War, Children

by Nonymos

Summary

After Bucky was released from the hospital, it only took him a couple of weeks to give up on himself. Difficult to believe in any kind of future when the simple act of staying alive was almost too big an effort.

Out the frosted window, across the street, there was a tiny homeless guy burrowing under an awning.

Notes
Hello, hello, readers! I’m so gruntled to be sharing some fic again with you, and I can’t wait to read what you’ll think of it. :D Three things before we start:
- Just like last time, I’ll be posting every Monday. Unless beta’ing gets delayed, there should be no hiatus. Expect a dozen chapters.
- Speaking of beta’ing, let’s give a HUGE round of applause for my tremendous beta laurie_ky, who might be the single most badass person on this planet.
- In this fic, I’m dealing with several themes I’ve done my best to research, and which might prove sensitive. If you feel the need to offer a correction, or discuss my take on these issues, don’t hesitate to do so.

That said, enjoy!
Bucky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One month after he moved into his uncle’s apartment, Bucky considered letting himself die as an alternative to ever going out again.

*Maybe* he should have stayed in therapy.

★★

Objectively, all Bucky had to do was put on his coat, go all the way down from the sixth floor and cross the street to pop into the 24/7 convenience store at the corner. If he didn’t want to go through all this trouble—which was understandable: it was getting dark, and the six floors up were a bitch when you were carrying groceries—he could just stay in and eat whatever for tonight.

Except that Bucky literally didn’t have anything left to eat.

No rice, no pasta, no cans of any kind, no soup, not even some tomato sauce he could have scooped directly out with a spoon. (Something he’d done before, and for which he would not be judged.) All he had left was a half-empty bottle of soy sauce, which would’ve gone marvelously well with—let’s say, rice. So all he had to do was go out and buy some damn rice.

Except that Bucky hadn’t left his apartment since he’d moved in.

It wasn’t like he was enjoying it. In fact, he’d been doing a whole lot of nothing. Wandering from room to room, turning on the TV, turning it off again, booting up his antique computer and giving up when the Internet failed to connect again. That was on the days he managed to move. Mostly he couldn’t bring himself to get out of bed. He’d stay in and stare at his alarm clock, at the time passing by, promising himself he’d get up *in five minutes, just five minutes more*, yet just staying there and hating himself a bit more with each passing second.

Whenever he managed to get up, the first thing on his mind was that his sheets were disgusting. He should wash them, he really should, but he didn’t have a laundry machine in there. The second thing was that he should take a shower. But the shower was even grosser than him. So he should
clean that first. But he didn’t have the energy, so he thought later, later. In the end he avoided the bathroom altogether and changed into slightly less dirty clothes—he didn’t have any clean ones anymore, so he had some kind of rotation system going on. His bedroom was a mess, and when he tried the living room instead, it was also a mess. He knew he should at least try to take the trash out. But he still had bags left, so they just piled up by the door.

He didn’t understand how this had happened. He couldn’t remember when he’d first started letting on. But now, all he could see were things he should clean, things he should put away, things he should tidy up, things he should do, things he should be. It made him want to go curl up right back under the covers. And most of the time, it was exactly what he did.

He barely even had enough energy for that. Even when he was resting, he kept catching himself thinking he wanted to rest. Kinda like wanting to go home but already being there.

Whenever he tried to motivate himself, to find something to kick his own ass with, he came up empty, and he kept asking himself questions which led to more questions which inevitably spiraled down into blank dread. In the end, why should he get up? Scraping by, pulling himself up, making himself cook and clean and plan—all of that, all this effort, and for what? What was the idea here? What was the point?

He’d tried talking about it with Rollins, once, during his short-lived week at the VA. That was before he’d moved in; he was still stationed with the others. Getting out of bed was already starting to become harder, and he’d tried to explain what he was feeling, struggling for words, thinking it’d be easier to tell someone he knew in private, rather than speak up in front of everybody. Rollins had looked at him and said: “Dude, you’re not suicidal, are you?” As if it was a dirty word.

It was what they were all terrified of, at the VA. Like a bunch of high schoolers gossiping about who was or wasn’t a virgin. Except this time around, it was who did or didn’t want to kill themselves. They’d come back from the war and they’d survived their wounds and yet they still had to pretend and be brave. Still had to be strong and claim they were fine, they were adapting well, therapy was working absolute wonders and they were totally looking forward to the Fourth of July. “Getting better”—the words you couldn’t escape. I think he’s getting better. Have you been getting better? We’re all gonna get better.

Bucky had hated his mandatory week of therapy, and dropped out as soon as he was allowed to. He was fine, he had a place to live, he was getting better, he just wanted to be left alone, he didn’t want to see these people and be reminded of what he’d lived through and what he’d done, he wanted to forget all about it—and maybe repressing was bad for you, but then again so was smoking and yet everyone did it. So they could all go to hell. He’d left, and despite the little voice telling him he was making a mistake, it had been such a relief.

Besides, Bucky wasn’t even suicidal. He wasn’t. He was trying his hardest to find reasons to live. And he was eating. Regularly, if not plentifully. This had become his pride—which was so pathetic to think about whenever he stopped and looked at himself. All the rest had started slipping out of his grasp bit by bit. But no matter how truly disgusting he’d become, he still fucking ate at least one meal every day. Proof that he hadn’t gone all the way down into the rabbit hole. That he was still trying.

Going outside, though. Going outside was beyond him now. He hated it, and he hated himself for it—but it had been so much easier to just let go. It was so terribly easier, to wake up knowing at least he wouldn’t have to dress properly, wouldn’t have to go downstairs, wouldn’t have to face Brooklyn in winter, its noise and its people. Again, for what? He had no one to see, no places to go. And maybe he was literally living in a pile of garbage, but no one was here to see it, so what
did it matter in the end?

Resignation tasted bitter. But resignation brought him quiet. All he had to do now was stay in and keep himself alive; this, he could still manage—just barely.

Except now he’d eaten everything there was to eat in his apartment.

Except, and because he was a fucking coward, he thought he could just order in—and the thought filled him with enormous relief: *he could just order in.* Except—and his stomach shrunk right back into a tight knot of fear—except he didn’t have Internet; which meant he would have to make a phone call. And phone calls weren’t really his area of expertise at the moment.

_God,_ he raged helplessly sometimes. _Just look at yourself. Can’t go out. Can’t get out of bed. Can’t even make a fucking phone call,_ and the panic squeezed hot tears out of him. But this angry voice belonged to the Bucky he’d once been. The Bucky he was now had turned into a shell of himself. A shadow gliding through the motions, unbothered by the filth left in its wake. A ghost.

His friends had stopped calling him long ago. Or rather, he’d stopped responding. He couldn’t check his emails because of the wonky Internet, so that was one thing he didn’t have to feel guilty about. He still got texts from Rollins or Rumlow sometimes, but those he’d learned to ignore. Rollins’ were just apathetic, kind of perfunctory, like a sedated man sinking into quicksand, vaguely believing he might still come out okay somehow. _Hey, man, let’s get out sometimes. Hey bud, let’s catch up sometimes._ Sent once in a while. Never worried by Bucky’s total lack of answer. Rollins wanted to convince himself everything was fine.

Rumlow, though—_his_ texts were becoming increasingly aggressive. Often obviously drunk, often in the middle of the night. One day he’d sent _come on you faggot let’s go kill someone. let’s go rape someone. what’s it gonna change. you and me, we know. we’ve been there we know._ Bucky had stopped reading them after that. Rumlow was crashing into flames and he wanted someone to come burn with him.

At least he didn’t know where Bucky lived. No one did. Except for Bucky’s uncle, of course, but _he_ was content receiving a text once in a while to make sure his apartment was still standing. Bucky relied on him to inform the rest of the family he was doing fine.

Sometimes Bucky thought about how no one would know if he died—he’d done such a good job isolating himself, he could die and no one would know before a week at least—

—and then he started breathing too quickly and his chest went too tight, and soon enough he found himself curled up with his head between his knees, fighting yet another anxiety attack all alone in his trash-filled apartment, because he couldn’t even take care of himself without riling himself up into breathtaking panic for no actual fucking reason.

How was he expected to make a phone call in these conditions?

At least, when the person was there, you could avoid their eyes, mumble, fill in the silences with gestures and body language. It still wasn’t a very pleasant experience, but no matter how much Bucky dreaded human interaction, the fact remained that he _needed_ it—one of the many miserable contradictions of his wretched self. He was going crazy with loneliness. He was losing his breath.
thinking about his forgotten death and his meaningless life. And, rationally, he knew talking to someone—anyone—would help appeasing these fears, just barely enough for his lungs to keep functioning. Talking to someone would help him believe he still existed. Maybe even give him the kick he needed to take out the trash at the very least, out of shame if nothing else.

But on the phone, the world tunneled down to a single line of communication, and suddenly you had to maintain a conversation for several minutes on end, with no blanks, no pauses, no silent talk allowed. The mere thought of it was enough to make his chest go tight again.

No. He couldn’t just order in. His choices, as they were, were down to two.

One: get dressed, go down, buy as much food as he could carry, come back up.

Two: starve to death.

Bucky lifted up his curtain to look out the window. From his apartment up on the sixth floor, he could see the streets of Brooklyn down below, the small convenience store blinking at the corner, the cars passing by. It was just beginning to get dark.

There was a third choice. It was called Get His Life Together, And Also Grow His Arm Back, While He Was At It.

It looked cold out there, even though it hadn’t snowed yet.

Bucky swallowed, then let the curtain fall.

* *

The secret was not thinking about it. Bucky had dressed, he’d put on his coat with the pinned sleeve, he’d put on his scarf and he’d put on his shoes, all the while telling himself he was just doing this for shits and giggles and he was absolutely not going to leave his apartment. He was already exhausted. He would have loved to actually stay in. For a second, he was on the brink of giving up.

Then he tightened his scarf and opened his front door.

He hadn’t seen the hallway since the day he’d moved in, which was sorta funny, in a very sad way. He froze for a dreadful second on the doorstep, mesmerized by the ugly browning wallpaper. Then shook himself up, with what felt like an immense effort. If he stopped moving, he’d have time to think. He stepped out and closed the door.

Okay. Okay. Deep breaths. Just lock the door and go. Bucky tried to do it, but he quickly realized it was a lost cause; the keys were jingling with the force of his shivers, and he couldn’t fit them into the damn hole. He didn’t want to stay here. He had to keep moving or else he’d lose what little courage he’d scraped up.

Fuck it. He left his door unlocked. Any thief was welcome to go in there and steal some of his dirty dishes.

Okay. More decisions. Stairs or elevator. This one was almost easy: the elevator was out of the question—if he had to stand and wait while watching the floors go by, at the risk of having someone else enter this little box and lock themselves in there with him, he would literally die. Or
maybe shit himself. The stairs were right here.

The banister was on the left; he used to grab it with his hand as he went down, but that wasn’t an option anymore and he focused on his steps like a little kid learning to go down the stairs like a grown-up for the first time. His hand was still shaking, but he’d buried it deep in his pocket so it was all good. All good. All good.

The six floors went by both too slowly and too fast. At long last, he found himself in the hall; he pushed the door open and got slapped in the face by a stinging wave of freezing wind.

For a second, he couldn’t believe he was actually outside. That was when he fully realized starving to death had been a serious option he’d actually considered.

*Suck it,* he thought to himself, breathing fast, *I can still do stuff. I’m gonna go buy food. I haven’t given up. You’re not gonna kill me. Not today. Not today.*

Okay. Okay, okay, okay. Bucky blinked, trying to get a hold of both himself and his surroundings. It wasn’t too bright, and it helped with the mind-numbing fear he’d started feeling under open skies; but God, the fucking noise. The long wail of an ambulance tore through the atmosphere and he closed his eyes as it grew louder, screwing them shut when the vehicle screamed by. Ambulances weren’t his forte either, and he focused on his breathing like his life depended on it, struggling not to let it go wild and airless. It was New York, so no one paid attention to the weird hobo fighting to breathe after two steps outside.

When he reopened his eyes, the ambulance was long gone, and his breathing was shallow, but regular. A few people hurried by, not even glancing at him—people didn’t look at embarrassments. At the moment, it suited Bucky perfectly well. These people would help him if he fell, but otherwise they would pay no attention to him. He was safe from a lonely death, and safe too from being scrutinized.

Still too many people.

Panic briefly seized him again when he wondered whether he’d taken his money with him, but the familiar bulge in his pocket chased the twist in his stomach at once. He hadn’t taken his wallet out of his coat since he’d last gone out. Thank God. He definitely wasn’t strong enough to go back up and then come back down again. Which reminded him—he’d forgotten to take the trash out with him. *You fucking idiot.* Too late for that now.

Okay. Too much stillness. He was getting jittery. Too many people, a space too wide around him. A threat could come from anywhere, or anyone. He was already scanning the buildings for snipers, and the darkening sky looked like it was calling for drones. He was imagining shadows disappearing around the corner, gazes drilling into his back. He *must* get a move on.

He started walking down the street, his eyes fixed on the blinking lights of the convenience store. It wasn’t *that* far. He could do it. He was allowed to walk fast. He was allowed to stare at the ground. He was allowed to look weird and mumble under his breath like a crazy hobo. Anything as long as he got this done.

People were talking on their phones, to each other, out loud; heels were clacking on the sidewalk; dogs were barking; bikes revved between the cars and roared through the atmosphere in sudden bursts of speed. Bucky shut it all off—tried, anyway—and kept walking. It was getting darker and darker, with just a tinge of pale blue westwards to remind people of the sun. If Bucky let his gaze go unfocused, the car lights and traffic lights and store lights all blurred together to paint a colored mosaic through the creeping shadow. This was Brooklyn. Despite everything, despite how unwelcome he felt even in his own skin, he was home. He’d managed to go out of his apartment;
he was going to buy food; he wasn’t hopeless yet. He wasn’t going to die.

Another ambulance screeched by. He was losing his breath.

At long last, he crossed the street and, without allowing himself to think once again, slipped into the convenience store. The door jingled when he pushed it open, and suddenly it was quiet.

Bucky took a deep breath, and let it out.

“Hello,” called the kid behind the counter.

*Can’t catch a fucking break.* Bucky ducked out of his line of sight without answering.

He instantly wanted to kick himself, but this was almost a continuous feeling whenever he interacted with someone else, so he tried not to give it too much credit. He couldn’t be the only impolite customer of the day, he reasoned with himself. No, the kid would not hate him for it. No, the kid would not refuse to serve him. Bucky’s brain was ridiculous. His intrusive thoughts were like a flock of very belligerent seagulls—he tried to disperse them but they always came back, hungry and ready to peck him to death.

Bucky grabbed a basket. He should have made a list. He should also have checked his bank account—though considering he hadn’t spent anything in a month, he must be in the clear.

Bucky wasn’t rich, but money wasn’t really a problem either, as long as he rationed himself. The whole apartment building he was in belonged to his family—well, to his uncle—so he didn’t have to pay rent. His bills were taken care of by his Army pension; just barely, but still. In these conditions he still had enough to buy himself food every month if he wasn’t too greedy. And he wasn’t, because he didn’t eat much.

So he could survive until he died.

Oh hey, dark thoughts again. Must be the neon lights. Bucky shook his head and focused instead on the very important question of which kind of ramen to get.

All in all, the actual shopping took him less than ten minutes, because he quickly realized he couldn’t do a month worth of shopping without two good arms. Besides, he couldn’t stand the awkwardness of buying twelve cups of ramen with the cashier watching his every move. (Bucky had to check every two minutes whether he was following him with his eyes. He was not. He was, in fact, doing crosswords, which only barely soothed Bucky’s paranoia.) Bucky could have been done with it even faster if he didn’t have to put down his basket every time he wanted to grab something off the shelf. Something he’d realized, after leaving the hospital: the amount of things for which you needed both arms was astounding.

Eventually, Bucky brought his basket to the counter and the kid looked up from his paper.

“Got everything you needed?”

He had very dark skin, sharp, elven-like features, and some sort of accent. Bucky wasn’t sure which. Something European.

Bucky cleared his throat. “Yeah. Um. Yes.”

Not winning any prizes, but hey, look at him going. Social interaction. He almost didn’t want to puke.

The cashier was beeping his stuff at the speed of light. “Do you want to put in a few coins for the
earthquake victims, sir?"

God, he was way too chipper for both his job and the subject involved. Bucky shook his head, then instantly felt the burn of helpless shame. He should have explained. He should have told him he barely had enough for himself.

He looked at the kid’s nametag. Kurt. Fat lot of good this did to him. He was as unable to start a conversation as he would have been to munch on broken glass.

“Here you go, sir,” said Kurt. “Cash or credit?”

Bucky wished he could have just teleported out of here, back to his place. He pushed it all down and tried to get a grip. He was half-way there. Couldn’t give up now.

He got out his wallet as way of an answer, fumbling a bit to dislodge it from his pocket, then fumbling some more to open it. God, he should have practiced this shit. His hand was trembling again. Why couldn’t he just get it done? Why did he always have to embarrass himself like—

“Need a hand?” the kid offered.

They both froze and Kurt’s eyes widened progressively.

“Mein Gott,” he choked out eventually. “This is not what I meant.”

The tightness in Bucky’s chest loosened a notch, which was a very welcome surprise. He wasn’t the only fumbling fool here.

“S’alright.” He pushed the wallet towards him. “Please.”

Kurt opened the wallet and counted the bills expertly. Bucky’s eyes tracked him, even though he was pretty sure this kid wouldn’t try to steal from him to his face. He still took back his wallet as soon as he could—with another spike of anguish; what if he thinks I’m racist? What if he thinks I’m suspecting him just because—and felt like an idiot when Kurt gave him his change back after he’d pocketed his wallet already.

Bucky clumsily shoved the change in his pocket while Kurt bagged his groceries for him.

“Thanks,” Bucky mumbled.

“You’ll be alright with all that?” Kurt asked in a worried tone.

It wouldn’t last him two weeks, but it was still a lot of bags. Bucky’s remaining arm had gotten pretty strong, though; and besides, he hadn’t bought anything really heavy, except for the milk.

“I’ll manage,” he said.

He picked up his bags and headed for the exit. He was almost out when the kid called him again. “Hey—”

Bucky had to make a physical effort to stop and turn. “What?” he asked, more curtly than intended, but—seriously, what now?

“You got a place to stay, right? Nights are getting cold.”

Bucky spotted the small shining cross around Kurt’s neck just as he remembered he did look like he lived on the streets. He shook his head. “I’m fine. Thanks.”
And he pushed the door, and got out, and took a big breath of freezing air.

The skies were completely dark now—well; dark orange—and just as he looked around, the traffic lights turned green, freeing the flow of cars which roared by as if they had somewhere to go. Bucky winced under the onslaught on his ears, but it was less of a shock than earlier; he shook his head like a wet dog and started walking down the sidewalk. He’d cross in front of his apartment so he didn’t have to wait here, where Kurt could see him through the glass.

As he walked, he started breathing a little easier. He’d made it. He had gone out to shop for groceries, like a grown fucking man; and even though he’d have to do it all over again in less than two weeks, he didn’t have to think about it right now. Right now he was going home with chocolate chip cookies.

He was almost there when he noticed the dark shape burrowing under the awning.

At first, he thought it was another kid; but when he looked closer, he realized it was just a small skinny guy, probably around his age. His legs were wrapped in a sleeping bag; he was wearing a jacket too big for him, old blue-and-red leather. There was a dirty backpack and several plastic bags around him, as well as a paper cup on the sidewalk, like some kind of hook without bait.

Bucky noticed him mostly because he was clean-shaven and all he could think was, Jesus, even this guy takes better care of himself than me.

He instantly felt horrible for thinking this. He wanted to cross the street to escape his own pettiness, but the traffic lights flashed green again.

Well—he could just turn his back to this guy and pretend he wasn’t here. It wasn’t even like he’d tried to get Bucky’s attention; and Bucky was a regular jerk, like everyone. He’d ignored tons of homeless people in his time.

But he had three bags of groceries with him. The acid feeling of guilt was already starting to fill his stomach.

The traffic lights turned red.

Bucky didn’t cross the street.

This wasn’t fair, he raged helplessly. He was almost there. He was almost there, and now he couldn’t move because of a fucking clean-shaven hobo who’d seen him carrying three bags of food. And Bucky was a big, fat, fucking whiner literally complaining because a homeless person had it worse than him. Outdoing yourself, Barnes, really fucking brilliant.

He thought of the change in his pocket, but—what if he gave this guy money just out of guilt, though? Wouldn’t that make him an even bigger asshole? Doing something meaningless just so he could feel better about himself?

But using that as an excuse not to give this guy money—wouldn’t that make him an even bigger asshole?

But this guy didn’t give a shit about Bucky’s internal struggles. He probably didn’t give a shit why he got money, as long as he got it. Not a lot of room for dignity on the streets. He hadn’t even asked for anything.

But what if—

Fuck it, Bucky thought, fed up with himself. If he didn’t do something, this was going to haunt
him for days. He slipped his bags down his arm so he could rummage in his pocket without putting them down. His change was still there, and he pulled out a bill.

Twenty dollars. He’d been digging into his open wallet.

He might miss them in the near future, but, again, fuck it. He just wanted to get this done so he could get the fuck out of here. He turned round just as the traffic lights went green again, then stiffly walked to the skinny guy and dropped the bill in his paper cup without a word.

The hobo looked up at him. Bucky didn’t avert his eyes quick enough and saw he had dirty blond hair and blue eyes, with dark rings under them.

“Thanks,” he said hoarsely, in a careful tone.

Bucky nodded awkwardly. The hobo bent down and stretched his arm to grab his cup. There was a star-spangled shield on the back of his jacket. He sat upright again and checked the contents of his cup. When he saw Bucky had given him a twenty, he blinked a little and looked up at him.

At this moment, the traffic lights turned red and Bucky whipped round with a lot of relief. He regretted having given away this much money, but all in all he felt better than if he hadn’t given this guy anything. This could have been him. And indeed, without his uncle’s apartment, Bucky had no doubt he would have been there under the awning to keep this guy company.

Chocolate chip cookies, he thought as he reached the other side of the street, and repeated it in his head like a mantra until he was home.

* * *

The next morning, the homeless guy was still there.

Bucky could see him clearly from the sixth floor, in his All-American jacket. In fact, it was the reason Bucky had managed to get up so early—out of curiosity, to check if the guy had moved. And he hadn’t. He was still under his awning, sitting up in his sleeping bag.

A lot of people were walking past; Bucky watched them go for long minutes, but he didn’t catch anyone giving him any money. Apparently, the guy wasn’t asking. He’d put out his paper cup again, but he didn’t actually ask people out loud for spare change. He didn’t even have a sign.

Bucky wondered if he was too proud or something. He wondered what he would do, himself, if he found himself in his place.

Probably ask. Probably do a sign and ask, and maybe he wouldn’t even need to bother; maybe people would give him their money anyway, because of his arm, because of how he looked.

This guy wasn’t even scruffy. He was just sitting there, curled up on himself, staring into space. People weren’t giving him anything.

* * *
Bucky ended up staying at the window all day. He had literally nothing better to do. Actually, this was the most motivation and interest he’d managed to muster since he’d gotten back on American soil. It was creepy, no doubt; but it wasn’t hurting anyone, and Sam would have probably pointed out it helped him feel connected to another human being while staying safe inside his apartment.

After a few hours, though, Bucky started to feel really uncomfortable. He’d always felt a pinch passing by a homeless person in the street, but every time he’d forgotten them and moved on; because the world was a cruel place and he couldn’t help everyone. Right?

But this guy—Bucky had stopped calling him “the hobo” in his head; it felt rude—was staying there, and Bucky stayed too. And so he couldn’t help wondering about him, so young and so frail-looking. Why was he out on the streets? Did anyone know he was there? Would anyone care if something happened to him?

And so Bucky was now spying on the only person he’d found who was less fortunate than him, and projecting his feelings on him like he was some kind of therapy doll.

Boy, but he really fucking despised himself.

It was easy to cultivate that; it was a fruit that didn’t need much to grow, and an activity that didn’t demand a lot of energy. So Bucky spent his day loathing himself and looking out the window.

Around 3pm, the guy got up and left, with all his stuff still under the awning. Bucky waited, and sure enough, the guy came back a few minutes later with a hamburger in a paper bag. He burrowed in his little corner again and wolfed it down.

Bucky’s stomach growled in sympathy. He’d forgotten to eat.

After he was done, the guy slipped down his sleeping bag, pulled his backpack under his head and apparently went to sleep. Bucky waited and waited, but he didn’t move.

Bucky gave up and went to cook himself some pasta, which he sprinkled with soy sauce before coming back to the window. The guy still wasn’t moving. Bucky waited, eating his pasta right out of the pan. It kept slipping from his fork.

When the night came, the guy woke up—Bucky must have caught him just getting out of bed the other day. He rolled his sleeping bag, which he shoved into his backpack. He checked his paper cup; nothing. (Bucky could have told him that. People were pigs.) He got up, stretched, shouldered his backpack and left, hurrying against the cold. Bucky could see him puffing out little clouds when he passed under a street light.

He wasn’t long to turn the corner and disappear.

Bucky supposed it made sense; it was better to sleep during the day when it was warmer and there were people around to unwittingly watch your back. At night, especially all alone and on the brink of winter, you kept moving.

This was a little bit like war, Bucky thought, idly rubbing his stump. A different kind than the one to which he was accustomed, but war all the same. He backed a little from the window; the cold made his phantom limb react in strange ways, and the glass exuded freezing air. The heart of his apartment was warm. He couldn’t see outside anymore, but there was nothing to see anyway.

Well. That had been his day.

Might as well go to bed.
The next morning, Bucky woke up at noon. He stumbled out of bed and shuffled through the trash littering his floor into the small living room, almost afraid of what he might see.

The homeless guy was back. Bucky was both relieved and annoyed. He’d vaguely hoped he’d vanish, if only so Bucky could tell himself he’d joined a shelter before the winter really hit. (Another testimony to how great a person Bucky was.)

Bucky pulled a chair near the window; his ass still hurt from sitting on the windowsill all day. At 2pm he ate a can of red beans, and watched as the homeless guy went and bought himself some chicken nuggets. Bucky wondered how long one could survive on a diet of greasy junk food. He had no doubt it was the cheapest thing available when you had no boiling water for ramen, but still—hamburgers and nuggets all the time. Not even good ones.

Time stretched by, slow like molasses. Whenever Bucky’s body got too stiff, he walked around his apartment, trying not to crush anything under his feet. Then he came back to the window, surprised with himself for staying interested in something for so long. The homeless guy was still there.

By nightfall, Bucky was getting agitated. His windows were frosting over. He could feel the cold through the glass. At least the skies were still clear, but the weather forecast announced snow later in the week.

Weren’t there, like, charity guys doing the rounds? Wasn’t anyone worrying about homeless people in winter? Surely someone would be there to pick up that guy. Direct him to a shelter. Right?

Bucky got out his phone. He was paying little attention to his own actions, so utterly convinced he’d never gather the courage to actually make the call that he was baffled to suddenly hear a voice into his ear.

“911, what is the address of your emergency?”

Oh God. Oh God, what the fuck had he done? What the fuck was he currently doing?

“Hi,” Bucky said, already starting to sweat. He hadn’t made a phonecall since his first and last disastrous try out of the hospital, two months ago. “Hello. Hi. Um. Hello.”

_Hello? Are you saying hello to the 911 people? What the fuck is wrong with you?_

“…Hello,” said the operator, sounding slightly disapproving. “What is the address of your emergency?”

“It’s not an emergency,” Bucky stammered. If he’d had a spare hand, he would have buried his face in it, but it was all he could do to cling to the phone for dear life. “Well—it—it sorta is, but it’s not. Um. It’s just—there’s a hob… a homeless guy across the street and I’m… I’m kinda worried?”

This was a disaster. This was a total disaster.

The operator seemed to think so; her tone was getting more and more doubtful. “Is he inebriated? 
“Does he seem dangerous to you?”

“No,” Bucky said. “No, he’s not drunk or anything, he’s fine, he’s just sitting there. He doesn’t even drink—I don’t think.”

“Sir,” said the woman, clearly fed up now, “can you describe clearly your problem to me?”

“The… look, it’s—it’s getting real cold and I’m—I’m just worried, okay? Is there… is there any plan for that? For the homeless in winter?”

“What is the address of your emergency, sir?”

“Brooklyn. You know how cold it gets in Brooklyn, right?”

“Sir, what is your exact address?”

“Hey—” Bucky clutched to his phone. “Hey, you’re not gonna come remove him, right? He’s not bothering anyone.”

“Sir—”

“No, you know what? You know—it was a, it was a mistake to call you and I’m—I’m very sorry I wasted your time and I’m gonna hang up now.”

Bucky hung up.

Then he put his head between his knees and pulled at his hair, hard, while taking deep breaths and thinking stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid.

It took him an hour or so to be able to move again.

He slowly walked to the kitchen and dumped his pan in the sink, on top of the rest of them. It really had been stupid. It wasn’t an emergency, so he had no business calling 911 in the first place. He had no idea why he’d done that—an atavistic reflex of some kind, taking command while his mind was drifting elsewhere. And he’d ended up telling them not to come get him—way to go, Barnes, really. But he’d been so afraid he’d accidentally called the cops on this guy.

This wasn’t his business anyway. He shouldn’t get involved. He shouldn’t assume he knew anything about this guy.

He didn’t know anything about this guy.

So Bucky was planning on going out again.

This was stupid. He wasn’t going to do it. It was ridiculous to think he might go outside for no
real reason, when he couldn’t motivate himself to leave his apartment for things that actually mattered. But he hadn’t slept at all during the night, kept awake by anxious thoughts which weren’t turned inwards for once. And now it was morning and he was putting on his shoes again, his fucking ugly little kid shoes because he couldn’t tie up his laces anymore.

He was so convinced he wasn’t really going to go out that he almost didn’t believe it was happening, even as he went down the stairs.

But hey, he was doing it. For a second there, he thought it would be—easy. After all, he’d made it last time. And this time around, he didn’t have to walk down the whole block. He just had to cross the street. It would be fine. (Shit—he had forgotten again to take out the trash. Too late, once more.)

He was at the bottom of the stairs now. He hadn’t run into anyone, which kept him under the delusion that this really could turn out fine.

Then he pushed the door open, stepped outside, and instantly knew this had been a mistake.

The cold had been like a slap to the face the first time; now it was like death was clutching at his lungs. He exhaled painfully and squinted against the sun. It was just before noon. There were tons of people, and they didn’t blur away when he squinted. The skies were wide over his head, like a chasm waiting to swallow him. Everything expanding around him. He wavered and stepped back, hitting the door of his apartment building.

His breathing was getting shallow. He gasped for air, then looked up. The homeless guy was there, across the street, and he was the reason Bucky was here—so Bucky was going to… Bucky was going to talk to him before he went back in. That was it. That was his goal for the day. His brief trip to therapy had taught him at least that. Stick to his goals. As long as they were reasonable. This wasn’t unreasonable. Right?

Okay, so. Crossing the street now.

His heart was kicking into overdrive, pounding painfully against his ribs. Jesus, this was why it was easier not to make any plans; he couldn’t possibly fail when he didn’t attempt anything. And he still loathed himself for making this guy responsible for his clear conscience. But—but—but now he was here. Because he was an idiot who didn’t think. And hell, he was terrified of phone calls and yet he’d managed to call 911 for no reason. He could cross the fucking street even though he was on the verge of a full-blown anxiety attack.

He could.

Bucky squared his shoulders; like a wink from the heavens, the traffic lights turned red. He held his breath and crossed the street, hunched down as though fearing sudden rain.

When he got on the other side, the little guy hadn’t moved, and for the first time Bucky got a good look at him.

This guy really was young, maybe younger than him; he was still clean-shaven, and he didn’t look dirty in a whole—probably went to a public bath or something, in the morning before he came back to his spot. But the shadows under his eyes had gotten darker. He wasn’t moving at all, trying to stay warm. He was really skinny. Not bad-looking; nothing too permanent carved into his face. He couldn’t have been out on the streets for very long.

His eyes were tired; maybe he’d glanced up at some point, but now he was looking away again. It was obvious he didn’t recognize or remember Bucky. Which was actually kinda strange. What
with the arm and all.

“Um,” Bucky said.

That got his attention. The guy had really blue eyes, perhaps even bluer for the dark rings under them. He stared at Bucky and Bucky stared at him.

“What?” he said after a minute.

Bucky cleared his throat and shuddered—God, it really was freezing out here. Or maybe his nerves were finally snapping after too much tension. How was he out there? He was half-crazy with terror, heart rate still through the roof, breaking in a cold sweat. What the fuck was he still doing here?

“I’m… I’m Bucky,” he said.

He got a flash of how he looked: a scruffy, long-haired, one-armed guy who hadn’t showered in days and who spoke like he had to pry the words out his own throat with a crowbar.

“…Okay,” the little guy said, looking expectant and wary. “I’m Steve. You want anything?”

Bucky stepped back. “No, I…”

He swallowed. His throat ached with the cold already, and shooting pains were squeezing his stump under the pinned sleeve. He needed to go back. He needed to fuck off.

“You… you got a… a place to… somewhere to go. Right?”

Really fucking articulate. Also, this totally didn’t just sound like he wanted to kick the homeless out of his neighborhood so it’d look better.

“I mean,” he said. “It’s getting… really…um—cold.”

“Noticed, thanks,” Steve said dryly.

He looked like he wanted to fight, but also like he was afraid of Bucky. Bucky couldn’t really blame him. He tried to make himself less threatening, but he had no idea how to make himself anything.

“You… you got a shelter to—go to?” he tried again.

“I can get by on my own,” Steve said curtly.

“Okay,” Bucky said. He was very good at imagining people wanted him to stop talking; he didn’t have to imagine it in the present case. “Okay. Sorry.” He had to get the fuck out of here. He couldn’t breathe.

“Are you gonna call the cops on me?” Steve said, more aggressive now. “I’m not bothering anyone.”

“No,” Bucky said quickly. “No, you’re not, and I won’t. I’m really sorry. I’m gonna… Bye now.”

He turned away and all but ran back into his building. He was lucky, somehow, because he managed to close the door behind him before he collapsed under the staircase and started gasping for air.
He managed to drag himself back up, somehow. The next day, he stayed curled up under the covers. Whenever he thought about getting up, his conversation with Steve popped up in his mind and he just wanted to curl up under the covers forever. He was dying of shame.

Late in the afternoon, he dragged himself out of bed to take a leak, then grabbed a box of cookies and a bottle of milk before crawling back under the covers, without looking out the window. He ended up falling asleep again.

When he woke up, it was almost dark. The milk had gone lukewarm. And it was snowing outside.

The skies had not cleared by the next day.

“It’s snowing,” Bucky said between his teeth, breath fogging the window. “It’s fucking snowing. Game over, dude. Just go find a fucking shelter.”

The little guy—Steve—wasn’t moving. He stayed under the awning all morning, slept through the afternoon as usual, and got up after dark with his little backpack, shuffling in the snow as he disappeared into the night.

Sleep eluded Bucky that night. At dawn, he was here to see Steve coming back, sweeping the snow away with his hand, and settling under his awning again.

Bucky wanted to go out and go to—a Starbucks or something, and buy this guy a cappuccino so he’d have something to warm himself up. The only problem was that Bucky was utterly unable to do it. After the disastrous episode of the other day, the mere thought of going back out was giving him palpitations. He had no idea what he would do when he ran out of food again, and he tried not to think about it.

It kept snowing, a little bit every day, so that every morning Steve had to sweep away the snow before sitting in his usual spot. Bucky wondered what he was doing during the night, where he was going. Maybe he was going to a shelter—but it was unlikely; he wouldn’t need to sleep during the day then, which he kept doing a lot.

As a matter of fact, he was asleep right now. His sleeping bag was slowly paling under a thin layer of snow.

By five, he still hadn’t woken up.
Bucky booted up his ancient computer. There must be a website he could check or (God, please, no) a number he could call to signal a homeless person in danger. The snow was bad enough already; but on top of that, the temperatures kept going down. Winter had engulfed the city like a silent wave.

The computer worked alright, but it still wouldn’t connect to the network no matter how many insults Bucky threw at it.

“Come on, you stupid fucking thing,” he said, almost tearing up with frustration, “come on, come on, I’m trying to do something here—” but computers were soulless and this one didn’t listen to him.

It was 7pm and Steve hadn’t woken up.

“Hey.” Bucky mumbled under his breath, his palm spread on the icy glass. “It’s dark. Get up, dude.”

9pm and Steve hadn’t moved. Still burrowed into his sleeping bag.

People passed him by.

He could be dead, Bucky thought with a stab of ice through his stomach, and they wouldn’t even know it.

“Jesus motherfucking Christ, what the fuck are you still doing here? It’s almost eleven!”

Steve wasn’t moving.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Bucky said. “You’re fucking kidding me right now.”

Steve wasn’t moving.
Around midnight, it started snowing again.

“Fuck,” Bucky said, clear and distinct like someone was here to hear it. His throat was dry and his voice wavered when he said it again. “Fuck.”

*

Steve was probably fine; Steve probably intended to spend the night here; Steve was a complete stranger; Steve would probably be pissed if someone woke him up; Steve definitely didn’t want any pity; Steve had explicitly asked not to be moved; Steve didn’t bother anyone; Steve was too young to die like this; Steve was maybe already dead; Steve was—

*

“Fuck,” Bucky said again, one last time, around 2am.

*

The cold was infinitely worse than before, but there was little noise, only a few cars from time to time. The traffic lights were green but Bucky crossed anyway, hurrying across the street, feeling like he was breathing knives. He shouldn’t be out there. How was he out there again? Nothing for a whole month, and now three times in less than a fucking week? Was he imagining this whole thing?

“Hey,” he called, way before he’d reached the awning. “Hey, Steve!”

He got closer, roughly grabbed his shoulder, shook him without grace. “Steve, wake up,” he said. “Hey, wake up! Steve, wake up!”

Steve was very pale and very cold.

“Wake up!” Bucky started shouting. “Steve, wake the fuck up!”

Steve didn’t move. This close up, Bucky could see his nose was red and irritated, and his lips were chapped and cracked. Too much cold dry air, too much polluted snow.

Bucky’s arm hadn’t been cut off at the shoulder. In fact, his stump went almost all the way down to what used to be his elbow.

He bent down awkwardly and slipped his stump under Steve’s shoulders. It was awkward and he had to try several times, but in the end he made it. He then slipped his good arm under Steve’s legs and lifted him up in one go, sleeping bag and all.
He almost let him fall and swore, blocking him against the wall so he’d have time to readjust his stump to support Steve’s weight. God fucking damn it but he missed having two arms. He had to hold him very close, gathering him into a bundle. Steve almost didn’t weigh anything.

(Later, it occurred to Bucky that then would have been the perfect time to call 911.

At the moment, though, he didn’t have any single thought running through his head, except that Steve was dying.)

*  

It was 2am, so Bucky didn’t mind taking the elevator. He much preferred enclosed spaces, actually, as long as he was alone there. Sure, he had Steve—and he had to keep blocking him against the wall so he wouldn’t slip out of his mismatched grasp—but it was as though Steve wasn’t there.

“Come on, Steve, wake up, Steve, wake up, wake the fuck up,” Bucky was saying in a constant stream, because he knew wounded soldiers—dying people—should be kept awake, but Steve hadn’t been awake to begin with and was definitely out cold now.

The elevator couldn’t go fast enough.

*  

Bucky was so stressed he’d been sweating under his heavy coat; his apartment felt like a furnace to him, and he welcomed the heat with desperate gratitude. He didn’t have a bathtub, which had never bothered him until then. He was pretty sure a hot bath would have helped.

But he would have had to undress Steve for that, and he couldn’t do that—because he only had one arm, first of all, and also because… well, he couldn’t do that. This whole thing was creepy enough as it was, Christ.

So Bucky put Steve in his bed—the couch was way too lumpy and narrow—and propped him up with a few pillows before piling up all the blankets he had on him. Then he heated water on the stove, which took five excruciatingly long minutes; when it was bubbling, he put a spoon between his teeth and took the pan with him into the bedroom, careful not to trip on anything.

He thought of putting the pan on the nightstand, but ended up putting it on top of Steve’s lump of blankets instead, in hope the warmth would suffuse through the layers of cloth. Then he took the spoon and made Steve drink the hot water.

As far as rescue plans went, it was probably the absolute worst, but Bucky had never dealt with hypothermia and it was literally the only thing he could do right now. By then, calling 911 had crossed his mind after all, but he’d dismissed the idea in a fit of acute anxiety—he’d fucked up last time so they had blacklisted his number—they’d put Steve in jail for being homeless—they’d put Bucky in jail for not calling them earlier—a very distant part of Bucky knew this was all bullshit and he should have picked up the phone, but he was on autopilot mode and the most important
thing in his life right now was to *make Steve drink the fucking hot water.*

It took a long time, spoonful after spoonful. Bucky fed him water in such small quantities that they went down even though Steve wasn’t really conscious. Bucky’s hand was trembling wildly by the end, and his sight was blurring and his back was aching with the hunched-over position he had to hold; but he made himself do it, made Steve drink the water, little by little.

Whispers of defeat were running through his head—he’d been utterly useless since he’d come back from his tour, he hadn’t even been able to take care of himself; it was laughable to think he could help anyone. He thought of what Rumlow would’ve said—*for fuck’s sake, just look at yourself, you’re spoon-feeding lukewarm water to a comatose hobo.*

And suddenly he thought *That’s fucking right I am,* with a surge of white-hot rage at himself—so vivid that for once, it was enough to send his anxieties running for the hills. Fuck everyone. He was trying to save someone’s life. He probably sucked at it and Steve would probably die anyway but at least Bucky was trying. He was doing something. He was *trying.*

After a long while, after the water had turned cold, Bucky put down the spoon, exhausted and shivering with nervous backlash, and slipped his hand under the covers to grab Steve’s hand.

And Steve’s hand was warm.

---

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please, leave a comment. 😊
Steve woke up with an urgent need to pee.

His sight was blurry, and he had to blink a lot before he could get a hold of his surroundings. When the world finally came into focus, he blinked a few more times for good measure.

Where the hell was he.

Several alarms set off at once in his head. The first one was *my backpack, where’s my backpack?* but he only had to move a little to feel it bumping against his legs. It was still in his sleeping bag where he’d stuffed it. Which meant he, himself, was still in his sleeping bag.

The second alarm was a vigorous reprise of *where the hell am I.* He looked around again, but the room he was in had no windows. A faint light was seeping in from somewhere, though; if he squinted, he could make out what looked like piles of trash littering the floor around him—dirty clothing thrown on top of greasy paper bags, cardboard boxes, flyers and ripped envelopes, an empty bottle of milk.

One thing was for certain: he wasn’t on the streets anymore. This didn’t really look like a shelter, though.

The third alarm was *shit, I really need to pee.*

He pushed on his arms to sit up, which caused maybe five or six blankets to slide off him and fall to the floor with a muffled *thump.* A cloud of dust rose up and Steve had to focus not to cough. His throat was even more irritated than usual. He looked around again; he could see a door to his left, slightly ajar—a bathroom; that was where the daylight came from—as well as a closed one in front of him. This one he could deal with later.

He began wiggling out of his sleeping bag, wrinkling his nose at the smell of himself—he’d sweated like hell in there, what with the thousand blankets someone had piled on him. When he focused, though, he realized his wasn’t the only unpleasant smell floating around. The whole room smelled moldy and dirty.

What the fuck was this place, he thought again. He didn’t remember anything from the day before. The most likely explanation was that he’d passed out and someone had just… taken him.

Fear got a tight hold of his guts and didn’t let go.
He forced himself to breathe slowly. One thing at a time. Right now, nature was calling even more insistently than his survival instinct, which was saying something. Besides—and he wiggled with renewed energy at the thought—maybe the fire escape was right out the bathroom.

He finally untangled himself entirely from the sleeping bag. He was still wearing his shoes, and in fact all his clothes, still layered in the same order he’d put them on last time. No one had undressed him; at least that was that. He slipped his hand inside the bag and pulled out his backpack. No time to roll up the bag—he was really on the brink of peeing himself.

Getting up, he waited a second to make sure he wouldn’t fall over, then padded across the room to reach the half-open door, which wasn’t an easy task with all that junk in the way. He didn’t want to step on something that would crunch or crack under his foot.

Eventually, he slipped inside the little bathroom and silently closed the door behind him, then locked it. His throat tightened when he saw the fire escape wasn’t there like he’d hoped. When he got closer to the window, his head spun a little.

Jesus. He must be on the sixth floor or something. There was no street down below, just a narrow back alley surrounded in even taller buildings, so he had no way to figure out where he’d been taken.

It wasn’t like he had a phone to call for help, anyway. Or anyone to call.

He shot an anxious look at the door. He’d locked it, sure, but even he could have probably broken that lock with something a little heavy. Fear wasn’t helping with his bladder problem, though, so eventually he very slowly unzipped his pants and pulled them down, then sat on the toilet seat. The bubbling noise made him screw his eyes shut, but it couldn’t be helped.

It seemed to go on for hours. He waited, sitting there, heart hammering against his ribs. When the fuck had he ingested so much liquid? Had he been drinking? Drugged? Was that why he was here? He did have a vague headache, and his limbs felt weak, but that was nothing new under the sun.

After what felt like ages, he was finally done and quickly stood, tugging his pants up. He didn’t want to flush the toilet so he just closed the lid.

The good thing was that whoever had taken him hadn’t come running for his blood. Maybe Steve was alone in here. Maybe he hadn’t been expected to wake up this soon.

He very carefully opened the bathroom door. There wasn’t anyone in the bedroom; the other door was still tightly closed. Encouraged, he shuffled across the room again and rolled his sleeping bag to stuff it in his backpack. He was practiced enough that it didn’t take him more than two minutes. He shouldered it, wavered a little. God, he was thirsty now, and his entire body ached. But the feeling wasn’t high enough on his—now considerably heightened—scale of discomfort for him to worry.

Okay.

Steve padded to the other door and closed his hand on the knob. He swallowed, very slowly turned it, then pushed it open just a crack.

On the other side was the main room—in even worse shape than the bedroom, with a disastrous couch looking like it was drowning in a sea of garbage. The smell was terrible.

But across the room, right in front of Steve, stood what was unmistakably the front door. He
slipped out and silently closed the bedroom door behind him. A little to the right, still against the far wall, was a small kitchen with dishes overflowing out of the sink. And a little more to the right was the other wall, with a window; and—just as he was beginning to really get his hopes up—in front of the window was a chair and in the chair was a man.

He was gaping at Steve.

Steve gaped at him. He felt like his body had been plunged into ice cold water.

One of them moved—Steve honestly didn’t know who flinched first, but it was enough to set the other in motion and suddenly Steve was backing against the closed bedroom door and the man was half-way out of his chair.

“What the fuck is this?” he said loudly.

The man flinched back and held up his open hand. “I’m sorry,” he rasped. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Where the hell did you take me?” Steve yelled, because he had to stay furious if he didn’t want to collapse with terror.

“You’re still where you were,” the man said quickly. “Uh—I mean, you’re still around—it’s just upstairs from—just-just-just look,” he finished helplessly, getting out of his chair and out of the way so Steve could look out the window.

Steve’s chest was heaving and his heart kept trying to beat out of his chest, so much that it took him a second to actually see what he was looking at. It was his street down there. This was his awning and his spot, though it was almost unrecognizable with how much it had snowed during the night.

“See,” the guy said, tentatively. “It’s not—it’s not far.”

Steve glared at him again. “What the hell?” he snapped, weighing his words with as much anger as he could. “Have you been watching me? Did you bring a chair to the window to watch me all day? Do you know how fucked up that is?”

Some part of him knew he shouldn’t be escalating the situation—but he had to make himself
bigger or this raggedy man would remember how small Steve actually was. At the moment, he seemed to have no defense mechanism against Steve’s fury; he just shrank in on himself more, looking like he wanted Steve to stop yelling at him, but had no idea how to achieve that.

“I know,” he stammered. “I know it’s fucked up—I’m—I’m really sorry.”

“So why am I here?” Steve said. “Huh? What’s the big idea now?”

“Nothing!” the guy said desperately. “I just—you didn’t wake up, and I thought—”

“What do you mean, ‘I didn’t wake up’?”

The guy rushed to explain. “You never usually stay the night, which—which I wouldn’t, either, it’s gotta be freezing cold at night and—I don’t know where you go, I swear, I’m not—I’m not following you, I just know that you usually leave around six—and I’m very sorry that I know that—but you always do leave and this time you didn’t and I was—and I was worried you were…”

His voice trailed off.

Steve still wasn’t sure what was happening here, but the tight knot of his fear loosened enough that he finally understood what this guy was saying.

He hadn’t woken up.

_He hadn’t woken up._ He’d stayed there under the snow.

He swallowed. This guy was creepy as hell and his apartment was a stink hole and maybe he did have unspeakable motives, but—he’d also saved Steve’s life.

“So what, what did you do?” Steve said, losing ground.

“I, um,” the guy said timidly, looking afraid Steve would start yelling again. “I went down around two am, and you were—you were unresponsive. I was… I was afraid I was too late. So I sort of… carried you up here and covered you in blankets and made you… drink hot water? I—I didn’t know what else I could do. I wanted to look up how to treat hypothermia but I don’t have Internet.”

“That’s exactly how you treat hypothermia,” Steve heard himself say.

The man blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t you supposed to put the person in a warm bath or something?”

