. Wasn’t great.”

“Understatement of the century,” Bucky huffs, but there’s so much warmth behind it, it strokes Steve’s soul. He kisses Bucky’s head, smelling the sage and lavender shampoo Bucky constantly buys at that high end salon in the East Village.

Then it’s Bucky’s turn to answer the question. Steve watches as Bucky sits quietly for a few moments, perhaps trying to figure out what to say. Then, the Bucky on the TV looks down.

“Hold up. You cried right off the bat?”

“Well, yeah!” Bucky slaps Steve’s arm. “I’m the crier, here!”

“Oh god,” Steve groans, but it’s more about the fact that he cannot stand seeing Bucky cry, even if it’s for happy reasons. The Bucky on the TV finally begins to speak, though it’s bit choked. “Well. Um. Steve knows this, it’s not like it’s a suprrise or anything…but I’ve known since I was
five years old that I never wanted to be without him in my life. Obviously life, uh, got in the way. I made a ton of mistakes. But loving Steve? That’s the best thing I’ll ever do. He’s so passionate, and he stands up for what is right, and he’s always calling me out when I’m doing something I shouldn’t, even if it’s forgetting to soak the dishes when I make ziti.” The TV Bucky and the real, flesh and blood Bucky both laugh like they’re trying not to break down. “He’s worth more than any gold medal,” TV Bucky adds, thumbing away a stray tear.

Robin Roberts smiles. “You know it’s funny you bring that up. Obviously you had tremendous success in your career, as has Steve, but neither of you have won Olympic gold.”

Steve feels a slight pain in his gut, but TV Bucky just smiles. “That’s okay,” he says. “Steve’s my gold medal.”

Steve closes his eyes tight. “Now you’re gonna make me cry, you asshole.”

“That was the goal,” Bucky says, sniffing. His body is pliant on top of Steve’s. Peaceful.

“You’re my gold medal too, you know.”

Bucky reaches up, touches Steve’s lips with his. “I know.”

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**Gold for Captain America**

**Gangneung**: Red Hook resident Steve Rogers finally has his gold medal.

Team USA defeated Team Finland in the Olympic Final last night, 3-2, in front of a sold out crowd at the Gangneung Hockey Centre. Rogers contributed a goal to Team USA’s campaign, winning his first team gold medal in hockey. This is his fourth Olympics, but he has made no plans so far for the 2022 Olympics in Beijing. The possibility of retirement has been floated, he admitted in the post-game presser, “but I’m still having fun, and my body is still working pretty well. If they’ll have me back, I’d love to. But right now, I’m going to treasure this moment. It’s one of the best moments of my entire life.”

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**A Match Made In Brooklyn**

It’s been two months since Steve Rogers led Team USA to Olympic gold in Pyeongchang, South Korea, but he might have just received something even better: a fiancé. Rogers and his long-time partner, fellow Olympian James “Bucky” Barnes, have announced their engagement.

Said Rogers in a prepared statement. “I am incredibly happy to win a gold medal for representing my country, but the true measure of how blessed I am comes from the fact that I get to share my life with the best person I’ve ever known, and the best friend I’ve ever had. The fact that I get to marry someone like Bucky is nothing short of amazing. I know I speak for Bucky when I say we are extremely grateful for the well-wishes we’ve received, and look forward to the rest of our lives together.”
Barnes, 35, and Rogers, also 35, have been together for four years, but didn’t go public with their relationship until Rogers announced his bisexuality in a special interview with ESPN The Magazine in November 2016. Their friendship can be traced back to meeting on an ice rink in Brooklyn, NY, when they were five years old. Barnes is now a skating coach and runs his own skating club in Brooklyn, and Rogers, who spent the majority of his early NHL career in Canada with the Calgary Flames, was traded to the New York Rangers in 2016. They reside in Red Hook, BK.

All the best to the happy couple!

Chapter End Notes

If you're reading this going "Wait, where's Bucky's POV? What happened in the four years between Sochi and Pyeongchang? WHERE IS ALL OF THAT INFORMATION!?"

Well, um, PART TWO OF THE STORY IS COMING SOON. AND IT WILL ALL BE FROM BUCKY’S POV. So you'll get not only his point of view of what's going on from 2014-2018, but there's also going to be flashbacks to Bucky's time in Detroit and, yes, Russia. More Nat! More of Pierce being a dick! It's all happening!

Thank you so much for all of your support on this fic. It was so, so fun to write.

End Notes

Tumblr.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!