“No. Actually, that could kill them.”

“Oh,” the man said. “Okay.”

There was an awkward silence.

Steve took yet another breath, and this time the oxygen reached his brain, enough for him to remember the guy’s name. He’d introduced himself the last time. Bucky? Something like that.

“It’s Bucky, right?” he said.

Bucky froze and his eyes widened. He nodded, carefully.
“Why didn’t you just call the cops?” Steve asked.

Bucky fidgeted. “You… um. You didn’t want me to.”

“What?” Steve said, incredulous.

“Last time, last time we talked, I don’t know if you remember, you said—you didn’t want me to call the cops on you.”

It was Steve’s turn to blink. This whole situation was just too surreal. His fear couldn’t stay at such high thresholds forever and finally began to ebb. The reality of what had happened to him started to manifest itself in his whole body, a deep exhaustion making it harder to stand, leaving him weak and trembling.

“I, um,” Bucky said hoarsely, before coughing a little. “I’m… I’m glad you’re alright. And again—I’m sorry I scared you. Also sorry for the… the stalking and stuff.”

His eyes widened again, as though he’d just thought about something. “You can go. You know that, right? I’m not—the door isn’t even locked or anything.”

“No,” Steve said wanly, “no, I’m starting to get that.” His legs were starting to feel like they wouldn’t support his weight for much longer, and he wavered, reaching out for support that wasn’t there.

Bucky instantly started forwards, then back like he didn’t want to risk setting Steve off again. “You wanna sit down? You should—look, I’ll…”

He walked away, careful to stay out of arm’s reach, and ambled across the room to go sit on the couch. Steve took a few wobbling steps and sat on the chair, hugging his backpack to his chest.

He’d almost died, he thought, head spinning, trembling with all his body now. It really hit him then, how close he’d come.

God. He’d thought he could make it, he’d thought he could tough it out; but the reality of things was that he had no idea how to survive on the streets. He even sucked at begging for money.

Maybe it was time to suck it up and try the shelters again. The thought made him tremble all the more.

“Oh,” Bucky said.

Steve looked up. He’d almost forgotten he was there. He stared at him for so long that Bucky shifted on his lumpy couch, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“Thanks,” Steve said hoarsely.

Bucky blinked.

“I think I would be dead if not for you,” Steve went on. “So… thank you, I guess.”

Bucky smiled at him—it was a tiny, uncertain shadow of a smile, which went as soon as it’d come. But it still stunned Steve a little, because it was so unexpected on the face of a man he’d been so ready to fear.

Without any warning, Steve felt suddenly deeply ashamed of everything he’d said. Bucky had taken a huge risk carrying him up here, and all Steve had done in return was—
—wait a minute.

“How did you carry me?” Steve said. “You only have one arm. How did you carry me?”

Bucky shrugged. “I managed.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Steve bit out.

God, he was so fucking naive. Someone must have helped him—another man—someone who’d be back soon, Bucky was just biding his time until they could—until they could grab Steve and—

“Hey, no,” Bucky said, back to looking alarmed. “No, no—look.”

He got up and went to take off his hoodie. He hesitated for a second—like he’d realized what he was doing—but then he went through with it, and shrugged it off to let it fall to the floor.

With this outer layer gone, the smell of old stale sweat got worse, but Steve’s attention was commandeered by what he saw. Bucky was wearing a black t-shirt underneath, which left his arms bare. He really did miss an arm—Steve was a little shocked to see it, though the gloomy lighting didn’t let him actually see much, beyond the fact that it wasn’t there. But more importantly, it was clear that the cut had been made at the elbow, not the shoulder. Bucky just hadn’t put his stump into the hoodie’s sleeve, making it look fully empty.

“Here, see,” Bucky mumbled. “It’s… it’s not good for much, really, but still enough to, um…” He made an encompassing gesture, like he was carrying an invisible bride.

“I’m so sorry,” Steve blurted out.

Bucky’s right hand closed around his stump; he looked up. “Sorry?”

“I’m such an asshole,” Steve said, mortified.

Bucky huffed a little, almost like a laugh.

“S’okay,” he said. “I wouldn’t have believed me, either.”

He bent down to pick up his hoodie and put it back on. He was really good at it, shrugging it on and sliding his right arm in the sleeve in one move.

“I know I don’t really… look my best,” he said, keeping his eyes down. “And this place is kinda, well.” He made a slightly helpless gesture. “So, you know. Can’t blame you.”

He sat back down. “Actually,” he said more quietly, “it’s good to have your guard up like that. You’ll live longer.”

Steve was at a total loss. Bucky seemed like a decent enough guy. In fact, Steve had never met anyone who would’ve carried a homeless person into their house like that. But this just didn’t make sense. If really he was normal—as in, not a murderous psychopath—then why did his place look like this? Why hadn’t he showered in days? Why was there trash everywhere?

Maybe this wasn’t his place? Maybe this was a—a squat or something. But Steve found that hard to believe. This was a respectable neighborhood; it was one of the reasons he’d picked it, so he’d be slightly safer out there. Someone like Bucky couldn’t have just illegally occupied an apartment like that, even though the apartment itself wasn’t much.

Bucky was still rubbing his stump through the hoodie, and Steve wondered what had happened to
him—in fact, he wanted to know what the hell was going on here, generally speaking; but he felt like he wasn’t really entitled to ask, now.

“So…” Steve said eventually, after another long silence. “I guess I should go.”

Bucky stopped rubbing his stump for a second; his piercing eyes jumped up to Steve’s face. Then he lowered his gaze again and resumed his absent motions.

“So…” Steve said eventually, after another long silence. “I guess I should go.”

Bucky stopped rubbing his stump for a second; his piercing eyes jumped up to Steve’s face. Then he lowered his gaze again and resumed his absent motions.

“Sure,” he said. “Yeah.”

Steve realized a small part of him still didn’t believe he really wasn’t in any danger; Bucky’s mild agreement left him so dizzy with relief dark spots danced in his vision. His next thought was that he definitely didn’t have the energy to go back out on the freezing streets.

But he should have died the night before and he hadn’t. So maybe that meant something.

“Thanks again,” he said awkwardly, getting up.

Bucky was chewing the inside of his cheek. Eventually he blurted, “You’re not—”

Then he shut up.

Steve waited. When it seemed like Bucky wouldn’t go on, he asked, “What?”

Bucky opened his mouth, but still didn’t speak for a few seconds. He was staring at the floor. “Are you—um. Are you gonna go to a shelter now?”

When Steve didn’t answer immediately, Bucky started rubbing his stump again. “No, sorry. It’s not any of my business.”

Steve felt strange. Eventually, he realized he wasn’t used anymore to people being mindful of him.

He still shook his head. “I can’t go to a shelter.”

“Okay,” Bucky said, without asking why.

It was obvious he wasn’t done talking, though. Steve stood there, waiting. It took Bucky a whole minute to work up the nerve to say:

“But then where… where are you gonna go?”

Steve didn’t understand this guy. He was caught between disbelief that a stranger would care that much about him, and dread that it had sinister implications.

“I don’t know,” he said carefully. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Okay,” Bucky said again.

He still looked like he wanted to say more, but it was like he couldn’t get the words out of his throat. He was holding himself very still and kept his gaze lowered. Steve had been scared, thinking Bucky wanted to hurt him; but Bucky looked terrified just talking to him.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked.

Bucky looked up at him, like a deer in the headlights. “What?”

“You’re just…”
Steve wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence.

“No,” he said. “Forget it.”

Bucky nodded, looking almost relieved, then got up and went for the front door. He’d told the truth—it wasn’t locked, and he pulled it open with ease. Steve walked to the threshold. A wave of cold air seeped in from the hallway, and he willed himself not to falter.

“Wait,” Bucky suddenly said.

Steve froze, but Bucky wasn’t trying to grab him or anything—he hurried to his small kitchen and dug into the plastic bags on the counter until he got out a packet of beef jerky.

“Here,” he said. “You might… you might need it. I’d give you more money but,” he winced. “I don’t really have all that much left.”

“That’s more than enough,” Steve said, slightly baffled. He took the jerky. It was sealed; of course it was. “Thank you.”

He stepped out of the musty little apartment and called the elevator. Bucky was still on the threshold, keeping him silent company, like he wanted to make sure Steve got down safe or something.

The doors opened with a ding.

“So,” Steve said, wondering if they should shake hands.

But Bucky didn’t step forward. He was back to rubbing his left arm. “Good luck,” he said nervously. “And—sorry again I scared you.”

“It’s okay, really,” Steve answered, getting in. “Maybe clean your apartment a bit next time?”

He’d tried to make a joke; and Bucky did smile, but it wasn’t anything like before. It was wan and tired and joyless.

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe.”

The doors of the elevator closed, and Steve was left feeling like a complete asshole.

*

It wasn’t even noon. Steve didn’t have the heart to go back under his awning today—actually, he wasn’t sure he’d go back at all. Knowing that Bucky was up there watching him was… weird.

Steve shivered and headed for the Barnes and Noble five blocks down. He could spend the day there, reading and eating his jerky. Then he’d go to the city hall to ask about plans for the homeless. Maybe another LGBT shelter, despite what had happened last time.

Again, the thought made his skin crawl.

He had no idea what lay ahead for him, and this scared him most of all. He didn’t have any idea how to survive on the streets for a prolonged period of time. He’d done a bit of research while he
still could, but he hated his situation so abjectly he’d almost killed himself believing he could just tough it out.

Going back to the Hodges was utterly out of the question. But shelters, even if he did convince himself to go, would be but a temporary situation. The truth of things was that he needed a job, and he could never get one that’d require a degree now; because he’d dropped out, and now he was homeless, and there was no way he could get back on track. No way he could make enough money to afford going back to college; and so no way to ever live the future he’d once hoped for himself.

He missed his mother. He wanted her to hold him, but it would never happen anymore, and that simple cruel truth still made him breathless.

He wondered what she would have thought of Bucky.

* *

When the call rang for all customers to head out, Steve’s head snapped up and he swore under his breath. He’d lost himself in his book and now it was dark outside. Too late to go to city hall.

_What an idiot_. He’d have to spend the night walking around again, because he now knew for certain if he went to sleep in this weather, he might never wake up.

God, he didn’t have the strength to do it. He thought of sitting there, of waiting to see if the staff would find him or if he’d manage to get himself locked in. With all the books. That wouldn’t be so bad.

“Sir?” someone said. “We’re closing.”


When he got out, it was snowing again.

* *

He walked up and down the avenue, sitting under bus stops when he felt like he was going to fall, getting up again as soon as he saw someone walking towards him, making it seem like he was going somewhere. He’d been on the streets for three weeks and he hadn’t gotten mugged or attacked yet; but this ironic sort of luck would run out very soon.

This was one of the reasons he’d stayed under the awning the night before; somehow he’d convinced himself he could do it, could stay there hidden until morning instead of wandering the streets at night. He was a boy and he looked the part, but it wouldn’t protect him forever.

_What about the girls_, he thought. _How do the girls do it_. He had no idea what he would’ve done, _if_. But his mother had helped him until the very end. They could have paid more to get her better care, but she’d wanted Steve to have several months of treatment in advance, until he could find a solution.
He only had two months’ worth of it left, and he hadn’t found any solution. He’d wanted it so bad, and it was saving his life now. But he would have given it all up to have his mom back.

His eyes began to burn, but he knew he wouldn’t cry. Crying was just time and energy wasted.

*

The skies starting paling around 6am. The shadows went away; people—ordinary people; daylight people—started to show up on the sidewalks, looking pinched and grumpy with sleepiness. Steve sat under a bus stop again and closed his eyes, breathing out for what felt like the first time since the sun had gone down.

He had sort of a plan. More like a really bad idea, which would probably fail. Still better than nothing, maybe.

He decided to wait for three more hours, just to be sure. And then he’d go and try.

*

Steve reached the building with a hammering heart. He was pretty sure it wasn’t going to work, and some part of him felt like garbage for even trying. He didn’t have anything to offer, really.

He got into the elevator and punched the sixth floor button.

*

Nobody was answering the door.

Steve knocked, and rang, and knocked again, but nobody came.

Abruptly, he felt so exhausted he had to sit down. It was over. It had been his only plan and it had failed before he could even try.

He stayed there for a long time, hurting with nonexistent tears. Eventually, he slowly got up and shouldered his backpack. He didn’t know where to go now. City hall? If it was open.

And then he heard a click behind him.

“Steve?”

Steve whipped round. “Hey,” he said breathlessly.

Bucky opened his door wider. He was still wearing the same clothes as the day before.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, baffled.
Steve swallowed, then held himself a bit straighter.

“I have an offer,” he said abruptly. “You let me stay here at night and—and I’ll clean up your stuff.”

Bucky blinked. “What?”

“I’ll clean up your apartment,” Steve said, a bit firmer. “I’ll do the dishes. I’ll take out the trash. I’m not asking you to feed me or anything. I won’t even use water, I can shower elsewhere, and I won’t bother you during the day. Just let me stay here at night.”

His heart was hammering by the end of his little speech. God, that really wasn’t a lot to offer. But Bucky had implied he needed help with all that. It was obvious he did. So maybe—maybe—just maybe...

Bucky just stared at him, for so long Steve remembered he was still creepy. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea at all. Maybe he’d just been lucky last time—maybe he was walking back into the lion’s den.

“Wait,” Bucky said.

He vanished inside the apartment and slammed the door.

Steve stood there, a bit dumbfounded. Did that mean he could stay or not?

He got closer to the door. He could hear Bucky rummaging inside, apparently looking for something in his hundreds of plastic bags and empty boxes. Steve heard several muffled swears and occasional thumps.

Eventually, the door opened again and Steve jumped back.

“Here,” Bucky said, slightly breathless, holding out a tiny metallic thing.

Steve blinked. It was a key.

“What…?”

“It’s,” Bucky said, “it’s the key to the bedroom. I mean the bedroom door. That way you can… you can lock yourself in if you want. Like, at night. If it makes you feel more… if you want.”

Steve couldn’t believe it. He felt light-headed all of a sudden, like he was going to float off the ground, or start sobbing, or both.

“Really?” he said, voice cracking.

“Yeah,” Bucky said. “You have to take the bedroom, though. I’m not… I’m not letting you lock me in there.”

“Okay,” Steve said. He was trembling with relief and tried to hide it. “Sure, anything you want. I mean—wow.” He still couldn’t quite believe it. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

There was a silence as they both stared at each other.

“So,” Bucky went on eventually. “So are you—are you coming in now?”
“Oh,” Steve said, “yeah—yeah, okay,” and he walked back into Bucky’s apartment.

It was stinky and moldy and there was trash everywhere.

But it was warm.

* *

“Here,” Bucky said. “Try it.”

Steve put the key in the lock, then tried to turn it. It clicked unsuccessfully inside; something was blocking it.

“You have to lift the knob with one hand and turn the key with the other,” Bucky said. “Try it again.”

Steve followed his instructions and managed to lock the door. Bucky nodded, like his point was well made.

Steve unlocked the door again, then looked at him. “So… what?”

Bucky glanced at him under his long hair. “Now you know I couldn’t get in even with a spare key,” he explained, with a little wave of his only hand.

Steve couldn’t believe that guy. “You don’t have to do all that,” he said defensively. “I…”

He’d wanted to say I trust you, but he didn’t trust him. There wasn’t a single soul he trusted. If he’d slept in there with the door open, his worry would have kept him awake. For Bucky to have thought about it must mean he was no stranger to fear, himself.

Steve wondered again how he’d lost his arm.

“It’s okay,” Bucky shrugged. “You don’t know me.”

“You don’t know me either,” Steve countered.

Bucky glanced at him again. He had really clear eyes, under the curtain of his hair. “Yeah,” he said. “We’re both taking a risk.”

Steve didn’t say anything. Bucky looked at him for a second more, then pushed the door open, and the bedroom appeared in all its smelly glory again. “So, here. You take that room.”

Steve had manners because his mom had taught him right; he wasn’t about to comment on the state of it. His mom had also taught him, though, to argue to death whenever a host tried to make even a small sacrifice for his sake. He wanted to say he could totally sleep under the kitchen table in his sleeping bag—he didn’t need a whole room, and certainly not Bucky’s own.

But Bucky had made it clear what arrangements he wanted them to have, and Steve was too desperate to have a door to lock. So he just nodded.

“S’ kinda full of trash,” Bucky said. “Don’t hesitate to throw stuff away.”

“What if it’s important?”
Bucky shrugged again. “I don’t have anything important.”

Steve found himself on the brink once again of asking why Bucky wasn’t cleaning his place himself. He didn’t look very happy living in garbage. But once again, he bit his tongue and said nothing. Bucky might still change his mind and kick him out.

“So there, you’re all set,” Bucky said. “M’ going back to sleep.”

“…It’s 11am?” Steve said.

“Is it,” Bucky said, sounding only vaguely interested.

He walked to his lumpy couch, pushed an empty Lays bag out of the way and let himself fall onto the cushions, tugging an old wool blanket up to his chin.

It was too awkward to just stand here watching him, so Steve walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

He took a second to close his eyes and exhale.

Then he reopened them and got a good look around. The bathroom door was wide open and gloomy winter daylight was washing in. The room really was a dreadful sight, and the smell betrayed more than a few leftovers rotting away quietly in the corners. It was a miracle Bucky didn’t have roaches.

Steve shrugged off his backpack and put it down.

_Think I’m gonna last the winter after all, mom_, he thought.

Exhaustion fell upon his shoulders. There was no way he could start cleaning right away. He’d spent all night up. He hadn’t eaten anything since the bag of jerky twelve hours ago.

He tentatively sat on the covers; his legs were feeling weak after a whole night of walking. He could… he could just sit here for a while and figure out how to tackle this.

The sheets were dirty, too, covered in crumbs and hair balls and strewn clothes, and he wondered when they’d last been washed. Maybe he should start with that, if he was going to sleep in that bed. Bucky didn’t seem to have a machine, so Steve could take the essentials and bring them down to the Laundromat three streets from here. And after that… he could…

* A flushing sound woke him up.

He blinked, then darted up when he realized he’d fallen asleep on Bucky’s bed. The door to the main room was open; the lights were on. It was dark outside.

_Shit_, he thought with a stab of fear. He scrambled to his feet just as Bucky came out of the bathroom.

“I’m so sorry,” Steve said quickly. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I just thought I’d sit for a bit and I must have—”
“S’alright,” Bucky mumbled.

He crossed the room, stepping over the junk lying around with the ease of habit. “Sorry for getting in. But the door wasn’t locked and I really needed to pee.”

Steve let out a feeble laugh. “Guess we forgot about that problem.”

And he’d forgotten to lock the door. A retroactive shiver ran through him.

He felt a bit less exhausted, though. He’d apparently slept all day, and he could feel it. He still felt like going back to sleep for a couple more hours—or days, maybe.

“Guess we did,” Bucky echoed.

“We could… set up a system,” Steve said. “Like you going to the bathroom before I lock the door every night?”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah,” he said vaguely. “Sounds good.”

He stepped out of the room and Steve was left standing there, feeling a little disoriented. He heard a whoof of cushions and understood Bucky had gone back to lie down on the couch. Everything he’d said had been in a dead voice, like he was only answering perfunctorily to Steve’s tone, without really listening to what he was saying.

Steve waited for a second, then took a decision.

“Are you—are you hungry?” he called.

It was a while before the answer came from the living room. “I guess.”

Bucky’s bags of groceries from earlier in the week were still sitting on the counter. Steve swallowed, then got out and crossed the room to reach the small kitchen area. He dug into one of the bags.

“Mac and cheese,” he said. “How about that?”

“Yeah. Sure,” Bucky answered. He sounded completely apathetic to what Steve was or wasn’t doing.

Steve looked at the piles of dishes in the sink and located a pan. He carefully lifted it, put it aside, then grabbed all the rest of the dishes and pulled them out to set them on the floor. When the sink was free, he opened the water and drizzled liquid soap into the pan. He could feel Bucky’s eyes on him all the while, though not in a watching way—more like he was staring into space and Steve happened to be in his line of sight.

Steve washed the pan, rinsed it, then filled it with water and set it to boil. Then he opened the fridge. Unsurprisingly, it was moldy and almost completely empty, but there was milk and butter. That was all he needed.

“You got salt?”

It was almost twenty seconds before Bucky answered. “Yeah,” he said. “Somewhere on the counter.”

Steve dug into a mess of plastic bags and ended up finding the table salt. He poured some into the water, then just stood there for a minute.
Watched pot never boils, his mom used to say.

He hadn’t cooked anything since she’d died.

He picked up a saucepan from the pile of dishes, then plugged the sink and opened the water; he rolled up his sleeves, grabbed the sponge, and went at it.

It took him almost half an hour to wash everything. The water was long boiling by then; he’d lowered the heat to wait till he was ready, and turned it up again before he poured in the macaroni.

The shelves over the counter were filled with what looked like bills and flyers, keys and coins, all sorts of junk; Steve put it all carefully on a chair, intent on sorting it out later, then started putting the dishes away. When he was done, he tasted his pasta; still not soft enough.

He wondered if Bucky was still watching him and risked a glance behind him.

He wasn’t. He was asleep on the couch.

Hadn’t he slept all day already?

Steve’s stomach was growling. He finished putting the dishes away, then tasted the pasta again and decided it was fine. Straining it and mixing the sauce in took him but a minute. The smell was mouth-watering, and the slick noises of the bright orange mix almost drove him insane. He’d forgotten he was starving, but now he definitely remembered it.

He divided the pasta between two bowls—blue and red—then stuck a spoon in the red one, and glanced towards the couch again.

“Bucky?” he called.

Bucky didn’t stir. Steve hesitated, but—there was no harm in waking him. The mac and cheese was hot. If he didn’t want to eat, he’d go back to sleep.

Steve padded across the room, bowl in hand. “Bucky,” he repeated, reaching out. “Hey—”

Bucky startled awake just before Steve touched him, all his muscles bunching at once. Steve snatched his hand back.

Bucky looked around; the tension left his shoulders, and his piercing eyes found Steve’s.

“What?” he said.

Steve swallowed. “Um,” he stammered. “Mac and cheese. If you want.”

Bucky stared at the bowl of pasta. Then he blinked, and reached out.

“It’s hot,” Steve warned.

Bucky obviously didn’t mind. He balanced the bowl on his lap, then took the spoon out, staring at it all the while as though he didn’t quite understand how it had gotten there. He looked up again, at Steve then past him.

“You did the dishes,” he said.

“Yeah,” Steve answered, nervous.
Bucky nodded slowly. Then he looked back down at his mac and cheese, and finally dug in.

“Thanks,” he said in an undertone.

“You’re—you’re welcome,” Steve said, weak with relief. “I’ve—I’ve made some for myself, if that’s okay? I’ll pay you back.”

Bucky blinked up at him, as if he didn’t understand. “Oh,” he said slowly after a while. “Oh, yeah. Don’t worry about it.”

Steve still wasn’t sure how to handle him. Bucky looked like he was—like he’d been sedated, or drugged. But Steve knew he would have detected weed or alcohol even with the plethora of other smells floating around. Bucky wasn’t a pothead or a drunk, and he probably wasn’t an addict either; otherwise he wouldn’t have given Steve free license to rifle through his stuff.

Yet his mind seemed constantly far away, as though he had trouble focusing on even the tiniest things. He was—adrift, lying fallow somehow. Like he’d been reduced to his bodily functions for now.

Bucky ate the mac and cheese. Steve ate his, too, standing up at the counter, not really facing Bucky but not turning his back to him, either. When they were both done, he walked to Bucky and held out his hand.

“Wanna give me your bowl?”

Bucky blinked again. “…Yeah,” he said. “Uh, here.”

Steve grabbed both bowls and quickly washed them, along with the spoons. Bucky was definitely watching him this time—as if he’d never seen someone do the dishes, not right after eating in any case.

“You, uh—wanna use the bathroom?” Steve asked. “‘Cause I think I’m gonna check in after.”

He felt awkward asking such a thing, but Bucky just nodded. He didn’t get up right away, though; for a while there, he seemed to dig into himself for energy. Then he finally pulled himself up and disappeared into the bedroom.

Steve looked around, mentally thinking about what he’d have to throw out and what he might need to keep. He hoped Bucky had a solid stash of trash bags. It would take him days to clean the whole apartment, but he was actually looking forward to it. He could make this place livable. It’d keep him busy and it’d keep him warm.

What happened afterwards—he’d figure it out later. This was his first real opportunity if he managed to seize it.

Bucky seemed unstable, though. Not in a dangerous way; more like one day he could just ask Steve to leave because his mere presence was too much to handle. Like he actually already wanted to ask him that, but just couldn’t muster the energy to do it.

Steve hoped he could have one week at least.
This time, Steve locked the bedroom door. Then he pulled out the covers and the sheets, rolled them into a ball which he threw on the floor, and replaced them with his sleeping bag.

It took him five minutes to work up the nerve to undress. He ended up locking himself in the bathroom first. He’d promised Bucky he wouldn’t shower, but he still took a bit of water at the tap to scrub himself slightly cleaner before he pulled out his injection kit.

He sat on the toilet and opened his box of sterile syringes and needles. He was almost out of rubbing alcohol, and did a mental note to buy more soon.

He was familiar with this little routine now—rub alcohol all over the upper thigh, wait for it to dry, screw on the needle, fill the syringe, chase the air, *tap, tap*. Then grab the muscle in his thigh with his free hand, deep breath and—a quick stab. Exhale through the sting of pain. Draw back on the syringe to make sure there wasn’t any blood. Then push it all in, slowly, still a bit weirded out to be doing this to himself, even though it had been months since the very first time.

*There,* he thought, putting on a Band-Aid. *Done for the week.* He definitely didn’t want Bucky to find the used syringe in his trash can, even though the odds of that happening weren’t very high, so he wrapped it in toilet paper and put it in his backpack. After packing his stuff in, he changed into clean clothes—he’d done a laundry run last week—and went back to the bedroom to slip inside his sleeping bag.

He’d thought maybe he wouldn’t manage to doze off, having slept all day. As it turned out, he barely had the time to register the smell of the mattress—stale sweat and salt—and then he was asleep.

*§*

He woke up the next morning with a jolt. It took him a few seconds to remember where he was; when he did, he lay back, heart hammering, and let his breath out.

He could feel stress adrenaline coursing through his veins. He figured it’d be a long time before he managed to sleep in late again. He wasn’t supposed to, anyway. But being able to sleep in one place all night, without worrying that he’d freeze to death, without worrying that someone would attack him—the relief was so sharp it was almost painful.

Getting up, he went into the little bathroom and enjoyed the absurd little luxury of brushing his teeth for as long as he wanted; then he drank long gulps of water at the tap, because he could. The small victories stayed. His strange roommate might kick him out any day without warning, but nothing could take that night away from him.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he realized he didn’t really think Bucky would do that.

He’d come for Steve in the cold. He’d watched Steve for days; he’d worried about him. He’d even tried to ask him if he had plans for the winter. He’d done all these things in a clumsy, even downright creepy way, but he’d still done them. And he hadn’t hesitated for a second when Steve had asked if he could stay.

Maybe Steve was stupid, maybe he’d come to regret it, but—he couldn’t help warming up to Bucky. The guy might look vacant and haggard most of the time, but he hadn’t given out so much as a hint of a threatening vibe, even with Steve shouting at him and cornering him in his own
home. Steve thought again about his slightly baffled look the day before, when he’d watched Steve do the dishes. He’d looked—relieved in an incredulous way, as if he couldn’t quite believe his load had been lightened even by this minuscule fraction.

Regardless of why, it was obvious he had been very alone for a very long time. Steve still wasn’t sure what his deal was, and his wariness wasn’t completely gone; but he was so tired, and no one had been kind to him in so long.

And Bucky, well—he looked like he could use a bit of kindness as well.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS. Thank you so much for your enthusiasm. I hope I can keep doing a good job with this. Thank you for reading and please, keep commenting, you don't know how much it means to me. <3
Bucky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky still wasn’t sure how it had all happened, but apparently, he had a roommate now. A roommate who’d done all the dishes—not just some dishes: all of them, at once—and who’d cooked mac and cheese for him. All of that shortly after nearly dying from hypothermia.

This was too good to be true, but also terrifying enough that it might actually be real.

Steve had gone back to sleep now, and Bucky was left sitting alone and stunned on the couch. He didn’t regret leaving the bedroom to Steve; he would have gone insane with paranoia locked in there, and Steve probably wouldn’t have stayed without a door to lock, anyway.

The thought of staying in his living room all night was odd, though. Bucky felt like he had even less to do than usual, without the excuse of a bed to lie down on without moving.

He was going to stay up all night, he could feel it. He’d slept way too much the day before; keeping it together as Steve shouted at him had eaten nearly all of his energy—God, he’d thought he’d never find a way to make Steve understand he’d really just wanted to help, and he’d been so exhausted afterwards he’d conked out for almost twenty hours straight. It had taken him that long to get up.

He’d said yes. Of course he had. What kind of asshole would have turned Steve down?

But the minute Steve had come in, Bucky had begun to feel out of his depth again, and his only wish had been for the conversation to end already, so he could go just back to his couch and curl up. Just—he was left alone. All he’d ever wanted was to be left alone. And this was the irony of it, wasn’t it—he had been left alone until then, for so long that he’d started wishing for people again. Only to be reminded of how quickly they overwhelmed him now.

Now that the dust had settled a bit, his shell of numbness was thinning and the restlessness of anxiety was returning—it was all he had in lieu of energy these days—which meant he was back to insomnia mode for the foreseeable future. Bucky’s circadian cycles had been a lost cause long before he’d even come back on American soil; but he’d never thought to be ashamed of that before, because no one had noticed or cared. Now, though, fidgeting alone in his disaster of a living room, all he could feel was shame—and anguish at the thought of Steve being there to witness it.
Bucky just wasn’t fit to be around people anymore, and Steve would be quick to realize that, if he hadn’t already.

* *

Bucky did stay up all night, playing mindless games on his phone—he couldn’t turn on the TV now that there was someone in the other room. Pierce had texted him, like he did every week or so. Around 2am, Bucky texted back.

*Nothing to report.*

It’d be good enough for his uncle. There were other texts, most of them—all of them?—from Rumlow. Bucky kept not reading them. Maybe one day it’d stop.

Looking at the text from Pierce again, he chewed on the inside of his cheek, biting a bit too hard to dissipate his nervousness. He had always been afraid one day his uncle would come for a surprise visit and witness how far he’d fallen; now he was even more afraid, because he knew without a doubt Pierce would make him kick Steve out in a heartbeat. No freeloaders was the rule. Bucky being jobless was already toeing that line.

But he was a one-armed veteran, and he was family. Even someone like Pierce couldn’t argue against that.

* *

Around seven, Bucky decided to make coffee. He was still restless and now also zoned out with fatigue. Steve would probably wake up soon, and Bucky would need some basic amounts of energy to face him.

Was Steve going to leave during the day? He’d said he’d only stay at night, after all. Bucky felt bad for feeling hopeful about it, but he was so exhausted already.

The pot was quietly bubbling when the door unlocked. Bucky took a deep breath, then turned round.

“Hey,” he said nervously. “Coffee?”

Steve wasn’t even in the room yet. Bucky felt irredeemably stupid. He took another deep breath as Steve stepped inside and closed the bedroom door.

He had bed hair, and he was wearing a big hoodie and jeans. He’d changed? Jesus, he’d changed. Bucky hadn’t done that in—who knew how long. He felt utterly gross standing there, facing this guy who still managed to keep it together better than him despite being literally homeless.

God, he should take a shower later.

“Coffee?” he repeated, trying to ignore the fact that they were both standing on a litter of trash.
“I’m good, thanks,” Steve said.

He was eyeing the pot like there was liquid gold in it, though. Bucky hesitated. “I’m… I’m not gonna drink the whole thing, you know that? It’ll just go to waste.”

“Oh,” Steve breathed. “Then—okay, then.”

Out of reflex, Bucky started looking around for a mug which wasn’t too dirty, then blinked when he remembered Steve had washed all his mugs and they were all neatly lined up on the shelf.

The feeling of sheer relief which seized him was ridiculously disproportionate. He didn’t have to do the dishes; they were done. One less looming sword. No need to scrape filth out of a chipped cup and hate himself for it.

Steve deserved way more than a mug of coffee, even though he didn’t realize it.

“Here,” Bucky said, filling it.

Steve reached out; their fingers touched when he grabbed the cup, and Bucky was glad to feel they were still warm. Steve really was staying here, he thought to himself. Which meant—a lot of stress and a lot of shame and a lot of anxiety attacks Bucky would have to hide; but it also meant he wouldn’t have to wonder whether Steve had died out there.

Like that, he was ready to try and tough it out.

“Thanks,” Steve said.

The silence stretched out. Bucky chewed the inside of his lip. Talking to people. About things. He knew how to do that.

“Did you…” He cleared his throat. “Did you sleep well?”

“Slept okay, thanks,” Steve said. “I was thinking of doing laundry this morning? And then maybe I can start cleaning around the apartment this afternoon.”

Bucky blinked. Steve had said he’d clean the place, but Bucky hadn’t expected him to… well, to actually do it. And certainly not that quickly. He wanted to do both these things in one day?

“You sure?” he said cautiously. “It’s okay to take a day or two. I’m not gonna kick you out if you don’t start right away.”

“I’m fine,” Steve said, before going on nervously, “… I hadn’t slept okay in a long time, you know. So—thanks for that.”

Bucky felt a pang. He wished he could have given Steve a smile, something comforting, something nice; but he already knew if he planned it beforehand, if he consciously thought I would like to smile now, it would feel weird and artificial like he had wax cheeks. Like he was an animal trying to grin. Nothing was ever easy, nothing at all.

He wanted to at least tell Steve he didn’t have to keep thanking him, wanted to think of a way to say I haven’t drunk out of a clean mug in weeks which wouldn’t sound too pathetic; but he didn’t find any.

“You… you wanna eat something?” he said instead.

“No, I’ll go get a burger later.”
“I don’t mind, you know,” Bucky said. “I don’t… I don’t eat much, you could—”

Steve firmly shook his head. “You’re letting me stay here for free,” he said. “That’s more than enough. I won’t take advantage of you.”

Bucky almost wanted to laugh. “There ain’t much advantage to be taken out of me.”

Steve stared at him like he wanted to ask something. But in the end, all he said was, “Do you have a bag or something? Gonna make that laundry run now.”

Twenty minutes later, Steve departed for the Laundromat, with a huge bag in which he’d stuffed Bucky’s sheets, but also all the clothes he’d found lying around. The apartment already looked a bit different for it.

Bucky stood there, aimless, for a solid five minutes.

Then he remembered he’d told himself he would take a shower while Steve was gone. And since he had to do it before Steve came back, he found himself undressing and stepping into the bathroom, like someone had given him a literal push.

He turned on the water and almost melted when the warm stream ran down his back. Even the belated realization that he’d have to put his dirty clothes back on afterwards wasn’t enough to ruin his enjoyment. He’d forgotten it felt so good. It was stupid, because it hadn’t been that long; two weeks, three weeks at most. But he’d still forgotten.

His sister had bought him conditioner as a joke when he’d come back—the little bottle had stood by his hospital bed—and he used it just to feel his hair get soft and silky as he untangled it with his fingers. Sometimes, he thought as he rubbed his scalp, he felt like his brain was actively numbing memories of pleasure, so he couldn’t access them anymore when he needed them. So even when he wanted to feel better, he couldn’t remember how.

The water got into his eyes, and he closed them. For a little while it was warm and quiet even inside his head.

*

When Steve came back an hour later, Bucky felt a tad less nervous. Another thing he’d forgotten: no matter how much you dreaded something, you always ended up getting used to it, at least a little. If nothing else, the novelty wore off.

“T’im back,” Steve said, then looked twice at him. “Hey—did you—”

He stopped, and Bucky felt himself smile a little. It did still happen to him sometimes, when he didn’t pay attention.

“S’okay,” he said. “You can say it.”

Steve grimaced a little smile back. “You… you took a shower.”

“I know, it’s amazing,” Bucky said, running his fingers through his hair. “T’m practically a functional member of society now.”
“Well then, so am I,” Steve said proudly. “Look. I’m carrying a bag of clean laundry.”

“Well, whoa,” Bucky said, getting closer, making a show of peeking inside the bag. “Careful, they’ll give you an adult badge for that.”

“God forbid,” Steve said.

Bucky smiled again, a little, and thought again about how his brain made him forget things he liked.

* *

Steve needed Bucky’s help to put the sheets back on; it was a bit frustrating with just one hand, but between the both of them, they had three of those, so it worked out okay in the end.

“Smells nice,” Bucky said when they were done. Even though they’d shaken them, the sheets were still warm. He would have loved to try them out; he genuinely couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept in clean sheets. They were already dusty the day he’d moved in; at the hospital, they’d always smelled like bleached-out sweat; and before that—well.

Steve must have seen it on his face, because he said, “You know, I understand that you don’t wanna sleep in here. But… we could take the bed out?”

“No,” Bucky said. “It’s fine.”

“It’s your bed.”

“It’s fine,” Bucky insisted. “I don’t sleep much, anyway.”

Steve looked at him weirdly, but said nothing. Bucky remembered he’d pretty much slept around the clock the other day—so, yes, okay, he could see how that was an odd thing to say. He wanted to explain, but he couldn’t pull on any thread about himself without bringing the whole ugly tangled mess with it.

His stomach very tactfully picked this moment to gurgle loudly.

“I’m gonna cook some lunch,” Steve said at once, then left the room in a hurry.

Left to stand there yet again, Bucky caught himself wishing Steve wasn’t so efficient. First of all—well, it was a bit humiliating. But more importantly, it felt like everything Steve was doing was motivated by the threat of Bucky kicking him out if he didn’t perform to satisfaction.

“What do you wanna eat?” Steve called.

“I—I don’t know,” Bucky said, joining him in the living room. “Something you’ll eat, too.”

“No,” Steve said firmly, standing straight at the counter. “I told you: I’m not eating your food.”

“You paid for the Laundromat,” Bucky tried to argue.

“You gave me the money I used for that,” Steve said.

“Yeah, I gave it to you. It was yours.”
“And you’ve given me enough.”

“Will you cut that crap,” Bucky said desperately. God, why couldn’t he just—“Look, there’s house rules, okay? If you live here, you’re not allowed to starve.”

“I’m not going to starve!” Steve snapped.

There was a silence.

“What else?” Steve asked with a visible effort.

“What?”

“What other house rules?”

Bucky shrugged. “Just that one. It’s about the only one I’m still able to follow.”

There was a silence. Steve looked like he was trying to decide whether to ask what the hell was wrong with him, and it was the third time in less than five minutes that he looked like this—and Bucky was so scared that Steve was actually going to ask him that he blurted, “Hey, so, how come—how come you’re homeless?”


Steve stiffened a bit. “It’s not a very interesting story,” he said. “My mom died in June. We had bills. I dropped out of school.”

Bucky didn’t understand. “Wasn’t there anyone to take you in?”

Steve shook his head in a tight little jerk. “Not really. I mean, there were my cousins but they were, um—” He swallowed. “I wasn’t really welcome there.”

It took Bucky a full second to realize what he felt was anger.

The intensity of it surprised him. The only anger he’d known lately was his stale self-loathing running in closed circuit. This feeling was outwardly, fresh and vivid—because how dare anyone kick someone like Steve out on the streets. His family no less. Who—who did that?

Even Bucky’s uncle hadn’t kicked him out, which was saying something.

“Well—fuck them,” he said, unable to hide his indignation. “You’re welcome here.”

Steve smiled at him, but just a little, as though he didn’t really believe it. Bucky felt more anger trickle into his system, and it felt good like cleansing fire. Whoever had taught Steve to expect that could go straight to hell.

“I mean it,” he said. “And—look—I understand about the food. I understand that you wanna keep… fending for yourself, or whatever. But—can you use the shower? At the very least. It’s not like—I mean, I have like fifteen of those to catch up on. You’re not gonna bankrupt me with hot water. Please?”

Steve smiled again, a bit more. “Alright,” he said. “Thanks.”

Bucky managed to smile back this time. It felt so good, this small thing, smiling at the right time like it was easy. Like it could become easy again.
“But I’m going out now,” Steve went on firmly. “To get something to eat.”

Bucky nodded. He was starting to understand Steve was more than a little stubborn. “Okay.”

Steve glanced towards the stove. “Do you want me to—”

“No—I’ll cook something for myself.” Shit, he’d done it before. Just because Steve was staying here didn’t mean Bucky could treat him like his house elf all the time. “You can just go, I’ll—I’ll leave the door open.”

Steve smiled, then left to get his jacket.

Yeah, Bucky knew what it was, to dread charity. Compassion was a rare and precious thing; but pity—pity was a twisted, self-satisfied version of it, and that was everywhere. Pity came from people who were glad it wasn’t them. Who used you to buy themselves a clear conscience. Bucky knew it; he’d pitied a lot of people in his time, before it was his turn.

So he wasn’t angry at Steve for trying to salvage his dignity. He was still trying to save what was left of his—acting like there wasn’t anything wrong with him, like he could keep himself on the surface of it all, even though he could see Steve had seen through him already and wanted to ask.

At the very least, Steve had agreed to use Bucky’s bed and shower. Bucky was distantly surprised that this invasion of his home didn’t disturb him more; but even though he took great pains to avoid addressing it, he was, in fact, a waste of space.

So if Steve could occupy a bit of it, all the better.

* * *

The rest of the week went on slowly, uncomfortably, and the tension between them drew tighter and tighter like a loaded spring.

Bucky’s sleep cycle was still upside down, so Steve couldn’t get much cleaning done—he was obviously reluctant to tidy up the apartment while Bucky was sleeping, probably afraid he’d annoy Bucky into kicking him out. So, true to his word, he didn’t hang around and just stayed out all day.

All day. Everyday. In fucking November. In fucking Brooklyn.

Most days, he came back with blue lips and frost in his hair, fingers so numb he couldn’t hold anything for long minutes, and Bucky knew he’d been out from dawn till dusk, begging for money. One time, Steve did return looking less harassed, less worn, and Bucky guessed he’d been sitting somewhere warm—something like a library, maybe. Bucky didn’t dare to ask Steve where he was eating. McDonalds again, most of the time, if the smell was anything to go by. Soup kitchens once in a while, probably.

Bucky tried to eat more, and at more regular hours. It felt like a betrayal not to, when Steve was out there freezing his ass off for a chance to feed himself today. At least Bucky just had three steps to make to go cook himself pasta or rice.

At times, three steps were still too much, because he really was that pathetic, but—most of the time, thinking about Steve was enough for Bucky to get off his ass and feed himself. He wished
he could have told Steve about it—wished he could have made Steve understand how much he was helping Bucky, even when he wasn’t physically in the apartment.

The apartment itself was slowly getting cleaner, which just weirded Bucky out. The thing about living in garbage was that, past a certain level of grossness, there seemed to be no point anymore. Making the effort of throwing one empty can of Coke away was not going to tidy up the rest of the pile. So the can stayed there, and the trash piled up, and it felt like a rising tide nothing could ever stop. But now—Steve was pushing back the tide. All he was doing for now was pick up the literal trash, put it into bags, and take the bags out; and it made an enormous difference already. The air was clearer.

Bucky wished he could have told Steve what that meant, too. But he wouldn’t have known where to start.

By the end of the week, his guilt was becoming unbearable. He was not only making Steve sleep in a dirty, windowless room, but also forcing him to stay outside all day in the cold, and spend what little leisure time he had up to his elbows in garbage. Steve looked thinner and paler every time he came back in the evenings—only to do Bucky’s dishes before he locked himself in for the night, because he was still fucking afraid Bucky might attack him in his sleep.

They couldn’t go on like this for much longer.

* * *

Bucky had a plan. His plan was simple. He was going to force himself to stay up all day.

That way, Steve would be able to clean during the day, eat inside, actually rest, stop looking like he was a dead man walking. All Bucky had to do was sit up on the couch, instead of lie down on the couch.

He could probably manage.

At dawn, Bucky watched the sun rise with trepidation. He was tired, and he had no doubt he would have crashed hard if he’d let himself. He had to tough it out, just for today at least, so Steve would have his day off.

Around eight, the key turned in the bedroom door. Steve shuffled in, and blinked when he saw Bucky with his eyes still open.

“Hey,” he said. “Still awake?”

“Yeah,” Bucky answered, aiming for chill and probably missing by a few miles. “I think I’ll stay up today.”

He’d prepared his sentence all night; he’d uttered it hoping to see a bit of relief on Steve’s face, knowing he wouldn’t have to squeeze his chores between Bucky’s haphazard naps, wouldn’t have to freeze half to death outside before he felt like he was allowed to come back.

Steve nodded. “Okay,” he said decisively. “I’ll catch up on the housework then. I’m gonna try and do as much as I can.”
It was an awful day.

All Bucky had wanted was Steve to rest; but instead he had to sit here and actually watch him rifle through the disgusting mess he’d made of this place, mortified that he didn’t even have the energy to get up and help. He should have helped. It was his goddamn mess. It was his goddamn apartment, for Christ’s sake.

But he was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. God, he hadn’t thought it’d be this hard; he hadn’t tried to force himself to stay awake in what felt like ages. But at the same time, he felt so wired he was certain he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep if it suddenly became an option.

He’d tried to pretend everything could work out fine, but there was no denying that Steve’s presence was fraying Bucky’s already worn nerves. It was ridiculous, because Bucky was pretty sure they both wanted the same thing—to have a safe space of their own, no matter how small; but between Steve’s stubborn sense of dignity and Bucky’s utter inability to use his words, they had both been getting more exhausted and tense every day.

But even as he was sitting there on his couch, vibrating between two layers of hell, Bucky still forbade himself to talk. Steve wanted to feel like he was useful. And he was useful to Bucky, so much—the apartment was free of most of its garbage, the laundry was done, the dishes too, and Bucky felt so awfully relieved he wanted to cry. But even his relief was impure; it only added to the utter shame of not having been able to do it himself. He was literally just sitting there while Steve did the job for him. He was disgusted with himself.

Steve tidied up and cleaned and Bucky kept fucking sitting there, and it was all he could do to keep it together. When nightfall finally came and Steve finally locked himself in the bedroom, Bucky exhaled for what felt like the first time that day, and curled in on himself and let himself shake, and wished he could get out of his own head, leave his body behind like dead empty skin and walk away from it.

And then, at the very end of the week, Bucky suddenly couldn’t take it anymore.

His unspoken attempt the other day had had one positive effect: it had flipped his sleep cycle again, and he’d managed to sleep a little the following night, and the night after that. Steve looked rather happy with that, though he’d spent the past two days cleaning up like his life was in the balance. Which he probably thought was the case.

And so that day, Bucky got up and found Steve already at work in the bathroom, digging rotten hairballs out of the drain. Bucky felt so deeply ashamed—not only at the sight of them, but also at the thought that he was forcing Steve to spend his Sunday like this—that he stepped in and said, without thinking, “Get out of here.”

Steve, kneeling on the slimy shower tile, froze. “What?”

“Oh,” Steve said, jumping to his feet. “Okay—sorry, didn’t realize you wanted to use the bathroom. I’ll just finish up with the living room while you—”

“Stop,” Bucky said. “Just—just stop. I don’t want you to—this isn’t what I—”

His breathing was picking up.

Oh, hell no. This was ridiculous. He wasn’t going to have an anxiety attack over this. He’d promised himself he wouldn’t let Steve see just how fucked up he was, and until then he’d managed. This was the only thing he’d managed to do. He couldn’t ruin it now.

He took a few deep breaths, then screwed his eyes shut when the feeling didn’t go away, feeding off itself, snowballing out of control.

“God,” he exhaled tightly, blinking hard. “God, fuck.”

He felt like the walls were closing in. Deep breaths. Deep breaths, and it’d go away soon.

“Bucky—”

“It’s fine,” Bucky gasped, gesturing with his hand, “it’s fine, I just—God, this is ridiculous—”

Steve looked hesitant. Bucky knew he was breathing too fast, way too fast. “This isn’t your fault,” he said hurriedly, because he had to tell him before he couldn’t—“I know we had a deal. But this—this isn’t working. For me. This isn’t—this isn’t working.”

“Oh,” was all that Steve said.

He didn’t sound surprised. Just resigned. Like he’d never truly expected anything better. Like he honestly believed Bucky was telling him to go.

“No,” Bucky barked, so violently Steve jumped. “Fuck! This isn’t what I—fuck!”

He took a shallow breath, then tried to force the words out despite the vise closing around his chest. “Steve—I’m not kicking you out. That’s what I’ve been trying to—I’m not kicking you out. Like—ever. You don’t have to leave unless you want to. You don’t have to worry that I’m gonna throw you out if you—if you sleep in late one day, or if you vacuum while I’m taking a nap, or if you haven’t—cleaned the fucking toilet bowl, or—or—whatever—and I know, I know you don’t want charity, but I don’t think you get what—I don’t think you realize I’m the pathetic one here. I do nothing all day and here you are slaving away for a chance to survive—and I hate it. I can’t stand it anymore, I fucking hate it, I—”

He was hyperventilating now, but he ripped more words out of his throat even though it physically hurt. “Steve,” and this was the most difficult, “I—I don’t like living in filth. You’ve gotta understand that. I hate living like this. I hate that I’m not doing anything about it. But I still don’t do fuck all, because I can’t, because the sad fucking truth is this is how I am. And you—you come in here and you do what I can’t do, and you have no idea what it means to me, what a fucking relief it is, to live a little less like a pig, to feel a little less like—and yet you still act like you’re the one owing me here. You have—you have to understand that you’ve already done more than enough. So just—please—you have to fucking stop, you’re killing yourself cleaning my shit and I can’t watch this happen anymore and you have to stop, please, you have to stop—you have to stop—”

He felt himself lose ground and lose the ability to speak altogether; he couldn’t breathe, felt like his throat had closed up, and a very distant, very tired part of himself said okay, this again—but just as he crumpled on himself and gave in to the overwhelming tide of crippling panic, he felt a
hand tightly grasp his.

“Hey,” Steve said, desperately, like he was talking down someone from a ledge. “Hey, hey, Bucky.”

Bucky wanted to push him away because fuck, no, he hadn’t been asking for more comfort—he hadn’t—but his fingers curled together with Steve’s despite himself and he held onto him like a lifeline. He was afraid he’d hurt him clutching at him so tightly, and this stupid concern helped keep himself afloat the roaring wave of his anxiety attack. He couldn’t move and couldn’t speak and couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t completely lose time; because despite everything, his raw, confused mind fixated on the thought that he was holding on too tight and he must find a way to let go of Steve’s hand.

It was through this weird kind of back door that he managed to recall the higher brain functions he’d lost in the landslide. He needed to let go of Steve’s hand, so he needed to calm down, so he needed to—breathe, yeah, that was the way to his miserable home. Breathe, James, breathe. Why was it Sam’s voice he heard? Fucking ridiculous. Breathe, James.

It took a long, miserable while before he managed to come back to himself. When he did, he realized he was sitting on the floor, with his back to the edge of the bed. His breathing was still labored and shallow, but it wasn’t completely erratic, and he managed to uncurl his fingers, one after the other; and finally, finally, he let go of Steve to wrap his arm around his own waist instead.

Then there was a long, quiet while where he just sat there, shuddering and thoroughly humiliated.

“I’m sorry,” he rasped eventually.

Steve had stood there all the while. Bucky wished he’d just go, just fucking leave him alone and leave him to sweep up the crumbs of his dignity; but after a moment of hesitation, Steve just sat next to him.

“Why?” he asked quietly.

Bucky shook his head. “I’d—I’d promised myself not to let you see how messed up I really am.” He let out a joyless little rattle of a laugh. “I know I was fucking it up already, but I’d hoped to keep it more or less together for a while longer.”

“Why?” Steve asked again, even lower.

Bucky screwed his eyes shut.

“Because it’s not fair,” he muttered. “You don’t have anywhere else to go. So you have to stay here with this stupid—fucking—pathetic dysfunctional wreck I’ve turned into. I was hoping I could at least… tone it down.” He breathed out. “Shoulda known that wouldn’t work out.”

So fucking maudlin, Barnes. He reopened his eyes, mentally kicking himself. Stop. Stop doing that. Fucking stop it.

“You’re not pathetic,” Steve suddenly said.

Bucky looked up at him without thinking. “What?”

Steve’s eyes were very blue and very wide. “You saved my life,” he said, sounding almost angry. “Yeah, you clearly have a hard time just taking care of yourself—and yet you still came down in the cold, and carried me up six floors, and saved my life. That’s something a lot of functional people would have never done.”
There was a silence. Mainly because Bucky didn’t know what to say.

“But—look at this place,” he said eventually, helplessly.

Steve shrugged tightly. “Sure, it’s chaos. But it’s not your fault.”

Bucky went very still.

“What?” he repeated, voice wavering.

“It’s not your fault.” Steve insisted, like it was obvious. “You just said it. You hate living like this. So whatever’s keeping you from doing something about it, it’s gotta be pretty strong and pretty fucking nasty.”

Bucky’s eyes filled with tears which rolled down his cheeks. He wiped them away, but more came to replace them.

“I’m sorry,” he said, baffled. “It’s just…”

It was just that no one had ever said that to him. Sam had spewed a lot of happy positive-thinking bullshit but he’d never thought to tell him that. It was so dumb, but—Bucky was trying his best, so maybe it was true. Maybe his best just wasn’t enough, and he wasn’t entirely to blame for being so weak.

It wasn’t really a comforting thought, but he still managed to breathe a bit more deeply.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, wiping his eyes again.

“It’s fine,” Steve reassured him. “Hey, someone tried to clean a hole through your apartment, that’d upset anyone.”

Bucky’s own wet laugh took him by surprise.

“Look… I’m really sorry, too,” Steve said uncomfortably. “I’m… not that good at letting people help me.”

There was a silence; Bucky heard him swallow.

“So,” Steve went on nervously. “I was thinking of… taking a break. Maybe… maybe watch TV a little?”

Bucky would have agreed to an impromptu pottery session. “Yeah,” he said hoarsely, trying for a smile. “That, um. That sounds good,” and Steve smiled back.

* *

Three reruns of Friends later, Bucky wasn’t really seeing the screen anymore, but he kept staring at it, content to just stay here. He felt quiet inside—well, not exactly quiet, but silent, at the very least. The kind of silence lingering on the battlefield after the assault.

Onscreen, Phoebe revealed that she used to live on the streets. Bucky gave her a lazy salute, then pulled the blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over Steve who was dozing off, tightly
curled against the arm rest. He probably hadn’t planned to fall asleep, but now he was here, and Bucky couldn’t carry him in the other room, and he couldn’t go there, himself, either. So he just sat on his end of the couch, trying not to move too much.

Around midnight, Steve shuddered in his sleep, and whimpered something which sounded like Mom.

*

Bucky swore a little too loud—and froze when he heard the brush of clothing against cushions behind him.

When he looked over his shoulder, Steve was sitting up, blinking sleepily. He yawned, ran a hand through his fluffy bed hair, then peered curiously at the blanket Bucky had thrown over him.

It was cute.

Bucky hadn’t had intrusive thoughts like that one in a while; it puzzled him so much he almost forgot to be angry at himself for waking Steve up. Steve, meanwhile, looked like he was finally registering his presence. He tensed up a little more, but not by much.

“Hey,” he said, hoarsely. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said. “Sorry. Um, I woulda carried you to your room but—didn’t know if…”

Steve smiled, and even though it was still a bit contrived, it was a true smile at the same time.

“I think that would’ve been alright,” he said.

He yawned again, then appeared to notice Bucky was standing weirdly close to the small kitchen area.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Bucky cast a glance at the stove. “Oh—that. I, uh…” He swallowed. He had to finish his sentence, or he’d regain very quickly the creepy points he’d apparently just lost. “I just… I thought I could make… breakfast? But—we’re—I’m—there’s no pancake mix.”

Steve stared. “You wanted to make pancakes.”


“No, I do,” Steve said, grinning for good now. He completely sat up, looking actually excited for the first time since Bucky had met him. “Hey, let’s go to the store and buy some mix and eggs and stuff.”

And there it was. Steve was trying to be friendly, Steve was trying to build something, and Bucky had to destroy it all because the mere thought of leaving his apartment was making him nauseous.


Bucky swallowed. He must have changed color pretty drastically for Steve to figure it out this fast. Steve got to his feet and walked closer. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t think…”
“Not your fault,” Bucky said between gritted teeth. “How I am.”

Steve paused.

Then he said: “How about a safeword?”

Bucky blinked. He must have misheard.

“Uh—what?”

“A safeword,” Steve insisted. “Like red, yellow, green—”

“I know what a safeword is,” Bucky said, incredulous. “Why—how—what does it have to do with… anything?”

“Just so I know when I should shut up?” Steve said. “No questions asked. Say red or yellow and I’ll back off.”

Bucky just stared at him, for so long that Steve shifted a little, looking uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean—”

“No,” Bucky said. “It’s—it’s a good idea. I think.”

“Yeah?” Steve said, looking hopeful.

Bucky nodded, and Steve did, too.

“Okay, so—no shopping for groceries,” Steve said. “I still want pancakes though. How about I go buy what we need? And then we can make some.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, unable to hide the relief in his voice. “Yeah, that—okay.”

“Okay,” Steve repeated, like it wasn’t even a big deal. “Want me to grab something else while I’m out?”

Bucky shook his head. Steve grabbed his jacket, put on his shoes, then said he’d be right back and went out the door.

Bucky heard him go down the stairs.

He wished he could do something for Steve. Something which wouldn’t end up with Steve doing more for Bucky instead, yet again.

“Lemme do the pancakes,” Bucky insisted when Steve came back up.

He horribly messed up his first try, but he hadn’t expected anything else from himself, so he wasn’t too discouraged. The next ones were honorable, and by the fourth one he was feeling almost confident. Steve straddling a chair by the stove, and commenting admiringly about how he never managed not to burn them, was a big help.
Eventually Bucky was done, and he looked at his pile of pancakes—burned ones at the bottom, getting prettier as the stack went up. It felt like a bigger accomplishment than it probably was.

“Y’know, I did buy something else,” Steve said airily.

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

Steve tugged the can out of his backpack and proclaimed, “Whipped cream!”

Bucky felt himself grin almost despite himself. “Good thinking.” He looked at the TV. “Hey, let’s eat all of these and… watch cartoons all day, or something.”

Steve smiled back, but shook his head a little.

“Settling for all morning,” he said. “I have to go out today.”

To get money hung unspoken in the air. Bucky nodded. “About that,” he said, “tell me how much you paid for those.”

Steve shut down in one second flat. “I’m not taking your money.”

Bucky held his gaze. “Steve,” he said. “We’re both gonna eat the damn pancakes. So I’m paying for one of these: the whipped cream or the ingredients. Your pick.”

“I don’t need—”

“You don’t need my charity,” Bucky said. “And I don’t need yours.”

Steve blinked, like it hadn’t even occurred to him.

“Uh,” he said eventually. “I—okay.”

Bucky hummed in satisfaction, then dug out his wallet.

Of course, he ended up paying what was probably the less expensive half, but it still felt like a small victory. By his own words, Steve wasn’t an easy person to help. But Bucky had tried and failed and tried and failed again to help himself. He had practice now. Steve wouldn’t stand a chance. Bucky was gonna help the shit out of him.

Just needed to figure out how.

*

Bucky had always liked cartoons, but he had trouble focusing on TV shows lately, even more so when there was someone else in the room. Even more more so, maybe, when that person was Steve, who had whipped cream on his cheekbone.

When he was done with his half of the pancake stack, Steve pulled out a dog-eared notebook out of his backpack, with a thick red cover, and started sketching the Steven Universe characters. Eventually, he noticed Bucky was looking at him and his hand faltered.

“Sorry,” he said.
“The hell are you apologizing for,” Bucky muttered. He held out his hand. “Lemme see?”

Steve hesitated, then gave him the notebook—but without letting go on his end, keeping the pages firmly pressed together, probably so Bucky couldn’t flip through. Bucky didn’t mind. The drawings were good; they looked like they’d come straight out of the screen.

“That’s neat,” Bucky said, letting go of the notebook. “Never could draw for shit.”

Steve smiled a little. “All you need is practice.”

“That takes patience,” Bucky said. “And usually I’m either exhausted or wired, there’s no in between.”

His own confession surprised him a little. Steve didn’t look weirded out or anything. All he did was ask, “So which is it now?”

Bucky thought for a minute. “Pancakes are hard. So, tired, I guess.”

“The good kind, though?”

That drew a small smile out of Bucky. “I guess,” he repeated, and he realized it wasn’t that big of a lie today.

For a second there was nothing but the cartoon’s colorful sounds, and the scrape of Steve’s pencil on paper.

Bucky heard himself say, “What are you gonna do when the winter’s over?”

Steve’s hand twitched, messing up the line of Pearl’s nose. He erased it, then started again. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Soon as it’s warmer outside, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“I didn’t ask where you were gonna go,” Bucky said. “I asked what you were gonna do.”

Steve shrugged tightly. “I don’t know. It’s not like I had much time to think till now.”

He looked up. The dark circles under his eyes had faded a little, but his eyes were still very blue, catching the flashes of color from the screen.

“What about you?” he asked.

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “What about me?”

“What are you gonna do?”

Bucky just stared. Steve waited for a while, then shook his head and went back to his drawing. “Sorry, Buck. Never mind.”

_Buck._

Bucky frowned a little. Who—someone used to call him that. It was—_Buck!_—it was—Rebecca, he realized, blinking. Rebecca called him that all the time, and he’d _forgotten._

“Buck,” he said.

Steve looked up. “What?”

“That’s… it’s something my sister would say,” Bucky said. “She used to call me that. Ages ago. I
He was so busy wondering at this forgotten fragment of his past that he didn’t notice right away how pale Steve had gotten. It felt as though he’d blinked and suddenly Steve was on his feet, lacing his boots with jerky gestures, shoulders tense.

“Steve?” Bucky said. “You’re… you’re leaving already?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered like he wasn’t all there. “Yeah, I’m—yeah. See you tonight. Thanks. Bye.”

He didn’t slam the door or anything, but Bucky was still left sitting there wondering if he’d said something wrong.

Maybe talking about family around Steve wasn’t the best idea.

* *

The TV was still on but Bucky wasn’t really watching it anymore. He went to sit at the window and thought about what Steve had asked. What are you gonna do. Doing stuff was for people who’d survived the war. And Bucky hadn’t. Not really. He’d tried therapy, fresh out of the hospital, he’d really tried, because at the time he was still hoping to build himself back into some kind of person. But it had taken him nowhere. His mind had kept running in circles like a trapped rat. And he’d been too paranoid to even try the meds, terrified of addiction, terrified of what it would mean to start taking them—that his life was turning into a dotted line, from pill to pill to pill. So he’d just given up entirely and now his life wasn’t any sort of line at all.

He remembered that, when he was a little boy, he used to go swimming in the river back at his grandparents’ house. There was a small creek in which he could swim back and forth; but one day, feeling adventurous, he’d tried going further, into the current, and the water had taken him. It hadn’t been brutal; he hadn’t realized it was happening. He’d simply tried swimming back and realized he couldn’t. And realized, as he threw all his strength into it, that he really, actually couldn’t, no matter how hard he tried.

The water was shallow, though; Bucky had grabbed at the bottom of the river, but it was only pebbles rolling through his fingers, until a bigger rock with sharp edges came scraping at his belly. He’d locked his fingers into the stony notches and held on for dear life. The rock hurt and cut at him. The panic and the water splashing his face made it hard to breathe. He couldn’t stay that way for very long, he knew it; but it was literally all he could do.

He’d ended up staying there for almost fifteen minutes. Eventually, his grandfather had come down to the creek to see how he was doing. As soon as he’d realized what was happening, he’d walked into the river, barely holding up against the current pushing against his legs, and lifted Bucky out, and carried him home, curled up and trembling against his chest.

Bucky leaned against the window and closed his eyes. It had been nice of Steve, asking him about his plans. But there was no getting out of the river this time.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and commenting! :D
For once, Steve was glad it was cold outside. He felt like he deserved it for being so dumb. There really was no reason at all to be so upset, but Bucky’s words, *my sister*, had reminded him of Gilmore Hodge—ruffling his hair and saying *it’s like having a little sister*—and it had been enough to chase him out of the apartment out of pure Pavlovian instinct.

He knew it was completely irrational. Bucky hadn’t *meant* anything by it—unlike Gilmore who’d been less and less subtle over time, going from sly remarks to painfully intimate questions as he became *really interested in all that stuff*. Steve couldn’t step out of his tiny room at the Hodges’ without Gilmore ambushing him into a long debate over whether or not Steve was crazy. Well, not *crazy* but—oh, Steve *knew* what he meant, right? After all, there was no harm in discussing Steve’s *condition* as a mental disease, for the sake of demonstration—after all, Steve *did* have to take a treatment, so it could very well be said that *there was something wrong with him*, right? But he didn’t have to take it *personally*, of course, Gilmore didn’t *really* think that Steve was a total freak, Steve just *had* to admit something about him was just sort of weird. Right?

One time, Steve had weakly tried to tell Gilmore he would like to just eat breakfast like a normal person for once, without talking about all that stuff—but Gilmore had instantly exclaimed that this was a *total* Freudian slip, Steve implying he *wasn’t* a normal person. As he started rambling, Steve had just tried to tune him off and not to cry in front of the Hodges, who were thrilled that their son was so interested in their poor orphaned cousin’s plight.

Then Steve had started suspecting Gilmore was spying on him while he took his shower, and after that, there really was no other choice but to pack his few belongings and leave in the middle of the night.

It was that impulse which had stung Steve again—Bucky’s *my sister* bringing back the feeling of suffocation and helplessness, of crushing isolation. But this time, it only took a few breaths of freezing air for the feeling to disappear, and for Steve to realize he’d completely overreacted. Shit, this was the first personal thing Bucky had ever revealed about himself, and Steve’s only reaction had been to storm out on him as if he hadn’t caused enough damage already.

So Bucky had a sister, Steve thought. Where was she right now? Where were all of Bucky’s family and friends, for that matter? Why did it seem like he’d been left to die up in his ivory tower?

Steve swallowed more guilt as he kept walking. His cheeks were still burning with the memory of Bucky’s breakdown—*you have to stop, please*—but also of his own thoughts when he’d first
moved in. Looking back on the past week, it was so glaringly obvious that Bucky was prey to something bigger than him. Steve hadn’t even given him a chance, stupidly wondering why he wasn’t cleaning up as though anybody would enjoy living like this.

He’d saved Steve’s damn life, wading through an ocean of mental barriers to come down and help him; and Steve was painfully aware he’d only given him trouble in return. He’d thought he could make himself useful cleaning Bucky’s apartment, but he’d gone at it like he was lighting a candle with a flamethrower, blind and deaf to Bucky’s growing distress because he was so goddamn proud he couldn’t accept people helping him even when he was fucking homeless—

His legs felt weak all of a sudden, and he stopped at a red light to catch his breath. He looked at it plume before his eyes, then took a look around for the first time since he’d left the apartment.

Without thinking, he’d been heading for his new spot—church right at the corner; people tended to feel charitable after Mass—but he realized he didn’t have the patience or the energy to beg today. He’d end up throwing the money back into people’s faces, if they gave him anything at all.

He couldn’t keep doing this, anyway. He had a place to stay, now; he needed to think up an actual plan and stop acting like a wounded animal on the run.

College was unattainable, he knew. But this wasn’t a good way of thinking; he couldn’t keep focusing on what he couldn’t have. He had to go about it step by step. The first step was find a place to live, and he’d achieved that thanks to Bucky’s generosity—and a shitload of luck. With an actual address to his name, maybe he could find a job at McDonalds or in retail. And then he could see about making money, and maybe saving enough to—do something. Pay Bucky back, first. Then get somewhere, anywhere. Carve a small place for himself in this world.

There was his treatment, though. In less than a month, he’d be all out. And—it was eating a lot of his money. Wouldn’t it be better to just—stop for now?

The thought knocked the breath out of him every time, and made his hands tremble so much it was all he could do to tighten them into fists. His mom had sacrificed so much for him. And—God, he didn’t want to think about that—what would happen if he stopped? He knew some guys could get by without taking anything, but he barely passed as he was.

At times he’d been so afraid Bucky had figured it out—he’d been so insistent for Steve to shower at the apartment. But eventually, it had become clear that Bucky had no clue. He was just trying to help. And they’d made pancakes, and they’d watched cartoons, and—and they’d joked around like they could become friends.

But the sad truth was that Steve never really knew who might or might not have a problem with him. And in his situation, he couldn’t afford to take that risk—Bucky had said it himself; if Steve wanted to survive, he had to stay for the rest of the winter.

So Steve simply must keep taking his treatment. The thought let him breathe a little easier. But that meant he’d better find a job fast.

* *

“Bucky?”

Steve pushed the door wider open and turned on the light. The small apartment still smelled faintly
of pancakes; the TV was turned off.

Bucky had fallen asleep in the chair by the window.

Slipping inside, Steve closed the door behind him. He thought about doing a bit of cleaning before bed, but he was exhausted from his long walk in the cold, and he didn’t want to risk waking Bucky up.

He toed off his shoes, shrugged off his jacket, then sat on the couch. It was dark outside, and he hadn’t eaten all day, but his stomach was in knots. He didn’t think he could go to bed right away, either.

After a minute of staring into space, he pulled out his notebook and opened it. Closing his eyes, he exhaled a bit shakily as his thumb brushed the page. The thick drawing paper felt like home under his fingers. He breathed in the faint smell for a long time, eyes closed.

Drawing Bucky came to him so naturally he only realized what he was doing after he’d begun. Bucky was the only other person in the room, after all, and he was holding still. But for the most part, Steve wanted to know him better, to be able to understand him better—and so he needed to draw him.

Bucky’s clothes were shapeless, hiding his body—thick socks, loose jeans, fluffy hoodie. The one time he’d taken a layer off, Steve had been too transfixed by his left arm to look at the rest of him. He drew Bucky in his clothes and all their folds, drew his empty sleeve and the curl of his right hand in his lap.

Bucky had fallen asleep in the chair like a man used to sleeping upright; he was barely slouching and leaning just a bit to the right. His chin-length hair hid most of his face—limp and greasy again; it had been a week since he’d taken that shower. The rest of his features was blurred by his scruff, and Steve strove to capture the shape of his face; bit by bit, like he was restoring a painting, he came to realize Bucky had full lips, a wide nose but a sharp jaw, high cheekbones that called for light.

The more he drew, the more he found to draw, as if Bucky’s face demanded to be admired before it revealed itself fully. Steve wished he could have drawn him nude. There was no lust in that thought—it was the frustration of an artist who sensed a great model and wanted to unearth him whole. But there was something truly brutal in the act of making someone pose, making them stand still and bare, to be stared at for hours on end, dissected, reassembled, transformed. Even if Steve had known Bucky enough to ask, he wasn’t a complete idiot. This was the last thing Bucky needed right now.

When Steve finished his drawing, it was almost midnight, and he was pretty sure he should destroy it so Bucky would never find it by mistake. But he also knew he wouldn’t, because this was the best thing he’d drawn in months.

He signed it, then hesitated at the bottom of the page—he wasn’t sure what to write. Man Sleeping in Chair? Unaware Model?

Eventually he just wrote Bucky. Then he shut his notebook and finally went to bed.
At first, Steve didn’t understand why he was awake. Then the pounding started again and he jerked upright.

Someone was knocking on the door. Not his door—the front door in the living room.

He glanced at the alarm clock: it was five am.

“Barnes!” came a muffled shout. “I know you’re in there! Open the fucking door!”

Steve got to his feet, heart thumping like mad. He unlocked the bedroom door with shaky hands and peered out.

“Bucky?”

Bucky was up in the darkened room. He glanced at Steve; he looked alert for the first time since Steve had met him, with a sharp glint in his eyes.

“Go back into the bedroom,” he said quietly. “Close the door.”

Steve backed off and shut the door; after a second of confusion as to what to do now, he crouched so he could look through the keyhole.

Bucky was just standing there. The pounding on the door was becoming more and more violent, though, so in the end he walked up to it and jerked it open.

On the other side of the door was a dark-haired man with hollow cheeks and fevered eyes. His leather jacket was open, and Steve could see dog tags glinting against the black fabric of his shirt. The man’s grin looked like it was going to split his face in two—glinting white like he was showing his teeth rather than smiling.

“James,” he said. “Fucking finally. Where have you been, man?”

“Brock,” Bucky acknowledged calmly. “How did you find me?”

“Now what the fuck is that tone?” Brock said, eyes wide and voice pitching high. “Huh? It’s been months. Can’t a man check on an old friend?” He grinned and reached out as if to tug on Bucky’s beard. “Or an old animal. Now you even look the part.”

Bucky turned his head away. “I asked you a question.”

“Take a fucking joke, dude, I swear.”

“Brock,” Bucky repeated, again, still calm. “How did you find me?”

“God!” Brock barked so loud Steve jumped. “You still have that goddamn stick up your ass. I’ll round up the guys, take it outta you one of these days. You’d love that—wouldn’t you?”

Bucky said nothing. Brock stared at him, then burst out laughing.

“Jesus, I’m kidding! I’m kidding! Just—just fucking smile, alright? Only reason I’m here is to check you haven’t blown your fucking brains out, you know.”

“Don’t have a weapon in here,” Bucky said.

Like it was the only reason he hadn’t done it yet. Steve swallowed.

“Lemme take a look around your hellhole—” When Brock tried to shoulder past him, Bucky
shoved him back. Brock stumbled, looked like he was about to hit him for a second. Then he grinned again.

“Aw,” he said. “Seriously, you fucking cocksucker. Can’t you just be fucking glad to see me? Invite me in like a normal fucking person? Since that’s what you’re trying so hard to be.”

Silence. Steve wished he could have seen the look on Bucky’s face.

“You hiding someone in there?” Brock said. “Is that it? A little twink to bend over the couch? Least you could do is share—”

Bucky put his hand in the middle of Brock’s chest and pushed him back out. He stepped out of the apartment and shut the door almost all the way behind him.

Steve wasn’t sure what he said next, because he said it so low and quiet. There was a silence. Steve thought he was going to strain something trying to hear better. And then—he heard a huffed laugh, a muttered threat, and then the unmistakable noise of someone going down the stairs.

Bucky came back in, closed the front door and visibly hesitated, before locking it.

Then he looked up, and his sharp eyes made Steve jerk away as if they could have met his through the keyhole. But when Bucky called, his voice was quiet and tentative again.

“Steve? You can come out.”

Steve swallowed, then opened the door. Bucky was standing in the middle of the room, rubbing his left shoulder again.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

Steve pushed the door fully open. Bucky was back to looking apologetic and mild. But whatever he’d said to that guy had scared him away in a few seconds.

Steve glanced at the front door. Locked.

Bucky caught his gaze and stepped aside, going almost all the way to the window. He always seemed to know when Steve was scared of him.

“I wouldn’t leave right away,” was all he said, very quietly. “He’ll probably hang around for a while.”

Steve’s tension deflated, and he felt horribly ashamed of his reaction, when Bucky’s first move had been to protect him. “It’s alright, Buck,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

They were still standing around in the darkness, and he turned on the light; it looked yellow and stale, but it was still better than the gloom of those early hours. “I just… Who was that?”

Bucky shrugged. “Sort of a colleague.”

“A colleague?” Steve repeated. “He was wearing dog tags.”

Bucky shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah. A colleague.”

“You’re a vet?”

Jesus. Oh, Jesus Christ, Steve really was the fucking king of idiots. He just hadn’t thought—even with the scruff and tiredness carved into his face, Bucky looked so young.
Bucky rubbed the back of his neck, fingers slipping through his dirty hair. “Yeah,” he mumbled again.

“Is that how you lost your arm?”

Bucky chewed on his lower lip.

“Yeah, but—” he paused. “Is it okay to say yellow on that?”


“S’okay,” Bucky said. “It’s just…”

“You don’t have to explain,” Steve said firmly. “You never have to explain. Unless you wanna.”

Bucky smiled, rubbing his left arm again. “Okay. Thanks.”

Steve fought the urge to apologize again, and glanced at the door.

“That guy. Was he drunk? Or—or high?”

Bucky shook his head. “Brock’s just insane. Been getting worse since we got back. Got this whole theory that we’re all beasts and we should live true to it.” He shrugged. “Not great at parties.”

“You looked so… calm,” Steve said. “Facing him. I thought…”

“You thought I lost it whenever someone looked at me wrong,” Bucky said, with a sour little smile. “It’s okay,” he added charitably when Steve started stammering. “To be fair, I kinda do. Thing is…”

He appeared to realize he was rubbing his arm, and dropped his right hand. “The boring stuff—the normal stuff—that’s hard. Like I unlearned how to behave in public. How to deal with people and… things, in general. Y’know?”

He looked at the door, too, as if Brock was still behind it. “But violence,” he said, sounding very old. “It’s the most straightforward thing there is. Not a lot of room for second guessing. Especially coming from Brock—I know him too well.”

Steve nodded. He understood what Bucky was saying, even though he wished he didn’t. He’d been so jittery and frantic ever since he’d moved in, himself; as if he couldn’t get used to the idea of a safe space anymore. At least on the streets, you knew—it wasn’t safe. You didn’t have to wonder. You didn’t have to take the hazardous bet of trust.

“You kept asking him how he found you,” Steve said. “Are you hiding?”

“Not actively,” Bucky said. “It’s just that no one really knows I’m here. I didn’t expect him to show up.”

“Why do you think he did?”

Bucky opened his mouth with the obvious intent to say he didn’t know. But then a wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows, and when they came out, the words were slow and thoughtful.

“I think… my uncle sent him.”
“Your uncle?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, still thinking as he spoke. “He owns the place. Probably wanted to check up on it, but he knew he couldn’t just send a stranger to do that.”

“Yeah—that Brock guy kept looking over your shoulder,” Steve remembered. “Trying to look inside.”

“Maybe dear uncle wanted to make sure I didn’t fuck up the place too much. So you see, I met you just in time.” His half-smile didn't last long. "Wish he hadn't sent Brock of all people, though."

Steve looked at the door again. “That guy is gonna wait around for you to come out.”

“No doubt,” Bucky nodded. Then he huffed through his nose, barely a laugh. “S’gonna be a long wait.”

Steve huffed too, despite himself—it wasn’t funny at all when you thought about it, but the tension inside him desperately needed to be let out. At least Brock hadn’t seen him; even if he lurked around the building, he wouldn’t know Steve was living in Bucky’s apartment.

Bucky shook his long hair. “On the bright side, I’m all shot up with adrenaline now. I feel like—” He sounded uncertain. “Maybe I could help you clean up today? Just—just a bit.”

“Uh—yeah,” Steve said, baffled. “Of course.”

He looked around, then suddenly changed his mind. “But—if you feel like doing something, you should do something for you. Something you’ve wanted to do for a while. And—and then help me, if you still feel up to it. Whaddaya say?”

Bucky’s lips ticked up again. “Yeah. Okay.” He glanced at the bedroom door. “That alright if I take a shower?”

“Of course,” Steve said. It wasn’t even six in the morning yet, but he definitely wasn’t going back to bed.

As Bucky headed for the bedroom, Steve called him back. “Hey. That guy—why was he calling you James?”

“S’my name,” Bucky said. “James Buchanan Barnes.”

Steve blinked. He didn’t know why he’d never realized before that ‘Bucky’ had to be a nickname.


Bucky smiled. It was a nice smile, which reached all the way to his eyes and made them crinkle at the corners.

“Nice to meetcha, Steve Rogers.” And then he disappeared into the bedroom.

* * *

Steve sat on the couch, and then lay down, because he was actually still pretty tired. The sun
wasn’t even up. His heart hadn’t calmed down, and he told himself it was because of that Brock guy, but—it wasn’t, really.

He was being stupid again. Telling Bucky his last name hadn’t been that big of a deal. But hearing Bucky saying his name had warmed him all over, and Bucky had looked so pleased about it, too. He was smiling more, now that Steve had actually started to talk to him, instead of just dealing with his presence like he was a wild animal.

Lying there, only half-awake, Steve dimly realized he had enough of himself—enough of being scared.

Fear had taught him everything was a trap. Fear had taught him everyone was an enemy. And it had probably saved his life. But now, he had to let himself unlearn that. Because if Steve couldn’t even trust Bucky, who’d gone above and beyond for him—then it was no use trying to get himself back into the world. He would remain a wild animal himself, unable to connect to anyone, able only to mistrust and dread, to snap and spit.

If nothing else, Bucky deserved better than that.

* *

Steve was still laying on the couch when Bucky came out.

Lying on his stomach, he kept his eyes closed. He heard Bucky come closer, until he was right next to him. Humid heat radiated from him.

He smelled good.

Steve didn’t move. Maybe he couldn’t. His body stayed where it was, face-down. He couldn’t see Bucky, and yet he knew what he was doing. What he was going to do.

Bucky put his hand on Steve’s head, then slid it down his back, until he could slip his fingers underneath the hem of Steve’s shirt. He took it off, somehow without moving him—it slipped off smoothly, without catching on anything, just ruffling the hair on Steve’s nape a bit. Steve still had his pants on, or maybe he was naked. Yes. He was naked.

Bucky’s other hand, even though he only had one hand, was clutching Steve’s thigh, as if to test how firm it was. It went up and up, closer to Steve’s ass, squeezed harder to part Steve’s inner thighs. His right hand was on Steve’s back. He pressed down, so Steve could only breathe shallow.

He was strong. Steve remembered some part of him was afraid. Or should have been. He could have spoken up, but he didn’t, and Bucky didn’t either, as if that wasn’t even an option.

Bucky’s fingers parted him, then slipped inside.

He did it slow and firm, and Steve didn’t actually feel it; all he felt was the resulting pleasure, the wetness and his own pulse between his legs. He’d allowed this to happen, and now it was happening.

Bucky was gentle, but relentless, pressing harder on Steve’s back so he couldn’t move, so all he could do was lay there while Bucky’s fingers went deeper and deeper into him. Bucky was going
to fuck him next, Steve knew. Hold his wrists and then do it.

Maybe it was already happening. Steve wasn’t sure. The pleasure made it difficult to think.

He was slowly rubbing off on the cushions underneath him, spreading his legs wider so the friction would sparkle like flint on steel. Rolling his hips. He could still feel the phantom weight of Bucky’s hand on his back. He could also still hear the shower. So Bucky wasn’t actually there, which he’d known since the beginning on some level, but now he was waking up for good—

—and Steve was waking up now, he was totally awake and rubbing off on Bucky’s couch—

He jerked up, ending up on all fours on the cushions, breathless. God, what, fuck, no. Exhaling a shuddery breath, he let the world fall back into place. Sun barely coming up, shower running in the background, living room still half a dump.

Shit. His dream was still echoing inside him, like he was only half-way out of sleep. He was incredibly riled up, hot and pulsing, right on the edge, and he knew his injections could boost one’s sex drive but—it wasn’t like he’d been in a place to appreciate it before then. He’d never been so aroused in his life. It made it difficult to think.

For an insane second, he was tempted to just finish himself off. But he couldn’t—he couldn’t do that. Right?

God he wanted to. His entire body was wound-up and quivering.

But in someone else’s home—on someone else’s couch—and for starters, what if Bucky came out of the shower while Steve was—? No—no, this was a bad idea, and Steve stumbled off the couch to avoid temptation.

Which proved to be an even worse idea. He’d been wet before, but now that he was vertical, he was fucking creaming his underwear. He could smell himself, the powerful scent of his arousal even through his jeans, so intense there was no way Bucky wouldn’t be able to smell it when he—

Of course, that was when the bedroom door opened.

Steve took a step back, feeling hot, certain his cheeks were too red, certain Bucky would see and smell and know. Bucky, though, came out of the room still drying his hair; the towel kept him from meeting Steve’s eyes.

Thank God.

“Bathroom’s free if you need it,” Bucky said, rubbing the towel over his head.

“Yeah, actually—gonna go real quick,” Steve said, and he grabbed his backpack, slipped past Bucky, into the bedroom then into the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it.

It was so hot in there, mirrors dripping with steam. Steve abandoned all thoughts of cooling off. He sat on the toilet seat and shoved his hand down his pants, grinding his palm against his pelvis.

Tremors were already prodding at him like electric shocks, making his toes curl in little jerks. He bit down on his free hand and kept a steady, brutal rhythm. He was getting closer, a bit more every time he pressed down, and disjointed images from his dream invaded his mind and—fuck—his body arched on the seat, legs tensing, muscles quivering, and then he was fluttering and pulsing and coming in increasing waves which spread throughout his entire body.

He sat there for a while afterwards, catching his breath. When he thought to open his mouth, his
teeth had left deep marks on the back of his hand.

So, he thought, a bit stunned like he’d been hit on the head. *That happened.*

Eventually, he got up and flushed the toilet to pretend, then washed his hands. Dark spots danced in front of his vision. The urgent heat of his arousal had ebbed away; all was left was a feeling of emptiness. He was still quivering a little.

Wiping off the steam on the mirror, he tried to sort out how he felt about this. The randomness of it was what puzzled him the most—he was *pretty* sure he’d never thought about Bucky like this. Was that because he’d just decided to try and be less defensive? If so, his brain was taking some pretty big leaps, here.

But it wasn’t the first time Steve’s sex dreams featured unlikely participants. And for Bucky to have starred in them wasn’t even *that* surprising, all things considered. Steve had been afraid Bucky would assault him, and then he’d started liking him instead, and his subconscious had clumsily tried to reconcile both extremes. That was all.

Steve looked at himself for a second, then dropped his hand from the mirror. Bucky didn’t know, so in the end there was no real harm done. Steve just hoped it wouldn’t happen again. This whole mess was complicated enough as it was.

He shed his jeans and slick underwear, then grabbed a washcloth and a new pair of boxer shorts from his backpack.

*  

“Hey,” Steve said, coming out of the bedroom. “So… you still up for a bit of tidying?”

“Yeah,” Bucky answered, looking slightly surprised with himself.

Steve still felt awkward and couldn’t really look Bucky in the eye. *Stupid subconscious.* “How about… picking up all the books? I’ll clean up that shelf and we can put them all up there.”

Bucky nodded. “Sure. I can do that.”

As Bucky started picking up the books one by one to build an unstable pile next to the shelf, Steve remembered another detail which might have prompted his dream. *Cocksucker. Stick up your ass. A little twink to bend over the couch.* Brock’s words to Bucky.

Maybe just insults, or maybe it meant…

Steve shook his head. Of all the things he knew—or thought he knew—about Bucky, this one really didn’t change anything.

It took them a couple of hours to gather all the books, then put them back on the shelf in neat rows. Somehow, it made a bigger change than cleaning out the garbage had. An organized library could shine elegance on the entire room. Bucky looked like he was thinking the same thing; looking around his living room, he had a little smile, with something wry in it.

“S’real nice,” he said. “Thanks, Steve.”
“Don’t thank me,” Steve said, “you did half the work. Hungry yet?”

It was almost noon, and Bucky nodded. Then he said quietly, “I’d like you to eat with me, though.”

Steve felt tired.

“I’m not gonna do that,” he said, for what felt like the hundredth time.

It was exhausting, to cling to his values in the face of Bucky’s relentless pleas to let himself be a kept boy. For a second, he almost wanted to snap at him—didn’t he know how hard it was already? Why did he have to keep pushing?

But Bucky was shaking his head. “I know—it’s—it’s not what I’m asking. Just…”

Steve waited. Eventually he said softly, “What’re you asking then, Buck?”

“I just feel like shit making you eat outside in the cold,” Bucky blurted, stumbling over his words. “Just… eat here today. Then… then tomorrow you can go shop for groceries for yourself. Or—eat with me this week, and shop for us the next. Whatever. Can’t we… can’t we just figure something out?”

Steve remembered what he’d thought earlier. *Can’t allow the violence to win.*

He wasn’t constantly on the move anymore. He didn’t have to take his backpack with him wherever he went. He didn’t have to buy food day-to-day.

Besides—he would *like* it, eating with Bucky. He would actually enjoy talking to him, sitting with him, finally letting himself catch a goddamn break.

“You’re right,” he said slowly.

He sat on the couch. To know that he wasn’t going to go out right away, that he’d have food in him to face the cold—it was such a relief he felt it in his bones.

“Wait…” He tugged his backpack closer, then pulled out a sheet of paper and wrote at the top *Whose turn is it to pay for groceries?* He made two columns, one of them titled “Me” and the other “You.”

He drew an X in his own column, then gave him the paper.

“Pin this on a wall somewhere?”

Bucky took the sheet of paper. When he saw what Steve had written down, his lips ticked up.

“Yeah,” he said. “That works.”

Steve just smiled back for a second. Then he glanced towards the bedroom. “Got a condition, though. You’re getting your bed back.”

Bucky looked alarmed. “Steve—”

“You’re not comfortable making me eat outside, well—I’m not comfortable making you sleep on the couch.”

Bucky looked torn. “I can’t get locked up,” he said. “I told you.”
“So we don’t lock the door,” Steve said.

There was a silence. Bucky was staring at him.

“You sure?”

*Can’t let the violence win.* Steve remembered his dream, remembered the pleasure of it. Bucky had been holding him down; but that had been okay. In his dream, he hadn’t felt unsafe or scared. In his dream, he’d trusted him.

Steve took a deep breath. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

Lunch was quiet, but the good kind of quiet. Bucky couldn’t really help out with the dishes—how had he *managed* before, alone, with only one hand?—but he hung around Steve instead of going back to curl up in his chair. Steve was also reluctant to leave, and he was quick to decide not to go out at all today, and instead try and use Bucky’s computer so he could look for a job online.

But Bucky had warned him his Internet was more than capricious; and Steve quickly realized he hadn’t been exaggerating.

“Ugh,” he said after half an hour of fruitless effort. “Nothing works. Have you tried calling that?”

The screen displayed a cheerful and entirely useless little window with a technician’s number to call. Bucky, who’d been leaning on the back of Steve’s chair and watching him with mild interest, bowed his head a little so his hair would hide his face.

“…I’m not super good with phone calls.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “Lemme try?”

Bucky said nothing, but dug a smartphone out of his pocket and put it in Steve’s hand. Steve noticed the dozens of unread texts—the last one from a Brock Rumlow—but he didn’t say anything. He dialed the number on the computer screen, then put the call on speakerphone on an impulse.

They both stared at the phone for three long rings. Then there was a click and a string of ridiculously smooth muzak filled the room.

“We appreciate your call,” said an automated feminine voice. “Please hold.”

“Oh boy, here we go,” Steve said. “Okay, I’m taking bets. How long?”

Bucky blinked, then smiled as if he couldn’t believe Steve was making him smile about this.

“Five minutes,” he said.

“I wish I had your optimism,” Steve said in a faux world-weary tone. “I say half an hour.”

Bucky snorted. “Half an hour? No way.”

“Bucky,” Steve said solemnly. “I have called so many helplines over the years. Believe me. The
pace of the muzak, the tone of the voice... It’s so gentle and relaxing. That’s a very bad sign. Thirty minutes, maybe more.”

“No way,” Bucky repeated, smiling again.

The first five minutes went by. Steve just raised his eyebrows at Bucky, who made a gesture of surrender. “Fine. But we’ll never get to thirty.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Ten minutes later, they’d both internalized the muzak enough to speak over the voice when it cycled back.

“We appreciate your call,” Steve said, with his finger up.

“Please hold,” Bucky answered dutifully.

Fifteen minutes later, Steve was sitting upside down on the chair, staring at the ceiling, and Bucky was on the floor with his back to the couch.

“This music,” Steve said. “Will play in hell as we try to fix computers for all eternity.”

“I give,” Bucky said. “You were right. We appreciate your call.”

“Please hold,” Steve echoed sadly.

At the twenty-ninth minute, Steve sat upright again just so he could put his forehead on the desk. “I don’t want to say it again.”

“But you will,” Bucky said in a monotone. “You’re part of the muzak, now. You are the muzak, and the muzak is you.”

“Nooo,” Steve said softly.

“Yes. Here it comes. We appreciate—”

“—Hello?”

Steve and Bucky both yelped and jerked upright; Steve almost dropped the phone trying to pick it up, and eventually managed to get a hold of it.

“Hello!” he yelled back.

“...Hello,” repeated the voice, sounding wary.

“You didn’t win the bet,” Bucky murmured with a grin.

“You didn’t either,” Steve whispered back, before talking into the phone. “Yes, hello, sorry—uh, our Internet won’t connect?”

It was a long, boring, and frustrating affair; but eventually, Steve hung up the phone, took a deep breath, and opened a page where the Google logo appeared like a victory.

“You did it,” Bucky said, mesmerized.

“I did it,” Steve answered in the same fascinated tone.
They both stared at the page like first men huddled around a fire. Then Steve groaned, stretched, and his whole body cracked.

“Jesus,” he whined. “Oh, my spine will never be the same.”

“You need a hot shower,” Bucky advised. “Especially if you still plan to sleep on the couch.”

“You’re right. Lemme just get dinner started before—”

Bucky snorted. “Steve,” he said. “Go take your damn shower. I’m gonna make ramen or something.”

The shower felt like a rebirth. It was the first one Steve took here; despite Bucky’s authorization, he’d kept showering at public restrooms, even though he never felt safe there, either. Here, the jet wasn’t very powerful, but the water was scalding just like he loved.

When he got out, he did his injection, vaguely hoping it wouldn’t bring him any more wet dreams. Whenever he thought about the one from the morning, he felt himself flush hot and start to tingle again. Stupid, stupid subconscious.

As he towelled off, Steve realized the thought of Bucky finding out about him wasn’t as terrifying as before. He was almost sure Bucky wouldn’t hurt him for it.

But maybe he wouldn’t be okay with it, maybe it’d go like with the Hodges or the girl at the LGBT center—no but I mean, like, what’s your real name?—and the thought made Steve sick to his stomach. Maybe he was a coward, but he was just beginning to let himself enjoy this tiny bit of shelter. He didn’t want to risk destroying it right away.

When he came out of the bathroom, the smell told him Bucky had reheated vegetable soup after all. He was pouring it into two bowls and looked up just as Steve came out.

“Thanks, Buck,” Steve said. “We appreciate your bowl.”

Bucky stared at him. Then he said flatly, “That’s it, I’m kicking you out.”

Steve was laughing, and he was laughing to be able to laugh about that, and the soup—well, the soup was pretty good.

“Are you sure,” Bucky said again.

“Bucky, it’s your bed. Here.” Steve gave him back the key. “So you know I won’t lock you up while you sleep.”

Bucky took the key with a wry look on his face. “You’re starting to know me a bit too well.”
“No,” Steve said, “just returning a favor.”

Bucky didn’t answer, but a faint smile touched his lips.

*

The couch wasn’t that bad. Sure, it was a bit lumpy, but Steve found a way to tuck his body in the hollows of the cushions, and it wasn’t the most uncomfortable place he’d slept in by far. He closed his eyes, let out a sigh, and fell asleep without even thinking about the unlocked bedroom door.

He slept through the night and woke up with the sun, which, considering they were in November, actually meant he’d slept quite late, for the first time in months. He sat up, blinking a bit in the pale light. There might not be a bed in here, but there was a window, and that was almost better.

Stretching, he got up and shuffled to the small kitchen. He could probably figure out how the coffee machine worked, so it’d be hot and ready when Bucky woke up. Also pancakes. They had batter left.

An hour later, Bucky still wasn’t up.

Steve ate half the pancakes and drank the coffee.

He turned on the computer, half-expecting it not to work, but the Internet was up and kicking. Steve clicked on a few links, then realized he’d need to print his resume and dug into Bucky’s closet for the antique printer he’d spotted there while cleaning up. Plugging it in, charging paper and checking for ink—the cartridges were miraculously still half-full—took him another couple of hours.

Bucky still wasn’t up. Steve was beginning to worry, but—he couldn’t just go in there. This was Bucky’s bedroom and he’d occupied it long enough.

He waited another half-hour just to be sure, then went and quietly knocked on the door. “Bucky?”

No answer.

“Bucky,” Steve said louder, with a sudden spike of fear. “Bucky?”

“Yeah,” was the muffled answer.

Before he realized this maybe hadn’t been an invitation, Steve pushed the door open.

Bucky was there, lying under the covers, curled up on his right side. His eyes were half-open and vacant, staring at the wall. They looked red and tired, like he’d been crying.

“M’sorry,” he said very quietly. “I can’t get up.”

He huffed, then slid a bit further beneath the covers. “I was doing good yesterday. I thought—”

He shut himself up. “I’m sorry,” he repeated tonelessly.

“It’s okay, Buck,” Steve said, with a weird mix of relief and heartache.

He stood there for a second, thinking. Then he said, “Hey. Can I sit with you?”
Bucky’s vacant eyes zeroed on him for a second. Then he looked away again. “M’not very good company.”

“That’s fine. I just wanted to draw a little.”

Bucky said nothing for what felt like a very long time.

“Okay,” he said in a blank voice. “Yeah.”

Steve went to get his notebook, then came back into the room. He climbed on the bed and sat next to him, with his back to the headrest. He propped his notebook on his knees and started drawing. Bucky was tense at first; but he relaxed bit by bit until he was completely limp again.

An hour went by. Steve’s pencil was the only thing troubling the silence—that, and the noises of New York on the other side of the wall. Distant sirens, cars roaring, bikes revving, all of it muffled like it was coming through a huge body of water.

“Going to the bathroom,” Steve said eventually—he’d drunk a bit too much coffee. It only took him a minute to go; when he came back and settled on the bed again, he almost didn’t realize Bucky was speaking up, because his voice was so hoarse and so quiet.

“What’re you drawing?”

Steve glanced at him, but Bucky was still on his side with his back to him. Steve went back to his drawings, throat tight.

“Just practicing faces.”

What he didn’t say was that it was all Bucky. He wished he could have helped himself, but—who was he kidding. He could already draw him from memory. He hadn’t felt such a compulsion to study someone in a very long time.

“I want to shave,” Bucky muttered. “I’ve been meaning to do it for fucking weeks. I just don’t—”

He abruptly shut up again. Steve kept drawing, waiting. Eventually, Bucky went on.

“Brock said. He called me an animal.” He swallowed. “I hate that.”

He sounded like he’d been called that before. Brock had said it with intent, like a word loaded with cruel meaning.

Steve flipped his pencil to correct a detail on his sketch.

“You’re not an animal,” he said, without taking his eyes off the paper. “Not sure about Brock, though.”

Bucky huffed through his nose, like the dejected ghost of a laugh.

“I can’t even fucking shave.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“Who fucking else’s,” Bucky said, and maybe he was trying to be aggressive but he really just sounded like he wanted to cry.

Steve put his pencil down.
“It wasn’t my mom’s fault that she got cancer,” he said, and his voice trembled just a little. “But she did anyway.”

Silence.

“She was a nurse,” Steve said. “She knew everything there was to know, they did everything they could. Didn’t amount to anything in the end.”

He braced his back against the wall. “It’s like… it’s like war. Suddenly you’re thrown into it and all that’s left to do is try to survive. And sometimes—sometimes you don’t make it.”

He wiped his eyes, then said, “You’re not any guiltier than she was. And you’re fighting as hard as she did. And it’s okay to lose battles, because you can’t expect to win them all.” He started drawing again. “Just gotta keep fighting.”

After that there was another very long silence.

“Your family,” Bucky said, then stopped again, like he didn’t have the energy to finish, or maybe he didn’t know how to phrase it.

“Never knew my dad,” Steve said. “All I got from him was my jacket.”

His pencil was moving again, but he wasn’t really drawing anything. “I have cousins on my mom’s side. The Hodges. But like I said—we didn’t really get along.”

This room was filled with silences.

Steve wanted to ask Bucky about his sister. About his parents. About his friends. About all the people who’d apparently forgotten him.

“But you like drawing?” Bucky asked, sounding drowsy.

Steve felt like Bucky was swimming underwater and only surfacing from time to time, so Steve could only hear disjointed fragments of what he was saying. He was okay with that. It didn’t have to make sense, as long as Bucky was allowing Steve to help keep him afloat.

“Yeah,” he said. “Wanted to make a career out of it, actually. Be a great painter or a comic book artist or both. Maybe in another life.”

He turned the page to start a new drawing. Bucky again, naturally. Temples, cheekbones, jaw. Scruff, hair, shadows.

As he drew, he moved his foot slightly to the right, as if to nudge Bucky’s huddled form, but he didn’t dare to go that far. He was stepping on the tense cover, though, so maybe Bucky felt it anyway.

They ended up spending the entire day in bed—Steve on top of the covers, drawing and drawing like he hadn’t let himself in a long time; Bucky periodically dozing off and waking up with a jolt. Steve asked him once if he was uncomfortable sleeping with someone else in the room, if he’d rather Steve go—but Bucky shook his head jerkily. So Steve stayed.
When the night fell, Steve shut his notebook and glanced at Bucky. “Hey,” he said quietly. “You awake?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, voice muffled by the covers.

“How about dinner?”

Bucky hadn’t eaten anything since the day before. He said nothing for a long minute. Then he turned on his back, looking at Steve for the first time since the morning.

His eyes were still red and almost glazed over with tiredness. He had the sheet’s fold printed on his cheek, like a spidery scar, and Steve had spent all day drawing him but he wanted to draw him all over again.

“Yeah,” Bucky repeated, quiet. “Guess that’d be a good thing.”

Steve smiled and got up. “C’mon.”

He grabbed Bucky’s hand and pulled him out of bed. “You have until the water boils.”

Bucky blinked slowly. “To do what?”

“Shave,” Steve said. “Go ahead. Don’t think, just go.”

*

Steve was cooking mac and cheese again—Bucky hadn’t bought a lot of fresh produce on his single grocery run, which made sense since it had been meant to last him several weeks. There was almost nothing left in the pantry or in the fridge, and Steve idly thought he should go buy more food soon.

A little while later, Steve looked up and called, “Buck? Mac and cheese’s ready.”

“Just a minute,” Bucky answered in a strained voice.

*Hey, something suddenly said in Steve’s head. Do you know you just told him to lock himself up in the bathroom with a razor?*

Steve shivered violently to chase that idea away.

It didn’t really work.

He turned round, ready to call Bucky again, then turned back—because honestly, he was being ridiculous—but then he had to turn again, because—it was stupid, but it was just that—just—

“Bucky,” he called, heart hammering. “Hey, you alright in there?”

He stepped closer, and closer, until he could peek inside the bedroom. The bathroom door was ajar. Steve slipped inside, reached out for the handle, then slowly pulled the door open.

And then he just stood and stared.

Bucky wasn’t exactly clean shaven. He was trying and failing to catch a few last hairs, which he
couldn’t quite get since he couldn’t get the skin taut with his other hand. But most of his scruff was gone—and his features were even more striking than Steve had imagined them. His cheekbones were sharp, and sharp also the line of his jaw, giving him a hungry, intense sort of look; but his eyes were soft, with thin crinkles at the corners. His lips were bitten red, almost obscene, his whole face looking naked somehow.

Steve was so busy looking at him that it took him a minute to realize Bucky was bare-chested—but then, oh, he did notice.

Bucky’s shirt had been thrown on the toilet seat, probably so he wouldn’t bleed on his clothes, because he must have cut himself a few times; there were vivid red drops in the sink. It was obvious that he’d been stronger and beefier before, and that his muscles had begun to fade due to a reclusive life and meager eating. But they were still densely packed under the skin, giving his every movement some kind of lithe, powerful grace.

He glanced at Steve, then went back to staring at himself in the mirror, apparently oblivious to how he looked and how Steve looked at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a clipped voice. “It’s just—with one arm, I can’t—”

Steve realized Bucky was close to tears with frustration, and that helped him to get his head back in the game. “You know, I—I think you’re good.”

Bucky looked at him hopefully, like he needed Steve’s seal of approval that he’d Done A Thing like a normal person. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Come eat.”

Bucky nodded, looking more exhausted than relieved, and put the razor down.

Steve felt himself panic a little when it looked like Bucky wanted to come out like this; he didn’t exactly block the door, but it was a close thing. “Maybe, um—maybe put your shirt back on though?”

“Fuck,” Bucky said, stepping back. “Sorry.”

For a minute, Steve couldn’t fathom why he’d apologize for being shirtless—then he realized it probably had to do with his arm. This had been the furthest thing from Steve’s mind. Hell, he hadn’t even looked at Bucky’s arm. Or, well, he’d looked at it, but it really hadn’t made a difference with anything.

Steve took a minute to hate his body, his hormones and his brain, then valiantly smiled at Bucky when he finally got out of the bathroom. Bucky didn’t see it; he was hunching his shoulders again, staring at his feet, and his long hair had closed like a curtain.

“Hey, I,” he began.

Steve waited. Bucky swallowed thickly, then managed, “Thanks. For—just…” He looked like he was trying and failing to push the words out.

Eventually, he just shrugged tiredly. “Wish there was some way I could pay you back.”

“Bucky,” Steve said. “You saved my life and you keep on saving it.”

Bucky said nothing.
“So—far as I’m concerned, I owe you a lifetime of mac and cheese.”

It really wasn’t about Steve making dinner and they both knew it. But neither of them had the words to speak of the rest.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Comments give me life :)
Bucky went to bed without really intending to sleep. He did feel tired, but not in a way sleep could solve. All he did was lie down, so at least he could tell himself he’d tried; then he got up again almost right away, and went into the bathroom. He shut the blinds, then flicked on the lights and stared at himself in the mirror.

Whatever he’d hoped to see, it wasn’t there. His scruff was gone, sure, but it hadn’t rejuvenated him. He could see the lines on his face and the dark rings under his eyes. It was like he was wearing a costume of his old self.

He slowly scraped the back of his hand over his cheek, smiling without mirth. He’d done a terrible job, really; he’d left patches of hair everywhere. He’d wanted to do it for so long, but even after getting the push he needed, it felt like he’d wasted it. Clean shaven or nothing, that should have been his goal, but he’d only managed half-way before giving up. As always.

Steve was more right than he knew. This was a war, and Bucky wasn’t winning it. Things had been going so well just the day before—he hadn’t had such a good episode in ages, and now…

Steve’s presence, Steve’s words, it helped—but because it helped, it made the hard parts harder. Bucky’s mind used to be just like the garbage piling up in his apartment: everything so messy he could pretty much ignore new loads of trash, let them sink into the general dump and keep on dredging through. Chewing shit was easier when you already had the taste in your mouth. But now Steve was here, and it was good—the first good thing in Bucky’s life since… forever, really. But the flickering light that was Steve was only casting the giant shadow of Bucky’s helplessness. Bucky didn’t know how to get better. He stood there, looking at himself in the mirror, and he knew there was something wrong with him, and he was unable to fix it.

Most of all, he loathed himself for feeling like this. There was no fucking reason he shouldn’t be able to do the dishes or go out for a walk. The only thing standing between him and a normal life seemed to be his own laziness and cowardice and mediocrity. And he knew, rationally, he knew
there was something more to it. But when he couldn’t see it, couldn’t touch it, it was hard to know it. Sometimes he thought he would almost have preferred having cancer. At least there would be some tangible proof that he wasn’t just making it up.

And then he hated himself even more for even thinking this. For fuck’s sake, Steve’s mom—

When he blinked, Bucky realized his eyes were burning. *Oh great,* he thought sourly, sitting on the toilet seat and grinding his palm onto his face, *here we go, crying alone in the bathroom again.* Shit, he wasn’t even sad, not in the common sense of the word; just tired, so tired, and so fed up with his own bullshit. He just wanted to go back to sleep—Jesus, he wasn’t asking for much. And yet, for some fucking reason, he couldn’t, and so he just sat there, and hated himself more. God, Steve would probably be appalled finding him in here, holding his little pity party.

Most of all, Bucky hated the thought he couldn’t do anything to help him. Himself, a lost cause, but Steve—if he could at least let Steve step on him to reach the sun, he would have done something good.

But the cold hard truth was that Steve needed money to become an artist, to get back into the world, and neither of them had it. Hell, even if Bucky had had the kind of cash his uncle was sitting on, there was no way Steve would accept it. So Bucky just stayed there, rubbing his eyes every few minutes, like the tired machine he was.

* A knock on the bedroom door jabbed his muscles awake, and he stood up, feeling stiff all over. Leaving the bathroom, he opened the bedroom door and daylight flooded in, making him blink. Steve was standing there, looking a little embarrassed. In the morning light his hair was a golden halo.

“Hey,” he said. “Sorry, I really need to use the bathroom.”

*I’m so glad you’re here,* Bucky thought desperately, *please don’t leave.* His hand clenched on the doorknob, but that was all he allowed. The less he showed of his creepy, tiresome self, the better.

“Sure, yeah,” he said, sidestepping. “No problem.”

Hey, at least he could move around today. Small blessings.

Steve locked himself into the bathroom, and Bucky walked into the living room to give him some privacy, because he wasn’t going to just stand here and listen to Steve doing—whatever he needed to be doing. Feeling tired already, Bucky went for the couch, then remembered Steve slept there now and aimed for the chair instead.

Steve’s notebook was on it. Bucky picked it up and set it on the desk, then sat in the chair with a sigh.

For a little while, nothing happened. Bucky sat listless, without thinking about anything in particular, vaguely hoping he’d fall asleep. Then the sound of the shower filled the background. Good. Steve was so damn skinny, a bit of extra warmth wouldn’t hurt.

Bucky realized he was still blearily staring at the notebook on the desk. Steve had said he wanted to become a professional. He must be pretty good, even if Bucky had only ever seen him draw the
Steven Universe characters.

How much was art school?

Too much. God, he’d been over this. Bucky sighed and pressed his head against the window, turning it to look down at the street below. Still black and white with snow, with the distant rumble of cars vibrating through the ice-cold glass. Without thinking, Bucky looked at Steve’s old spot under the awning. There was someone sitting there, not slouching—alert, back straight and hands open.

Bucky closed his eyes and thumped his head against the glass, once. Fucking Rumlow.

Bucky wasn’t even mad at him, really. Rumlow was a nasty son of a bitch, but—he’d been screwed over like everyone else overseas. A man had died on top of him. Bled on him for hours before he could be moved. That would have fucked up anyone.

Pierce, though—he must know exactly what he was doing, telling Rumlow where Bucky lived. Rumlow fixating on Bucky wasn’t a secret, and it was also one of the reasons Bucky had stopped going to the VA. Bucky knew he was paranoid, but he also knew his uncle. Pierce’s plan relied precisely on Bucky’s paranoia. He must have thought with Rumlow around, Bucky wouldn’t be content just calling the cops and would want to move altogether, liberating Pierce from his duty to help his family—which, for him, just meant wasting his Brooklyn apartment on a gay jobless cripple who wasn’t even related to him by blood. He’d offered, and he couldn’t decently back out now; but if Bucky himself wanted to move out, if Bucky himself started refusing his help, then no one could accuse Pierce of anything.

Bucky wasn’t going to call the cops, but he also wasn’t going to move. Like he’d told Steve, Rumlow scared him less than a telephone conversation.

The bedroom door opened.

“I’m going,” Steve said. “Hope you don’t mind—I used your printer for my resumes.”

Bucky looked away from the window. “Course not,” he said automatically. “So you’re looking for a job?”

“Yeah. McDonalds or something.” Steve grimaced a smile. “Gotta get out there if I wanna be able to pay you back one day.”

Bucky didn’t say anything, because he knew it would be useless; but the thought was clear in his mind. Over my dead fucking body. And then he smiled to himself, just a half-smile, because, hey, look at that. A reason to stay alive.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Steve threatened.

Hopefully not all of it. Bucky shook his long hair, then smiled a bit more fully. “Just calculating my interest rates over here.”

Steve snorted a laugh, then slipped on his brightly-colored jacket and unlocked the front door.

“Steve,” Bucky said quietly. “Be careful. Rumlow’s down there.”

Steve froze.

Then he shrugged his thin shoulders and decisively opened the door. “He doesn’t know me. I’ll be fine.”
“I know,” Bucky said, even lower. “Just… don’t engage.”

Steve grinned at him. “Promise.” And then he was gone.

Bucky ate a single protein bar for lunch. That was fine. Steve had fed him regularly and somewhat plentifully in the past days. They’d eat for real together when he came back.

Bucky was looking forward to it—so much he hated himself again. This wasn’t fair to Steve, this much dependency. Steve shouldn’t even be here helping Bucky’s sorry ass in the first place. He should have friends and family and he should be going to fucking art school.

Bucky glanced at the notebook again.

Then, just like when he’d called 911, he suddenly found himself moving—getting up and walking to the computer before he knew what he was doing.

He booted it up and stared at the screen as it blinked out of sleep. It took a while—the thing was so ancient it was a miracle it still worked, really. Eventually, the desktop came on and Bucky opened the navigator. Typing one-handed was more frustrating than he remembered, because he couldn’t help trying to use his left hand, only to be reminded again and again that hello, it wasn’t there anymore. Eventually, he managed to type the final p of *scholarship* and pressed enter.

It’s dumb*, he thought as the terribly slow network ground its way through metric tons of data, like a rheumatic librarian huffing and puffing along the shelves of a gigantic library. *Steve probably thought of that already.*

Eventually, a list of art scholarships around the world blinked onscreen, and Bucky grabbed the mouse, laboriously clicking through link after link. Most of the pages, he found, had been made before the apogee of new technologies, and were therefore terribly bothersome to read. There were lots of dead links; and when the dreaded 404 finally failed to appear, the actual info wasn’t much better.


In another life, Bucky had competed for a full-ride athletic scholarship of nine thousand dollars. He’d lost, which hadn’t bothered him too much—he knew he didn’t really need the money, not as badly as other contestants did. Just would have been a nice help.

But five hundred? The fuck were you gonna do with five hundred dollars? Buy some pencils and a lollipop?

Sometimes other scholarships went up to a thousand. Sometimes fifteen hundred. But it still wasn’t gonna do much good. The only worthwhile ones Bucky found were Scottish and British ones, ten thousand pounds and twenty thousand pounds, respectively.

Yeah, Steve must have thought of that. And must have realized, like Bucky did now, that it was a dead end.

Bucky clicked shut the tabs one by one—he’d opened nearly fifteen of them. The last one was so unreadable he’d just skimmed it, but he forced himself to read it whole this time, just in case. *Art…*
He blinked, frowned. Jesus Christ, he hoped this school wasn’t training any graphic designers. Or at the very least that none of them had worked on the website. Art Renewal Center.

Bucky blinked again, then drew his chair closer. Part of the Maria Stark foundation, ARC usually awards 30 000 $ a year to aspiring young artists who wish to paint and/or sculpt in the realist tradition.

He clicked on the link and skimmed through the list of ARC-approved schools—which apparently received the honorary title of “Mansions”—scattered all around the world. His hand trembled. There was a Mansion in New York.

Going back, he scrolled down the page to take a look at the requirements. Applicants should be intent on becoming career artists. He swallowed, trying hard not to get his hopes up, and scrolled some more. This competition is not open to students inspired by abstract, conceptualist or non-traditional forms of construction.

Bucky looked at Steve’s notebook.

He really shouldn’t do this. Steve’s actions had made it clear he didn’t want Bucky to flip through his work; and even though he’d left his notebook lying around, it only meant he was trying to trust Bucky not to open it. Bucky wasn’t blind. He knew Steve was still afraid of him and working hard to be a little more relaxed around the apartment.

But—he had a really good reason. It wasn’t curiosity; he didn’t want to do it. But there was nothing else to do.

Bucky let go of the mouse and slowly pulled the notebook closer, by the tip of his fingers, as though he was afraid it was going to bite him. He thought for a minute. Should he open it at random? Or look at the first page?

At random it is. Bucky delicately opened it.

It was a drawing of a smiling woman, propped up in her hospital bed by several fluffy pillows, with a nasal cannula and IV bags hanging over her head like oddly-shaped balloons. She looked terribly small and yet she lit up the whole room, pushing darkness back to the edges of the page, like it was looming there waiting for her to weaken.

Bucky abruptly closed the notebook.

He shouldn’t have seen this.

Maybe it was lucky he was used to self-disgust. Chewing on it, he managed to reopen his burning eyes, push the notebook back into place, and look at the screen again. Steve was a traditional artist alright. Also, he was incredibly talented. Bucky felt like he’d met Steve’s mom somewhat; like he’d peeked not at a drawing, but at an imprint of her soul. He only felt more awful for it.

If it meant Steve could get the scholarship, though, Bucky’s transgression would have been worth it. Swallowing again—his throat was so dry—he clicked on the Procedure link.

Students should download the application form and complete it in its entirety. Students who wish to apply are asked to send not less than 10 and no more than 15 images in a jpeg format of their best work. A minimum of three letters of recommendation is required, preferably from the master painter with whom you are currently studying. Students must include a biography or a CV. Students must include a 250 word-essay: ‘My Long-term Educational and Career Goals.’ Applications must be sent by the end of—
So Bucky was having an anxiety attack.

He had the presence of mind to let go of the mouse so he wouldn’t crush it in his hand, and grab the desk’s edge instead. His heart was hammering in his ears, his vision was tunneling, and his throat felt too tight to breathe.

He pushed back the chair and let himself fall to the floor, curling in on himself and grabbing his own hair hard. The sharp pain gave him something to hang onto. His heart was still trying to beat out of his chest—he felt it thumping like a separate entity, a creature trying to get out of his ribcage, and he must be having a heart attack or heart failure or some kind of significant thing; his heart couldn’t possibly beat so hard and so fast for so long, to the point that he was having chest pains, like it was bruising him from the inside. Bucky curled tighter, pulled harder on his hair, and desperately tried to breathe.

Breathe. Come on, in… It hurt, like it was building pressure. And out. A shuddering wisp of air escaped his lips. In—and out. He imagined Steve holding his hand, saying Hey, Bucky, and the tightness around his chest eased a little.

It took him twenty minutes, maybe more, before he finally felt able to uncurl.

In fact, looking up at the clock, he saw it had been exactly twenty-nine minutes. Not thirty; twenty-nine.

We appreciate your call, Bucky thought—and he didn’t quite smile, but he felt the possibility of it and it was something already.

After another trembling minute, he exhaled, took a deep breath, and pulled himself up. His legs didn’t feel all that steady, so he dragged the chair closer and let himself fall into it. Yet another minute to breathe, then he worked his jaw and tugged himself close to the desk again, like a man going into battle.

Alright. He had to do this step by step. Solve one problem before moving on to the next.

First in line was the application form. Bucky took a deep breath, then opened it.

It wasn’t that bad, he told himself. Name in full. Personal website. Employment information. All of that would be in Steve’s resume, which must be somewhere on Bucky’s computer since he’d printed it just the day before. As for the mailing address and phone, Bucky could just put his own. Then there was List of works. Bucky winced. That was the 10 to 15 required samples of Steve’s drawings. It would be unpleasant but not impossible to solve; Bucky would just have to violate Steve’s intimacy a bit more. But hey, he’d already seen the portrait of his late mother, so it probably couldn’t get any worse.

Not for a moment did it occur to Bucky to simply tell Steve about what he was doing. If he did that, Steve would just stare at him and tell him the whole attempt was ridiculous—which it was. Obviously, it was a lost battle, but Bucky's denial could sustain itself for a little while longer. He'd probably get discouraged and stop in a minute, anyway. All in all, if someone in this apartment was gonna stress himself out over a meaningless endeavor without a real chance of success, Bucky would rather it be him. He was already doing it every day, so what the hell.

Bucky exhaled, then kept on reading. The drawing samples were accessible, the 250-word essay he could just write himself. The letters of recommendation were his real problem. At least three of them. And those he couldn’t just make up—he was pretty sure forging letters would not be doing Steve a great service…
Alright, alright, stop. He’d said one thing at a time and he had to stick to it. He needed information he’d only get from Steve’s resume, which was possibly still in his computer since Steve had printed it just the day before. In fact—if he had Steve’s resume he could know to which high school he’d gone; so then he could… call… his teacher…

Yeah, what a great plan with no glaringly visible flaw.

Jesus Christ. Bucky gritted his teeth, then opened a text file and made a list.

Application form (need Steve's resume)

Three letters of recommendation (need Steve's resume)

Biography or resume (need Steve's fucking resume)

10 to 15 images (need Steve's notebook)

250-word essay (need inspiration)

Okay. Okay.

Great.

Fuck.

* *

Bucky started with the innocuous things, like checking whether his printer also allowed him to scan stuff (it did) and whether Steve’s resume was still on his computer (it was).

He didn’t actually start anything else. He didn’t have the energy. Hey, he’d spent his entire afternoon looking for scholarships and having crippling anxiety attacks; lots of work all in all, and also it was getting dark. Steve would be home soon.

Don’t say ‘home’. Moron.

He went to sit on the chair by the window, and it was a physical relief to get away from the computer. He knew postponing this meant it’d probably never get done. Which didn’t really come as a surprise.

* *

Around 8pm, there was a knock on the door. Bucky looked up from his prone position on the chair, instantly alert. Steve never knocked, not without opening the door at the same time.
But then his voice came through. “Bucky? You in there?”

Bucky got up and crossed the room. “Yeah,” he said. “What’s wrong? Is it locked?” He went to open the door, but the knob wouldn’t turn.

“No—wait,” Steve said.

Without thinking, Bucky tried again to open the door. “Steve? What’s going on?”

The doorknob still wouldn’t turn. His heart rate was going up. This was stupid. He wasn’t locked in, it was obviously just Steve blocking the door, but—

“Blood,” Steve said with a wince in his voice. “Uh, kind of a lot.”

Bucky blinked, thrown out of his circle of thoughts for once.

“Bucky?” Steve asked, unsure.

“Yeah. No, that’s okay,” Bucky said, heart calming down. “Thanks for the warning. I’m opening the door now.”

He did, and the door opened, and the shadow of the hallway receded from Steve’s face.

“Shit,” Bucky said, softly but with a lot of feeling.

“I’m fine,” Steve answered at once, slipping past him to get inside. “Not as bad as it looks.”

Bucky closed the door, looking at him. Steve was shrugging off his backpack with jerky movements and fumbling with the zipper of his jacket. His face really did look awful. No way he’d done that to himself—all the doors and the stairs in the world wouldn’t have been enough.

Shuffling closer, Bucky reached out. “Can I?”

Steve put down his backpack and blinked as he straightened up. “Uh,” he said. “Sure—”

When Bucky seized his chin, he flinched into complete stillness. Bucky made him angle his face towards the light, very slowly. His left eye was swollen shut. His lips were split, top and bottom. His cheekbones had changed color; there was blood crusting under his nose.

“Dizziness?” Bucky asked.

Steve shook his head. Probably no concussion, then. Bucky let go, then slipped his hand beneath Steve’s open jacket—but then Steve reared backwards.

“What are you doing?” he said, holding his jacket tightly around himself.

Bucky blinked, hand still outstretched. “…Checking your ribs.”

Steve stood still for a beat, then released his grip on his jacket. “Oh,” he said. “Oh, right.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said. “I didn’t think…”

His voice trailed off. For a second, he felt so sharply powerless he couldn’t move or speak. All he could do was stand there, like he’d stood in the bathroom looking at himself, wishing he was different, wishing he was someone else. More than anything, he wanted Steve to feel safe; but he had no idea how to behave to make it happen—what to say, what to do to convince him he’d never hurt him.
“It’s fine,” Steve said. “You don’t… I mean, I’m fine. I would know if I wasn’t.”

Right. His mother was a nurse. Bucky took a deep breath and forced his childish disappointment down, because this wasn’t about him.

“What happened?” he finally asked.

Steve gave a wry little shrug and said, “Someone beat me up,” like it really wasn’t a big deal. He took off his jacket and folded it on the couch. “I’m gonna go wash up a bit.”

Bucky blinked, then followed Steve to the bathroom. Steve was definitely acting weird. “Steve, wait. Who was it? Just—I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said, slipping into the bedroom and opening Bucky’s pharmacy. “Don’t worry.”

Bucky recognized what he was trying to hide—it was the same shameful feeling which seized Bucky himself, whenever he was berating himself for being so weak. Steve wished he could have been stronger. Steve wished he could have kicked the world’s ass.

But who in the world would be enough of an asshole to do this to him—he’d been out looking for a job, for fuck’s sake—

But Bucky knew the answer already, didn’t he.

“It was Rumlow,” he said. “Wasn’t it?”

“No,” Steve said, but he was making too big of a show looking for supplies to tend to his wounds. Bucky rubbed his left arm. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“It wasn’t him,” Steve repeated, pouring disinfectant on a cotton disk with hands shaking with anger. There was a pause, then he admitted reluctantly, “He was sort of involved.”

He started wiping off the blood, rubbing angrily at his face. Suddenly, Bucky was reminded his presence made Steve uneasy, and he stepped out of the bathroom to lean against the bedroom wall, out of sight. He would have gone back to the living room altogether, but he desperately needed to understand what had happened.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “How could he know you—”

“It was my jacket,” Steve said tightly. “I’d left it on your couch last time. He recognized it.”

Of course. His big, bright, colorful jacket with a goddamn target painted in the back. Bucky clenched his hand into a tight fist. Rumlow wanted everyone to feel like he did. Seeing Steve dropping resumes, looking for a job—it must have driven him crazy with the need to destroy those flickers of hope. Knowing he’d probably hurt Bucky through Steve was just an added bonus.

“What did he do?” Bucky asked again, low.

“Nothing,” Steve insisted. “He just said he was gonna show me something. We went to some—”

“You followed him?”

“He grabbed me, alright?” Steve spat, sounding outraged that Bucky had made him say it. “There was no one around and he grabbed me, and then he took me into some kind of old building, with people lying around.”
Junkies, Bucky thought. Rumlow had dragged Steve into a fucking junkies hideout.

“And he started just rooting through their pockets and taking everything he found.” By the sound of it, Steve was scraping at something, possibly scrubbing blood out of his hairline. “They didn’t even know he was there, and he kept on saying how that was the natural order, and all that.”

Bucky stared at the floor for a while, frowning. Then he looked up and over his shoulder, though he couldn’t see inside the bathroom from this angle, just the yellow light coming out the door.

“And?”

“And nothing,” Steve said sharply.

Bucky paused.

“Steve,” he said slowly. “Did you start a fight with him.”

It was like Steve had waited for him to scold him for this, from the moment he’d walked into the apartment with his face bashed in. “He was taking their stuff,” he said. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Literally anything else,” Bucky said in disbelief.

“Yeah, well, guess what,” Steve answered, “you’re not my fucking m—”

He abruptly shut up.

Bucky heard him noisily catch his breath. He just stood there, leaning against the wall, feeling terribly useless.

He wasn’t really surprised that Steve would endanger his life so recklessly. He knew, from experience, that it was much easier to risk everything when you didn’t have anything to lose. And Steve certainly believed he didn’t.

Bucky would have liked to be able to tell Steve his mother wasn’t dead and his cousins hadn’t cast him away. He would have liked to be able to hold Steve, to bring him what little comfort he could. He would have liked to be able to tell Steve everything would turn out fine in the end.

“Oh, go ahead,” Steve said dejectedly.

His voice sounded toneless against the echoing bathroom tiles. “Yell at me if you want.”

He sounded so much like a petulant teenager, it wasn’t hard to guess he’d had this conversation countless times before, defending his right to fight when people insisted he was too small and too reckless. Bucky turned his head towards the open door again, wishing he could see Steve, see the look on his face.

“I’m not gonna yell at you,” he said.

“Why not?” Steve said sharply. “I’m always spewing bullshit to you about fighting wars, and I can’t even win my own battles.”

His voice was unsteady, and Bucky really shouldn’t have started smiling, but there he was. “The hell you talking about,” he said. “You won.”

Steve paused.
“What?” he asked eventually, unsure.

“You proved Rumlow wrong,” Bucky said, eyes closed. “You went against his natural order bullshit. You tried to help those guys, when they weren’t even conscious to see it. Just by starting that fight, you won it.”

There was a long silence.

Eventually, Bucky heard shuffling feet. Reopening his eyes, he saw Steve’s shadow stretched in the rectangle of light out of the bathroom. Bucky looked up to find him at the door, staring at him.

He didn’t look like he was about to explode anymore. In fact, he looked a little ashamed of himself.

“What are you standing here?” he asked meekly.

Bucky shrugged. They both knew why; no point in saying it out loud.

But then Steve reached out and took Bucky’s hand to press it against his ribs, where Bucky had tried to touch him earlier.

Bucky just stared at him, eyes wide.

“I trust you,” Steve said, bruised but standing strong, like a fierce little tree in a battering storm. His heart was pounding against Bucky’s fingers. “There’s… stuff going on with me, that’s hard to talk about. But I do trust you. I’m sorry I’m so awful at showing it.”

It felt strange to hear it, like the words themselves were warm and glowing. Bucky didn’t even know he could still feel like this. Actually, he wasn’t even sure he’d ever felt like this before. His head was spinning a little—it was so unexpectedly intimate, to have his hand over someone’s heart like that. Or maybe it was all just Steve.

“And it wasn’t right snapping at you,” Steve went on with difficulty. “I’m just so used to people telling me it’s stupid to—”

“Lemme stop you right here,” Bucky said, straightening up, which brought them closer together. “It was stupid fighting Rumlow.”

Steve blinked. Bucky smiled a bit.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s really, really good to know there are idiots like you.” He shrugged. “But it was still fucking stupid.”

“Hey,” Steve said, but his affronted look was a bit undermined by the fact that he was still holding Bucky’s hand against his side.

There was a moment of them standing there, looking at each other. Bucky could still feel Steve’s heartbeat against his palm, a bit more steady now. More than ever, he felt the need to just close the distance between them and wrap Steve in his arms.

He wasn’t dumb enough to think of actually doing it; but right this moment he knew he was going to get Steve into fucking art school, or die trying.

“I’ll… make dinner or something,” he said eventually, because Steve was still dripping blood on the tiles and Bucky couldn’t stare at him forever.
“Okay,” Steve said. He didn’t let go of his hand right away.

Bucky managed to convince Steve to sleep in the bed that night—mostly by insisting he was going to be on the computer till dawn, anyway. If it had just been about the state he was in, Steve would have never agreed, stubborn little shit that he was.

Knowing he was safe and sleeping in Bucky’s bed brought Bucky more rest than if he’d been sleeping himself. Sitting at the computer, Bucky got out his phone and, for the first time in weeks, read his latest messages. Rumlow, of course.

*saw your little protege earlier. not sure he’ll make it home*

Bucky felt nothing, if a bit of relief at not having seen this before Steve got back. He should have called the cops on Rumlow ages ago, but the acute knowledge that this could have been him—that this might still be him, someday—had kept him from doing anything. Now that Steve was at risk too, though, he didn’t know anymore.

One thing at a time. Taking a deep breath, he went back to the ARC website, then clicked on the little download icon.

He waited for the printer to sputter out the application form, then opened Steve’s resume on the computer and uncapped a pen with his teeth.

The first thing he saw on the resume was that Steve’s middle name wasn’t mentioned. Bucky wasn’t sure whether it really mattered, but he’d rather be safe when he could. Maybe he could find a way to ask him. He just put down Rogers, Steve for now, then wrote down his own phone number, address and email.

He realized that meant he’d have to start checking his emails again.

He exhaled, then laboriously filled the rest of the form. Employment information, educational information, additional information. It took him nearly two hours, mainly because he felt compelled to double check and triple check everything he wrote down.

Fuck, he’d forgotten how utterly exhausting paperwork was. His skin was crawling just thinking of everything else he had to do. But then he remembered Steve’s bruised face, Steve’s furious look, what was I supposed to do?

If Steve could stand and fight in the face of Rumlow’s heinous crap, even though he’d lost everything and had no cause for hope—then Bucky could fill out a fucking form.

Reading the resume again, he realized Steve did have a personal website. For a hopeful minute, Bucky thought he could be saved from having to open Steve’s notebook again. But when the page finally charged, Bucky only had to scroll for a few minutes through Steve’s posts to realize it wouldn’t do—Steve had only posted quick sketches, most of them fanwork. Bucky knew next to nothing about art, but everything about Steve’s work looked amazing to him—the proportions and expressions were flawless, the characters’ positions dynamic and lively, the shadowing and colors always on point. But even he realized this wasn’t the type of samples ARC expected. They wanted something more like what Bucky had seen in Steve’s notebook—the simple brutality of Steve’s smiling mother in her hospital bed.
There were a few text posts, too. Apparently, Steve had tried to ask for help from his followers. But he’d been as timid about it—or as reluctant—as he’d been begging for money on the actual street, and obviously, they hadn’t saved him.

Bucky swallowed and closed the website. He had to look into Steve’s notebook. There was no point being selfish about this. If he could get Steve an ARC scholarship, even hurting him would have been worth it. And maybe Steve would even forgive him eventually.

_Not a chance_, hissed a mocking voice in his mind, sounding like Rumlow’s. _You already know it. He doesn’t have enough references. He doesn’t have letters of recommendation. He doesn’t have proper, clean work to sample. You know it’s gonna fail and that’s why you won’t talk to him about it._

Bucky already knew all that, so actually hearing it in his head didn’t change anything. And hey, he had the resume, and he’d filled out the application form. Two out of five. He opened a blank text file, wrote _My Long-term Educational and Career Goals_ on top, then settled in his chair to stare at the flickering cursor.

Almost four in the morning and the page was still blank.

Bucky sighed, rubbing his face. He’d started typing a thousand embryos of sentences which had all aborted almost immediately. _For my future I’d like. My career goals are. What I envision for myself is._ He’d tried looking for inspiration, but he just wasn’t cut out for this type of thing. He’d stopped envisioning his own future long ago.

_To tell you the truth_, he typed blearily.

He deleted it. Then inched his chair closer, and started again.

_To tell you the truth, I am not Steve Rogers. Steve Rogers has no idea I am doing this. Steve Rogers is currently homeless, without a family, and dead set on not bleeding on anyone._

_The address, phone and email are mine, by the way. I am a twenty-six-year-old, one-armed veteran, and if you’ll pardon my language this letter is a bitch to type. At first I tried pretending I was Steve talking to you about his hopes for the future, but I don’t think he’s got many of those. You’ll notice he doesn’t have a lot of references, which must be why he didn’t apply himself. He is probably the last person you’d accept in your school._

_On your website it says the scholarship is based on merit, but need is also taken into consideration. Steve has both merit and need, as well as a dream he probably abandoned. I cannot support him forever, if only because I know he won’t let me. But trust me when I tell you I wouldn’t send this letter if I didn’t think he was worth it. I will not talk to you about his talent. You’ll see for yourself._

_I don’t ask that you give him any kind of special treatment. I only ask that you consider him the way you consider everyone else. I’ll admit my approach is an unconventional one, but if you really do care about art for art’s sake like you claim to, this shouldn’t be a problem._

Bucky rubbed his eyes, then selected his essay—and blinked a little. The bottom left corner told
him it was precisely two hundred and fifty words.

How about that, he thought. Then he added a few courtesy formulas, signed it James Buchanan Barnes, and clicked save.

The pale winter sun was coming up, and Bucky was still staring at the notebook peeking out of Steve’s backpack.

It had been a long, long night, and he really didn’t want to open this fucking bag. He’d tried to push back this moment for as long as possible, as if a miracle might prevent it somehow from happening. But the only other thing left he needed to do was to call Steve’s high school in the very faint hope to obtain a letter of recommendation, which was impossible right now—Bucky hadn’t prepared himself mentally for it, and it was way too early in the morning anyway. But if he kept doing nothing, it would soon become too risky to scan Steve’s drawings, because Steve always got up early and might catch him doing it.

Getting up, he walked to the window and peered down. No Rumlow yet, though Bucky had no doubt he’d show up later. He still hadn’t decided what to do about that, either.

He went back to the desk. He had to do at least one of these things. Choosing what to do about Rumlow was impossible. Betraying Steve’s trust, on the other hand, was just a gesture away.

Oh, fuck you, Barnes. If really he was doing this, then he had to stop whining and just fucking do it. He pulled out the notebook and set it on his lap. The ARC foundation needed at least ten drawings. Bucky knew right away the portrait of Steve’s mother would feature among them. He put it on his list as his number one, then opened the notebook.

First were a few sketches, portraits, a lot of them nude, some obviously from art class. Bucky slowly flipped his way through. At the turn of a page came the portrait of a girl staring right at him, with something hard and outraged in her eyes. She looked a lot like Steve. Maybe a cousin. She made Bucky feel uncomfortable, like she was seeing right through him, like she knew he shouldn’t be looking at her.

She became number two on the list.

Number three, four and five were three graceful dancing nudes which Steve had obviously spent a lot of time on—two men and a woman, looking like they could have jumped right out of the page. Bucky marked them down, then kept going. Next was Steve’s mother, which he’d already listed; turning the page, Bucky then came across a series of portraits done from a weird angle—it took him a second to realize this was how the world must look to Steve when he was sitting on the street. Bucky made them number six to eight. After those came the Steven Universe characters Steve had drawn a few days ago. Bucky smiled a little, but didn’t mark them down and turned the page.

The next portrait was him.

Bucky’s brain sort of froze. He stared at the drawing for a minute, like he expected it to turn into someone else. But no. It was him, arm and all, asleep in the chair by the window. Steve had even written his name at the bottom of the page. Bucky.
Bucky’s hand was shaking a little when he turned the page.

Him again.

A dozen little sketches from different angles, smiling or frowning or staring into space. He turned the next page. Then the next, then the next. It was all him.

Bucky’s chest was getting tight and there was a buzzing in his ears, which was enough of a warning sign. He closed the notebook and looked up at the ceiling, breathing deeply, a bit shakily. *Calm down.*

He just—he didn’t understand why Steve would draw him. Not even just once; dozens of times. It made no sense. Why would anyone draw him?

Maybe it was just because Bucky was the only other person around, but somehow Bucky felt this wasn’t enough of an explanation. His heart was still a little fast. He wasn’t even sure how he felt about this, really, beyond the automatic anxiety of his stupid, maladapted mind. Right this moment, though, the imminence of an attack forbade him to keep flipping through the notebook, which was something of a guilty relief.

His thoughts were still swimming in distant shock as he carefully put the notebook back into place down Steve’s backpack; it pushed out a rectangle of plastic, which he picked up without thinking. Steve’s driving license. Vaguely reminiscing he still needed to know his full name, Bucky turned it over to get a look.

Only the picture wasn’t Steve, but a mix between him and the girl in his notebook. Her face, but his haircut. Her eyes, and his eyes.

Their name. *Stephanie Grace Rogers.*

---

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Comments make me unreasonably happy. :D

Spoiler warning: Bucky finds out Steve is trans, without Steve's knowledge.

(If some of you are into classic art, you might know that ARC schools are a real thing. The name cracked me up, because ARC? ARC reactor? Tony Stark? The Maria Stark Foundation? No. It's just me. Alright.)
Anyway, there's a lot of artistic licence going on here, of course, but two things are exact in this chapter: 1) the scholarship and its application procedure, and 2) how fucking ugly the website is.)

UPDATE: HOLY SHIT, GUYS, ARC CHANGED THEIR WEBSITE. it's beautiful now ;;
Steve woke up sore and aching. His eye was throbbing and almost fully shut, and his entire face felt like an old watermelon. Well, he couldn’t say he’d never gotten worse, but it still wasn’t the greatest feeling in the world.

Sitting up cautiously, he noticed a glass of water and a pain pill on the nightstand. Only the week before, he would have never taken anything left for him while he wasn’t conscious, much less drugs. But now, he had no problem swallowing the pill and downing the glass of water, and something inside him ached with gratitude.

It made him all the more embarrassed of the way he’d reacted when Bucky had touched him. Stupidly, Steve had been afraid he’d… what? Feel a softness which wasn’t there anymore? Feel scars he didn’t have? He’d been a weird, cynical sort of lucky on that one—chest so flat already that T had made it fade enough to his liking. He still had a very faint layer of breast tissue, but nothing that warranted top surgery—at least not to him.

His dysphoria had always been pretty minor, all things considered. He wanted to look more like a boy so people would treat him like a boy, since they couldn’t figure out by themselves it was what he was. So he very much needed the hormones. But after his mom had helped him look through his options for bottom surgery, he’d realized none of it was appealing to him. He didn’t feel the need to change his body. Just the way people saw him.

So really, there had been nothing for Bucky to find.

And it made Steve uneasy, because—he wanted Bucky to know. It just didn’t seem fair to keep being jumpy over a detail he was pretty sure, now, wouldn’t matter to a person who kept saving his life. But Steve had no idea how to bring it up.

Right now, sitting in Bucky’s bed, he was just relieved to be back here in one piece. He was lucky to be so small, in a way; no one considered him a serious threat, which meant no one ever took the time to finish him off. The moment Steve had gone down for good, Rumlow had turned away, leaving him to bleed in the dirt. Coming home to Bucky had been tough, but not the toughest thing Steve had ever done. He knew someone was waiting for him. So it had been manageable, really, to get up and drag his bones along the streets. Someone was waiting for him. Someone cared for him. Someone knew him.

Steve looked down his empty glass. Truth be told, his feelings had long outgrown themselves into a tangled knot in his chest, some kind of painful fondness he couldn’t soothe. Maybe that was
why he’d held Bucky’s hand against his side, in the hope that he’d reach inside and find out.

“Hey,” Steve said, pushing the bedroom door open. “You’re awake. I was thinking I could…”

Bucky didn’t answer. He was sitting on the couch and staring at the opposite wall, eyes wide.

“Bucky?”

Bucky looked at him as though he’d been speaking Klingon. Steve was almost tempted to glance over his shoulder, see if there was someone behind him or something.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

Bucky opened his mouth, then paused, then nodded. “Yeah,” he said, looking only slightly less baffled. “Hi. Sorry.”

“S’okay,” Steve said cautiously. “D’you want breakfast?”

Bucky was back to staring at him.

“Bucky?”

Bucky startled. “Yeah, I’m,” he swallowed. “No.”

“No… breakfast?” Steve said, confused.

Bucky shook his head, then nodded, then shook his head again. “Nope. Yeah. No breakfast.”

Steve still wasn’t sure what was going on. “Are you alright?”

Again, Bucky shook his head, as though trying to clear it. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just. Having a weird day.”

He exhaled and visibly made an effort to sound more like himself. “How’s your face?”

“Okay now,” Steve said. “Thank you for the painkillers.”

Bucky was chewing his lip now, and his hand was fidgeting a little on his lap, twisting the seams of his pants. Steve recognized this pattern easily now; he wanted to say something but didn’t know how to phrase it, or maybe was afraid to do so.

“I did lose it in Iraq,” he blurted.

Steve froze.

“The—the arm, I mean,” Bucky stammered on. “We—we were trapped under our vehicle for several hours and maybe if rescue had gotten to us earlier they could have saved it but—they couldn’t.”

He kept picking at his pants. “Rumlow was there, with me—he, he got stuck under a dead guy—Thornton, he got stuck under Thornton. It fucked him up. I mean—it fucked us all up but it fucked
“Bucky, wh—”

“I was thinking you should know,” Bucky said too quickly, paling fast like he was getting ready to puke, “you should know stuff about me. I know all this stuff about you and you don’t know anything about me and it shouldn’t—”

“Bucky,” Steve said.

Bucky shut up.

“I don’t need to know more about you—I mean, I’d like to,” Steve said, floundering, “but—but not if you’re gonna freak out about it. I don’t want to—I just want to hear what you want to tell me. Okay?”

Swallowing, Bucky nodded, then exhaled a shuddery breath.

“Besides, you don’t know that much about me. It’s okay, Buck, it’s fine—really.”

Bucky said nothing, still picking at his pants. He’d begun to tear an actual hole there.

Steve felt useless. There was definitely something weird going on here, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what.

“It’s okay,” he repeated, trying to put into words what he’d felt waking up, the sentiment of being in a place that wanted to be home. “There’s nothing you need to do to make me feel safe. I already do.”

Bucky let out another shaky breath and nodded again. “Yeah,” he said, “okay,” but he didn’t look really convinced.

* *

This was only the beginning of the oddest, most frustrating week Steve had ever been through.

That first day, they ended up watching cartoons, but it was nothing like last time. Steve could tell Bucky wasn’t focusing on the screen—he was sitting still, shoulders tense, lips bitten red. Steve watched a few episodes of Adventure Time for the sake of it, then said he was going to clean up a bit. Bucky didn’t object, and in fact maybe even looked relieved.

The thing was, there wasn’t much left to do, even in the bedroom. Bucky, as it turned out, did not own a vacuum cleaner, and they couldn’t afford to buy one; in those circumstances, the apartment was as clean and tidy as it could get—though still not very homey. Obviously, Bucky had brought nothing of his when he’d moved in, and the furniture was all his uncle’s. Steve straightened out the books on the shelves, picked up a few clothes and folded them on a chair, and then he was done.

Puzzled, he sat on the bed. He could hear the chatter of the TV in the background, coming from the other room.

“Hey,” he called uncertainly after a while. “I was thinking of going for groceries?”
At first, there was no answer. Then Bucky’s clipped voice came through the door. “Yeah—I don’t think Rumlow’s around.”

Steve got up and came back into the living room. Bucky was standing by the window, paying absolutely no attention to the TV. He didn’t move at all while Steve put on his jacket and his scarf.

Steve was wracking his brain trying to come up with something to say. All he found was, “You want anything in particular? From—from the store?”

Bucky slowly turned away from the window, like he had trouble detaching from it, and shuffled back towards the couch, without looking up. “No,” he mumbled. “Nothing—nothing in particular.” He sat on the cushions and started picking at his clothes again.

“Well,” Steve said. “If you’re sure.”

Bucky didn’t react. He was staring into space.

Steve felt awkward leaving like this—he felt the need to walk to Bucky, to squeeze his hand at the very least. Let him know he wasn’t alone, even though Steve wasn’t much use to him. But touching Bucky had so many delicate implications, and Steve didn’t dare to unwittingly make things worse.

“Okay, so, well, I’m going,” he said. “See you later.”

Bucky nodded absently.

* 

It was aggressively cold outside, but Steve almost welcomed it in hope it could help him see clearer. It didn’t really work—the freezing air just made him hack dryly, to the point that he had to breathe through his scarf for a while. His face was stinging.

He wondered whether Bucky was looking at him from the window, but he didn’t glance up; it was a bright, sunny day and Steve knew he wouldn’t be able to see him through the reflective glass.

Getting to the store took him less than five minutes, but his teeth were still chattering by the time he reached it. The door jingled cheerfully when he stepped inside, and he was glad for the heat this time, even though it made his face sting even worse.

Steve walked up and down the aisles. He couldn’t stop his thoughts from drifting and, as a result, spent almost five minutes wandering around the store without picking up anything. Another five minutes and he had at least stocked up on beef jerky and chocolate chip cookies—not exactly the cheapest, but he’d starve to death before he deprived Bucky of his comfort food. He then tried to grab whatever fresh produce he could, as well. Tangerines, mostly, a few apples. As for the rest, he scrupulously scoured the aisles to find the cheapest brands.

“Cash or credit?” the cashier asked with a bright smile. He’d lowered the seat of his chair so he could crouch on it and still be at eye-level. The result looked a little weird, but Steve guessed sitting in the same position all day had to be tiring.

“Cash, thanks,” Steve said. He felt his ears burn as he counted the small change in his hand. It was
so obvious how he’d gotten it. He already knew how much he needed and, for a horrible second, he thought he’d miscalculated, thought he wouldn’t have enough; but then he found one last coin at the bottom of his pocket, and handed it to—Kurt, if the nametag was to be believed—with intense relief.

Kurt made no move to take his money, or ring his items. When Steve looked up, he saw that he was squinting into the distance.

“Is… is everything alright?” Steve asked.

Kurt squinted harder, looking like a dramatic extra in a B-rated movie. “You know,” he said, “the store’s policy is to throw everything away when it gets past the expiration date.” He had a German accent, which was a bit unexpected.

“Um,” Steve said. “Okay?”

“And today many things will expire. I marked them with a little fuschia dot.” Kurt waved a purple highlighter. “To remember better. Also today, my boss told me I could close whenever I wanted, because it’s my birthday and I handle the store all by myself all year.”

Steve looked at him.

“So I decide the store is closing right now,” Kurt said. “Everything marked with a little fuschia dot is officially thrown away. It no longer belongs to anyone.”

Steve said nothing. Kurt smiled at him, sharp and bright. “Of course, you can just pay and go.”

“I—” Steve said.

He bit back the angry words who wanted to leave his throat, stamped down on the familiar prickle of humiliation. He wouldn’t get another chance like that one.

“Maybe I’ll—I’ll take a last look around,” he managed.

Kurt was now ostentatiously staring at a crossword puzzle. “You do that.”

Steve spun on his heel and walked through the alleys all over again, heart beating. A lot of items had purple dots on them—mostly meat and vegetables. Steve filled an entire bag next to his meager first one, and brought it back to Kurt, who ringed only the items he’d picked the first time around.

“There you go,” he said, “twenty-four dollars thirty.”

Steve’s true total must be around sixty dollars. He swallowed, then said in an undertone, “Thank—thank you.”

“My friend,” Kurt said, wiping the change off the counter, “I know all about small money. Pay it forward, yeah?”

He grinned again, and Steve felt slightly better. “Yeah. Thanks. Really.”

When he finally got out of the shop, part of Steve was dizzy over what had just happened, another part still anxiously reliving Bucky’s odd confession of the morning, and as a result he almost didn’t understand what he was looking at—but then he blinked and saw.

Rumlow was standing across the street.
When he saw Steve, he gave him a little wave. He’d been careful to stay where Bucky couldn’t spot him from his window, tucked in a corner, away from sight. Leaning against the brick wall, he was pulling on his cigarette, exhaling big gusts of smoke in the freezing air.

Steve inhaled sharply, then crossed the street. Rumlow missed a beat, like he hadn’t expected that—but then he just watched Steve come to him with a slow grin.

“See,” he said. “You’re already asking for more.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all animals, whatever,” Steve said. “Which VA did you go to?”

Rumlow just raised an eyebrow at him. “What now, shrimpy?”

“You musta gone to the VA with Bucky. Which one was it?”

Rumlow grinned, then drew on his cigarette again. “Suck my dick and I’ll tell you.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake—”

Rumlow grabbed his face and angled it forcefully towards the light—his cigarette coming dangerously close to Steve’s face in the process. “Nice bruisin’. Shame your eyeball didn’t pop out.” He squeezed tighter, nails digging in. “You know Barnes likes that, right? I mean really likes it. You shoulda seen him in the field, he was like a bitch in heat.”

He tried to force his thumb into Steve’s mouth—and Steve sharply twisted free, spitting. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“You want something from me. Thought it’d be free?” Rumlow blew out the smoke through his nose, still grinning, and grabbed the front of Steve’s jacket, roughly pulling him close again. “Ain’t nothing fucking free.”

Steve tightened his fists—and it reminded him he was carrying grocery bags.

There was a time when he would have risked losing them anyway, but these days—these days he couldn’t even afford violence. Those were for Bucky. And he’d promised he wouldn’t engage and he’d already broken that promise once already.

He twisted free again and stepped back too quickly for Rumlow to catch him a second time.

“If you can’t even have a normal conversation, I have no interest in sticking around,” he said dryly.

He started walking away, breathing harshly in the cold. Rumlow didn’t attempt to follow him; last time, he’d grabbed Steve when there wasn’t anyone around to see, but he wasn’t crazy enough to try it in the middle of a busy street.

“It was the Brooklyn Center,” he called.

Steve didn’t stop.

“I know you heard me,” Rumlow went on loudly. “That means you’re sucking me off next time, Stevie boy! Ain’t nothing fucking free!”

Steve flipped him off over his shoulder and kept walking. His heart was pounding, but it gave him strength to drag the grocery bags all the way to the building and past the glass door, until he could drop them in the elevator.
He stood there, panting. Then he pressed the sixth floor button and let the doors close on him.

* *

“Bucky?”

Seeing the clock on the wall, Steve realized he’d been gone almost an hour. There was no sign of Bucky; the computer was on, though.

Getting closer to the screen, Steve got a glimpse of his inbox—the email on top came from a Rebecca Barnes, and was unanswered like all the others below. Steve quickly closed the window so he couldn’t see more, swallowing a pang of guilt.

“Bucky,” he called again, turning away and crossing the room. “You asleep?”

He pushed the door of the bedroom; Bucky was there, buried under the covers so only the top of his head could be seen. Steve wasn’t sure he was actually asleep, but if Bucky didn’t want to answer, that was fine.

He closed the door. Alone in the living room, with the computer still humming, he felt like something had happened, maybe was still happening, but he couldn’t figure out what.

The room looked too empty, and the heat of Rumlow’s cigarette had stayed with him, burningly close to his skin. He rubbed his cheek and tried to think of something else.

* *

Bucky spent all day in bed. He wasn’t up when Steve went to sleep, and he still wasn’t when Steve woke up the next morning.

Steve waited a couple of hours, then decided to go out today. He was going stir crazy wandering aimlessly around the living room, and he’d checked his inbox a thousand times for emails that just weren’t there. He might as well do something productive with his day and go out to check on his job applications himself.

Maybe he was also doing it out of sheer spite. He knew a reasonable person would have stayed in for a little while, but his face almost didn’t hurt anymore and he was almost sure Rumlow wouldn’t try to assault him in the middle of the street.

Besides, he told himself as he went down the stairs, that might have been an empty threat. Rumlow said a lot of things—in fact, he would not stop talking as he dragged Steve along the last time.

Yeah, thought Steve, stepping outside and tightening his scarf. Empty threat. He pushed his hands down his pockets and headed out, walking briskly against the wall of cold air.

It only took him five minutes to realize he was being followed.
Rumlow wasn’t even trying to hide, actually, wasn’t trying to get closer either—just tailing him patiently, like a shark.

Steve had no idea what to do—he couldn’t complain that someone was walking in the same direction as him. And clearly, Rumlow couldn’t do anything to him while there were people around. Steve quickly decided to just ignore him. He couldn’t keep looking over his shoulder all the time. He had stuff to do, and if Rumlow wanted to scare him, he could play that childish game on his own.

But Rumlow didn’t relent. Several times, as Steve was doing the rounds of his potential employers, Steve thought he’d lost him; but Rumlow always turned up again, a few steps behind, like he’d sniffed Steve’s scent and wouldn’t ever lose him. Steve was boiling inside. The only thing keeping him from walking up to Rumlow was his promise to Bucky. He’d said he wouldn’t engage, and he wasn’t gonna. He couldn’t just throw himself to the wolves and risk seeing that expression on Bucky’s face again.

It was a long, stressful day, and Steve was utterly worn by the time he came back to Bucky’s apartment.

“Bucky?” he called.

Bucky wasn’t there. There was a faint smell of food lingering in the air, and dirty dishes in the sink. They looked like he’d tried to wash them, but with only one hand, it couldn’t have been easy. At the very least, he’d gotten up to eat, but he’d apparently gone right back to bed.

Steve went to knock on his door. “Bucky?”

“Yeah,” Bucky answered.

Steve took it as an invitation to come in, and pushed the door open. He wasn’t really surprised to see Bucky curled up in bed. This time, though, he was turning his back to the door.

“Bad day?” Steve asked.

“Just tired,” Bucky mumbled.

“Want me to sit with you?”

Bucky flinched. It was barely perceptible, but it was there. “No,” he said. “No, I’m—I’m just gonna try to—sleep.”

Steve tried not to feel too hurt. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll… I’ll be in the other room.”

Bucky said nothing, stayed still and tense, and eventually there wasn’t anything to do but close the door.

If Steve was hoping for a change the next day, he was cruelly disappointed. Bucky did not want to come eat breakfast, and in fact refused to come out altogether. So Steve ate alone, then bundled up and went out, intent on begging for money today since the job hunting wasn’t doing so good.
He realized quickly enough that Rumlow was on his trail again. There was still nothing he could actually do about it—short of going to the police, which was unadvisable for a variety of reasons—so he just went to his usual spot, sat on the icy sidewalk, and shoved his hands down his pockets to keep warm, trying not to look at the sharp silhouette waiting for him at the corner, patient like a vulture.

The day went by without anything actually happening, save for Steve growing more and more uneasy—and numb with cold. He tried to distract himself by watching people walk by—he often spotted a lot of weird or otherwise remarkable things, small things like a woman with mismatched socks or three people stealthily, quickly kissing each other on the mouth before parting. But today was a very cold day and no one lingered. Steve could not ignore Rumlow’s continued presence at the corner. After a while, he tried to calm down by repeating to himself that there was nothing Rumlow could do, not while they were in public.

By nightfall, he got up to head home, and Rumlow trailed him like a shadow. Steve had no idea what he was waiting for. How could he afford to be there all day, just watching him, following him around? How did he pay his bills? He was bound to give up eventually. Right?

It was completely dark, now. There were fewer and fewer people around, and even though Steve despised himself for it, he found himself walking faster and faster, to the point that he was almost running by the time he got to Bucky’s building. Despite his horrible feeling about all this, he got into the hall without trouble.

It was okay, he thought, panting in the elevator. God, he was so stupid, Rumlow couldn’t do anything. Bucky’s was a busy neighborhood. There would always be people around to unknowingly shield Steve from harm. It was all he could hope for, anyway. Telling Bucky what was happening was out of the question. He was dealing with enough shit already; Steve could get by on his own.

When he reached the sixth floor, the front door was open as always, but Bucky’s door—the bedroom door—was still tightly shut. Steve was too discouraged, too tired and too cold to try and draw him out this time.

He sat on the couch, put his hands under his armpits to warm them up, and tried very hard not to think maybe it meant Bucky was finally starting to have enough of him.

* 

The next couple of days blurred together, depressingly similar—every day freezing cold, every day shadowed by the distant presence of Rumlow, every day without Bucky.

It was a small apartment, so they still saw each other—had to, really. Steve entered Bucky’s room once or twice, on his way to the bathroom; and sometimes Bucky came into the living room to grab something to eat. But those were short encounters, early in the morning or late at night, and Bucky always went back to bed right away, closing the door in Steve’s face.

Steve tried to be reasonable about this, telling himself Bucky must be having a difficult week, telling himself this wasn’t about him. He knew—now that they actually had Internet, he’d read up on depression, on anxiety, on everything he could, to make sure he wouldn’t inflict too many rookie mistakes on Bucky; and he knew he should do his best not to take anything personally. But he just didn’t understand what was going on, and he couldn’t stop thinking about the last
significant thing they’d talked about—Bucky trying to tell Steve about how he’d lost his arm, and Steve basically telling him he didn’t want to hear it.

*No,* he thought again, angrily, anxiously—it hadn’t been like *that.* And it wasn’t just about Bucky forcing himself to share painful memories. Whatever was going on, it had started *before.* Something had happened during that night, the one Bucky had spent on the computer while Steve slept away his aches in the bed.

The problem was that Steve didn’t *know* that for sure; and he was terrified asking would make it all worse. Right now, it felt like the safest route was to trust Bucky—to give him his space, to be patient, to trust him to come back eventually.

He’d gotten distant before. Maybe things would get better.

* *

On Friday, Rumlow almost got him.

Steve had turned into a narrow alley only to realize it was a dead end; he got back out instantly, diving back into the flow of people, but when he turned around he saw that Rumlow had been running—he’d darted forward, and was just starting to slow down seeing Steve come back out.

This time, Steve did run home, slipped inside the building and spent the most stressful minute of his life waiting for the elevator.

He *almost* told Bucky what was happening. He intended to, he really did; but by the time the elevator ride was over, he’d caught his breath and changed his mind. No, he couldn’t bring himself to add Rumlow to the list of Bucky’s problems. He had been enough of a disturbance already. Besides, it wasn’t like anything *dreadful* was happening to him. His face had almost completely healed. He hadn’t found a job, but he’d gathered a bit of cash this week. He was *fine.*

* *

That night he lay on the lumpy couch, wrapped in the old wool blanket, trying and failing not to wish Bucky would start talking to him again.

* *

At the end of the week, Steve knocked on Bucky’s door.

“Buck? Please come out. I don’t think you’ve eaten in two days.”

No answer.

“Bucky.” Suddenly Steve felt on the verge of breaking. “Please.”
“I’m not hungry,” Bucky answered through the door.

Steve swallowed and stood there. He stood there for five full minutes, waiting. But nothing more happened.

*  

He slept fitfully, trying to be strong and to resist the urge he felt growing inside him. But in the end he was too weak and too desperate to keep enduring; and come morning, he knew it couldn’t be avoided anymore.

He got out of bed, put away his sleeping bag, then walked to Bucky’s door and quietly, quietly pushed it open.

“Buck?” he whispered.

No answer. Bucky’s breathing was slow and regular; he was asleep.

His phone was on the nightstand.

Steve swallowed, then walked into the room.

*  

The phone rang for a long time before someone finally picked up.

Steve’s teeth were already starting to chatter. It wasn’t that cold in the hallway, but the building was old and without any sort of central heating. Steve should have worn his jacket.

“Brooklyn Center, how can we be of service?”

“Hi,” Steve said, shifting where he was sitting, on the first step of the stairs. His voice echoed in the staircase. “I… I was hoping to talk to a counselor?”

Steve glanced nervously at the door of Bucky’s apartment. He didn’t want to risk waking him up; he already felt bad enough stealing his phone, and even worse, stealing his phone to do this.

“It’s about someone you probably had as a patient,” he went on. “Uh—James Barnes. James Buchanan Barnes?”

There was a silence. Steve heard faint voices in the background, like someone had covered the phone with their hand. Then all of a sudden, a male voice was in his ear.

“Hello, this is Sam Wilson.”

“Hi,” Steve said. “My name is Steve Rogers, I—”

“Darcy said you were calling about James Barnes? We’ve been trying to contact him for weeks.
“Is he—”

“He’s fine,” Steve hurried to say. “He’s asleep right now, but he’s fine.”

On the other end of the line, Sam let out the disbelieving laugh of someone who’d stopped hoping for good news. “Jesus Christ.” There was a harsh noise, like he’d let himself fall in a chair. When he spoke again, his voice was muffled as though he was rubbing his hand over his face. “Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. I honestly thought I’d never hear a word about him again.”

“I don’t understand,” Steve said, shivering. “Did he…?”

“It’s been so long since he left,” Sam said, disbelief still in his voice. “We haven’t gotten any sign of life since. The other vets tried calling him. I tried calling him. We all sent him a bunch of emails. I even called his goddamn uncle, and trust me when I tell you that the Secretary of State is not an easy man to get a hold of.” His voice got clearer, like he’d dropped his hand. “And when I did reach him, all he told me was that I’d done my part.”

Silence. Steve kept shuddering on his step, not sure how to react to this. Also—the Secretary of State?

Sam exhaled audibly, then cleared his throat. “Wow. I’m sorry. I totally just word-vomited on you.”

“It’s—it’s okay.”

“No, I really must apologize here. Not terribly professional of me. It’s just—we rarely get good news after that many weeks of silence.”

“I do understand,” Steve insisted. “Actually—it’s great to know someone out there is still worrying about him.”

“Right back at you,” Sam said. “You a friend of his?”


“I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that,” Sam said. “He was so hell-bent on carrying on alone.”

Steve thought of the unread texts and emails on Bucky’s phone.

“Were you his therapist?” he asked.

“Well, I’m in charge of group therapy,” Sam said. “So yeah, him and a few others. How is he?”

There was a silence.

“I don’t know how to help him,” Steve blurted. “I’m trying, but—I’m so afraid to make things worse.”

Sam laughed softly over the phone, just a huff of breath. “I know that feeling, trust me.” There was a shuffle, as though he’d changed position, settling for a long story. “Last I saw of James Barnes, he didn’t want to be helped. From what you’re telling me, he hasn’t changed his mind.”

Steve said nothing.

“It’s complicated enough helping the ones who want to get better,” Sam said. “But people like James—they don’t think they deserve it, so they don’t see any point in trying. He was offered a
“Are you telling me there’s no hope?” Steve said. The cold anger in his own voice surprised him. “Is that what I’ve called you for?”

Sam laughed again—this time, it was genuine. “Of course not,” he said. “You calling me is the very proof that there’s always, always hope.”

Steve breathed in, then out.

“Does he know you’re calling?” asked Sam.

Steve shook his head with a fresh pang of guilt. “No. Actually, I’m outside his apartment so he won’t hear.”

“Okay,” Sam sighed. “Listen. I’m giving you my personal number. If you need help, or if there’s an emergency, you can call me, any time of the day or night.” He spelled the numbers out loud, waited till Steve had saved them in Bucky’s phone, then went on, “There’s not much I can do from here, but he’s got you. I understand things are tough right now?”

“Yes, it’s…” Steve was surprised at how suddenly and how badly he wanted to cry. He forced it down and swallowed thickly. “He’s not—violent or anything, he’s—he’s the kindest person I’ve ever met. And—it’s not like I’m expecting him to just magically get better, but he’s never been like this. He’s shutting me out completely. I think something happened—I think something upset him, but I don’t know for sure.”

“Sounds to me like you both need to get out of your heads,” Sam said. “Look—you’re aware he’s in a sensitive position, and that’s good. But it’s making you just as sensitive in turn. Don’t overthink this. You’re worried about something? Get him to talk to you, and don’t stop till everything’s out in the open.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“So annoy him till it happens anyway. Maybe he’ll hate you for it, but you’re the one who can take a hit here, so don’t be afraid to shake things up. You need to remind him you’re still here, and you still care about him, and he’s gotta deal with that whether he likes it or not.”

Steve exhaled. His hand was shaking a little around the phone, maybe with relief at having told someone, having been told that it was okay to worry.

“Okay,” he managed. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m really, really glad you called.”

There was a silence.

“I’m… I should probably go now.”

“Would you mind keeping me posted? You can also swing by the VA if you feel the need.”

“Maybe I will. Thank you,” Steve said again. “I’ll call.”
Steve came back into the apartment, phone in hand. He stood there for a minute, still processing his conversation with Sam, then frowned slightly and thumbed open the navigator.

_Secretary of State_, he typed.

The Internet told him the current Secretary of State was a man named Alexander Pierce, who would most likely be running for President. Steve scrolled down his Wikipedia page. One of the sections was called _War Veterans Rights_. “Pierce has been lauded for his involvement with war veterans rights, and made it a cornerstone of his future campaign.”

Scrolling further down to get to reference 178, Steve saw that it linked to a video. He clicked on it, let it load, eyeing the other thumbnails linked in the margin—Pierce shaking hands at VAs, Pierce posing with amputees and soldiers, Pierce giving an impromptu interview in the street, under a black umbrella held by a bodiless hand.

The main video suddenly started—Piece on a TV show, smiling paternally at the camera, applause just fading in the background.

“—of course it’s a concern. It’s always been a concern of mine. I have always been personally involved in helping our boys. My very own nephew served his country, you know, couldn’t get home to his family for personal reasons, and so I took him in. He’s—well, it’s awful to say, but he’s crippled, and he’s mentally handicapped as well—he can’t take care of himself at all. And yet he’s still one of the lucky ones, really—what about the people who don’t have rich uncles?” he asked, drawing smiles and even laughter from the people around him. “I believe it is our duty to help people like him. This is why I’m asking for your trust—not just for me, but for the brave men and women who—”

The bedroom door suddenly clicked open and Steve almost dropped the phone, only barely managing to shut down the navigator instead.

“Hey,” Bucky rasped, shuffling in. He looked and sounded like a dead man walking. “Have you seen my…”

His voice trailed off when he saw the phone in Steve’s hands. He stepped forward and Steve handed it back without thinking.

“I’m sorry,” he said in an altered voice.

Bucky shook his head once to dismiss the apology. He was already turning away to go back in his room, thumbing at the touchscreen. He hadn’t even questioned why Steve had taken his phone while he was sleeping.

And all of a sudden Steve had enough.

“Hey,” he said, heart pounding. “Sam Wilson says hi.”

Bucky froze on the threshold.

He was staring at the screen, though, and Steve wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard him. No—in fact, he was positive he hadn’t; Bucky seemed to have just registered Steve talking to him and stopped on instinct, without processing the words. Steve could see the screen from there: he was reading his emails.

“Bucky,” he pleaded. His eyes were burning.
Bucky slowly turned round. His eyes were still glued to his screen. “Steve,” he said in a tight, halted voice. “There’s something…”

He stopped, then frowned and looked up, like Steve’s words had finally reached him.

“Sam Wilson?”

Steve swallowed. “Yeah.”

For the first time that week, Bucky was looking straight at him, surprise quickly morphing into incomprehension. “How do you know him?” A beat, and it was fear. “Were you—did he send you here?”

“No,” Steve exclaimed, horrified. “Jesus, Bucky, no! I just called the Brooklyn Center—”

“How did you know I went to the Brooklyn Center?”

“I—” Steve stopped, then winced. “…I asked Rumlow.”

Bucky’s almost panicked look shifted back into astonishment. “You did what?”

“We were in the middle of the street,” Steve said, briefly piqued. “What was he gonna do? I needed to know. I’m…” He hesitated, then deflated. “I’m worried, Buck. You… you haven’t talked to me all week…”

Bucky swallowed, then glanced at his phone again. “Uh,” he said, and his voice became clipped and high-strung again. “It’s… maybe you should sit down.”

“What?” Steve said, desperate. “Bucky, I don’t—what the hell is going on?”

Bucky looked down. “There’s—there’s something I need to tell you,” he said in that awful voice. “Please sit down.”

Steve stood blinking for a few seconds, then took a step back and sat down on the couch, feeling horribly apprehensive all of a sudden. This was it. He was—he was about to get kicked out.

Bucky looked left and right for some place to sit, then clumsily dragged the chair from the desk in front of Steve and sat down.

“I did something wrong,” he said abruptly.

Steve blinked. This wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

“Something wrong? I’m pretty sure you—”

“I looked at your notebook.”

Steve’s heart missed a beat.

Bucky was staring at the floor, but Steve stayed silent for so long he eventually glanced up. He swallowed thickly when he saw the look on Steve’s face, paled by several shades, but said nothing.

“Did you,” Steve croaked eventually. “All—all of it?”

Bucky nodded mutely.
Steve’s head was spinning. He thought he’d be angry, but terror ate up everything else—all he
could think of were the dozens of drawings of Bucky, Bucky, Bucky, and he was thinking oh
God, he saw them.

“I—but I had a reason,” Bucky said in a small voice. He looked as scared as he’d been on the first
day, when Steve had shouted at him. Like he was afraid Steve was going to hurt him somehow. “I
would have never done it otherwise, you—you have to believe me.”

“Wait,” Steve said feebly, with a rush in his ears. “You don’t mind?”

Bucky blinked. “…No? I mean—I’m not sure I understand why you’d do that. There’s… there’s
gotta be better things to draw.” He shifted on his chair. “Anyway, that’s—that’s not what I’m
trying to say.”

“What are you trying to say, Buck?” Steve asked, hearing himself as though from a great distance.

Bucky sat completely still for nearly ten full seconds.

Then he blurted:

“I applied for an ARC scholarship on your behalf.”

Steve stared.

And stared.

“What,” he said eventually, at a loss for anything better.

“I applied for an ARC scholarship,” Bucky repeated. “That’s why… that’s why I needed your
drawings.”

Steve couldn’t make sense of this, no matter how hard he tried. “But,” he stammered, brain still
painfully trying to reboot. “Bucky, what—an ARC scholarship? Like… the Maria Stark
foundation?”

Silence.

“Bucky, that’s—that’s the stratosphere of art school. You can’t apply to that with quick pencil
sketches. That’s crazy.”

Bucky huffed. “Well,” he said. “I’m crazy, so.”

“You’re not crazy,” Steve said automatically, hearing Pierce’s politician tones in his head—he’s
mentally handicapped, he can’t take care of himself. “Bucky, I don’t—I thought about
scholarships. I’m just not qualified to apply for this. Or anything, really. I don’t have a portfolio—or
references.”

“Well, you do have one letter of recommendation,” Bucky said, embarrassed. “From your art
teacher in high school.” He swallowed and, impossibly, went even paler. “God, this… this sounds
way more invasive and creepy now that I’m saying it out loud.”

Steve blinked. “Mr. Erskine?” When Bucky nodded, he repeated incredulously, “You called
Erskine?”

Bucky looked even more uneasy. “Uh, not really. I chickened out and wrote him an email. He
answered me right away, though.”
This was what his panicked confession had been all about. I know so much about you and you don’t know anything about me. Steve swallowed. “But—don’t they also ask for an essay—”

“Point is,” Bucky said hurriedly, “I sent the application. And I promised myself I wouldn’t tell you until they answered, because—I might as well be the only one to freak out about this.”

Steve could only stare at him. This was what Bucky had been doing, that night he’d spent on the computer. This was why Bucky had been distant and unfocused all week. Not because he was fed up with Steve, but because he’d been trying to do… this.

Bucky looked miserably ashamed of himself. “They just answered,” he said, handing his phone to Steve. “It’s… it’s a no. I’m so sorry.”

Steve took it and slowly scrolled down the screen.

Dear Mr. Rogers, thank you for applying to the ARC scholarship award. We regret to inform you… Steve kept scrolling absently, thumb swiping over bland apologies and formal explanations. He wasn’t really seeing the words.

“I can’t believe you did this,” he murmured.

Bucky shrank in on himself. “I’m really sorry,” he said, sounding utterly mortified. “I thought—I don’t know what I thought. It… it made sense at the time…”

“No,” Steve said, heart beating fast. “I mean, I can’t believe you did this.” He looked up at him again. “Bucky… this is the most incredible thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

Bucky blinked.

“But—you’re not… you’re not mad?” he asked in a wan voice.

He sounded exhausted, Steve realized. He’d tortured himself over this all week, and he was on the brink of physical exhaustion. And Steve would have been mad—hell, he never even let his mom look into his notebook. But Bucky had literally been shredding his own clothes over how horribly he regretted it.

“No,” Steve said, throat closing. “Bucky—no. I mean—it… yeah, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t do it again, but I—I sort of did the same thing looking up Sam Wilson, you know? And that—that was mostly to help myself. You… you did all this for me.”

Bucky closed his eyes and exhaled—he was trembling, and Steve felt like his heart was physically twisting in his chest.

“Bucky… it’s—” He put down the phone and brushed the screen as he let go of it, accidentally scrolling down a bit more.

However—

Steve froze.

“Wait,” he breathed, picking it up again and scrolling back up.

Bucky blinked. “What?” When Steve motioned him closer, he very shyly got up then sat next to Steve on the couch. “What—what is it?”
“Dear Mr. Rogers,” Steve read out loud.

Thank you for applying to the Maria Stark’s Art Renewal Center scholarship. We regret to inform you that your candidacy was not declared eligible by the NYC Mansion scholarship committee.

This decision was not an easy one. Taking into consideration your financial situation, this committee acknowledged the quality of your artwork. Unfortunately, they could not in good conscience accept samples so far below the technical level of the other candidates.

He scrolled, heart pounding.

However, the ARC scholarship exists for the express purpose of making art accessible to all. Rejecting your application altogether, on the sole basis of material ineligibility, would go against the very oath this foundation represents.

Hence, and due to your exceptional circumstances, this committee has hereby decided to put the Mansion’s resources at your disposal for one day, so as to allow you to submit at least one representative sample of your top work.

Please communicate us your specifications and availabilities as soon as possible so we can make the appropriate arrangements. Applications close on November 30th.

Sincerely,

Philip J. Coulson

Grants and Scholarships Committee for the Maria Stark Foundation.

After a long silence, Bucky looked at him.

“So…” he hesitated, voice still shaky. “Does this mean…”

“They want me to come draw at the Mansion,” Steve said in distant shock. “So I can give them a sample worth considering.”

“That’s—that’s good,” Bucky said, looking completely floored. “That’s good! Right?”

“It is,” Steve said. He was staring at the email. “But I can’t do it.”


“I don’t have a model.”

Bucky’s eyes went wide. “The fuck do you mean? I’m sitting right here.”

When Steve looked at him, he instantly deflated a little. “I mean, you’ve… you’ve drawn me… before, after all, right? Maybe I’m not… not the best subject, but—”
Steve shook his head. “No, Buck,” he said softly. “Thank you, but I’m not asking you to do that.”

“Why wouldn’t—”

“For starters, the Mansion’s in Midtown. You’d have to come all the way there with me.”

Bucky’s protests died on his lips.

“And then pose for me,” Steve went on. “Which—first of all, you’d have to be... well, nude. And I don’t know how long it’ll take. Maybe the entire day. You’d have to keep perfectly still, in the exact same position, for hours on end, in a place you don’t know, maybe with strangers around, without any clothes on.”

Bucky was growing significantly more ashen with each of Steve’s words. Steve himself was feeling a little sick on his behalf, to be honest.

He looked down and reread the letter, scrolling down on the phone, drinking in each word.

“But Bucky, this is—this is huge,” he said, feeling a little dizzy. He felt like he’d impossibly brushed a world he’d believed was forever out of his reach. “They were ready to give me a chance. The samples’ quality was the only reason they didn’t declare me eligible. Maybe next year —”

“Fuck next year,” Bucky said, a bit too shrill.

Steve looked up. “Bucky—”

“Are you fucking listening to yourself? How are you even—” Bucky was livid, and not just because he looked on the brink of throwing up. “You’re fucking unreal.”

“Bucky, I can’t make you—”

“Steve,” Bucky snapped, “this is not open for discussion.” He was shaking in earnest now, but his pale face was incredibly stubborn. “I’m—I’m doing it,” he said, looking terrified of what he was saying as he was saying it. “I am.”

There was a silence as they just looked at each other.

And then Steve couldn’t help himself anymore: he suddenly leaned forward and wrapped Bucky tight in his arms.

For a difficult few seconds, it felt like Bucky wouldn’t relax; his breath was quick in Steve’s ear, and tremors ran through his tense body. But then—painfully slowly—his hand came up to rest on Steve’s back, as though he wasn’t quite sure he was allowed. After another few beats, his fingers curled into the fabric of Steve’s shirt, and he pushed his face in the crook of his neck before letting out a long, shaky breath.

Steve squeezed him tighter then, as tight as he dared. Bucky shuddered in answer. He didn’t smell terribly good, but he was incredibly warm. His breathing was still shakily cautious; it was almost painful, the way he held onto Steve, like he was getting ready for it to end any second now and desperately trying to enjoy every last moment of it.

But Steve didn’t let go. And gradually, Bucky relaxed, though he obviously didn’t dare to believe his luck, tension seeping away in stops and starts. Steve felt the precise moment when he melted for good, letting out another long breath which shook a little less as he sank in Steve’s embrace.
They stayed like this another few quiet minutes, lost in each other’s heartbeat. Steve felt like he could have stayed forever.

Eventually, he still had to pull back—he didn’t go far, though, leaving his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky looked at him with wondering eyes.

“I’ve… I’ve wanted to do that for a long time,” Steve confessed.

He felt like he’d blurted that out in the most awkward way imaginable; but the next second, Bucky’s faint, slow smile made him feel like the exact opposite.

“That’s…” Bucky said hoarsely. He cleared his throat, ducked his head. “Thanks for saying that.”

“It’s true,” Steve insisted.

Bucky’s hand tightened on Steve’s shirt again. “Me too,” he said. “I—I wouldn’t have…” He swallowed. “But—me too.”

Steve couldn’t look away from him.

“You really are doing this for me,” he murmured.

Bucky nodded, wary, but still with that look of faraway wonder in his eyes. “Yeah, I am,” he said. “Right now, it feels like it’ll be easy.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Comments are the sugar in my coffee. :D

(The great downamongthedeadmen asked me how Steve’s jacket looked like exactly, for Reasons, and I was like "haha are the Reasons fanart?” AND THEY TOTALLY WERE. Which makes me more ecstatic than I can say. Look at it. It's gorgeous. I'm trying real hard not to keysmash here, I don't know if you can tell.

If you do fanart or a rec for a fic of mine (like vaysh or eidheann_writes over at LiveJournal—thank you!) or even if you've just found my fic through one of those, please tell me, you don't know how happy it makes me. Thank you guys so much.)
“Buck?”

Bucky’s eyes blearily blinked open. When he realized he was leaning against Steve, he started and froze; but then he confusedly remembered Steve’s hug. That had really happened. Right?

“Aw,” Steve said. “Sorry, you were falling asleep.”

“No, it’s okay, I—I didn’t mean to drift,” Bucky mumbled on automatic pilot, holding himself cautiously, ready to bolt upright at the first sign of Steve’s discomfort.

But Steve seemed to have no problem with Bucky slumping into him. Bucky tentatively straightened up a little, inch by inch, until he could put his chin on Steve’s skinny shoulder. Steve didn’t flinch—didn’t even really seem to notice, like one wouldn’t notice a friendly presence. Like it was normal, and even welcome.

Bucky was a bit amazed. Maybe he shouldn’t have pushed his luck, but he didn’t want to move away from Steve’s warmth, not just yet, so he stayed there. Glancing at the window, he saw that the skies were only just darkening into their nightly orange glow. Still late afternoon, then; he couldn’t have slept for very long.

He remembered Steve had been talking to him.

“What’s… what’s up?” he asked.

“Um—well, here,” Steve said awkwardly, showing him the phone. “How does, um… how does that sound?”

He’d already crafted an answer to Coulson.

It was both polite and concise, telling him they’d be ready at his earliest convenience, thanking
him deeply for the opportunity, and asking if they wouldn’t mind Steve using charcoal on paper.

“Is that okay?” Steve said, nervous. “I don’t wanna sound too formal, but it’s kind of a big deal. And I was wondering if maybe you want me to ask for a particular date, we can—why are you smiling?”

Bucky shook his head with a huff. “Nothing, it’s just…” He finally straightened up, taking himself away from Steve’s shoulder with regret. “I spent the entire goddamn night writing my letter to these guys, and you one-up’ed me in, like, fifteen minutes.”

Steve looked at him.

“It’s great,” Bucky added. “Your email, I mean. I think you can send it like this. Hell, it’s still kinda early—maybe they’ll get it today.”

Steve stared at him for a second longer. Then he looked back at the phone. “Okay,” he said. “If you think—okay."

He hesitated for another brief moment, then pressed send. They both stared at the little screen for a while.

“So,” Steve said after a while. “You hungry or something?”

“Not really,” Bucky said. “Just… tired, I guess. I haven’t been sleeping much.”

“Me neither,” Steve murmured. He gave him a little smile. “It’s been kind of a long week without you around.”

Bucky winced internally. Leave it to him to make Steve worry to the point of making him turn to Brock Rumlow for help. God, he couldn’t have fucked this up more if he’d tried—it was a miracle Steve even talked to him anymore.

On the other hand, Bucky reasoned wryly, a week with him around all the time might have been even more depressing to go through. But he had a feeling Steve didn’t want to hear that.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead. He felt like he couldn’t say this enough. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, don’t be,” Steve said. He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Look—Bucky—you don’t have to do this for me. I understand—”

Bucky shook his head in a jerky movement. “Stop—shut up,” he said quickly. “I won’t change my mind, so don’t do that. Don’t give me outs.”

He was afraid of what would happen if Steve kept insisting he didn’t have to do this. Because technically, Bucky didn’t want to pose for him. It was the last fucking thing he wanted to do. The pervasive numbness which left him bedridden on his worst days was dissolving what few shreds of courage he tried to gather, over and over again. All he could feel was reluctance, exhaustion, and the awful spike of anxiety. But these feelings, he knew, weren’t really his. The darkness and greyness in him were at work to undermine him. He desperately tried not to let them win. Maybe, just maybe, he could do this one helpful thing despite all the broken parts of himself teaming up to ruin it.

“I get it,” Steve said, like he really did follow everything that was going on in Bucky’s scrambled mind. “I won’t ask.” Their sides were still pressed together; he nudged him a little. “You know you still got the safewords, anyway, right?”
Bucky blinked at him.

Actually—no. He’d completely forgotten about the safewords. But right this moment, he did remember that Steve had, in fact, always trusted him to know when his own boundaries were pushed. His shoulders slumped a little when the tension left them.

“Thank you, Steve,” he said tiredly. “I just hope I won’t fuck it up too much.”

“Hey,” Steve protested softly. “There’s no way—”

Bucky’s phone buzzed in Steve’s hand, making them both startle. Bucky took it from him to get a look. It was bound to be Rumlow—or Pierce—or maybe Rebecca—
— but it wasn’t.

It was Phil Coulson.

“Uh,” Bucky said, throat dry. “He—uh.”

He swallowed and managed, “He says we can go tomorrow.”

“What?” Steve said. “There’s no way—”

Bucky handed him the phone back, and Steve read the email with wide eyes. He stayed frozen for about a minute, then looked up at Bucky.

“Are you good to go tomorrow?” he asked, looking pale.

Bucky swallowed. The true answer was no, of course; he’d never be good to go, but maybe that just meant he’d rather go as soon as possible. He wasn’t sure he could physically stand another week of anticipation and dread.

“Might as well,” he said.

Steve said nothing. Bucky opened his mouth, hesitated. “Are… are you good?”

All of a sudden, Steve was looking very scared and very young. “Yeah,” he said in a small voice. “Yeah, of course.”

Bucky felt useless. Dealing with his own anxiety absolutely hadn’t prepared him to assuage someone else’s fears. “Hey,” he said awkwardly. “This is really sudden and all—because I was too stupid to tell you about it—and I’m really, really fucking sorry—but it’s... it’s gonna be okay, you know? Your little sketches blew their mind already. Imagine what’s a full-blown piece gonna do.”

Steve gave him a wan smile. “You shouldn’t be reassuring me.”

“Uh, yeah, I should,” Bucky said, raising an eyebrow. “This is about you. Me, I won’t even have to worry about what to wear.”

Steve cracked up—and Bucky felt inordinately proud, like he’d told the best joke in the history of ever at the exact right time.

“Thanks,” Steve said, rubbing his face. He inhaled sharply, then repeated, “Thanks, Buck.”

He looked at the phone he was still holding, then slowly wrote an answer to Coulson, even more
concise than the previous one. Yes, please, and thank you. Then, without a beat, maybe so he couldn’t hesitate any more, he sent it.

“We gotta figure out how to go there and stuff,” he added, giving Bucky his phone back, like he’d done nothing out of the ordinary. “But I guess there’ll be time for that tomorrow morning.” He rubbed his face again. “God, I’m still having a hard time processing all this. I just want to sleep for eleven years.”

“Take the bed tonight,” Bucky said in a low voice.

“No,” Steve answered at once, dropping his hands. “No way.”

“The couch is awful, and you’re gonna need your strength tomorrow, and this is all on me anyway. Take it.”

“No,” Steve repeated.

“Steve—”

“No.”

“God—just—then let’s both sleep in the stupid bed,” Bucky let out.

Steve blinked at him and Bucky felt his cheeks suddenly heat up. But now the words were out of his mouth. He stared at the floor and stammered, “I—I mean—it’s not like… It just—it makes sense. It’s a big bed. It doesn’t have to be awkward, or—or anything.”

Except it would be. Because Steve had always been awkward with showers and beds and touching and any sort of intimacy—and now Bucky knew why.

He’d felt awful enough flipping through Steve’s notebook without his permission, but this was nothing compared to the shame which had clawed at him all week over seeing Steve’s ID. He shouldn’t have seen this. He didn’t know shit about gender, but he knew what it was to be outed, and he felt so abjectly guilty he’d been having stomach pains. The second he’d seen the picture, the name, he’d known he’d gone too far—known the entire attempt had been a horrible mistake. But by then it was too late.

Beyond even his guilt lay anticipated shame: he’d never met a trans person—or if he had, he hadn’t been aware of it—and he’d been so scared he wouldn’t be able to help looking at Steve differently, now that he knew. It was one of the many reasons he’d been hiding in his room like the pathetic idiot he was, leaving Steve all alone to face Rumlow and God knew what else. There was no fucking limit to how much Bucky despised himself over this whole mess, and he hated himself even more for this very feeling—because he didn’t get to fuck up and then whine about fucking up. This wasn’t how it worked.

But as it turned out, now that he’d finally crawled out of his room, the complete opposite of what he’d feared was happening to him. He couldn’t have looked at Steve differently even if he’d tried.

In fact, now that his obligatory moment of blind panic was over and done, he found that he literally didn’t know what to do with this information. Steve was still Steve. He hadn’t magically turned into a girl overnight. There wasn’t anything different about him—about the way he talked, or, or whatever. So Bucky had accidentally found out some stuff about his genitals: awkward, sure. But hardly earth-shattering, all things considered. If anything, the whole affair only served to shed a sad light on what kind of problem Steve’s cousins might have had with him, and why Steve felt like he couldn’t fit in the homeless shelters.
But the fact remained that Bucky shouldn’t have known this—he’d intruded on what little privacy Steve still had, and he felt so awful about it he wished someone could have wiped his mind.

Steve was still staring at him. “Are you sure about this?” he said hesitantly.

Bucky had let his thoughts drift so far he was puzzled for a second as to what Steve was asking; then he remembered they’d been discussing sharing a bed, and felt himself flush hot with embarrassment once again. He would have said no, except Steve needed a good night of rest, and Bucky knew him enough by now to know he’d die rather than let Bucky take the couch.

“Yes,” he mumbled, shifting a bit on the cushions. “Yeah, I am.” He felt compelled to add, “I don’t—I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, though.”

*Jeeze, that was a lost battle from day one.*

“No,” Steve said suddenly.

Bucky looked up at him. “…Okay?”

“Okay,” Steve repeated. “We can do that.”

There was a silence. Then Steve stiffly got up and said out of the blue, “I’m just—I’m gonna brush my teeth,” and then left the room.

Bucky was left feeling uncomfortable about the entire conversation, as it often happened every time he tried to start one of these. God, on top of everything else, what was he fucking thinking, offering something like that?

But, well, if Steve said this was okay, then it had to be. Right? Clearly he wasn’t the type to let himself be pushed around.

Bucky rubbed his left arm, distantly grateful he hadn’t had an anxiety attack. Couldn’t afford that this time around. He had a big day tomorrow.

Oh, God. He didn’t want to think about it.

* *

When Steve got out of the bathroom, Bucky was already sitting on the edge of the bed. He was wearing a long-sleeved sweatshirt, probably in an effort not to freak Steve out with his stump.

Steve was a responsible, respectful adult; he might have fled to the bathroom to hide how flustered he was, but he hadn’t done anything else than brush his teeth in there. Still, when he saw Bucky, sitting there, so effortlessly beautiful and entirely unaware of it, he felt his insides twist a bit too pleasantly.

*God, now isn’t the fucking time.*

“Hey,” Bucky said, looking up, looking horribly nervous. “So—I thought—since we said—”

“It’s still okay,” Steve assured him.

He’d put on his pajamas before going out of the bathroom, because he wasn’t entirely stupid. He
climbed into bed and drew the covers over himself, trying not to sigh in relief—the bed was awfully more comfortable than the lumpy couch. Most of all, it was such a deep relief to be next to Bucky, to be talking to him again.

“So,” Bucky said shyly. “Should I, like, turn off the light?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Steve said, grabbing the radio alarm clock. “I’ll set an alarm for 9am?”

“Sounds good,” Bucky said stiffly. He lay down on his back and reached for the light on the nightstand. “Good night.”

The room went dark. Steve fiddled with the clock, then put it back and lay down on his stomach. It could have felt like a casual sleepover, but instead it was weird, like they’d stepped into the life of an old married couple for one night and didn’t know their lines.

Bucky wasn’t moving at all, and as far as Steve could tell, wasn’t breathing either.

“Hey,” Steve said. “If you can’t sleep, I’m going back to the couch.”

Bucky exhaled with a shudder Steve felt through the mattress. “No, it’s—” he audibly swallowed. “Sorry. I haven’t slept next to someone in a long while.”

Steve thought about the day they’d spent side by side in that very same bed, but he had to admit to himself it really hadn’t been the same thing.

“Since the Army?” he said without thinking.

A dead silence answered him.

“Sorry,” Steve said, mortified. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Yeah. Since the Army.” Bucky shifted a little on the mattress. “At the time, sticking together, it was what kept us all going. But then it all kind of—fell apart.”

Steve hesitated. “What happened to the others?”

Bucky stayed silent for a minute. Then he said, “Well, Thornton died, obviously. And Sitwell, too. I lost my arm, and the other guys were fine—physically at least—but after we got home, it all went to shit very quickly.” He swallowed. “I hear some guys come back, stay close for the rest of their lives, but we… we could barely stand the sight of each other anymore.”

Steve didn’t know what to say.

“I have no idea why I can talk about this right now,” Bucky muttered, like he was talking to himself. He snorted without humor and added, “Maybe it helps putting things into perspective for tomorrow.”

“Want me to share some heavy shit?” Steve offered, surprising himself.

Bucky huffed a laugh in the dark. “Sure, why not.”

“I still think Mom’s alive sometimes,” Steve said. “I feel like she’s just gone on a trip and she’s taking a while coming home. It’s been months and I still can’t comprehend the fact that she just won’t come back.”

Bucky said nothing, but Steve felt the mattress dip, like he’d shifted closer and then stopped himself. Steve wasn’t sure why he’d said that.
“Do you…” he began, then sucked in a breath. Maybe he should just fucking shut up.

“You can ask,” Bucky said quietly. “Shit, Steve, you can ask me anything you want.”

Steve hesitated for a second longer. “…Do you still have your mother?”

Bucky’s voice was infinitely tired. “Yeah. And my father and my sister.” He shifted on the mattress again. “But I’d rather they remember me the way I was before. You know? They don’t deserve—it’s… It’s better for me to be here.”

Steve chose his words before his spoke. “But… aren’t they worried about you?”

“My uncle keeps them updated,” Bucky mumbled. “It’s fine.”

Steve liked this less and less. The recent memory of Pierce’s smug tone made it all worse. “Was that his idea? For you to come live here, instead of going back to them?”

“I—don’t…” Bucky hesitated. “I don’t know—I was at the hospital when he came to see me but—no, I think I’m the one who asked, I… I don’t really remember… I was on a lot of meds at the time. I don’t know. All I know is it’s better this way.”

Steve exhaled his anger and saved it for later. Now wasn’t the time.

His eyes were getting accustomed to the obscurity. Bucky was a lonely, stiff shape in the dark.

“Hey,” Steve said again.

“What?” Bucky mumbled.

“This is gonna sound sort of lame,” Steve said, words rushing a bit, “but could I… uh—is it okay if I hold your hand?”

There was a beat.

“No, I’m sorry,” Steve backtracked immediately, cheeks heating. “That was just weird. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay.” Bucky interrupted. He sounded surprised, but not in a bad way. “It’s just that I should probably be on your left to do that.”

Steve blinked. “Oh,” he said. “Right.”

Bucky sounded almost amused now. “One-armed logistics nobody thinks about. Wait…” Steve heard him shift and turn on his stomach. A second later, his hand was brushing the mattress next to Steve’s head. “Here.”

Steve slipped his hand over Bucky’s, interlaced their fingers, and was almost embarrassed by the weight it took off his shoulders.

“Thanks,” he said. His throat was too tight. “This is dumb. I’m sorry.”

“No.” Bucky’s voice was soft. “It’s fine. I…” He paused, like he was trying to sort out his words; but then he just repeated, quieter, “It’s fine.”

There was a silence, crossed by their joined hands. Steve could feel Bucky’s pulse, if he focused hard enough. The exhaustion of a week in the cold, always looking over his shoulder for
Rumlow’s shadow, suddenly fell on him like a ton of bricks.

Tomorrow would be a hell of a journey. He still wasn’t sure he’d entirely wrapped his mind around it.

“G’night, Buck,” he murmured.

“Good night,” Bucky said, and for a longing second, Steve wanted to shift closer; but he closed his eyes and focused on Bucky’s hand.

*B*

Bucky woke up at 5am sharp, got out of bed and barged into the bathroom just in time to fall to his knees and throw up into the toilet.

It hadn’t happened to him in a while, and it burned and hurt his throat, and his stomach was still convulsing even though there was nothing left inside and fucking Christ, it’s today, it’s already today. Something was screaming at the back of his brain on a single, prolonged note, like a siren. Everything had happened way too fast. Coulson’s answer, and then Coulson’s proposal, and suddenly the world was rushing at Bucky like the ground at a falling man. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to do this.

When he looked up, still gasping and shaking, Steve was at the door. Bucky wanted to say something to him, but then he started heaving again.

Steve, bless his skinny ass, didn’t ask Bucky if he was fine. He walked into the bathroom and gathered his greasy hair in his hand, raking his nails over his scalp as he did. Bucky shivered a little, felt a thrill go up and down his spine. It was weird, for something to feel this good even as he was still retching over the toilet. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he didn’t deserve it at all.

“Done?” Steve asked softly after three long, painful minutes.

Bucky slumped on the tile; if Steve hadn’t been there, he would have rested his head on the toilet bowl. “Yeah,” he rasped. “Yeah, I… I think.”

Steve’s fingers slipped out of his hair. Bucky was shaking for good, now, and drenched in a cold sweat. He brought his knees up and scooted back until he could sit with his back against the wall.

“We’re off to a great start,” he managed, shuddering, “aren’t we.”

He heard Steve fiddle with the tap, filling up a glass of water. “Without you, there wouldn’t have been a start at all,” he said.

He gave him the glass. It was warm water. Bucky held it close to his chest so his shivers wouldn’t slosh it everywhere. After another couple of minutes, he felt steady enough to sip a tiny bit, thankful for the awful taste being washed down.

He took his time drinking. When he was done, Steve took the glass back and flushed the toilet.

“Wanna take a shower?” he asked.

*What, with you?* prompted Bucky’s brain—that one was just a reflex from a lifetime of ribbing
and quipping, really; but the ensuing intrusive thoughts made him claw at himself inside. *No no*. He was *forbidden* to think about anything like that. He’d done too much progress with Steve, earned too much trust even when it was clearly wasted on him. And he *literally* still had the taste of bile in his mouth—what the hell was wrong with him?

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely, pushing to get back to his feet. “I’m gonna do that.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “Take all the time you need.” He left the room and closed the door behind him.

Bucky stood still for a few shivering minutes. Eventually, he unstuck himself from the wall and started shedding his clothes with clumsy, jerky gestures.

The shower revived him a little, like one revives a corpse. Bucky stayed under the stream until his anxiety didn’t let him stand still anymore, screaming he was going to be *late* and he had to *hurry* even though it wasn’t even six in the morning yet; once he was out, he quickly dried himself, shivering, then stumbled naked into the bedroom, which—well, thank God Steve wasn’t there.

Though, he suddenly remembered, Steve was going to see all of him very soon.

Maybe this *really* wasn’t the best idea.

*Yeah, no kidding,* Bucky thought with dark sarcasm as he pulled on mismatched clothes. It didn’t matter; he’d be taking them all off in a few hours, and he had to stop himself from pulling on three shirts and a hoodie as he usually did. In so few layers, he felt too vulnerable, but he could not afford to take fifteen minutes to undress when the time would—

—deep breaths, deep fucking breaths.

He’d been naked in a room full of people before; he’d showered along with his team, and his sense of privacy had taken a serious dent during his stay at the hospital. But this wouldn’t be the same, he knew. Because—and he realized it as he formulated the thought in his mind—he actually cared what Steve would think of him.

He shoved his erratic feelings down and went out into the living room.

“Hey,” Steve said. He looked kinda stressed out, himself, staring at his bowl of cereal like he expected spiders in it. He looked up and gave Bucky a little grimace. “I don’t suppose you’re hungry?”

“Not really, no,” Bucky said.

He stood there for an awkward minute which seemed to stretch out into eternity. Then he stammered, “Can we—can we go? Like, right now? I know it’s too early, but I—I freak out a lot less when it’s still dark outside.”

Steve got up at once. “Whatever you need, Buck.”

He put his still-full cereal bowl into the fridge, which Bucky thought was a rather odd thing to do, but who was he to talk.

“Subway or bus?” Steve asked.

Bucky blinked at him, then the question registered and he said quickly, “Subway. Definitely subway.”
Sure, overcrowded subway cars were only marginally better than open skies, but he’d take any margin he could get.

“Subway it is,” Steve said. “Is there anything you know you’d like me to do? Something that might help?”

Bucky thought for a second. Then he said, “Could you—maybe—stay on my left side? Like, when we walk?”

He felt ashamed just for asking, but Steve smiled at him and repeated, “Whatever you need.”

*

Bucky looked paler and paler as they both put on their coats and scarves and shoes. Steve had wondered how he managed to tie his laces, but as it turned out, he had Velcro shoes. It still took him several tries before he was done.

“Okay,” he said miserably. “Guess I’m ready.”

He didn’t say another word as they stepped in the hallway, and silently handed Steve his keys so he could lock the door for him.

“Elevator?” Steve asked.

Bucky jerkily shook his head and headed for the stairs.

They started going down. Bucky was oddly watchful of his steps; Steve realized losing his arm must have fucked up his balance—and he wouldn’t have got a lot of opportunities to practice stairs if his agoraphobia kept him locked inside his apartment.

For what felt like the first time, Steve took the full measure of what Bucky had lost. An entire limb, gone, forever—gone, the simple evidence of having two hands, of living in a world built by and for two-handed people. To say nothing of the trenches of war still ravaging his mind. What courage he’d had to muster to come down and get him, that fateful night when he’d saved Steve’s life.

“This is stupid,” Bucky said between his teeth, too pale. “I’m sorry, Steve, this is so fucking stupid.”

These self-loathing words clashed so much with Steve’s train of thought that he said without thinking, “Yellow.”

Bucky stopped in the middle of the stairs. “What?”

Steve kept going for a few steps; then he stopped, too, and looked up at him. “I said yellow,” he said. “I don’t want you apologizing about doing stuff for me. It’s not right.”

Bucky huffed a short, dark laugh. “I don’t think that’s how safewords work.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you’re such an expert,” Steve said.

Bucky quirked a small smile, then started going down again, bowing his head to stare at his feet, hair falling down before his eyes. Steve waited for him, then went down by his side, and there
was a moment of quiet.

Steve knew he should have been more stressed out, himself; but it all felt too much like a weird dream. His thoughts hadn’t caught up on the reality of what he was living. At the moment, it helped him not to freak out, which was very much needed, so he didn’t try to prepare himself to what was coming. As they went down the last flight of stairs, he did abruptly hope, though, that Rumlow wouldn’t be out there waiting for them. God—he’d completely forgotten about him until then.

And then suddenly they were on ground floor, behind the glass doors of the building’s hall. The outside was dark and orange, and for a second Steve saw it as a completely unsheltered, alien world—as Bucky must see it.

Bucky exhaled. “You know where to go, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said. He’d memorized the plan while Bucky was taking his shower. “I know this neighborhood, Buck. I was on the streets for three weeks before you picked me up.”

“That was a weird thing to do, wasn’t it?” Bucky said tightly. “Just—grabbing you and taking you upstairs. You must have thought I was some kind of rapist serial killer.”

“But you’re not,” Steve said softly.

“And now we’re doing this even though you never asked for it—God, I never even asked you if you wanted to get into this fucking school—”

“Bucky, it’s my dream,” Steve said quietly. “Stop. You’re the greatest guy I know.”

Bucky scowled. “You musta met a lot of terrible people then.”

And then he pushed the door and stepped outside.

Steve instantly saw the toll it took on him. Bucky had been tense before; but the second he stopped having four walls around him, he went completely rigid. His eyes darted from building to building, came back to the people walking around them, glued themselves to the ground for three forceful seconds before they started whipping around again. His breathing was quick and shallow.

He screwed his eyes shut, then reopened them. “Ugh,” he said. “Fuck.”

“Good to go?” Steve asked uneasily.

Bucky nodded his head yes, no, maybe. “Let’s just—move.”

He started walking at a very quick pace, and Steve hurried after him. Thankfully, Bucky was living very close to the Bedford Nostrand Avenue station; they wouldn’t even have to cross the street. But it was still a ten minute walk.

Steve didn’t even look around for Rumlow—if he’d been there, Bucky would have spotted him. He moved like he was in a horror movie, expecting a jumpscare at every turn. Steve wasn’t sure what to do, to speak or not to speak, to get closer to him or give him some space; he felt almost as helpless as Bucky looked. Bucky was already ashen, yet somehow still managed to get paler by the second. He wouldn’t have walked differently crossing a warzone.

Just as Steve was about to ask if there was any way he could help, Bucky blurted, “Can you—say something. Anything.”
“Sure,” Steve said. “Wanna… um, wanna hear about my very first fight? I was six.”

Bucky’s restless eyes landed on him for half a second. “Six?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, hurrying not to fall behind. “Well, my mom always said I started younger, but it’s the first one I remember.”

Bucky was back to compulsively scanning their surroundings, but the fleeting shadow of a smile tugged up his lips for a second. “Okay,” he rasped. “So why’d you fight?”

“Bunch of little punks pouring salt on a slug. I told them to stop.”

“And?”

Steve shrugged. “They didn’t wanna.”

Bucky huffed a dry laugh—then startled violently when an ambulance blared by, freezing on the sidewalk.

“Bucky?”

Bucky was staring into space, translucent pale. Steve tugged on his sleeve. “Bucky,” he said. “I’m here. You’re in New York. We’re okay.”

Bucky blinked several times, then looked at him; for a second, it looked like he didn’t recognize him at all. But then he swallowed, and some awareness crept back into his gaze. Sweat was beginning to bead at his temples.

“This is just so fucking sad,” he breathed. “I’m sorry, Steve, I—”

“Red,” Steve said firmly. “You don’t apologize.”

Bucky opened his mouth, then clicked it shut. Steve was still holding onto his empty sleeve; he reluctantly let go, then nodded towards the end of the street.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re almost there.”

Bucky swallowed again, then followed him to the subway. As soon as they stepped underground, he relaxed by the tiniest fraction; the line of his shoulders was still tense as Steve bought the tickets, and he looked ready to snap every time travelers came a bit too close to them. But no one was paying them attention—a tiny blond man in a too-big jacket, and a one-armed veteran with crazy eyes; nothing that’d raise a New Yorker’s eyebrow.

“I got them,” Steve said. “C’mon.”

He’d bought the return ones in advance, though the possibility of a return trip seemed completely abstract at the moment. The idea that they could not only get to their destination, but also actually accomplish their goal? No, something was going to get in their way; the email would prove a prank from some bored ARC intern; Bucky would freeze and refuse to move; Steve would freeze and fail to draw; Rumlow would appear and kill them both. No actual future was conceivable beyond the immediate next step of their journey. Which was taking the actual subway.

When they got into the station, Steve noted with relief it was almost empty—they were too early for rush hour. It was white-tiled, with red, square columns lining up along the platform.

Bucky looked like he’d stepped back from the edge of madness, at the very least; but he was still
terribly tense. He kept glancing nervously to the left, where the train would appear. When the faraway, oncoming clatter started to bounce off the echoing walls, Bucky froze up—and screwed his eyes shut when it rushed into the station.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked over the rumble of the train.

Bucky shook his head, eyes still tightly shut.

“Talk to me,” Steve said as the train started skidding to a halt. “Even if you think there’s nothing I can do—tell me what’s going on in your head.”

Bucky swallowed. “It’s…the noise,” he said. “Loud things coming at me, it’s—”

The doors clacked open, making him jolt. He reopened his eyes and added miserably, “And, you know, it’s not like I can put my hands over my ears or anything.”

The people were coming out. Steve looked at him, then took an executive decision. First they had to get in, though.

“Let’s go,” he said, and Bucky followed without question. He really did behave like he was in a warzone, following his commanding officer’s every order. Which—made Steve his commanding officer, apparently. Steve wasn’t sure he was entirely comfortable in that role, but he had to do his best. It was his fault Bucky was in this mess.

They slipped inside without too much trouble; it wasn’t overstuffed—Steve was more and more grateful Bucky had made them leave so early—but it was still full. It was really hot in here, and Steve zipped open his jacket as the doors closed behind them.

“How many stations?” Bucky whispered in a tightly-wound voice. He was staring at the ground.

“Eight,” Steve said. “Going to the end of the G train.”

“And then we’re there?” He sounded pleading.

“No—then there’s five stations on the F train.”

Bucky nodded, then winced when the train picked up speed, roadbed clacking in a merciless staccato under their feet. The noise seemed to fill up space like a swelling scream.

“Are you a veteran?” asked a clear, direct voice over the din.

Bucky froze. Steve, who’d been looking around for an empty seat, turned round: it was a woman, in one of the seats with their backs to the wall. Steve stepped closer to Bucky and said, “Yes ma’am, he is.”

“Then you can have my seat.” She got up, without adding anything else, and walked to the other side of the car.

Bucky still looked petrified. “I—don’t—”

“Take the seat, Buck,” Steve said.

Once again, Bucky obeyed without question, while Steve thanked the woman with a look. After he’d sat down, though, Bucky looked up at him with a shadow of helpless anger in his eyes. “I don’t need to be sitting down,” he said between his teeth. “It’s not—it doesn’t make any difference.”
“I know,” Steve answered. “Just wanted to try something. Can I?”

Bucky couldn’t have known what he was asking, but he still gave a little jerky nod, looking anxiously at him. Steve hesitated for a split second, then took a step forward and put his hands over Bucky’s ears, slipping his fingers under his long hair. He shuffled closer so Bucky could press his face into his stomach.

Surprise made Bucky go still for a second; but then he relaxed with a bone-deep shudder, pushing a little against him.

“That okay?” Steve murmured, bowing his head close so he could be heard, pressing his hands tighter over Bucky’s ears after speaking.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered in a shaky whisper. His voice cracked when he added, “Thank you.”

Steve felt wetness seep through his shirt. At first, he didn’t understand—then it seized him at the throat, almost pushing tears out of his own eyes.

“Hey,” he murmured helplessly. “Buck, you’re... you’re doing great.”

Bucky let out a wet scoff. “You know I’m not.”

“You’re terrified of doing this and you’re doing it anyway,” Steve murmured fiercely. “That’s the very definition of bravery. I won’t let you think otherwise.”

He wished he could have kissed him—he wished he could have known, for certain, that a kiss would convey the deep stunned emotion he felt for this shaking man. It was a pure, unadulterated feeling, which existed only by and for itself. There was only the immediacy of knowing that Bucky, so unthinkingly generous, so heartbreakingly brave, was absolutely worthy of love—and so Steve loved him almost despite himself, like some kind of physics law, like air rushing in to fill a vacuum.

The eight stations went by in a blur. Some people were probably staring, but Steve and Bucky were enclosed in their bubble for a few precious moments. Bucky was holding very still, but it felt like he was centering on himself, rather than building up tension. His breathing was slow and deliberate.

Eventually, the doors opened on Court Square station, and the train emptied itself. Steve stepped back regretfully, immediately missing the warmth of Bucky’s forehead against his stomach, and the softness of Bucky’s hair as the strands slipped out of his fingers.

Bucky blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the light. When he looked up at Steve, his eyes were still red-rimmed, and he looked more frazzled than ever; but there was also something new in his gaze, which made Steve feel like maybe that train had taken them much further than they’d meant to go.

Nobody gave up their seat on the F train.

Bucky was sharply aware Steve would have kicked up a fuss, if he hadn’t known this was everything they didn’t need right now. They stood pressed against each other, but it wasn’t like
before—other people were pressed around them, the train to Midtown much busier than the one coming from Brooklyn. Bucky felt like he was about to vibrate out of his skin, and a piercing migraine was swelling behind his left eye; but the lights and the noise and the people and the constant assault of micro-information were toned down just a little by the memory of Steve holding him close, letting him rest his forehead against his narrow body, wrapping him in his embrace for a precious while and giving him shelter.

*Lay your weary head to rest,* sang something in Bucky’s memory. Shit, that stupid show Rebecca used to watch all the time. He wondered how she was doing. He could have read one of her thousand emails to know—he’d been shocked, waiting for Coulson’s reply, to see how many there were. But this disastrous trip to Midtown only went to prove that his family was better off not knowing what a miserable wreck their son had become. Steve having to witness it was enough of a humiliation already.

Bucky was inconceivably tired, like all the marrow had been sucked out of his bones. Stress was the only thing keeping him upright; he hadn’t stopped being nauseous since the morning. He hadn’t eaten anything in almost three days now, and dark spots danced in his vision from time to time. When he thought of how this was only the very *beginning* of this fucking day, he wanted to physically collapse—to curl up in a dark corner and put his head between his knees until everything had gone away.

A faint part of him was very glad it was too late to back off. Because as he was now, if the smallest chance to flee had presented itself, he would have seized it and ruined Steve’s tenuous hope of a brighter future.

“We’re there,” Steve said.

Bucky swallowed. The subway had been something of a respite, but he knew they couldn’t stay underground forever.

Oh, *shit,* the sun must be up by now.

“How far’s the Mansion?” he asked nervously.

“Five minute walk, Buck.”

Bucky nodded like this hadn’t been a death sentence. And the doors opened, and they left the train, and they walked the hallways, and they found themselves out in the open again.

The sun *was* up, and it was like the skies were a vacuum trying to suck him up into nothingness.

Bucky looked down, *down,* because looking up made everything infinitely worse, and focused on his steps best as he could, and started walking. He had to keep walking. He had to boil himself down to this single act. Because, when he thought about it, *even* if he suddenly decided to give up, he would still have to *walk* to get to safety—*walk* under the open wound gaping over his head. There was nowhere to go, but forward, into the very terror he wanted to run from. Bucky was truly back to war—to the paradox of a situation where he couldn’t keep going, and yet it was all he could do. War never lets you stop. You are always crawling in the mud, in the dust, with a missing arm, a missing leg, guts spilling out of you. You keep going, even when everyone else lies butchered around you, even when there is no real reason to move. You keep going. Only the dead get to stop.

“Bucky,” Steve said. “You’re in New York. I’m with you. We’re walking down the street and we’re safe.”
His voice sounded distant, but Bucky hung onto it like a drowning man to a friendly hand. Steve was shielding his wounded side from the bullet trails and the phantom blasts echoing all around them.

“I won’t leave you alone,” Steve said. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I’m with you and I’ll stay with you.”

Bucky walked like he was in a nightmare, unsure of the ground under his feet, of the distance he’d pushed behind him. Above him was nothing, like a big fat chunk had been ripped away from the world. Nothing was the enemy, because open skies stood not in the way of bullets and shrapnel.

“We’re walking.” Steve was the only solid thing in a fuzzy, blurry world. “We’re going to the Mansion. We’re almost there.”

He was going to fall head over heels. To be swallowed into the sky. He felt the wind, sucking up, the dilatation of the atmosphere around him. Soon the car swerving upside down, the world turning on its head, Bucky hanging from the ceiling with his arm wrenched at an awful angle, the safety belt stuck, the doors deadlocked—and Thornton’s blood trickling down for hours, so excruciatingly slowly, drop by drop by drop onto Rumlow who shouted for it to stop, and raged, and begged, and sobbed, until his voice broke.

“We’re almost there.”

Nothing but white noise in his head. He was slipping away, curling up into a safe corner of his mind.

“Stay with me,” Steve said, from a great distance. “Just a bit more.”

The skies closed down and the endless void suddenly shrank into a much smaller space. Doors opened and closed, and Bucky blinked, blinked again, and looked around him.

He was in a great, beautifully wainscoted hall, with dark panels of wood and chandeliers of crystal above his head. A thousand paintings were hung on every wall. Some were huge, some tiny, some oval and some square. The floor was shining marble, folding up into large steps leading to a massive front desk. The desk was lit by a single, tasteful, red-and-gold stained glass lamp.

He shook himself, came back into himself like reeling in a fishing line. He swallowed, looked to his left, and there was Steve. Some part of him was surprised to find him here, like he would have been surprised at a too-coherent dream.

“Hey,” Steve said, looking anxious.

“Hey,” Bucky breathed in answer.

Steve dug up a smile to give him. “How… how’re you holding up?” he asked.

Bucky swallowed, then looked around. “Better,” he said, though he couldn’t quite say it in a steady voice.

The ceiling was too high for his taste, but it was still better than the fucking hellscape he’d just crossed. He had a hard time believing he really was here, in an actual ARC Mansion. The place was so classy it was unreal. It looked like the fucking staircase at Hogwarts. It was almost easier to think he really was still overseas and imagining all this.

But already the restlessness was milling under his skin again. Now came the second part of his torture. He tried not to think about it, tried not to speed towards this oncoming train.
“Okay,” Steve said, “we’re really early, but we can walk to the front desk and—”

“Mr. Rogers?” called someone.

They both looked up. A gorgeous woman was coming down the stairs, with bouncing dark hair and blood-red lips—the only concession to femininity in an otherwise starkly simple outfit. Something in her posture pinged at the back of Bucky’s brain. Military.

“You are Mr. Rogers,” she said, holding out a delicate hand. She had a crisp, precise English accent. “Aren’t you? My name is Peggy Carter.”

Steve shook her hand, reverting to what must be his default politeness—he was nervous, too. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am. I’m Steve.”

“I wasn’t expecting you so early,” she said, though she obviously had been expecting them. Bucky felt distantly baffled at the mere existence of people like her—with her entire life so obviously together, she might as well be a different species. What it must be like, he mused, to have everything under control at all times.

“And you must be Mr. Barnes,” she said.

She’d read his letter, apparently. There was no trace of mockery or contempt in her tone, though; and once again, Bucky felt some sort of kinship—or at the very least, he recognized enough patterns in her behavior to soothe his nerves by a tiny fraction. He gave her a formal nod. “James.”

“He’s my model,” Steve said, and there was some kind of defensive pride in his voice which surprised Bucky.

“I see,” Carter said. “Very well then.” Her bright eyes looked between them both. “This is all a bit unusual, I must say. But we’re all very eager to see what’ll come out of it.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Steve said. The line of his shoulders was tight. “We were hoping to get started right away, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” Carter said. “I think the Lehigh room has been made ready for you.”

Bucky’s surroundings faded out of awareness again as they were led through the polished corridors by Carter’s silhouette. His heart rate was going up already. What was he doing here, really? This place was so ridiculously, enormously out of his league. To bare himself to these walls would feel fucking obscene. He thought of Carter, imagined her well-defined, alabaster form arching into a graceful pose for Steve’s pencil. This made more sense than him—his limp hair and his badly shaven cheeks and his fucking stump. His unbalanced body and his unbalanced mind.

Carter stopped in front of a small, wooden door with a brass doorknob. She offered to take their coats, and didn’t even wrinkle her nose when she received Bucky’s sewn-up trench and Steve’s antique leather jacket.

They walked into the Lehigh room, and Carter hung their coats in a corner. To Bucky’s relief, it was much less stately than the great hall. It looked lived in, like people had come and gone in it during the day already, despite the early hour. There was only one opaque window on the far wall, right under the low ceiling. A big easel stood alone in front of an immaculate platform blasted with white light, like a field of nuclear snow.

This was where Bucky would stand. His vision swam for a second.
“So,” Steve said behind him.

“Yeah,” Bucky rasped.

Carter was gone. The door had closed behind her. Bucky didn’t want to do this. *Please, please, I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to. I don’t want to.*

“Bucky?” Steve asked. "Are you gonna be alright?"

No. The answer was no. But Bucky couldn’t explain how ashamed he was of his weakness, of his thousand goddamn neuroses, of all the fucking *drama* merely to *get* here. He was ashamed of his fear and he was ashamed of his shame. Mostly, he was devastated to realize he really couldn’t do anything anymore, not without an effort so humongous it completely ridiculed the very attempt. He didn’t know how to put this into words, the absolute despondency he felt, the feeling of being hollow, being a husk of a person and knowing he’d never get better. He didn’t know how to tell Steve that he had no idea what happened now, how he would react, how he would survive this entire thing. He was on the threshold of the unknown.

He didn’t want to *do* this. But the alternative was letting Steve down.

*War never lets you stop.*

His mind went blank, and maybe it was a mercy; he ducked his head and pulled his sweatshirt over it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Comments are always cherished :D
Bucky moved to undress, and Steve became so completely enthralled by what he was seeing that he forgot all the rest.

As he reached behind himself to grip the back of his shirt, his body formed a tense curve Steve could have drawn in a single breath—with a single brush of ink. Then he ducked his head, and his shirt came along with the sweatshirt. The first unexpected strip of bare skin burned itself into Steve’s retina. As the cloth fully slipped off, he drank in the expanse of Bucky’s back—his skin was sickly pale for not having seen the sun for so long, and his muscles too sharply defined underneath, as if the envelope shielding him from the world was getting thinner. All flat planes and hard lines. Bucky’s body was a razor.

Steve let his eyes run over it as it moved, as Bucky bent down to undo his shoes. For the first time, Steve was getting a good look at the left side of him, under that violent light which enhanced every detail. The skin over his stump was smooth and gleaming like a deep burn; going up, it burgeoned into a ring of gnarled scar tissue, which then slowly faded into healthy skin, like a sea monster gliding under the surface. The line of his shoulders was beautifully drawn; underneath, the angular brackets of his shoulder blades contrasted with the long, smooth dip of his spine, and Steve could have drawn just this—just his back, and the way the dark tangle of his hair parted over his white nape.

Bucky was trying to open his jeans, now, but shaking so hard he couldn’t pop the button.

Steve knew he should have busied himself, if only to make this more casual—to make it easier on this man who’d already went through so much for him. Stop staring at him like he wanted to make him feel like a complete piece of meat. But every time Bucky moved, the lights and shadows played in different ways, and his body turned into a thousand paintings, and Steve just couldn’t look away.

Bucky finally managed to pull down his jeans. He wasn’t wearing any underwear, probably hadn’t seen any point to it while dressing. Under the waist, too, his body was so sharply contoured it was almost painful to the eye. When he kicked the bundle of his clothes away from him, Steve saw the softness of him between his legs, just before they closed and he was all angles and lines again.

And then Bucky stopped moving. His breathing was audible in the deep silence.

“I—” he said. He was shivering, but apart from that holding very still. “Should I… turn around.
Or—or stay.”

And Steve hesitated.

Even though they’d come this far, he could still decide to put an end to it. He could still assume Bucky wasn’t in his right mind, pushing himself way too much, way too far. Steve could refuse to do this, if Bucky was too stubborn to preserve himself. Maybe it was his duty, even. Maybe it was a crime, maybe he was being a selfish monster, letting this happen.

But then what could he say? “Sorry, I changed my mind, thanks for trying, put your clothes back on?” He wasn’t cruel enough. Besides, they had a safeword system in place and Bucky had proved able and willing to use it. If he wanted to do this, Steve had no right to stop him, no matter how uncertain he was about it all. He had to allow him the dignity of his choice.

Steve wished he could have reassured him, at least—but then how could he have? What could he possibly say that’d make this entire situation better? He was going to do the very thing Bucky obviously feared. That was what they were here for. Between them was this violence to come, only barely soothed by consent. Nothing could be done to make it more bearable.

So Steve only said, “Yes. I want you to face me. Both feet planted on the ground. Look at me if you can.”

He had no idea why he was asking for such a straightforward position, when he’d been so fascinated by the twists and arches of Bucky’s body a minute ago. Something had gotten into him, the instinct he’d only felt in very rare occasions—when ripping his dysphoric image from the mirror, or desperately trying to keep his mother’s death away. He knew what he wanted, before he knew why he wanted it.

Bucky took a deep breath, and turned.

He was unavoidably naked now. The harsh white light splashed on every square inch of his body. There was no way for him to hide any part of himself, and Steve realized this was precisely why he’d wanted him like this. So he couldn’t hide. Bucky always ducked his head and hunched his back, let his hair hide his face, his clothes hide his body.

Steve took a piece of graphite. It was cold and heavy in his hand, leaving dark smudges on his fingers already. He put his other hand on the paper, felt the grain of it under his suddenly hypersensitive skin.

A great calm took over his mind.

The very first line rendered him blind to his paper altogether. What he saw, as if through his easel, was Bucky and all the versions of himself, all these snapshots fading in and out of existence with his every breath. All of what Steve must attempt to preserve and crystallize. He’d never drawn with a surer hand. First came the line of his shoulders, the axis of his spine, and then Steve was not thinking at all anymore. Bucky was…

Bucky was staring straight ahead, with the same haunted gaze he’d had walking under open skies. Exhaustion was carved into every last line of his body; screams and horror lay curled up into the negative space of his missing arm. The edges of his ribs and hipbones cut through the air when he breathed.

He was drawn tight with the need to stay upright. His shoulders were squared in effort; his feet were pushing down the floor. Thighs rigid, stomach a flat plane with tension. Shallow breaths were parting his lips. His hair was disheveled, his eyes red-rimmed. He was built according to the
life he’d been leading, with whipcord muscle on sharp bones, without the kindness of fat. Strength in his arm, strength in the verticality of his legs, in the width of his hips. Strength in the shadow he cast on the floor, standing in the way of light.

He was human, excruciatingly so, with frizzly hair trailing down to his penis, his balls drawn tight and close to his groin, his hand twitching in his efforts not to hide himself. Human the despondency, the exhaustion; human the disbelief that he really was human, that he was something to look at.

Most of all, he was painfully beautiful, the golden ratio of his frame in sharp contrast with the absence of his left arm. His chest was broad and strong, with a few strewn hairs curling in the dip of his pectorals. There were shadows carving perfect arches under his eyebrows, his cheekbones, his jaw. No color on his face except for his lips; and framing it, the dark mass of his hair, like a wildling, like a survivor from a far distant land. His eyes alone could have warranted hours of work. He was alive, vibrantly alive, despite the weight on his shoulders, the deaths attached to his steps, the stormclouds in his mind.

And he was crying. It had started imperceptibly, eyes watering, jaw straining in his efforts to hold it back; but now there were hot tears running down his motionless, mesmerized face. His lips were trembling with his shaky, silent breath. His body was locked in painful effort.

Standing still for so long was way too difficult a position. Steve should have called for a break a long time ago. For how long had he been drawing? He felt like he could only have been five minutes, but in a moment of awareness, he realized he was working on the tiniest details of Bucky’s eyes, already, the smallest wrinkles and the faintest shadows. The next second, his enthrallment swallowed him again; he was losing time and losing space, projected whole into the beauty he tried to seize. His fingers were black with coal. He couldn’t stop. His whole body felt like it could crumble at any given time, except for his drawing hand, certain and driven. This whole situation was so deeply unreal, like a miracle he could feel slipping from his fingers already. He had entirely forgotten their reason for coming here. In fact, he’d forgotten where they were at all.

And Bucky was crying, shaking, but he was staring at Steve, too, hanging onto Steve’s eyes for dear life, and Steve never looked away. He owed this to him. He couldn’t have looked away if he’d tried. There was no weight to his body; time had come to a standstill. As they kept staring at each other, as Bucky kept pouring into Steve and Steve into Bucky, they both felt what the other felt—Bucky, the intuition of something he would have never associated with himself; Steve, the echo of a trust so absolute it was difficult to fathom. They were both trembling with physical exhaustion, with cold and hunger, with a long week of nerve-wracking anxiety, with this alien, unsettling situation they’d found themselves in. It was unbearable, it couldn’t last, and yet Bucky kept standing still and Steve kept drawing, like something had taken possession of them both at the same time. It all came down to the lines and shadows Steve put onto paper, his thumb spreading smudges under Bucky’s eyes, painting silver into his irises, shading his jaw with stubble, filling with shadows all the hollows of him. There was a sharp delimitation between the soft white grain of untouched paper, and the growing solidity of the drawn image, volume, weight, presence. Steve felt like he was drawing not a portrait but a person, always coming back to add more truth, more fragments of soul, so close to have it come to life.

Then his graphite started hovering over the paper without touching it, like a magnet over a magnet. Perfect, the hands and feet told him, perfect, the hipbones and clavicles scolded him, perfect, we are perfect, the hair and eyes and lips told him. And he ran in circles, and he tried to add more, refusing to understand for a minute. But then, then, he realized it had to be over. He swayed on his feet, stepped back from the easel. Yes. Yes. It was over. He was done. There was nothing more he could do.
Steve dropped his graphite which broke on the floor with a dry little sound. He stumbled further away from his drawing, looking around as though trying to gather the thoughts he’d been scattering. His sight was blurry; his hands were trembling.

“Bucky?” he said hoarsely.

Bucky didn’t move. He was standing naked and so pale he could have been made of marble, gutted with exhaustion, so tired he couldn’t even shiver anymore. His gaze was empty, distant, and Steve was suddenly skewered with terror.

He walked to him, hurrying as he got closer. “Bucky, hey—” he called, heart kicking into tachycardiac panic, reaching to frame his face, making him look down—but Bucky’s eyes went right through him. “No,” Steve breathed, “no, God, Bucky,” he shook him a little, but Bucky didn’t react, didn’t move at all, “I’m so sorry, I’m—I should have—just—Bucky? Bucky, God, please just talk to me, please—tell me—”

Bucky’s forehead pressing against his made him abruptly shut up. Steve stood there, panting, eyes burning.

“Hey,” Bucky rasped, faint and hoarse.

Steve couldn’t breathe. He swallowed thickly, painfully.

“Hey,” he echoed in a shaking whisper.

Bucky was in fact still shivering, too faintly to be seen, but enough for Steve to feel it. When he spoke again, he sounded like he’d only recently learned to speak English. “Can I…” He looked for his words. “Sit down? Is the…” Another silence, then with difficulty, “Are you done? Or do I need to…”

“I’m done, God, I’m done,” Steve hurried to say. “Bucky, I’m done. You can sit. You can rest.”

Bucky sat down, his body stiff and heavy, naked on the cold floor. Steve looked around and spotted a luxurious fur coat hung in a corner of the room, next to their own jackets. He didn’t even care whose it was—he hurried to it, grabbed it, and brought it back to wrap it over Bucky’s shoulders.

Bucky made an odd little sound, like he hadn’t expected that. Steve sat with him, hands fluttering over his frame, too guilty to touch him; but then Bucky folded forward and settled with his head on Steve’s thigh like it had always been the plan, burrowing under the coat and exhaling a deep sigh, his face turned towards Steve’s stomach.

Steve helped him find a comfortable position, curled his arms tight around him, trying to shield him from the entire world. “I’m so sorry,” he repeated over and over. “I’m so sorry.”

Bucky muttered something.

“What?” Steve said. “I didn’t hear—”

“I said red,” Bucky mumbled louder.

Steve blinked.

Resting his head a little more comfortably on Steve’s leg, Bucky took a deep, long breath, and exhaled. For a few seconds, everything was utterly silent.
“Hey,” he mumbled into Steve’s thigh. “Steve.”

It took Steve way too long to muster the answer. “What?”

Bucky reopened his eyes, just a sliver of grey peeking up, with crinkles at the corners. “I think we made it,” he said wanly.

Steve huffed what he thought to be a laugh, but then he realized he was crying—crying for real this time, his body starting to convulse with oncoming bursts of tears.

“Yes,” he managed, “we made it,” and then he crumpled down and sobbed into Bucky’s shoulder.

He’d almost forgotten that his body was capable of those huge heaving sobs, drawing his breath in erratic stutters, wringing all the sadness out of him. Bucky didn’t try to stop him, didn’t tell him to calm down. He’d curled his arm around Steve’s narrow frame, and, holding him close, he was letting him cry.

When it became obvious that Steve wasn’t just shaking with sobs, but also with cold and fatigue, Bucky whispered, “Hey. Come here. Come under here.”

Steve was crying too hard to resist; he let himself be pulled under the heavy fur, and Bucky tugged it around them both, bringing their bodies together. He was naked, but it didn’t matter. Standing there for hours on end, it hadn’t mattered.

Or rather, he had mattered. Steve had drawn and drawn and drawn, and every time Bucky had expected him to wince and step back and say that was probably the best he could do considering the circumstances, Steve had kept drawing instead, looking almost obsessed, looking fascinated, like Bucky was a multitude, an endlessness, a whole. Like he was all Steve would rather be drawing. For hours on end.

And Bucky had started feeling strange, like everything he was feeling, everything bad and hard and uncomfortable, he was feeling it for Steve; like his physical pain and his mental anguish were being sublimated into something beyond themselves. Suddenly they’d found a use, a purpose; they were no longer their own end, and as a result Bucky wasn’t stopping at them. There was somewhere further to go. He was standing still, and it was taking a heavy toll on him, to hold the position, naked under this harsh white light, to keep exposing himself; but he’d realized that now that push had come to shove, he could withstand it. This was so much easier than fighting his nightmares. This was sheer, old-fashioned physical strain. And this he knew how to deal with. You just stood and endured.

So he’d stood and endured, and as Steve drew him, Bucky had started feeling more and more of this sublimating feeling, like some great pure glow was coming from the inside of him, making his mind white out. Steve had lit it up. Steve had made him feel it. Bucky had started crying, then, with gratitude or with something more—love, maybe, the deep relief of it, of feeling something so pure when he’d been afraid he couldn’t feel anything anymore.

Eventually, the pull of fatigue had started to become stronger than these confused emotions; but even then Bucky had kept standing, feeling only a deep calm at the thought that soon it would be over, soon he would have done it, and he could rest, and Steve would be happy with him. And he
had waited, sinking deeper and deeper into himself, into a quietness like he hadn’t known in ages.

He was only barely coming out of it now, as physical rest finally overtook his body, warming up, tension ebbing like a low tide, awareness coming back to him. Steve was crying less violently, breath hitching, narrow shoulders shaking. He’d pressed his face into Bucky’s shoulder, and he was spreading snot and tears all over him, and Bucky was absolutely stoked about it. He’d finally managed to bring him some comfort.

“I’ll s-stop,” Steve hiccupped, “I’m s-sorry, I’ll s-stop, I j-just—”

“You cry all you want,” Bucky murmured.

The fur was so thick they were already warming up. Bucky shifted a little to put less pressure on his arm. “Where’d you find that coat?”

A tiny smile burst on Steve’s lips, between two gasps. “It was just hanging in a c-corner,” he said—but then he pulled back and looked at Bucky with that helpless, desperate look again. “Bucky, I’m s-so sorry—I let you stand there all that t-time…”

“Fuckin’ red,” Bucky muttered. “Listen to my safeword, dammit.”

“But—”

“You were standing upright too, I recall,” Bucky said. “Steve—just stop saying sorry. We gotta stop saying sorry to each other. I don’t have the energy for this. We—I think we did something good, and I—I don’t wanna fight about it. Please.” He brought their foreheads together. “Stop.”

Steve’s breath hitched again, but then went smoother, a little. “Okay,” he said in a small voice. “Okay, I… okay.” He swallowed. “It’s just—you weren’t answering me. It was like you were gone.”

“I think I was,” Bucky murmured. He smiled a little. “But it wasn’t a bad thing.”

There was a silence, during which Steve’s breathing returned to a shuddery version of normal.

“Could I see it?” Bucky asked. “The drawing?”

“Of course you can,” Steve answered. “Maybe—if you wanna dress first…”

Dressing did sound like something he should do. They sat up together, the heavy coat sliding off of them. Bucky awkwardly got up, stumbling a little as if he hadn’t eaten in days. Which he hadn’t. Steve sat there for another second, sniffling a little and wiping his eyes.

Bucky grabbed his jeans and put them on. It was oddly freeing, not to care about his nudity, about what Steve would think of it, if he’d be shocked or disgusted or appalled. He’d already seen it all. Bucky picked up his shirt next, but it was hopelessly entangled with his sweatshirt. He considered it for a dejected second, trying to muster an energy he resolutely didn’t have; but then Steve came to him and helped him—easily separating them, without making a fuss about it, turning them inside out then just helping Bucky put them on, the shirt then the sweatshirt, arranging the sleeve over his left arm.

Bucky let him. He’d always thought he couldn’t stand being helped with that. But he knew for certain there was no condescension in Steve’s gesture. It was nice, allowing himself to give in for this little thing, letting someone make his life just that much easier.

“There,” Steve muttered. He looked nervous. “I, um… I don’t know if you’ll like it—I… I did my
Bucky didn’t answer. He just took his hand and led him behind the easel.

They both looked at the portrait for long minutes.

Bucky was aware Steve was glancing more and more nervously at him, but he couldn’t react. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from it.

Something was rising in his throat, like the urge to cry or to laugh, a painful swelling between his ribs. Everything he’d felt during the session, everything Steve had made him feel from day one, it was resolving itself into one unavoidable evidence. Bucky felt dumb, burningly dumb, but the truth of it was before his eyes, in the intensity with which Steve had drawn him, down to the cracks of his lips, the shadows carved into his cheeks, the worn edges of his nails, the haunted life in his eyes.

*I’m a person,* Bucky thought wearily. *Aren’t I?*

He’d spent so long convincing himself he wasn’t one anymore. He’d believed so deeply in his own worthlessness. He’d thought he could just give up on himself. What was he thinking, really? That he could just decide to stop being human? That he could just pretend life wasn’t touching him anymore? No. He’d been fooling himself. No one on this earth has the luxury of being a ghost. War never lets you stop, and he was still fighting. He was a person, despite the numbness which made him into a flat line sometimes, he was a person, and it was all he could do to carry on.

Steve was looking at him a bit anxiously still. Bucky tore his gaze away from the drawing, looked at him, smiled. “I’m fine,” he said. “It’s fine. Actually, it’s perfect.”

He squeezed Steve’s hand in his. “Let’s go home.”

They walked out the door, in the dark, gleaming corridors. When they reached the great hall, Peggy Carter was at the front desk. She looked up; her bright eyes went slightly rounder. “Steve. I thought you’d gone.”

“We were just leaving,” Steve said. “Thank you so much for having us.”

Bucky was looking through the beautiful glass doors. It was dark outside. They’d stayed in that room all day.

Carter still looked a bit baffled. “But—have you eaten at all?”

“No really,” Steve said, with his little smile. “We’re gonna go home and get some rest.”

“You do that,” she said, looking at him critically. They must look like they’d battled a bear in there, both red-eyed, obviously weak with hunger and sleep-deprived, pale and unsteady on their feet. Bucky distantly wondered what they’d done with the huge coat. He hoped Steve had put it back.

“Before then, however,” Carter said with a small smile curving up her red lips, “I would very much like to have your actual email, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh,” Steve blinked. He glanced at Bucky, who felt himself flush a little. But Steve just smiled before he turned his gaze to Carter again. “Sure thing, ma’am.”
She watched him scribble it on the perfect notepad she’d pulled out of nowhere. When he was done, she enquired, “Have you left the drawing in the Lehigh room?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “It’s only one drawing, but—yes,” he said, and in that last word there was pride.

Carter kept looking at him for a second. “I see,” she said. “Well—I won’t be keeping you. You look like you could both use some rest.”

She shook his hand, then reached for Bucky’s hand and briefly looked straight at him. There was faint amusement, but also a great deal of consideration in her gaze, and Bucky felt his mistreated sense of trust unfurl a little in response. He wondered if maybe it was thanks to her they had been able to come here today.

And then they were turning away, crossing the hall, heading for the exit. Just before they left the building, Bucky looked over his shoulder and saw Carter head for the Lehigh room, hurrying up a bit, like she was curious, even eager to see.

*See him,* he urged her silently. *See him for who he is.*

The cold air of the outside blew holes into his prayer, and he clung to Steve’s hand and bowed his head as they stepped into the darkness. The first thing they saw, getting out, was a kebab vendor at the corner.

Only this morning, Bucky would have never been able to stand still on the sidewalk for more than ten seconds; but a whiff of roasting meat was enough to override all other commands in his brain, and he almost begged Steve not to worry about him and just buy the fucking food. Steve got two shwarmas which were handed to them after three long minutes of torture, and they wolfed them down standing on the spot, without talking and almost without breathing, tearing off huge chunks of pita bread and greasy meat to be swallowed without chewing. Ambrosia wouldn’t have tasted better.

“Fuck,” Bucky exhaled, crumpling his paper in his hand.

“Agreed,” Steve said, a bit breathless.

It was far from enough, but it was the strength they needed to head back home.

The journey back was tougher and easier at the same time. Tougher, because they were both exhausted and stunned. Easier, because Bucky was less afraid at night; under obscured skies, he managed not to drift back to war, but mostly he was carried by what he’d accomplished, by the memory of that great warmth inside him, the feeling that maybe his fears and doubts did not always have to be the end to end all; this floating feeling made him just a bit less vulnerable, just a bit more whole.

What he’d done today might have seemed unsurmountable even to someone a whole lot less fucked up than him. But they’d made it, and now they were both on the other side, they were going home. For the first time in so long—he felt like he’d really *done* something.

“You know, I’m really proud,” Steve said.

They were on the G train to Brooklyn, sitting side by side. What time was it? The car was almost empty. Even the noise was more manageable.

“Maybe it’s not my place to say it, but I’m really proud of you.”
They were still tightly holding hands.

Bucky slowly turned his head towards him. It was definitely not his place to tell Steve he was proud of him, too, but he gave him a smile which he hoped conveyed the feeling. Steve smiled back, bright and warm.

“Hey, when do you think we’ll know?” Bucky said. “The results?”

Steve actually giggled. “I don’t know. I have no idea. Actually, I don’t really think anything’s gonna come out of this.”

“No, that’s okay,” Steve quickly reassured him. “It really is. I mean—it’s just one drawing, you know? They can’t decently take me in over that. It would be so unfair to the other candidates. It was just a nice gesture, this whole thing, just a bit of charity.” He leaned back into his seat. “But that’s okay. Because I didn’t do it to get into the school. I did it for something so much more important.”

Bucky was looking at him. “What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

Steve was smiling at the ceiling like he was seeing stars through layers of metal and concrete. “I just… I have hope again, you know? Before I met you—I could only see dead ends everywhere I looked. And now I feel like anything’s still possible. Like just trying is enough to have a real chance.”

Bucky kept staring at him. This was what Steve’s drawing had made him feel, too. Hope. Like he was a person. Like it was okay for him to have the wants and dreams of a person. Maybe he wasn’t just a creepy, trash-dwelling, one-armed hermit, and maybe he could want some things—maybe if he kissed Steve, he wouldn’t be met with incomprehension or disgust.

The thought was deeply jarring; he tried to chase it away, cursing himself—but it came back. What if he kissed Steve? What would happen?

“It’s our stop,” Steve said.

Bucky got up. His heart rate was elevating, and it wasn’t because they were getting out of the subway and walking down their familiar street. Any other time, merely entertaining the possibility of doing this—it would have been dismissed at once, deemed stupid, ludicrous, shredded into pieces by the doubts lurking in the murky waters of his brain.

But Steve had fallen asleep holding his hand. Steve had shielded him from the crowd on the subway. Steve had drawn him again and again, and one last time like a celebration.

It was like when Bucky was a kid at the pool and sneaking onto the forbidden diving board, both thrilled and terrified by the height. Soon, someone would realize he was too small to be there, and make him go down before he had seized his chance to jump. He had to do something, and do it now, while he was still stupid enough to not think and let himself. In ten minutes, it would be too late. In ten minutes, he would be back to his cycle of fear and numbness; he would persuade himself he’d misinterpreted entirely Steve’s behavior and words. He probably had. Just because Steve was nice to him didn’t mean—God, he was starting already. Maybe it was already too late.

But he still didn’t have a definite answer to that question—if he kissed Steve, what would happen?

They were inside their building now. Steve called for the elevator, and Bucky didn’t even object. Not a chance of anyone else joining them for the six-floor ride, not at this hour. Whatever hour it
actually was.

The doors opened on yellow light; they stepped into the cramped space, let it close shut around them.

Steve hadn’t let go of his hand. Bucky held on to that detail for dear life. But God, he couldn’t decently do this. He was self-deluded. He was going to wreck everything, like he almost had already, going through Steve’s notebook. He could not allow himself another mistake like—

“Steve,” he blurted.

Steve looked up. He looked tired, but happy.

“Just—” Bucky was losing his breath; his heart was painfully hammering against his ribs, now. It was all he could hear. Jesus Christ, he was working himself into an anxiety attack over this. “If this isn’t right—just tell me—if I’m ruining everything—”

Steve’s brow furrowed slightly. “What are you talking about?”

Bucky had no idea whether this was right or wrong, whether he was blinded by pessimism or by hope. Anxiety was clawing at him already, like it had suddenly realized what he was trying to do, and catching up to him for good. He had to do this now, now or he would never—

He reached out as if to cup Steve’s cheek, only barely touching him. He leaned in, just enough for his long hair to brush Steve’s cheekbones.

And then he stopped. He was unable to do it all the way; able only to make his intention clear. Now he’d leaped, and now all he could do was wait, freefalling, utterly petrified with fear.

Steve was staring at him, eyes wide.

Bucky held still for one heartbeat, two heartbeats, and then felt himself crumble inside. “I didn’t mean—” he said, breathless with terror, drawing back his hand. “Steve, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I don’t know what I was—”

Steve kissed him.

It was softer than anything Bucky remembered. Just a touch of the lips, not even pressing yet. He stilled, so utterly focused on what he felt he didn’t dare move, didn’t dare breathe.

But then Steve slid the softness of his mouth over Bucky’s mouth, so gently Bucky could have cried, and Steve stepped close, as close as he could, pressing their chests together, and he wrapped his arms around Bucky; and Bucky finally broke the spell, wrapped his only arm around him in answer, held right. Steve’s hands came up, framed his face, buried themselves in his hair. When Steve deepened the kiss, licking past Bucky’s parted lips, just a little, just a touch, Bucky’s vision swam for a minute—the soft, hot slickness of it felt overwhelmingly intimate, and it kept jarring him out of the moment, some baffled part of him thinking this can’t be happening, I’m dreaming, this isn’t happening.

When they parted, it was only because the elevator doors had opened—also, Bucky felt like he was somewhat lacking in oxygen. But Steve was looking at him, eyes very blue, pupils blown, and Bucky kept completely forgetting to try and catch his breath.

Then the brightness ebbed, like a cloud was passing behind Steve’s eyes. Like he was realizing something.
He let go, stepped back, turned away, pulling the keys of the apartment out of his pocket.

A chorus of terrors burst into cackles at the back of Bucky’s brain, but—running on fumes of joy, of hope, of bewilderment, he managed to ignore them for a second more. “Steve,” he called. The door of the apartment was open; Steve had disappeared inside. “Steve, wait!”

He didn’t have to run very far to catch up to him; Steve had stopped in the middle of the living room, fidgeting with the keys. Bucky took the time to close the door, locked it. A small shiver ran through him; they were home, they were done, but this wasn’t even the relief he’d expected, because for the first time in months, in years, something was more important than mere quietness—mere safety—mere survival.

“Steve,” he repeated, throat dry. “Was that… didn’t you…?”

He didn’t dare to go on, couldn’t find the words, for fear of what they’d cause. He didn’t know how to ask this in a way that wouldn’t sound like he was demanding something. He was terrified of the answer.

Steve looked just as scared, though. His face was ashen, and when he spoke, his voice wavered.

“No, it—it was alright.” Then he scoffed at himself. “Christ. It was more than alright. But—” And then he started stammering worse than Bucky on his worst days, growing paler with each word. “But there’s—I think there’s—there’s something—you should know—probably—about me.”

He swallowed thickly, visibly gathering his courage, and Bucky thought, oh.

Oh!

He felt an odd mix of baffled relief—was that all? Was that the only thing that’d make Steve think twice about this?—and impending panic.

“I… I think I already know it,” he said.

Steve gave him a poor, brave little smile. “I don’t think you do.”

“No, but I do,” Bucky said. “You’re, um… you’re trans—is that it?”

Steve’s face.

So, uh, yeah. Maybe Bucky could have been a bit less abrupt about it.

There was a long minute of bug-eyed silence. Eventually, Bucky cleared his throat, hoping to break the ice.

It didn’t help with anything. Steve was still making the face.

“Um,” Bucky said, a little miserably.

Steve finally broke through his shell of shock.

“You knew?”

He couldn’t seem to be able to close his mouth. “You—but—since when?”

“Um,” Bucky repeated in an even smaller voice. “Since… the beginning of the week? I was putting your notebook back, and your… your ID fell out.”
Steve just stared at him.

“I wasn’t looking for it,” Bucky said, very weakly. “I know what it’s like—to be outed, I mean. I never meant to do that to you. I’m… I’m really sorry.”

“But—” Steve said. “But you kissed me.” He sounded like he wanted to make sure it had happened. “You knew, and you still…”

His voice trailed off. They just stared at each other, Steve still pale and stunned, Bucky entirely unsure of what happened now.

“So…” Steve swallowed. Then he gave a hopeful, tentative smile. “Could I—can I kiss you again?”

Bucky felt his eyes go wide; he nodded so eagerly he almost twisted something in his neck.

Steve exhaled a shuddery breath, wrapped his arms around him and kissed him full on the mouth, making him back off for balance, drawing a surprised noise out of him when they collided with the wall.

“Bucky,” Steve said between kisses, and he sounded so happy Bucky suddenly felt completely overwhelmed with his own happiness. This was the most ridiculous thing in the world—how could his wasteland of a mind even grasp the concept anymore?—and yet it lived inside his chest, so bright Bucky could have almost believed the shadows would never come back. It really made no sense, because Steve knew him—he’d seen the self-neglect, and the numbness, and the hundred ugly ways in which Bucky was broken; and yet he didn’t stop kissing him, like it really was Bucky he wanted to kiss.

Eventually, they did pause, Bucky still backed against the wall, Steve still pressed against him. They stared at each other for a few breathless, delirious seconds; then Steve started laughing, letting his head fall forward, against Bucky’s chest.

“God,” he said. “I can’t stand up. I’m gonna fall.”

Bucky felt the same. The day had been impossibly long, and he could feel his legs about to give out.

“Let’s go to bed,” Steve said. “But—together—please.”

“Yes,” Bucky answered. There was nothing he wanted more. “Yes.”

They hadn’t even taken off their jackets or shoes; they threw them off haphazardly then staggered to the bedroom and dropped into bed, tugged the sheets over their bodies. This time, instead of staying apart, they wrapped their limbs into a tangle, and it was a miracle to be allowed to touch—to hold—to breathe him in. Bucky knew he was holding on too tight, but he couldn’t let go. He was afraid if he let go he would wake up.

“You—” he mumbled into the crook of Steve’s neck. “You feel so good.”

He would have felt ridiculous and creepy, except that Steve’s arms squeezed him tight, Steve’s lips pressed into his hair, and he breathed shakily, “You too”—and Bucky thought this was by far the best thing anyone had ever said about him.
Steve didn’t remember falling asleep, and didn’t remember either, at first, why he woke up happy.

Then he realized Bucky was curled against him, breathing into his neck, and his happiness grew threefold, tenfold, so fierce it was almost painful. Steve turned to face him, to watch him and drink in the sight of him. He’d looked at him for so long already—but this wasn’t the same. He was so beautiful.

He was also awake; Steve could tell in the way he breathed, and the careful way he didn’t move. But he didn’t open his eyes and didn’t speak, and Steve knew him enough by now to know he was afraid to burst the bubble, as though he believed Steve to be under some strange delusion. Steve was more than happy to prove him wrong.

He inched closer and pressed his lips to Bucky’s cheekbone, in a soft, chaste kiss which made him go even stiller, holding his breath. Steve smiled, then kissed the corner of his lips. Then his neck, then his cheek. Just a peck every time, with that soft little noise, almost inaudible.

Bucky shivered with each tiny kiss, but he still said nothing and didn’t open his eyes. His expression was one of cautious wonder, and if he was tense, it was only with expectation.

Steve pressed a close-mouthed kiss to his lips, then slowly crawled on top of him, making him roll on his back—just so he could hug him like he wanted, with all his body, chest to chest. A smile was flickering on Bucky’s lips, like it wasn’t sure it should be there. Steve kissed it, and kissed it again, running his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

“This is so weird,” Bucky murmured.

Steve froze; and to feel him freeze made Bucky’s eyes blink open. “No—no, good weird,” he said. Then he winced. “Shit, this is why I wasn’t saying anything.”

Relieved, Steve let out a little laugh, then pressed a kiss to the tip of Bucky’s nose. “Why is it weird? I just wanna kiss you.”

“That’s weird,” Bucky mumbled as if to himself.

Steve kissed his mouth again, and for a split second Bucky parted his lips; then he sucked in a breath and turned his head away.

“Seriously,” he said.

Steve drew himself up on his elbows to look at him. Bucky looked worried, but not for himself—more like he was unsure whether Steve was in his right mind. “Steve, I… Well, first of all, I don’t have an arm.”

Steve blinked. “Bucky, I don’t care about that.”

“You’ve just—seen it from afar,” Bucky said, “but—it’s a stump, Steve, and it’s just there, it’s—it’s gross.”

Steve thought for a second. “Can I touch it?”

Bucky wrinkled his nose. “God, you’re not gonna kiss my scars or something, are you?”

Steve coughed a laugh. “No. I just want to try touching it. Get it out of the way, you know? Since it’s making you nervous about the rest.”
Bucky’s eyes searched his face; he didn’t look entirely comfortable with the idea, but he still closed his eyes and mumbled, “Sure—okay.”

Steve hesitated, then slipped his hand under Bucky’s clothes. His body, which had no common sense or decency, registered the faint trail of hair up Bucky’s flat stomach—his strong chest—and kicked into high gear. Steve firmly ignored himself and moved his hand into the loose sleeve. There was more than enough room for him to push his hand downwards over Bucky’s arm, even though he had to raise himself a bit higher on Bucky’s body for that. They were face to face, now, looking into each other’s eyes, and it was maybe a bit too close for comfort but Steve’s fingers were hitting the first bumps of Bucky’s ridge of scars already.

Bucky flinched, and Steve stopped at once.

“Can you—feel that?” he asked.

Bucky gave a nervous nod. “Yeah—it’s kinda numb—but yeah.”

Steve moved his fingers, felt how gnarled the skin really was, tried to get used to the feeling. He slipped his hand further down, when the skin grew unnaturally smooth and tense over the flesh.

“It feels weird,” Bucky said with desperation in his voice. “Doesn’t it?”

Steve saw no point in lying. “It’s unusual,” he said. He cupped Bucky’s stump, rubbed his thumb over it. “But not gross.”

Bucky shivered a bit. “You can stop,” he said, “please stop now.”

Steve quickly pulled his hand out of the sleeve, and Bucky visibly breathed easier.

“You okay?” Steve asked quietly, and Bucky nodded, swallowed. “You want me to give you a bit of breathing room?”

“Don’t you dare,” Bucky mumbled, wrapping his arm around Steve who smiled and squeezed him back.

They stayed curled together for a little while. Steve wished he could have enjoyed it in an entirely platonic way, but his body was still very much aware of how Bucky felt under him, warm and solid, so dense and so real. Steve screwed his eyes shut. He had to fucking stop. Bucky could barely handle kisses, it was stupid to imagine anything like…

The problem was, Bucky’s hand was on the middle of his back, and it was a bit too similar to the dream he’d had. It took no effort at all to imagine Bucky’s leg folding up, slowly pushing between Steve’s thighs while his hand kept him down, so all Steve could do was stay there and feel it pressing, pushing, making his legs spread—

—and then it was precisely what happened, except it wasn’t slow at all: Bucky had apparently tried to sit up and more or less kneed Steve in the crotch.

“Shit!” Bucky said, “I’m sor—” but then he seemed to realize he wasn’t exactly crushing anything, and they both froze. Steve could feel his own pulse between his legs, and Bucky must be able to feel it too.

Then it got worse—because Bucky moved, just a little, and Steve’s breath rushed out of him.

“You… you like that,” Bucky said. He seemed fascinated.
“I do,” Steve exhaled, and he should have been mortified but he was so, so riled up. “Sorry.”

When they looked at each other, Steve could see the hesitation in Bucky’s eyes—a similar feeling was probably reflected on his own face. How do you ask someone if they’re comfortable enough in their own body to have sex?

And then Bucky found how. “Are you… are you safewording?”

Steve blinked. “No,” he said, and then he repeated so Bucky knew he meant it, “I’m really not. But—but are you?”

Bucky looked out of his depth and too conscious of it.

But he still whispered, “No.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, as always. Comments fuel me! ^^
And now they were in bed, and Bucky was lying down on his back, and Steve was braced above him with his hands on each side of Bucky’s head, and they were both fully dressed, clad in jeans and t-shirts and sweatshirts—and yet Bucky felt more naked than he had under the harsh lights of the Mansion.

The thing was—ever since he’d woken up with his arm missing, he’d fallen out of his step with his own body. On the rare occasions when his loitering libido got the jump on him, he never acted on it. The one time he’d tried—in the hospital, looking for any sort of comfort he might still get—his body hadn’t managed, and the mortification had only added to his misery. From then on, he’d just waited for his unwelcome hard-ons to go away, unable to feel anything but awkwardness and disconnection. Even faint disgust sometimes, depending on how long it had been since his last shower.

But now, all of a sudden, he was so conscious of his body, in a way he hadn’t experienced even posing for Steve—it had been the opposite then; he’d finally managed to forget himself entirely. Now, though, he was aware of his legs, of his torso, of his left arm, of his right hand. Mostly, he was aware of all the places his body touched Steve’s.

Bucky was gay—had only ever desired men—had in fact only ever slept with men—and until this very moment, he’d always associated it with being into dick. Steve, astride Bucky’s leg as he was, very clearly didn’t have one of those. But when Bucky shifted again, the friction made Steve’s thighs clamp tightly around him, breath shuddering out of him—his hands clenched into the sheets and his entire body arched over Bucky with such obvious, visceral want—

“Wait—wait,” Bucky blurted in sudden panic.

Steve moved off him at once, looking apologetic already, but before he could roll further away, Bucky hurriedly pulled him back. “No need to go that far.”

Steve blinked, then smiled and stayed. They were back to laying face to face, Steve on his left side and Bucky on his right. Steve looked so—turned on. He was flushed, pupils blown, and Bucky could not process this look directed at him.

“I’m,” he said, terrified, because there was no way he could live up to that. “Steve, I’m.” He desperately needed to warn him, about how disappointing this was going to be, about how clumsy he felt in his own body. He took a deep breath and pressed his hand over his eyes. “It’s—you should know—I’m not…”

Steve said nothing, waiting. Bucky exhaled, hand still clamped over his face. “It’s—it’s just—really, it’s been a long time, and—” He swallowed. God, he couldn’t look at him. “And, uh, also, I know jack shit about vaginas.”
Steve burst out laughing, and the corners of Bucky’s lips tugged up a little, involuntarily.

“I—” Steve said, still giggling, “I want to kiss you. Can I kiss you?”

“You don’t have to ask,” Bucky murmured. He had to move his hand away for that, though. So he did.

Steve cupped his face before he leaned in to press their mouths together, in another one of those ever-so-soft kisses, and Bucky closed his eyes to do nothing but feel. His brain still refused to process it all. There must be some angle of the picture he was missing. Sure, Bucky had had an epiphany, he was a person and yadda yadda, but he was still sharply aware that a toilet mop was more attractive than him—and also probably more hygienic, and more suited to social interaction.

He might tentatively accept the fact that Steve liked him, but Steve being aroused by him just made no sense. He’d been so wary of Bucky for so long…

But Steve was kissing him, still so slowly, like he wanted to enjoy every second, and there was still heat pressing behind it, and Bucky could feel himself echoing it—even though the fantasies forming in his head were shapeless and confused.

Bucky knew Sam would have told him this wasn’t reasonable at all. Clearly, he wasn’t ready for this. He should be more level-headed—he should take it slow until he was more comfortable with his own body. But Sam could go fuck himself. Bucky would never be comfortable in his body—not like he was before. If he made himself wait until he was all fine and dandy again, then he’d spend the rest of his life waiting. Was that what he was supposed to do? Deny himself because he didn’t love himself enough yet?

*That* didn’t sound very loving.

So yeah, Bucky wasn’t being reasonable—was in fact being fucking reckless, but he wanted to try. He wanted to at least try, and see how far he could go.

He pulled back from the kiss and mumbled, “Go ahead.”

Steve stilled. “What?”

Bucky hid his face in Steve’s shoulder, because being brave was scary. “You want something, just—go ahead,” he repeated helplessly, absolutely unable to be more explicit.

Which might prove a problem. As a matter of fact, Steve hesitated, probably trying to determine whether Bucky was on the brink of a panic attack or just shy. But Bucky wasn’t shaking and was breathing okay—all things considered—so after a moment, he felt Steve’s leg tentatively nudge at his.

Bucky got the message, pushed his leg back between Steve’s thighs, slowly this time, and felt Steve shudder—his breath hitching when Bucky moved with intent, rubbing against him.

“F—” he exhaled, clutching at Bucky’s sweatshirt. “*Christ.*”

Bucky still didn’t know shit about vaginas, but Steve kinda made him want to learn.

If he *was* going to freak out, it should have started already. Right? Or—or he should be shriveling up inside like he always did, because feeling nothing was easier than feeling *everything.* But instead, he felt kind of like he was thawing, and it hurt in that exact same prickling way, making him sort of nervous and jittery and uncomfortable—but not numb.
Steve put some space between them so he could frame Bucky’s face and kiss him again, deep and open-mouthed this time—and just like in the elevator, the hot wetness was jarring in a thrilling, lewd way, and Bucky sort of lost his mind.

“Could I—” he heard himself ask.

Steve pulled back, even more flushed than before, looking dazed and hot. “What?”

Bucky panicked and pushed his face into his shoulder again. Deep breaths, deep breaths. Okay. “Um,” he tried again. “I was thinking—maybe—”

God, he used to be fluent in dirty talking, but his left arm had waved that goodbye and now he was back to fumbling teenage levels. Fuck everything. Things used to be easy.

Fortunately, Steve was amazing. “You want me to do something for you?”

Bucky shook his head.

“You want to do something for me?”

Bucky nodded. And then, because he felt utterly ridiculous, he forced himself to mumble into the fabric of Steve’s shirt, “Uh, head—if-if that’s okay.”

Steve went very still.

“You—want to—”

Bucky made himself pull back from Steve’s shoulder. “Um. Yeah,” he said, meeting his eyes with an effort. And then, because he couldn’t help himself, he added, “Gotta warn you, it’s… probably gonna be underwhelming.”

Steve stared at him. “No,” he said in a hoarse voice, “no, I don’t think it will.”

Bucky couldn’t help smiling. Steve swallowed, then visibly made an effort on himself and said, “But—are you sure?”

“I want to try,” Bucky murmured.

He still felt awkward and profoundly unerotic, but Steve’s inexplicable desire for him was so obvious that Bucky wanted to do something about it. He didn’t expect any miracles from his body, but at least he could still use his mouth. He hadn’t given someone pleasure in a long time, and he was letting himself realize how much he’d missed it.

Steve shifted even closer.

“You have to touch me first,” he whispered, and it gave Bucky goosebumps. “Or I’ll never believe you’re not forcing yourself.”

Bucky swallowed. “Okay,” he said under his breath. God, not wearing underwear under his jeans was a terrible move. “Where, um…”

“Come here.” Steve grabbed Bucky’s hand, slipped it under his own shirt, over his bare hip. “Go wherever you want.”

Bucky inched close enough that they could press their foreheads together, and shut his eyes. He couldn’t see anything now; he could only feel what he touched.
He moved his hand up—it felt safer for now. His fingers brushed over the sharp hipbone, then over ribs he could trace delicately under the skin, one by one. Slowly, he moved his hand to Steve’s stomach, which fluttered under his touch. He moved higher still, to Steve’s chest, making him breathe a bit deeper, like this was a big deal. It probably was, Bucky realized.

Eyes still closed, he spread his hand over Steve’s torso. It was flat in a noncommittal way, with just enough softness under the skin to remain ambiguous. His heart was beating like mad. Bucky rubbed his thumb around a nipple, felt it harden under his touch, and it made something twist and coil inside him.

Steve’s breathing was uneven.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked anxiously.

“Yeah,” Steve said under his breath, “—yes.”

Bucky closed the last of the space between them, kissing instead of being kissed, for the first time. It was a slow, unhurried one—they were both still focused on Bucky’s hand, which was now migrating across Steve’s side, settling in the middle of his back. When Bucky pulled him close to bring their bodies flush together, Steve took a sharp inhale.

Bucky’s leg was still between Steve’s thighs. He moved—and Steve made a short, helpless sound. Bucky let his hand slide down the gentle dip of Steve’s lower back, then over his ass.

He waited, barely breathing, for Steve to say something; but Steve remained still and expectant, and so Bucky grabbed his ass in a firmer grip, let himself feel it for a second. Then he pulled Steve up, so very slowly, making him ride his leg, the friction rough through their jeans. Steve made that noise again and clutched at him more desperately. He was breathing harshly and Bucky realized he was, too.

He was vaguely half-hard, which he dismissed knowing it’d probably fade for no reason anyway, but—he really, really wanted to go down on Steve, now.

He relaxed his grip on Steve’s ass, then followed the waist of his jeans with his fingertips, until he got to the button. He brushed his fingers down the seam of the zipper, barely touching the cloth. Steve was utterly still, lips parted. Could he feel even that?

For a second, Bucky was in danger of losing his nerve. He had no instincts here. What if he fucked everything up? What if he just ended up just hurting Steve by confessing he didn’t know what to do?

Fortunately, Steve was still amazing. He reopened his eyes, smiled, and reached around Bucky’s fingers to pop open the button of his pants.

“Right,” Bucky said, and Steve huffed a laugh, and Bucky smiled, too, because—he was really worried about messing up, but he was in bed with Steve, and he still wasn’t panicking and he wanted more of this, more of this warmth and more of Steve being still and attentive to his own pleasure.

Bucky kissed him again, open-mouthed, and this time he could appreciate it beyond the sheer shock of sharing this sort of intimacy again. He grabbed Steve’s belt and tugged up, putting more pressure on Steve’s crotch, enjoying his shudder like it had coursed through his own body.

Letting go, he reached down again, pulled the zipper open, but Steve was still lying on his side and Bucky still only had one goddamn hand.
“Could you,” Bucky whispered between two kisses, “um—help me out with—” and Steve shifted away at once, rolled on his back and lifted his hips, pushing his jeans down then kicking them the rest of the way off. He was wearing blue boxers underneath.

Bucky took a deep breath, then decided to be brave and moved on top of Steve’s body, straddling him so his legs were bracketing Steve’s hips. His arms ended up on both sides of Steve’s narrow shoulders, mirroring how this had all started. Bucky would have to rest on his stump if he wanted to maintain that position while running his hand over him—it never felt good, to put pressure there, but he could probably withstand it for a few minutes.

He had another wavering moment. Steve saw it, looked up at him, his eyes a very dark blue now. “I—” Bucky said. “Are you sure—”

Steve grabbed Bucky’s hand again, and this time he guided it just under the band of his boxers.

It was a huge relief—despite everything, Bucky realized he still wouldn’t have dared, still wouldn’t have done it, without such an explicit permission. He exhaled, bent down to press his forehead over Steve’s, and closed his eyes again. Then he slowly started to move his hand further down, inch by inch.

Steve was very still, didn’t seem to breathe, and now that he thought about it, Bucky wasn’t really breathing either.

First was the mound of Steve’s pubic bone; it was covered in short, rough hair. He was shaving, must have done it at the beginning of the week, maybe. Bucky let his fingers stop there for a second. This felt so profoundly intimate already, and the more he stayed, the shallower he breathed.

Steve remained unmoving, imperceptibly trembling with expectation. Bucky reopened his eyes just to see him, and they could have attempted another kiss, except they could not really focus on anything other than Bucky’s hand, and their mouths just sort of opened on each other. Bucky could feel Steve’s shaky breath on his lips.

Steve’s hand came up, cupped his cheek, went up to tangle in his hair.

Bucky’s stump was beginning to ache, and he closed his eyes again, trying to concentrate. His back muscles were locking and straining to keep his body poised over Steve’s. Steve lay still, his hand still in Bucky’s hair, never looking away from him.

Bucky’s fingertips went down the fuzzy curve of his labia, in a very light caress, then dipped into hot slickness. Steve let out a shaky breath, clutched at him, and Bucky shook, too.

His left arm was seriously hurting now.

“Oh, okay,” he murmured, “I’m—I’m just gonna—” and he pulled back to let himself slide down to the floor, on his knees, pushing his hair aside. Steve propped himself up on his elbows, staring at him with huge dark eyes.

“Come closer,” Bucky mumbled, “here,” and Steve shifted until his hips were on the edge of the mattress. Sitting up briefly, he took off his shirt; he looked very white and skinny in the dim light, his collarbones delicate under the skin. His legs were open, there was a line of wetness on his underwear, and Bucky could smell him—a deep, heady scent which made his head spin.

Quickly, so there wouldn’t be time for it to be awkward, he pulled Steve’s boxers all the way down and put them aside; then he settled between his legs, bracing his hand over Steve’s left
thigh.

And there they were.

He didn’t expect to be turned on then—historically, he’d never responded to what he was seeing right now. And yet he did react to it, almost despite himself, because Steve was aroused, so aroused, so ready, and Bucky had always gotten off on that, on his partners’ eagerness, and he vaguely wondered whether genitals had actually ever had anything to do with it.

“Tell me—” he mumbled as he got closer, “if I do something you don’t—”

Steve murmured that he would tell him, that he always would, and Bucky nodded, as reassured as he could hope to be. Then he leaned down and got his first taste.

And the taste was overwhelming. It flooded him, the dizzying taste of sex, and without thinking, he pushed his tongue in to have more, and he felt the easy give, the ready slickness of it. A very primal need overwhelmed Bucky’s brain—the need to sheath himself into that warmth and forget everything else; it was like being suddenly drunk, and he made an effort to think about what he should do, instead of just losing his mind.

There was one thing he knew to look for. He mouthed up, trying to find Steve’s clit—and a spasm and a strangled cry told him he’d succeeded.

“Wait,” Steve’s gasp was laced with laughter, “Jesus, not right away—” and Bucky obliged, with a spike of embarrassment. He was only too conscious that he lacked experience here.

But on the other hand, as Steve had just reminded him, some things were the same for everyone. Teasing before pleasing and all that. The thought reassured Bucky a little, allowed him to stamp down on the first stings of shame.

He started again, and this time, he tried licking with the light point of his tongue, just once—and Steve let out an uncontrollable, trembling noise. Bucky kept going like that—slow, light stripes, only barely touching Steve at times, and it was surprising how easily it riled Steve up, judging by the sounds he made—he was audibly trying to bite them back, too.

“Bucky,” he let out eventually, frustration swelling in his voice—but before he could say more, Bucky went in with a broad, deep stroke, and Steve moaned like he’d been relieved from a great pain.

Bucky got a great boost of confidence all of a sudden. He was more than half-hard, now, but he kept ignoring it. He didn’t want to be distracted. He had no idea what he was doing, sure; but he was beginning to feel like he still couldn’t do any wrong. Between Steve’s thighs was a great place to be.

Steve was growing more open, less hypersensitive, and soon enough he whispered Bucky could, maybe, if he wanted, maybe try to go back to ohgodyes—his clit had hardened and filled, Bucky couldn’t help noticing. When he paid special attention to it, Steve’s legs spasmed and closed around his head, squeezing him tight and blocking sounds. It was kind of nice, being enclosed like this, like there was nothing else in the world, nothing but Steve to be explored with lips and tongue.

Bucky tried a few different things until he found a nice trick, which was pushing in as he licked up, then circling around Steve’s clit, before sliding back down and doing it all over again. Steve sounded like this was the right path to ecstasy, so Bucky’s instinct was to start moving quicker, like he usually did when things started to get serious—but Steve’s voice came down to him,
gasping, “No—no, um, can you go back to—slower… yes—yes, that…”

Slow it was. Bucky settled into a lazy pace, and he felt it resonate in Steve’s thighs, clenching and relaxing around his head, in Steve’s hips, moving to accompany him, until Bucky was initiating a languid wave which rolled all the way up through Steve, and then back again.

It went on for a long time, five minutes, maybe more. Bucky had lost count; he’d lost himself to the indolence of it. They were just taking their time, taking it slow after all, in this comfortable place, and he was starting to think maybe it wouldn’t go any further. But then—

then—

—all of a sudden, out of fucking nowhere, on the same stroke Bucky had done fifty times before, Steve heaved in a deep breath, and arched—and cried out—

—and he was coming, half-sobbing with it, in successive waves, and it was like it was happening through his entire body, hips pushing up, thighs closing around Bucky’s head and clamping into place, heels digging into the top of Bucky’s back, and Bucky felt his every spasmodic pulse of pleasure in his mouth, and he kept going and Steve kept going too, and it lasted for an entire minute, before it finally began to ebb, little by little, until Steve was resting on the bed again, limp, dazed, motionless, legs relaxing again and falling open.

Bucky could only hear his own breathing, now.

He wobbled and rested down on his calves, a bit surprised to realize he was breathless—also, his jaw ached like hell, which he hadn’t noticed at all until then. His thighs, too, because he’d been kneeling half-up all this time.

But mostly, he wasn’t touching Steve and he was already beginning to feel withdrawal symptoms. The floor was actually very cold.

He climbed onto the bed, hesitantly. Steve still wasn’t moving, eyes glassy and only half-open.

“Hey,” Bucky said timidly, unsure whether Steve could even hear him.

But without even looking, Steve grabbed Bucky and wrapped himself around him, with all four limbs, and squeezed so hard Bucky couldn’t breathe for a second. When he was able to, he exhaled and clumsily wrapped his arm around Steve, hugging him as well. He was still dizzy with the taste of Steve and the feel of Steve and the fresh memory of Steve’s fucking gorgeous orgasm. Thinking back on this incredible minute, of the noises Steve had made—desperate, halting, wavering and then cracking at the peak—he realized he was still hard, hadn’t flagged yet.

That’s not gonna win me any bets in Vegas, he thought wryly. But for once, he didn’t manage to feel completely jaded about it. He felt a tiny bit more welcome in his body than he had before. Mostly, though, he just felt stunned.

“God,” Steve slurred unexpectedly. He moved to nuzzle at Bucky’s neck. “Buck, you’re so great,” he said, “you’re the most awesome, most amazing person in the universe.”

Bucky huffed a laugh. “Pretty sure you’re just high from—”

“No, shh,” Steve said, hand flopping haphazardly to land about everywhere on Bucky’s face before it finally found his mouth.

It was impossible to stop smiling. A distant part of Bucky was still trying to warn him that he’d crash hard to make up for such a high, but for once it was easy to ignore it, to pretend he was
Normal for a little while.

Steve tugged himself entirely on top of Bucky—he was still completely naked, and Bucky still fully clothed, and it baffled him a little that Steve did not seem self-conscious in the slightest. Steve was very light, but Bucky still felt his weight like it was completely pinning him down.

With deliberate slowness, Steve rolled his hips, dragging his crotch—wet and so open—over the bulge in Bucky’s pants. Half of Bucky’s brain shorted out.

“I got condoms in my backpack,” Steve said, apropos of nothing.

Bucky’s mouth opened, and stayed open.

“You can say no.” Steve smiled, sort of wickedly. “But I got ‘em.”

He rolled his hips again, slow and intent. It had to hurt—so bare, over Bucky’s jeans—but the scent of him made Bucky’s head spin again, and he realized Steve was so slick it probably felt as smooth as gliding over silk.

It fucked with Bucky’s mind so completely he could only rasp, “Yeah,” even though he didn’t remember what he was agreeing with. But then Steve moved away to lean over the side of the bed, so he could reach for his backpack, and then Bucky remembered.

“Why,” he managed, scooting up to manage more of a sitting position, “why do you have condoms—”

“One thing the LGBT shelter was good for,” Steve smiled, putting the box on the nightstand. He came back in Bucky’s lap and slipped his hands under his shirt. “That okay?”

Once again, Bucky couldn’t do anything but give a wide-eyed nod, even though he should have really warned Steve that his body tended to quit on him at the most inopportune moments. When Steve pulled at his shirt and sweatshirt, Bucky ducked his head and lifted his arms to help them slip off.

The way Steve looked at him, it was impossible not to feel at least a little hot. Despite the arm.

“Stop staring,” Bucky muttered, flustered. “You’ve already stared for a whole day, you creep.”

“You’re right, staring’s not enough anymore,” Steve said, and leaned forward to kiss him, his hands roaming Bucky’s torso, sliding down to his abs, like he’d been dying to touch him. Bucky moaned—just a breath, barely a sound, but it still surprised him. He could feel himself straining against his jeans, painfully hard now, in a way which didn’t let him ignore his own body—a feeling he usually hated, but now, here and now…

It was like he’d felt in the Mansion, that even the bad things about him could be liked by someone else—by Steve—so maybe they were not all bad, maybe he’d just been caught in his own head for way too long.

Steve opened Bucky’s jeans, still kissing him as he did, and he must have forgotten Bucky wasn’t wearing any underwear because his pupils blew up again when he pulled his pants down. Bucky shifted his hips to help him, and kicked his jeans off.

He felt terribly, awfully naked for a horrible moment—felt engorged and sweaty and hairy. And God, he smelled—he was clean but he smelled, the musk so intense it made him wrinkle his nose. Everything about him dirty, and not in the good sense of the word.
But the next second, Steve’s fingers were wrapping around him, and his tongue was back in Bucky’s mouth, and all of Bucky’s remaining brain functions went right out the window. Steve 

liked it. Steve liked him.

“Yes?” Steve breathed between two kisses, and Bucky answered hoarsely, “Yes—yes,” because he was flying blind and maybe he was two seconds from spinning out of control, but for now he was still flying.

They could have teased each other more—they could have taken it slow, but suddenly they were both in too much of a hurry, Steve’s hands shaking with eagerness as he opened the condom, Bucky just as febrile as he helped him roll it on—the sensation was so oddly familiar to Bucky, the latex plain and thin and squeezing him a little. It made everything feel so weirdly normal, so weirdly mundane. Like Bucky had never really stopped doing this, like there wasn’t a gaping fracture between who he used to be and who he was now.

Bucky could feel his entire body straining with impatience. He grabbed Steve’s neck, pulled him close, and they kissed messily, teeth clashing a little; and while they did Steve knelt up, over Bucky’s lap, and Bucky’s heart was thumping like mad in his chest, and he really hoped he could keep it together for a little while longer, just a little longer, their hands were fumbling to find the way, Steve parting himself, Bucky lining up; there was a last heartbeat, and then in one slow, smooth motion, Bucky was enveloped in gliding warmth and colors exploded in starburst patterns behind his eyelids.

“Steve,” he exhaled, and he made an enormous effort to open his eyes, to string two thoughts together, unable to control his breathing, “I’m—I’m not hurting you, am I?”

“Fuck no,” Steve exhaled, wrapping his arms around Bucky, squeezing as much as he could; and it was strange, because suddenly holding him tight seemed much more important than moving, and Bucky hurried to cling to him as well, feeling almost scared. His sheer need for Steve was becoming unbearable, an agitation he didn’t have enough outlets to vent out—they were as close as humanly possible and it still wasn’t enough. He didn’t know what to do, where to go—he felt like he was going to explode, to go mad, something.

Steve must have figured it out, too, because he lifted himself off Bucky—squeezing him all the way up, drawing a shuddering breath out of him—then sat back on the bed. “Come on,” he panted, eyes bright, flushed hot. “Like this.”

“I can’t lean on my left arm,” Bucky said, even though he was already crawling on top of him.

“So lean on your right,” Steve answered, arms curling around him, “you’ll see, I’ll—” but kissing each other was more important than finishing that sentence, and Bucky trusted him anyway; he found Steve with his hand so he could line up again, before putting his weight on his right elbow as he easily slid back into wet, burning heat. That meant he couldn’t hang onto Steve; but Steve hung onto him, fingers digging into Bucky’s glistening back, and Bucky fully drove in with a smooth thrust which made them both gasp.

“Yes,” Steve breathed, “again—” and Bucky moved again, slower, trying to sense his responses like he had before, until Steve’s eyes opened and he breathed, “What are you doing?”

Bucky blinked at him. “I—”

“You’re trying to make me come,” Steve panted. “I already came, Buck—” his legs hooked themselves behind Bucky’s thighs, “it’s your turn—in me, I want—”

Bucky let his head fall down, because this was too much. He gripped the bed with his right hand,
took a shaky breath, then rolled his hips and thrust—hard and deep like his body wanted, and it fired up every synapse in his brain.

“Again,” Steve panted, and Bucky did it again, and again, and he shouldn’t be doing this, shouldn’t be using Steve’s body like this, except he was doing it and he could feel his pleasure coiling inside him already, tell-tale tremors building up in his thighs, and for a split second he was terrified he actually could not do it—he would not come, just reach a plateau and remain stuck there, just like in the hospital; but he was so far gone, with Steve’s fingers digging in his back, Steve’s body clenching to meet him, Steve’s teeth into his shoulder—so far gone he could not even jinx himself, and he gave a last harsh thrust and went completely still, buried deep, and his orgasm pulsed out of him, hot and uncontrollable.

He felt himself shudder, heard himself cry out as Steve held him tighter than ever, whispered a string of yes, yes, Bucky in his ear, both of them drenched in sweat, skin to skin, so hot and so close, so close, so close.

* 

After that, it all went very fuzzy at the edges. Bucky’s body felt heavy, but not in the usual, deadweight way. Just lazy and languid with warmth. A strange sort of joy possessed him, the relief and laughter coming after a sudden fright—the fear he’d felt while flying apart, now soothed, now made into nothing but lingering pleasure. He couldn’t quite believe he’d gone all the way and now it was over and all he had to do was bask in the afterglow.

He felt Steve move under him and turned to his side to free him. Out of reflex, he took off the condom, barely had the time to think he’d never manage to tie it into a knot before other hands took it from him, took care of it. The sweat on his skin was cooling fast, and he was beginning to shiver when Steve came back, drawing the covers over them both, curling around him, sighing out a little.

Bucky turned to him and just looked at him with eyes half-open. Steve smiled—Bucky’s hair must be a mess since Steve reached out to comb it back with his fingers, tracing the edges of Bucky’s face while he did it, fingers trailing down his temples and curving behind his ears.

He was still smiling, and Bucky smiled too, couldn’t help it, and for some reason they both started laughing—not loud, just under their breaths, like they were thinking of the same inside joke, or the same happy memory.

Everything was funny. Everything was good. He was looking at Steve, drinking in his every feature, his hair sticking up every which way, darkened with sweat. Steve was looking at him too, with something soft in his eyes. His hand was still playing with Bucky’s hair; he let his fingers trail down to his mouth, and Bucky parted his lips to feel them, so light. He remembered what he’d done, and trembled a little with delight at the memory.

“I didn’t think you’d do that,” Steve murmured.

“I liked it,” Bucky said, honestly. He wasn’t sure what that meant, alignment-wise. Chaotic Gay? Or maybe genitals really didn’t have anything to do with it? But God, he couldn’t have given less of a fuck right now. It wasn’t like his body had been very big on consistency before that—and besides, he strongly suspected the main reason he’d liked going down on Steve was, well, Steve.
“I really liked it,” he repeated. “And you… you went on for days,” he couldn’t help adding, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

Steve blinked, then grinned. “What? When I came?”

“It happened out of nowhere,” Bucky insisted. “I didn’t even do anything special and you just…”

Steve huffed and wrapped him in his arms, holding him very tight. “Yeah, Buck,” he said, “you kinda did.”

Bucky was surprised to feel wetness come to his eyes; he quickly blinked it away, then softly butted his head into Steve’s shoulder. They stayed like that. He felt safe in a way he’d forgotten, safe from others and from himself, for a precious while.

Because he was an idiot, he couldn’t help talking again after a few seconds. “I wasn’t sure I’d be able to—um, to finish.”

He felt Steve tense by a fraction, growing just a bit more alert, and he hurried to add, “Because I don’t—it’s—it’s been difficult. For me to, um. Ever since. You know.” God, he had to stop talking. Why did he have to open his goddamn mouth every time, that was beyond him.

But Steve was relaxing again. “I understand,” he said. He hesitated, then added, “It’s never been easy for me either. I tried it when I was still, um—still trying to figure stuff out. I had this friend, Sharon, and she, she listened, it went okay, but… it wasn’t great.”

He was stumbling a little on his words, and Bucky almost said Steve didn’t have to tell him about it; but then he realized Steve was perfectly aware of that. He’d probably never told anyone, but somehow he was okay telling Bucky, entwined with him in damp sheets. It was a strange feeling, even more intimate than sex, to be murmuring hushed stories in the dark.

“It was always easier when I was alone,” Steve said.

Bucky nodded. Then he said, “But, just now, with you—it was easy with you.”

“Me too,” Steve murmured, kissing him again, “Buck—me too.” Then he huffed a laugh. “I’m real glad I had condoms.”

A really weird thought went through Bucky’s mind. “Hey—can you—”

He bit the words back, but too late—Steve inched back to look at him. He didn’t tense again, though; in fact, he looked sort of amused.

“Ask the question,” he said.

Bucky hid his face in his hand again. “No, I’m—I’m sorry—”


Bucky was mortified. “Can you, um,” he mumbled from under his hand, “—can you get pregnant.”

Steve started laughing, and he sounded so sincere Bucky felt a little better. He managed to look at him again, and even grimaced a little smile. “Yeah, well, sorry,” he said, “it’s not usually something I gotta worry about.”

“No shit,” Steve said, grinning from ear to ear. “And yeah, I can, actually.”
Bucky blinked. “For real?”

“Well, not right now, but I still got all the parts,” Steve shrugged. “I’d just have to stop my treatment, and I’d probably get fertile again after a few weeks.”

He didn’t look particularly happy about it. Bucky swallowed, suddenly feeling like he was in the middle of a minefield. God—he hadn’t meant to find himself here, and he was so clearly about to put his foot in his mouth again he felt kind of petrified.

Steve saw the look on his face and frowned a little. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yes,” Bucky said, panicking, “I—I just, um—I wouldn’t want to… I can’t figure out what to ask.”

Steve blinked. “What to ask?”

“Well—I should be asking stuff,” Bucky explained. “Right? I don’t know… I told you, I don’t know anything, and I—I’m going to say something horrible, I can feel it—and I should try to avoid that—but I really can’t figure out what to ask,” he repeated helplessly.

Steve looked at him for a second. Then he kissed him.

Bucky stilled; even after what they’d done, the softness of Steve’s lips made everything else go quiet. He closed his eyes, and when they parted, his anxiety had faded.

“Oh,” Bucky said. Then he wrinkled his nose and said, “oh.”

Steve laughed, and it was easy again to laugh with him; and when it went away, they were still smiling at each other.

“I can show you a few websites,” Steve said, “if you need to be on solid ground.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said with intense relief. “Yeah, that—that’d be nice. Thank you.”

Steve kept smiling, then pulled him close to kiss him again. Bucky closed his eyes and wondered, feeling dizzy, if that was something he should get used to. He wasn’t sure he could.

He was tired and loose with pleasure, and it was easy to sink into sleep, even though they’d only been awake for a couple of hours. Bucky felt so warm he forgot to be afraid it might not last the night.

He felt so warm he forgot everything.

Bucky slept for a long time.
When he stirred again, it was getting dark. He’d slept all day—they both had; Steve was still in bed with him. Bucky felt exactly like someone who’d slept all day, groggy and heavy and gross.

The sheets were sticky, which became more uncomfortably obvious as he completely woke up. He also realized his left arm was exposed; wincing, he moved it under the covers and pulled them up to his shoulder. His skin was cold.

Lying back down, Bucky stared at the ceiling, hoping to sink back into the warmth of earlier, but it was gone. When he tried to recall it by reminding himself of Steve moving against him, the discrepancy between then and now only got worse.

No, it’s okay, he told himself, throat tightening, it’s okay, it can keep being okay, but the more he told himself that, the more he realized it was a lie. His stomach was twisting into a tight knot. This was all wrong. He should be still be feeling lazy and happy and good. But instead he only felt scratchy and uncomfortable and out of place. Everything that had happened in the past forty-eight hours was now defragmenting at the back of his brain; and insensibly, his body was tensing, his mind was beginning to wish for the silence of stones.

It wasn’t like it hadn’t happened to him before. But it was stupid, he thought helplessly. It was just because he’d woken up in a bad place. He should have known to return to the warmth of before, but he’d lost his way. His mind was emptying up, smoothing down. He felt like staring at a wall and doing nothing else for the rest of the day.

But he wanted to feel good, dammit. He had every reason to feel good. Why couldn’t he just fucking feel good?

“Shit,” he said under his breath, still staring at the ceiling.

It woke up Steve, whose eyes lazily blinked open, then focused on him.

“Hey,” he whispered, already smiling. His arm stretched across Bucky’s chest.

Bucky looked at him. This wasn’t fair, he thought, trying to spur himself. This was good. He should still feel good. Maybe he could fake it. If he really applied himself.

But he didn’t really believe that. He felt like shit for no reason, and the need to cry pushed behind his eyes for no reason at all, even though nothing showed on his face—he never did manage to cry properly when he was in that state. Sometimes he just sort of leaked tears until his head was in a wet spot.

Steve looked back, and his expression changed. His hand came up, brushed Bucky’s cheekbone, and Bucky closed his eyes despite himself. He wanted to feel the deep, aching tenderness—he remembered it so well, it was so recent, but his mind kept slipping out of focus. He was too tired even to think. He couldn’t force himself, even though he knew he was about to hurt Steve. How fucking awful was that?

“You okay?” Steve asked quietly.

Bucky needed to tell him this wasn’t because of what they’d done. Well—clearly, it was, but he regretted none of it. Maybe it had been too much, maybe he’d gotten in over his head; but anything was too much for him these days, so he’d really rather crash for a worthwhile reason.

Steve’s hand came over his eyes, and it soothed them—they were burning, and he hadn’t noticed.
“Hey,” Steve repeated, even quieter.

Buck exhaled silently. “I’m sorry,” he said. He had to explain. “It’s not your fault.” It was awful; he tried again. “I’m just so tired, I don’t know… I’m sorry.” It was even worse.

Steve said, “Like when we sat together last time.”

Bucky’s eyes blinked open, and he looked at Steve, who was still looking at him.

“Yes,” Bucky managed. He was so tired even from speaking. He was so tired of himself—a few lying words and this all could have been avoided, but he hadn’t even been strong enough for that, not even for Steve’s sake. Now it was all fucked and he just wanted to go back to sleep. He couldn’t concentrate on anything. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

Steve wrapped a hand behind his neck and kissed him, for a heartbeat or two. Then he said, “I’m going to take a shower. Then you’ll go, while I change the sheets, and after that we’ll go back to bed. Okay?”

Bucky leaned into him and nodded against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. He wanted to tell Steve, how he knew he was ruining everything, how he wished he could have just stayed fucking happy for more than two hours in a row.

“Red,” Steve said gently, and Bucky wanted to cry—but he didn’t manage.

*

The shower didn’t help, because then Bucky was wet and had to dry himself. It took him almost fifteen minutes—for the longest time he just stood there, shivering and absentmindedly gazing at the towels, until he finally moved to take one and slowly rubbed it over his skin, crawling with goosebumps.

Putting on fresh clothes didn’t help, either, because he was clumsy and heavy and it took ages. Underwear, shirt, pants. Just standing up was exhausting to him, and he could only feel some vague relief when he got out of the bathroom and saw that Steve had changed the sheets already, so he was finally allowed to crawl back into bed. He sat, listless, while Steve tinkered in the kitchen, wishing he could just go to sleep.

Why did he want to sleep. He’d slept for ages already.

He waited and nothing happened, but he couldn’t help noticing, little by little, that at the very least he’d stopped spiraling down—stopped feeling gross and itchy and getting worse by the second and doing nothing to stop it.

Steve came back into the room. He was wearing his pajamas pants, but instead of his top he’d pulled on one of Bucky’s t-shirts. He also had a mug in each hand.

“Hot chocolate,” he said, carefully sitting cross-legged next to Bucky. “Here.”

Bucky carefully took his cup and blew on it, because that was what you did when you were handed something hot. He didn’t really want it, though. He didn’t really want anything, except to be left alone for a while. But now he had to drink all that; the thought discouraged him in advance.
“We have chocolate,” he said, just to say something instead of sitting here motionless and silent. He hadn’t phrased it like a question. Too late now.

“Yep,” Steve said. “Courtesy of Kurt. You know, the grocery store guy?”

Bucky nodded. He looked up at Steve, who was looking down into his cup. His lashes were very long. Bucky wished the story about Kurt wouldn’t take too much time; he had trouble keeping his thoughts in line. Hopefully he could manage to nod at the right places.

But Steve said, “I’ll tell you later. Drink up.”

Bucky looked at his hot chocolate. He could make out his muddy reflection.

“That’s not right,” he said.

He instantly cursed himself for sounding so maudlin. In the corner of his eye, he saw Steve look up at him. There was a silence, then Steve asked quietly, “What do you mean?”

Bucky felt a distant echo of frustration. No, he—he had a reason to say what he’d just said. But his own logic eluded him, slipped away from his grasp, like a dream upon waking. He made an effort, trying to pick up the thread of his thoughts.

“It’s warm,” he said. Not enough. Another effort. “This… this is what should have happened,” he said, looking at his chocolate. “But I’m fucking it up. I can’t even pretend to enjoy it. I’m so—I just always fucking ruin everything in the end.”

“Bucky”, Steve said. “Look at me.”

Bucky looked up. Steve was staring at him; even in the dim, fading light of the evening, his eyes were such a vivid blue.

“If you think I’m mad at you for that,” he said, “you don’t remember anything I told you last time you were like this.”

Bucky thought for a second. “I kind of don’t,” he admitted.

That pushed a small laugh out of Steve, and Bucky felt a faint shadow of it pass over his own lips, despite everything.

“Buck,” Steve said simply, “please drink your chocolate. I made it for you, and I promise you deserve it.”

So Bucky drank the chocolate. It warmed him inside, which did feel good, because Bucky’s body wasn’t attuned to his mind, which was a bad thing most of the time but not right now, probably. He thought maybe the sugar helped, too. When they were done, Steve took back Bucky’s mug and put it on his nightstand, then turned the lights off.

Being able to slide under the covers at last was a relief. There was no way Steve still wanted to sleep; yet he settled next to him, a warm presence. His feet were brushing Bucky’s, and his hand was curling next to Bucky’s shoulder.

The fresh sheets were actually kind of nice, Bucky thought distantly, before he closed his eyes.
When he woke up, he didn’t feel better, exactly, but at least it was morning.

Steve was still here, which was a bit unexpected. He must have felt Bucky move, because he shifted closer without opening his eyes, nestling against Bucky’s side. Bucky still felt mostly empty, but he put his arm around Steve and hid his face in his hair.

He was desperately glad Steve was here, but he couldn’t tell him that—because if he implied that Steve’s presence helped him, Steve might feel pressured to be here, might feel guilty when he wasn’t. Might feel obligated. All Bucky could do was stay here, breathe him in, try to enjoy it while it lasted.

Some time passed. Even as Bucky was now, the memory of Steve crying out, sobbing out—it gave him chills, and he mentally curled up in that little crack in his wall of blankness, tried to stay there for a little while. He felt like it had all happened to someone else. It was unconceivable to think he’d managed to do such things only a few hours earlier, when he was such a flat, grey wreck now.

Steve’s hand distracted him, thumb rubbing circles into his left shoulder. Bucky should have felt good, knew he did actually feel good, somewhere under the layers of numbness and worry; but there was something squeezing at his chest, oppressing his breath, and he had to constantly remind himself to loosen up, only to tense up all over again the next second. He just had to relax—but he couldn’t.

“Do you know, I can still feel you in me,” Steve suddenly said.

Bucky blinked.

“Not that you hurt me or anything. You’re just big,” Steve added casually. “S’nice.”

An involuntarily huff escaped Bucky’s lips, which would have been a laugh on another day. He wondered how Steve knew to do that, to find things that jostled him.

“I keep wondering how it felt for you,” Steve went on. “Was it very different?”

It took Bucky a little while to realize it had been an actual question. “Uh—yeah,” he said cautiously. “Less—less, um… tight. I—I guess.” He didn’t dare say wetter or hotter.

“Do you even usually top?”

Bucky huffed again. “I… sometimes.”

It was easy. Just lying there and talking about vaguely dirty stuff with Steve. His body didn’t want to him to realize it, but it was easy. He had fucked up their morning after, but maybe this wasn’t irredeemable.

This very thought upset him again, though—he couldn’t even be consistent in his misery, he couldn’t even stay sad, which meant he’d just fucked it all up over something which wasn’t even that serious—

“You ever took a strap-on?” Steve inquired.

This time, it was almost a real laugh. “No.”

“We can go dick shopping on Amazon. I’ll even let you pick the size.”
“Christ,” Bucky muttered. He didn’t remember what he was thinking about just before, and Steve didn’t let him.

“What? A nice, textured one,” he went on. “Maybe vibrating. It’ll be horribly expensive, of course, but I’ll starve myself and work hard to afford it, and we’ll get it in the mail just in time for Christmas. It’ll be just like in a fairy tale.”

“Stop,” Bucky whined, pressing his face into Steve’s hair.

“Or there’s fisting,” Steve said cheerfully.

Bucky choked.

“What?” Steve repeated. “Can’t deny it’s cheaper. And I have small hands, you’ll be fine.”

Even as he snorted with laughter, Bucky could still feel the pull of numbness—it was a strange, unpleasant sensation; his mind kept going out of focus, trying to slip away, to drift back to blankness, as though just thinking was a straining effort. It was easier to overcome it with Steve there, to battle the self-loathing rising up in waves, but it never fully went away.

“No, but seriously,” Steve said, with a grin in his voice. Then his tone became more sober. “Seriously,” he repeated. “You know there’s… there’s no pressure to do it again. Right?”

Bucky exhaled. Of course Steve would need to verify that, even though he’d probably stopped himself from asking until then.

“I know,” he said. Then he finally managed to say what he desperately needed to make him understand. “I’m good, Steve. It—was good. I’m just… me.”


He squeezed him, and Bucky’s eyes fluttered shut. Steve smelled nice and clean; Bucky was slightly surprised to remember he was clean, too. Because Steve had made him take a shower, and Steve had changed the sheets.

Bucky suddenly hoped this would not end up in Steve doing everything for him even more so than before. Maybe Bucky could try harder, at least for a few days at a time. So as not to become too much of a burden. For Steve—maybe he could.

But Steve would not stay forever. Bucky already knew that. Steve was still understanding now, still patient, still able to smile at Bucky—but he would end up needing to breathe, needing to clear his head from Bucky’s constant relapses into flatness, because he was human. Bucky wouldn’t blame him when it happened—he was human, too, and it was what he constantly felt, the need to get away from himself. In fact, he felt it right now, hating that he couldn’t simply marvel over the fact that they’d slept together. They’d slept together, and he should be over the moon, and instead his thoughts kept going in commiserating circles for no reason. Anyone would want to get away from that if they could.

And even if Steve did stick around—it only meant he’d end up flattened by the steamroller in Bucky’s mind. One day Bucky would wake up and Steve would just be another obligation, another annoying variable, another faint bump to smooth out before Bucky could go back to bed.

Bucky screwed his eyes shut, seized by suffocating terror at the thought, and the fear helped—if he could still feel fear, then he wasn’t all gone. But it choked him now, the terrible panic of a rat in a maze, like when he’d looked at himself in the mirror, absolutely unable to see a way out. He
desperately tried to remember the portrait they’d left behind in the Mansion—tried to rekindle that fleeting sensation of being a person, of feeling like he could be one, like it was dormant somewhere within. Like it wasn’t too late. He must hang onto it, do something with it, before the oblivion in his mind erased Steve one way or another, before he ruined everything one time too many, beyond all repair.

He had to do something. He didn’t know what. He didn’t how to ask for help, or what could even help him. But trying to figure it out—he could only hope it was a tiny step forward already.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading. ^^ Comments bring me joy!

Note: Steve's wrong when he tells Bucky he's not fertile at the moment. As it turns out, T cannot be trusted to completely shut down the ovulating cycle; even without periods, there is still a slight chance of getting pregnant. While looking for more info on trans forums, I came across a lot of trans guys who didn't know about this, so I've decided to let Steve have this misconception. A huge thanks to catastrophecutie for pointing this out to me!

Also, MORE FANART FROM DOWNAMONGTHEDEADMEN! What a good.
After almost twenty-four hours in bed, Steve woke up for good and spent a good ten minutes staring at Bucky.

He was lying on his stomach with his face half-buried in his pillow. A few stray locks of hair had trickled down across his face; Steve was tempted to replace them, but he didn’t want to disturb him. Deeply asleep at last, Bucky looked like he was finally getting the rest he needed after the chaotic couple of days they’d just been through.

It seemed to have all happened at once—or at least in direct succession, without breaks, Bucky’s confession leading to Coulson’s email leading to the long trip to Midtown leading to the elevator leading to—everything after.

Again, Steve was tempted to touch Bucky, and again, he made himself stay still. But watching him, watching his eyelids still faintly red and swollen from unshed tears, watching the dark circles carved under them—he felt so fiercely protective it made him breathless. He wished he could have found the words to tell Bucky he wasn’t going to leave him alone to fight this horror. He wished he could have found such new, exact, sincere words that Bucky would have no choice but to believe him.

Slowly, as not to wake him up, Steve rolled to his side and slipped out of bed. The floor was cold under his feet, but as he stood up, his attention was commanded by how sore he was—it actually made him stop so he could feel it better, the memory of sex still echoing in his body. He’d never quite felt that—an ache he liked to remember. The inside of his thighs felt weirdly irritated, and there was still a pleasant twinge deep inside him, but most of it was actually muscular pain, in his thighs and in the muscles of his back, from when he’d strained and arched.

He couldn’t remember that part without flushing hot, and he realized he was smiling like an idiot and couldn’t stop.

Grabbing his backpack, he went into the bathroom and pulled down his pants, leaving the door half-open. This, too, was amazing—being able to do this, without being scared or hiding. Bucky knew, Bucky had seen and touched and tasted him.

No one else ever had, not really. Steve had sort of punched his V-card himself a few years ago, back when he still avoided mirrors. At the time, it was the only way he had to retain a bit of
control over his own body, the only way—or so he thought—to understand what it fucking wanted from him. Sharon had helped, it was true, with a strap-on and with her fingers, but it had all remained very matter-of-fact. They’d both treated it like a series of experiments; they’d even made lists. It had never been a big deal. Sharon wasn’t even a good friend, just another bored teen in August. It was something they’d done, mostly good fun, a little weird, and it had ended just like it had started, without drama, Sharon kissing Steve on both cheeks before leaving at the end of the summer.

Steve remembered Bucky pushing into him, the way it had made Bucky’s whole body tremble, the way his own body had opened for him, still so charged with pleasure every touch made his toes curl—and his eyelids fluttered shut despite himself. He could have never imagined, back then, that one day he would get to feel like this. It was the first time he’d had sex not only as himself, but with someone he desired.

Reopening his eyes, he saw himself in the mirror, how much he’d changed in less than a year; and despite the cold weight of his mom’s grave, he still felt like he had felt after leaving the Mansion. Like one day he would be looking back upon this difficult time, knowing the end of the story, knowing it ended well.

Steve stuck the needle in his thigh and ignored the fact he only had three left. He would not lose hope. He would dig his way out of this slump, and goddammit, he’d take Bucky with him.

He took a burning hot shower, changed into his last pair of jeans and clean shirt—he’d need to do another laundry run soon—then left the tiny bathroom, and felt his heart jump a little at the sight of Bucky sitting up in bed.

His outlandish beauty was even more contrasted than usual, skin too pale, hair too dark, lips too red. For once, all he was wearing was a thin shirt; underneath, the outline of his body was carved down to the bare essentials—it hurt to see him and yet he was gorgeous. He was still looking dazed, but less spaced out than before, and his piercing eyes anxiously stared up at Steve from under his long hair.

“Hey,” he said very quietly. He was picking at his pants again, in small repressed movements.

Steve was overwhelmed as always by the need to kiss him, to hold him, and he tried not to feel too transported with joy when he realized he could—it was strange, feeling so inflated with happiness when Bucky looked so uncertain and miserable, and Steve wished he could have shared with him his deep-seated, solid feeling that everything would turn out alright in the end.

He crossed the room and sat on Bucky’s side of the bed. “Hey,” he smiled. “Morning hug?”

Bucky blinked, then fabricated a little smile. Steve wrapped him in his arms and felt him go still and attentive as always, like he could still not believe this was happening. He hadn’t shaved in a little while now, and his cheek was rough against Steve’s skin—

“Oh,” Steve said, suddenly pulling back. “That’s it!”

Bucky looked puzzled.

“You gave me beard burn!” Steve explained excitedly. “On my thighs!”
Helplessly, Bucky began to laugh under his breath. “I’d,” he said, “I’d say sorry, but you look pretty psyched about it.”

“I am,” Steve confirmed with a grin. He got up and pulled on Bucky’s hand. “C’mon, let’s migrate to the couch. We need breakfast and cartoons and I gotta tell you about Kurt.”

Bucky got up and followed him, still faintly smiling. This, thought Steve, was how he’d make Bucky believe he’d stay. By staying, by being there, day after day for constant proof.

*...

“…and he just gave me all that stuff,” Steve finished. “Can you believe it?”

“Well, I’m pretty impressed he found a way to make you take it,” Bucky mumbled into his shirt.

“Hey,” Steve groused, stilling his hand.

Bucky whined pitifully and butted up his head into his palm. Steve wished he could have resisted for a second longer, but he couldn’t and resumed scratching Bucky’s head, making him curl and sigh happily.

“I was just saying,” Bucky muttered. “You got your pride, s’a good thing.”

“Yeah, yeah, grasp for straws.”

The TV was on, but they were only watching perfunctorily, lazing on the couch. Bucky had been nervous at first, constantly asking whether he was too heavy, but then Steve had started the scritches and he’d just melted. Their empty bowls of cereal were still on the table, to be cleaned later. Everything could wait until a bit later.

“Hey,” Bucky mumbled. “What’re you gonna do now?”

Steve shrugged. “Same thing as before, I guess. Keep pushing until something gives. I’m bound to get a job interview eventually, or at least a bit of freelance work. Drawing logos, maybe, that kind of stuff.”

His fingers raked through Bucky’s hair, nails catching at his nape, and Bucky nuzzled into his borrowed sweatshirt with a pleased noise. Steve snorted. “You’re just a big cat.”

“Mmmwhatever you say,” Bucky slurred.

They were silent for a warm little while. Then Bucky’s voice rose again. “Hey, do… do you really not think anything will come out of the Mansion thing?”

“I really don’t know,” Steve said softly. “I keep thinking it’s too little too late, but at the same time… They did ask me to come, and it’s hard to believe they would have bothered if they were gonna say no anyway, so—I don’t know.”

Bucky made a noise like he understood. Steve hesitated, but the moment was so slow and warm he felt maybe he could ask. “What about you?” he said. “What do you want to do?”

He felt Bucky tense, but he wasn’t freezing up. More like bracing himself for a hurdle he needed
to take.

“I—” he stammered. “I—about that. I was—I don’t know if—I was thinking maybe—”

Steve felt it creep up his spine before it happened—a sharp knock on the door.

They both froze, and Bucky shifted to look up.

The knock happened again, sounding exactly the same, curt and precise.

“That’s not Rumlow,” Bucky mumbled.

He moved aside to let Steve get to his feet. Steve looked at him, then turned off the TV before walking to the door. He wished there was a spyhole; there wasn’t, but there was a safety chain and he put it on before he cracked the door open.

It was Rumlow.

But it wasn’t just him.

“Good morning,” said Secretary of State Alexander Pierce. “May we come in?”

* 

Steve backed off from the door, but Pierce just called in a slightly louder voice, “James. Come open that door, please.”

Bucky had turned ashen.

“James,” Pierce repeated.

Bucky got up from the couch and walked to the door like a zombie. Fingers shaking a bit, he closed the door and undid the safety chain before reopening it.

Pierce thanked him with a nod and walked into the room, appraising it with expressionless eyes which slid over Steve like he was a piece of furniture. Bucky backed off a few steps then stood there, still deathly pale. He didn’t seem to be able to look away from Pierce. Steve was more concerned with Rumlow, but Rumlow wasn’t even trying to come into the apartment—just standing in the corridor, without looking at Steve either; he was staring at Bucky with hungry eyes, and his hollow cheeks made him look all the more like a famished wolf.

“Well,” Pierce said, after a few tense seconds, “don’t just stand here. Take a seat.”


“Don’t be silly,” Pierce said, tone still impersonally debonair, “sit,” and Bucky sat down on the couch.

For the first time, Pierce’s eyes moved to Steve, who felt his entire body stiffen in a way it hadn’t since his nights on the street.

“I’ll stand,” he said at once, and his words came out hard and confrontational.
Bucky’s eyes flitted to him, wide and anxious—but Pierce just smiled. “Please,” he said. “There’s no reason to be nervous. I’ve just come to make sure James was doing fine.”

“Is that why you’ve brought him?” Steve said, nodding at Rumlow.

Pierce looked politely surprised, then glanced over his shoulder. “Brock? Is there a problem?”

“Ain’t done nothing, sir,” Brock said. “Just followed him around like you said.” He winked at Steve.

Bucky glanced between them both with a confused look. But Steve didn’t even have time to feel guilty; Pierce was raising a calming hand. “I apologize if he scared you. But I needed to verify a few things. You understand.”

Pierce sat on the chair, with the careful movement of aging men. “Steve,” he said, voice heavy with fatherly understanding, “your position is a difficult one, but I’m afraid that doesn’t entitle you to take advantage of my nephew.”

Steve opened his mouth but Pierce cut him off. “I know you were only trying to survive. But Brock tells me you’ve been living here, not just visiting once in a while.”

He glanced at the sheet pinned on the wall. Whose turn is it to shop for groceries?

“Sharing expenses, I see,” he said. “Yes, that must have been quite a relief. To say nothing of the free showers, free heating…”

“Sir,” Bucky tried, still sounding terrified. “He’s a friend, sir—it’s not—”

“James, he’s not your friend,” Pierce said quietly. “I’m certain he acted like one, but surely you realize anyone would have done the same in his situation. Hell,” he smiled, “I probably would have.”

“Sir, you really don’t—”

“James,” Pierce repeated, with a hint of steel. “Please tell me one thing: did you offer him to stay? All of this, was it of your own initiative?”

A terrible few seconds went by.

“No,” Bucky rasped eventually. “He—he asked, sir, but—”

“That’s quite enough.” Pierce looked at Steve again, took in his ruffled state, the sweatshirt he’d borrowed from Bucky, and his gaze hardened. “Dear Lord,” he murmured, “you’ve slept with him. Haven’t you?”

Steve opened his mouth again, but he was so indignant he couldn’t find his words before Pierce’s derisive scoff silenced him. “Do save me the outrage,” he said, getting up. “I am definitely too busy for that kind of song and dance.”

He took a few steps around the room, running his fingers over the books’ spines on the shelf. “I have been working with veterans for years, young man. And as far as I can recall, I’ve always found little parasites like you buzzing around them. Always easier to prey on the weak, isn’t it? Even when there isn’t much meat to pick off the bones.”

He looked perfectly at ease in this apartment, Steve realized—in a way Bucky never had, always seeming out of place, never touching anything he didn’t strictly need. The old wallpaper, the
antique computer, the way the furniture was arranged, it was all a perfect frame for Pierce, designed after him and for him, without any place for Bucky—he’d only been allowed on the surface of things, sitting on the edge of the chairs, sleeping on top of the bed, unwelcome under his own roof.

“It’s possible you were sincere,” Pierce said in a tone which suggested he doubted it very much, “but even then, you can’t ignore the fact that James isn’t of very sound judgment these days. This situation is abusive by default, and the fact is you’ve been taking advantage.” He turned to him again. “Now, I’m not heartless—I’ll give you a bit of money, which should leave you enough time to make new plans. But I have to ask you to leave.”

Steve moved forward, but for the first time Rumlow moved, too—didn’t advance, just moved, rearranging his position like a spider lurking in the corner. His eyes were fixed on Steve now.

“Let’s not make a fuss,” Pierce said, expressionless.

Steve looked at Bucky and was horrified to see him looking confused. He seemed to be trying to resist a suggestion made to his mind, staring into space with a helpless look on his face. But Steve knew it was so difficult for him to string his thoughts together at the moment.

And it could all be true, seen from a different angle—the angle Pierce had just laid out for him, pieces fitting so awfully well together: Steve coming into his apartment, protesting for show then giving in to Bucky’s pleas to use his shower and eat his food. Doing everything he could to stay in Bucky’s good graces: cleaning up the place, fixing the Internet, but also giving Bucky a pass for his indiscretions, and even going pliant when Bucky wanted to fuck him, all that just to keep him happy—it could all be true.

And Bucky didn’t believe Pierce—obviously did not want to believe him—but he had such a hard time trusting his own judgment. Because Pierce had told him that his own judgment could not be trusted.

Steve felt himself tremble with a fury the likes of which he’d never known before. His hands were already into fists and tightened to the point of pain.

“Is that how you cut him off from his family?” he asked harshly.

Bucky startled, then only looked more confused and scared than ever. Pierce’s gaze, in contrast, went distinctly colder.

“That must have been so easy for you,” Steve said, “right? You, the fucking champion of all parasites—you were family, and you were the fucking Secretary of State, so of course they let you sit by his bed when he’d just lost his arm, when he was drugged and confused—and you talked him into thinking his family would hate to see him like this? Would hate to see him at all?”

“Now—”

“So fucking easy,” Steve barreled on, “because he’s scared of emails and phone calls, isn’t he? So cutting him off from everyone was goddamn child’s play! And you just locked him in this fucking shithole and didn’t even tell his therapist where he lived, because James was an adult and he had a right to be left alone and you told him it was better that way, didn’t you?”

Pierce’s eyes were like ice—and yet he smiled. “I’m sorry the apartment isn’t to your taste,” he said, “though I frankly didn’t expect you to be picky. Still, young man, we’re in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and I am quite eager to know why I would have constructed such an elaborated heist only to deprive myself of a substantial rent.”
“Oh, my God,” Steve said, nauseated, unable to keep the disgust out of his voice, “that’s the very first thing you told him, isn’t it? How expensive this place is and how crazy generous this is of you. Do you think I’m buying any of this? You’re a fucking millionaire. It says so on your goddamn Wikipedia page! And do you know what else it says? That you’re running for president, and that veterans rights are a cornerstone of your campaign.”

The room was very silent. Nobody was moving.

“So?” said Pierce in a very calm voice.

“So you needed a veteran,” Steve said, all the pieces falling into place in his mind as he spoke. “And not just anyone. Because any candidate can go shake hands at the VA and it’ll always look phony and staged. But you, you were lucky enough to have a vet in your own family, a young handsome one, with the kind of trauma cameras just love. Now that would get you anyone’s sympathy—it’s campaign gold. But your campaign doesn’t start for a year and you couldn’t let Bucky’s family talk him out of working for you—and you certainly couldn’t risk Bucky getting fucking better, couldn’t you? So you just—you just—”

Words escaped him now. “…you just made sure he wouldn’t,” he finished, slightly breathless, eyes wide.

Pierce just stared him down for a few more seconds.

“Very imaginative,” he said.

He looked over his shoulder. “Brock, please take care of Mr. Rogers.”

“Sir,” Rumlow nodded.

He slipped inside the apartment and grabbed Steve’s arm so hard it hurt. Steve tried to move away, but unlike the last time, Rumlow’s grip was implacable.

“Let me go,” Steve said, tugging, then instinctively turning towards the couch. “Bucky—”

But he realized, then, that Bucky was petrified, shaking, losing his breath, desperately trying to fight off an impending panic attack. Rumlow bent down to collect Steve’s shoes and jacket, then dragged Steve towards the exit.

Steve couldn’t believe this was happening—he bucked and tried to plant his heels into the ground, but he was in his socks and slipped on the wooden floor. “Fucking let go of me! You can’t do this! Bucky!” he called again, desperate to go to him, to help him—to help—but Bucky was folding on himself, crumbling, and Steve fought and struggled and tried his damnedest to break free, but Rumlow physically pulled him out of the apartment and the last thing Steve saw, looking over his shoulder, was Pierce walking towards Bucky before the door closed on them.

* 

Rumlow threw him to the floor. “Put your shoes on.”

Steve scrambled up to his knees, looking around. There was only one other door on the sixth floor. What if he screamed? Would anyone come out? It was the middle of the day. Everyone must be at work.
Rumlow shoved Steve with his boot, making him sprawl again. “I said put on your fucking shoes.” He looked down on him and grinned. “I want you to get a head start. Otherwise it’s no fun.” He moved to step back, then, out of nowhere, kicked him hard in the side. Steve convulsed and screamed when his body gave in a way that almost made him throw up—all the air had been pushed out of him; he couldn’t breathe.

Rumlow snorted. “See? Can’t even fight back.” He took a step back, leaning against the opposite wall with folded arms and a crazy smile. “Put them on.”

Steve managed to uncurl, taking deep gasps to fight the pain. He groped for his shoes and pulled them close. The bright target in the back of his father’s jacket was gleaming in the dim light of the hallway.

“The jacket too, if you want,” Rumlow smirked, following his eyes. “But that’ll just slow you down.”

Steve laced his shoes, then slowly tugged his jacket closer—the pain was still flaring too bright when he moved; he’d need another few seconds before he could stand. He carefully slipped on his jacket, though—he would need it once he was outside in the cold, because he fully intended to outrun Rumlow. The problem were the stairs. If he broke his neck down those, Pierce would have no problem at all making it seem like an accident…

And then, looking at Rumlow’s grin, he understood that was the plan.

“This is crazy,” Steve panted, slowly pushing to get up. God, his ribs hurt like hell. Even when he breathed. “All this for a few photoshoots, for tearjerker interviews, it’s crazy.”

“No,” Rumlow said, laughing, “you’re fucking crazy. Saying all this to Pierce’s face, even though you know who he is?” He walked forward. “This isn’t about James fucking Barnes, you poor sucker. This is about you flat-out threatening Pierce’s entire career—Pierce’s reputation—and thinking you can get away with it.” His grin grew lopsided. “What will you do if I just let you walk? Keep your head down and make no waves?”

Steve stared back. Rumlow’s grin widened. “Thought so. And you don’t seem like the type to be bribed. Sorry.”

“So you’re working for him?” Steve panted. “You’re his fucking attack dog? What happened to your grand theory?”

“I’d say this fully supports my theory, Stevie boy.” Rumlow grabbed his arm again, shoved him towards the stairs. “Time’s up.”

Steve was breathing quicker. Oh, God, he was stupid. He shouldn’t have put on his shoes. It was all Rumlow needed to make it look real. Like Steve had been leaving on his own volition and slipped by accident, not like he’d been dragged in his socks into the freezing hallway.

The stairs were very steep, with high steps and sharp corners. Rumlow made him stumble forward, until he was on the very edge.

“Pray you get it on your first try,” he said in Steve’s ear—

—then the door burst open and Bucky threw himself at Rumlow, sending him to crash against the hallway’s wall.

Steve wavered and actually slipped down a few steps—his heart leapt in terror before he caught
himself on the handrail. He looked up, met Bucky’s eyes—haunted and wide and crazy under his mane of dark hair, crushing Rumlow with all his weight but already losing ground.

“Run,” he let out desperately—Rumlow bucked under him, struggling free, growling and spitting—“Steve, fucking run!”

Steve let go of the handrail and ran.

He almost did break his neck a few times flying down the stairs—the stories blurred past and he stumbled hard when he suddenly found himself out of steps, on ground floor. Already he heard someone running down after him, the old wooden stairs trembling with it. He pushed the glass door, got hit by the wave of freezing cold, tried to suck in a breath and felt pain flare in his side again. Tears filled his eyes, blurred his sight.

A flash of yellow caught his eye and he stepped into traffic without thinking.

“Hey,” he called breathlessly, raising his hand. “Here—yes—fuck, thanks,” he gasped when the cab stopped next to him. He hurried to the back and slipped inside.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

Rumlow appeared at the glass door and froze, dark eyes darting around.

“Just drive,” Steve gasped, trying to catch his breath, “please just drive for now—”

“It’s red, mate.”

Steve looked up at the red light. “Fuck,” he mumbled, moving away from the door. Rumlow saw the taxi, saw Steve inside, and stalked forwards. He couldn’t do that—he couldn’t pull Steve out of a cab—could he?

“Fuck,” Steve repeated breathlessly, groping for the door handle behind him—but then the lights flashed green and the cab drove forward, away from Bucky’s building, leaving Rumlow on the sidewalk.

Steve exhaled, then winced again when he breathed in. His side was hot and tender, throbbing in time with his heartbeat. He pulled his jacket tight around him and curled on himself.

A couple of minutes went by as he tried to catch his breath and stop shaking.

“Not that ah mind drivin’ round,” said the driver with a strong Irish accent, “but have ya maybe taken yer pick?”

“I—” Steve said weakly. For a second, his mind was empty. There was nobody he knew. He almost gave the name of his mom’s hospital; a few doctors might remember him there—maybe…

Then the answer came to him in a rush.

“Brooklyn Center,” he said. “The VA—please. Do you know—?”

“Course ah know,” the driver said. “Short ride after all, but yer payin’.”

The car had been moving east; it turned around at the next red light and came back up the parallel avenue. Steve looked at the grey and white buildings blurring past with a sense of deep disbelief. It was a weird thing to realize, but he hadn’t gotten into a car in ages.

Every time they stopped at red lights or because of slow traffic, Steve couldn’t help looking
around for Rumlow to appear, but of course he didn’t—of course he wouldn’t have pursued a cab on foot. It was a short ride, less than twenty minutes, before the car pulled up by the curb in Chapel Street. The VA was a tall, brownish building, with a glass door reflecting daylight.

Steve braced himself, his hand on the handle.

“How much?” he asked as casually as he could.

“Lemme see—” the driver said, and Steve opened the door and burst out of the cab.

“Hey!” he heard behind him—but he didn’t stop, despite the lancing pain in his side, and pushed the glass door open to run into the building.

Two women were chatting by the front desk; he rushed up to it and tried to speak, but he was breathless and his side hurt so much he had to fight off a rise of nausea.

“Whoa,” said the brunette behind the desk. “Slow down, mister, what’s wrong?”

“I’m—” Steve managed, “there—”

“Ya little shit!” the cab driver bellowed, barging in behind him. “Did ya think you’d get away with—”

“Sir,” the second woman snapped, a redhead with Natasha on her badge—“you are in a veteran center and it is imperative that you lower your voice.”

“Ah’ll lower mah voice when ah get mah fooking money!” he shouted so loud he could have shattered glass. “Ya think ya can just mock honest people around here? If ah’m not paid in ten fooking seconds—”

“Well hiya there, bro,” an exceedingly cheerful voice said behind him—it was a man with sandy blond hair and purple hearing aids. “What’s all this now? Throwing a big tantrum? Saying very bad words?”

The cab driver went even redder. “If ya think—”

“No no no wait, hear me out—I was just thinking maybe you’d like to come yell at the vets directly? There’s a whole buncha them right over there in the other room. Special loud noise trauma day. It’s like, what are the odds, right?”

The driver abruptly shut up.

“So, I mean—don’t hold it in like that, man, just get it out there, you know?” The sandy-haired man beamed and put his hands on his hips. “Or you could calm down before I break your fucking teeth for disrespect! What d’you say, champ?”

“Clint,” said the redhead, but she looked like she was trying not to smile.

“Ah’m just—ah’m sorry, but—this little punk,” said the driver in a more normal voice, helplessly pointing at Steve. “He just fooking ran off without paying. Ah can’t stand for that, ya know? Ah’m sorry ah yelled but—ah just can’t.”

The redhead—Natasha—took one glance at Steve, still struggling to catch his breath, then looked at the driver again. “I’ll take care of it. Come with me.”

He followed her outside; Steve saw them talk for a few seconds behind the glass doors. The driver
looked increasingly apologetic, and his face was returning to a normal color. Eventually, Natasha nodded, opened her wallet and counted her bills. A lot more than Steve would have thought—but it was true that the taxi had driven him around for a long time.

She sent him away, then came back into the room.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Steve panted.

She raised an eyebrow. “I suppose we’ll see. Tell me what I just paid for.”

Steve drew himself up, gritting his teeth against the pain. “My name’s Steve Rogers,” he said. “I’m here for—it’s about James Barnes, he needs—he needs help. Please.”

Natasha glanced at the brunette, who instantly disappeared in the back like this had been a very clear signal. Steve looked at her in confusion; meanwhile, Natasha got out her phone and sent out a call, without a word of explanation.

“Barnes?” Clint said, hoisting himself up on the desk. “Wasn’t he here, like, at the very beginning? The creepy one who didn’t talk?”

“That was all of you at the beginning,” Natasha said flatly, waiting for her call to connect.

“You got me there,” Clint grinned. “She got me there,” he told Steve. “I was totally like that at first. Then I figured it’s more fun annoying people until they wish you were shutting the hell up, you know?” Then he blinked and looked at Natasha again. “Hey, wait,” he said, “Barnes. Is that the guy who—”

“Steve,” said a voice Steve recognized—and he pulled himself up again, realizing he’d slipped a few inches down against the desk. A black man with cropped hair hurried up to him.

“Steve Rogers?” When Steve nodded, he said, “I’m Sam. It’s good to see you.” He put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Now take a breath and tell me what’s happening.”

“Detective Danvers?” Natasha was saying now, walking away from them. “It’s Romanov from the VA.”

Steve tried to take a deeper breath without feeling like his side would split open. For a second, he didn’t know where to start.

“Pierce,” he said eventually. “Bucky’s uncle.”

“I know him,” Sam said, calm eyes looking into Steve’s. “Go on.”

“He’s been—cutting Bucky away from his family,” Steve said. “On purpose. For his campaign. He showed up—he’s with Bucky right now—I called him out on everything and I think…I—I think he tried to have me killed.”

*There’s no way they’ll ever believe me,* he thought. *There’s no way anyone would ever believe that.*

“Fucking finally,” Natasha said, startling him—he hadn’t realized she was done with her call.

Sam squeezed his shoulder and said, “I’ll explain. Just take a breather first.”

Nodding, Steve did his best to regulate his breathing. After a few minutes, he managed to calm down until his side only barely ached anymore.
“You good?” Sam asked, and Steve nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, though he was still audibly breathless. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Sam looked worried, but he still let go of him and straightened up just as a blonde woman pushed open the glass door and jogged up to them. She was wearing a NYPD jacket.

“Carol,” Sam said, looking impressed. “That was fast.”

“I was working a case literally two blocks down, you’re one lucky bastard,” she grinned. “What do we got?”

“Assault and battery, at the very least,” Natasha said, shrugging on a red-and-black leather jacket. “Murder attempt, if you’re feeling bold.”

Carol raised her eyebrows. “Murder? You said maybe harassment.”

“We’re changing our angle,” Sam said. “Steve here says Pierce tried to have him killed when he confronted him about Barnes.”

“Ooh, that’s more direct, I like it.” Carol got out a notebook and a pen. “I’m gonna need a statement.”

Steve blinked, astounded. “But—how—wait, there’s no time,” he stammered. “Pierce is with Bucky right now.” It suddenly occurred to him he’d forgotten a very important detail. “And he’s got Brock Rumlow with him!”

“Figures,” mumbled Natasha while Sam groaned, “Oh great.”

“Steve, you have to give me the cliff notes,” Carol said. “I can’t barge in there without a solid reason.”

Steve nodded his understanding, still trying and failing to regulate his breathing.

“You’ll make your deposition later,” she went on, “and we might even need you to testify in court, there’s a high probability we’ll end up there. Are you prepared to do that?”

Steve felt himself blanch. He opened his mouth, but the words he needed to say didn’t come out.

“Steve,” Sam said. “What’s the problem? We have to hurry.”

Steve forced himself to speak. “Steve’s not my legal name,” he said in an altered voice. “I’m—I’m—I’m trans, and I don’t—I don’t look like my ID pictures anymore.”

Sam paused. He glanced at Carol, who shrugged, then towards Natasha, who thought fast for a second then told Steve, “It’s alright. We’ll check in with Jen or Matt to be sure, but I don’t think it’ll be a problem. Did your birth name start with an S, too?”

“Uh—yes,” Steve said.

“Then S. Rogers will do fine.” She tied up her hair. “Cliff notes. Go.”

Steve forced his chest to stop heaving long enough to get out a few haphazard sentences about Pierce isolating Bucky, Steve calling him out on it, and Rumlow dragging him out. When he was done, Carol straightened up and said, “Okay, that’ll do for now. Stick around, we’ll head to the station when I get back.”
“Where does he live?” Natasha asked.

Steve blinked in utter confusion—the pain was worse than ever now. “What?”

“Where does James live,” she said patiently.

Steve stammered out the address, finishing with, “On the sixth floor, but—”

“Good,” she said. She grabbed the car keys Clint obligingly handed her. “Thanks, Barton. Hold the fort.”

“Yes ma’am,” he grinned.

“We’ll talk when we get back, sorry,” Sam called over his shoulder to Steve, and then they were all gone, hurrying out of the building.

Steve was left standing there, absolutely dumbfounded.

The silence settled in. All he could hear were Clint’s combat boots softly thudding against the desk, and a great buzzing in his ears.

Eventually, Clint glanced at him and said, “You look a little pale, dude. Wanna sit down?”

“I—” Steve said. “I don’t—how did they—”

“Breathe and lemme talk,” Clint said. “Obviously, they’ve been planning a little rescue mission. Since you called, actually. You were the dude who called a few days ago, right?”

Steve, baffled, could only nod.

“Alright,” Clint said, “you see, even though Sam tries not to mix up his patients too much, he was so upset after Alexander Pierce told him he’d done his part he was telling everybody and their mother.” He launched into a pretty accurate imitation of Sam’s voice. “How dare this guy say this to me, this is so shifty and wrong, you don’t cut off a vet from his support system and blah blah.”

“Uh—yeah,” Steve said. “He told me about that.”

“So they suspected they were dealing with a situation of abuse, and they made a battle plan, just in case. It’s sort of their job. Problem is, they didn’t know where Barnes was, and they didn’t know for sure something was going on. It was all just supposition—until you came along and voilà!”

“But—” Steve said, but Clint kept talking.

“Now—who is Alexander Pierce?” he pretended to muse. “Why, he’s a man of great ambition. He’s running for fuckin’ President. Do you know what cutthroat shitfests presidential campaigns are? That guy can’t afford a single skeleton in his closet.” He sounded gleeful. “So you see, Detective Danvers ready to charge him with assault and battery on behalf of a war veteran—it’s gonna scare him right out of your pal’s apartment and all the way into his lawyers’ office.”

He kept bumping his heels against the desk, like a kid. “Not gonna lie, there’s like a 99% chance he’ll bribe his way outta this anyway, or find a way to have the charges drop or whatever, but the spotlight will make him back off.”

Steve stared at him.

“You want me to repeat all that?” Clint offered. “Because I can if you want.”
“No,” Steve exhaled, “no, I got it,” and he let himself slide down to sit on the floor with his back to the desk, curling in around himself.

He shook there for a few minutes.

Eventually, Clint spoke up again. “Hey, do you want something to drink? They won’t be back for a while.”

“Uh,” Steve said. He swallowed. His throat was horribly dry and raspy. “Yes, I—please.”

“Aight, don’t move,” Clint said, jumping off the desk and disappearing in the back.

Steve stayed on the floor and tried not to breathe too deeply. That way, his side almost didn’t hurt. He thought he felt cold, though he wasn’t sure. His mind was a great jumble of thoughts.

Clint came back after a few minutes, holding a glass of water.

“There ya go,” he said, plonking down next to him.

“Thank you,” Steve said, taking the glass. He took a sip—then spluttered it out. “What,” he coughed, “the fuck—that’s not water!”

“Why the fuck would I give you water?” Clint said, blinking. “It’s vodka from Nat’s personal stash. Which, don’t tell her, man, I’m counting on you.”

Steve coughed again, and it hurt like hell but he couldn’t help laughing, a little helplessly. His hand holding the glass was shaking. The rest of him was shaking too.

“Seriously, you should drink it,” Clint said.

It didn’t seem like bad advice after all. Steve’s teeth were chattering a little. He made himself stop, braced himself, then downed the glass in one go. It burned like fire going down his throat, but he felt a bit more stable seconds after, like it had weighed him down.

“Nice,” Clint said, taking the empty glass back from him then holding out his hand. “I’m Clint Barton, hi.”

Steve laughed again. “I kinda got that.” He shook his hand. “I’m Steve.”

He looked at Clint, at his purple hearing aids, and he thought his eyes looked a bit like Bucky’s—too sharp and too tired at the same time, for all his liveliness.

“Rumlow really try to kill you?” Clint inquired, putting the glass down on the floor. “Seems a bit conspicuous.”

“He—he wanted to push me down the stairs,” Steve explained.

He had trouble realizing it had happened to him. It felt so surreal. He felt like he should be more shocked. But his hands were still shaking a little. Was he in shock? Was that what it felt like?

“Oh, alright,” Clint said. “Like an accident thing. That’s pretty nasty.”

Steve suddenly realized he’d left his backpack in Bucky’s bathroom. His notebook. His shots.

But the alcohol on top of the aftershock made him numb, and he only felt some kind of distant despondency at the thought.
“Wouldn’t have anyone looked into it, though?” Clint was thinking out loud. “Like, don’t you have any friends or shit?”

Steve’s sight was blurring. He rubbed his eyes, then looked at Clint—it was difficult; his head felt much heavier all of a sudden.

“What…” he said with a coated tongue.

He couldn’t speak—couldn’t think, and he could feel his fingers going numb, his stomach radiating unnatural warmth.

“What,” he said again. “What did you put in the vodka.”

Clint looked at him weirdly.

“Nothing,” he said. “Except, y’know, vodka.” He sounded uncertain. “But maybe I shouldn’t have given you that much. You look like you’re a lightweight.”

He got up and pulled Steve to his feet; Steve’s side screamed in protest, but he was too fuzzy to let it show. He felt disconnected from his own body, like this was all happening to someone else.

“C’mon,” Clint said. “They’ve got a couch in the break room.” He helped Steve walk behind the desk. Steve felt uncoordinated and heavy. He was a lightweight, and he was also trans, and he’d said it in front of Clint, and now Clint was dragging him into a small room with no one else around, and there was nothing Steve could do.

Clint helped him down on the couch. Everything was blurry—the closets, the chairs, the coffee machine in the corner. Steve could not have moved, could not have screamed if he’d tried. He was breathing too quickly.

But Clint didn’t touch him.

“I’ll be outside if you need anything, okay?” he said, stepping back. He looked worried. “I’m—fuck, maybe I shouldn’t have made you drink.”

“It’s fine,” Steve slurred—and then he passed out.

—

“—Barton, you dummy.”

“I didn’t know!” Clint’s voice sounded too loud in Steve’s ears. “He looked sort of—in shock! I’m not a doctor, okay—I don’t even work here!”

“And thank fuck for that,” Sam grumbled. “Steve? Can you hear me?”

Steve frowned, then, with a huge effort, raised himself up on an elbow. “Um,” he said, “yeah.” God, everything was spinning around him.

“How do you feel?”

“Headache,” Steve croaked. He breathed in, and remembered his ribs still hurt as fuck, too, but he
wasn’t going to tell anyone that. He didn’t want to undress here.

“Barton, go get him water.”

Steve managed to straighten up a bit more. The electric lights bore into his eyes and made his headache throb painfully for a second. Lights on. It was dark outside.

Sam sat next to him. “Sorry about Barton,” he said. “He means well.”

“That’s fine,” Steve said, fully sitting up. Now that he wasn’t staring directly into the light, his headache was manageable, and the tremors in his hands were gone. “I think it actually did help,” he said. “A little.”

“Here,” Clint said, coming back with a small plastic bottle. He looked deeply embarrassed. “Um. I’m sorry. I swear this time it’s water.”

Steve smiled up at him. “It’s okay. Thank you.” The water was cool and felt like heaven on his tongue. His headache cleared a bit more. He finished the bottle, then looked at Sam.

“I’m sorry I left in such a rush,” Sam said. “Do you want me to explain right away, or do you need a bit more time to screw your head back on?”

“Clint already explained,” Steve said. “I think.”

Sam blinked, then glared at Clint.

“Did you now, Barton?”

“I—I just notice things!” Clint said, holding his hands up like a man taken hostage. “It’s not my fault!”

Sam let out a prolonged, long-suffering huff, then looked at Steve again. “Okay,” he said. “So you’ll be happy to know it worked.”

Steve drew himself up. “Seriously?” he said, suddenly breathless and forgetting the pain. “Did Pierce—did you arrest him?”

“He’s at the precinct right now, but he’s swearing Rumlow acted on his own. Also threatening lawsuits left and right. But that’s secondary—we got James out, and it’s doubtful Pierce will get near him again. The only reason he even tried all that was because nobody was watching.”

“He tried to kill Steve, though,” Clint butted in.

“Barton,” Sam said, rubbing his temples, “could you please shut up?”

“What? He did! Who says he won’t try again to keep him from testifying?”

“Nobody knew I existed at the time,” Steve said. His teeth were chattering again. “It… it should be fine now.”

Sam peered at him. “What do you mean, nobody knew you existed?”

“I’m—um—I’m homeless,” Steve said. “And I don’t—I don’t really have a family. So. Yeah.”

They both looked at him.

“Now I need vodka,” Clint said, and left the room.
“You better not,” Sam yelled after him. He sighed, then turned back to Steve. “God, I’m sorry about all this, man. I shouldn’t have forced your hand.”

“I’m the one who came to you for help,” Steve protested. “I want to be doing this. I’ll testify to anything. Where’s Bucky now? Is he gonna be alright?”

“You need to know that Rumlow escaped,” Sam said. “The NYPD’s on the lookout for him, but you won’t be safe out there.”

“I just want to know how Bucky’s doing,” Steve insisted. “Are you bringing him here?”

“Here? No,” Sam said. “He must be in a car to Pennsylvania as we speak.”

Steve felt like he’d been slapped in the face. He blinked, then blinked again.

“Pennsylvania?”

“Nat called his family. They live in Stroudsburg, and they have a car, so it was possible for his sister to come right away. We determined it was the best course of action—we can’t house veterans here, and James has been away from his support system long enough.”

“But—”

This could not be happening. But Steve had no way to put it into words, and all he could do was lamely stammer, “But he can’t be in a car, he’s—he’s scared of the outdoors.”

Sam looked puzzled. “We know,” he said. “Steve—don’t worry. This is our job. I’m sure Nat thought of something.”

“But,” Steve said again, helplessly, but at this moment the door opened on Natasha.

“Christ,” she sighed, shaking her hair loose from her bun. “What a day. I need a shot of vodka.”

“Yeah—about that,” Sam said, straightening up, “we need to talk about you keeping alcohol in here where vets can find it.”

“You mean where Barton can find it,” she said absently, opening a closet. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t drink.”

“He just said he was off to drink right now,” Sam pointed out.

“And that was a lie, because the vodka’s right here. Jesus, it’s like you don’t even know him.” Natasha pulled the bottle from under a stack of tampon boxes, then closed the door. “And besides, you did know that, or else you would have stopped him,” she concluded. “So shut up now, Wilson.”

Sam opened his mouth, then shut up. Natasha poured herself a drink in a paper cup from the coffee machine, then downed it in one go; Steve winced a little in sympathy, but she looked perfectly unscathed as she put the cup back down.

“Where’s Carol?” she asked.

“Got called up on her other case,” Sam said. “She’ll take Steve’s deposition tomorrow.”

Steve was faintly relieved about it; he felt like he’d been chewed up and spat out, and the vodka was still making his thoughts slow like syrup.
“Any word on our friends at the attorney’s office?”

“Couldn’t join Matt,” Natasha answered. “It’s Saturday, the office is closed. We’ll have to wait until Monday, unless I can get a hold of him before then.” She exhaled, then looked at Sam. “You’re gonna have to pay the Barneses a visit. Sooner rather than later.”

Sam nodded with a small wince of empathy. Natasha looked up, as though seeking something else to think about, and her gaze landed on Steve. “Hey,” she said. “How are you holding up?”

“Uh,” Steve said. “I was—I was just asking about Bucky.”

“I’m sure you were,” she said evenly. “I asked how you were doing.”

“Yeah, he’s gonna need a place to crash,” Sam said before Steve could ask about Bucky again.

Natasha nodded. “Okay,” she said, then to Steve, “Do you mind if we leave right now? I’d rather keep the full debrief for tomorrow—it’s been a long day for everyone.”

Steve got up automatically. “I—” he said, a bit bewildered. “Wait, I don’t—where are we going? The police station?”

“No, my apartment,” she answered simply. “Unless you’d rather stay with Sam.”

Steve glanced at Sam, who said, “You can if you want. But we thought—between two strangers, we thought you’d prefer a woman.”

Steve found nothing to say to that. Beyond the simple fact that they’d thought of this—they’d obviously discussed what to do with him even as they were running across the city to rescue Bucky.

“If there’s someplace you’d rather go, I can drive you there,” Natasha said. “But we can’t risk Rumlow finding you—he’s a lot less predictable than an old white politician. And we need you to stick around until this whole thing is over and done.”

Steve swallowed. “No,” he said. “There’s… I don’t have anywhere to go.”

Natasha’s face softened. “Then come on,” she repeated more gently. “My car’s just outside.”

Even though he wanted to ask about Bucky, Steve got the very clear feeling Natasha would not answer him until at least the end of the ride, so he stayed silent, digesting both his vodka and the events of the day.

Natasha turned out to live in Midtown, which led to a completely surreal moment when they drove past the ARC Mansion. Steve felt like he hadn’t seen it in years. He watched it disappear in the rearview mirror.

She pulled up in a quiet street. Steve followed her out of the car, his side aching more than ever, to the point that he had to count his breaths and walk with small strides. The cold was like a living thing trying to pry its way into his lungs, and he was freezing by the time he reached Natasha’s front door. He didn’t know anymore how he’d ever been able to walk around all night carrying
his backpack. He did not think, at the moment, he’d ever have the strength to do that again.

Her building was much fancier than Bucky’s, and Steve wondered what she did for a living—it couldn’t be just working at the VA. He wasn’t even sure he understood what she did at the VA. Natasha led him through hushed corridors padded in red velvet, and knocked on a door.

“Um,” Steve said. “Do you live with someone?”

“I don’t,” she answered.

“Isn’t this your apartment?”

“No, I live two floors up.”

The door opened on a small man with curly hair and an owlish blink.

“Natasha?” he said. His voice was very soft.

“Hi, Bruce,” she smiled. “Do you mind?”

Bruce blinked at Steve. Then at Natasha again. Then he just sighed and stepped back. “Come on in.”

Increasingly puzzled—who the hell was this now?—Steve stepped into an apartment which looked disturbingly like Bucky’s, except there wasn’t any actual trash littering the floor. Bruce was apparently just very untidy.

“Here,” he said, shoving stuff off a medical bed rolled in a corner. “Have a seat.”

Steve looked at Natasha, feeling ambushed. “I don’t need a doctor,” he said.

“Oh, that looks like cracked ribs,” Bruce said in his soft voice, like this was all perfectly normal. “Nat, can you give us the room?”

She just raised an eyebrow at Steve, then left. Bruce waited for Steve to sit down on the medical bed, then stepped closer and held out his hands. “Can I?”

Steve would have been nervous, but there was something so deeply calming about Bruce—and this entire day had been so completely unreal—that he nodded.

Bruce didn’t make him remove his clothes; he just slipped his hands under Steve’s shirt, in such a clinical way Steve could not even tense. Or maybe he was too tired—his vodka-induced blackout seemed to have only worsened his exhaustion.

“You often consult out of visiting hours?” he mumbled.

“Only for patients who don’t have insurance,” Bruce said, hands moving gently against Steve’s ribs, pressing here and there. “I’m not even that kind of doctor.”

Steve blinked a little. “Then what are you?”

“Neurosurgeon,” Bruce said vaguely, “but I dabble.” When Steve abruptly stiffened in pain, Bruce blinked again. “Oh,” he said. “Well, that’s a bit more than cracked.”
"He had a broken rib the whole time?" Sam talked so loud Steve could hear him through the phone. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"You can ask for his autograph tomorrow," Natasha said. "Any word from Matt at all?"

"You're the one with the attorney friends, lady—and don't try the distraction thing! What did you do about the damn rib?"

Steve wasn’t really listening to their conversation. It blurred in the background, even though Natasha’s kitchen was an open space and he wouldn’t have needed to strain his hearing. The day had finally caught up on him for good, now that the piercing pain from his ribs was going away, in a buzz of heavy painkillers Bruce had given him. Natasha’s home was surprisingly cozy, with warm colors, fluffy handmade quilts and stuffed animals all over the place. She’d ordered sushi and Steve was chewing on the last piece, feeling very tired.

He remembered how he’d felt in the morning, waking up next to Bucky and thinking this might just turn out okay in the end. He’d been wearing Bucky’s sweatshirt. He was still wearing it, he suddenly realized. A threadbare old thing, navy blue, with a safety pin biting into the left sleeve. He couldn’t swallow that damn last piece of sushi.

“What do you mean, you didn’t go to the ER?” Sam was yelling now, but Natasha said, “Talk to you tomorrow, Sam. Bye,” and hung up on him.

She put down the phone, then came back to Steve. “Are you finished?”

Steve swallowed—it felt huge and it hurt going down, but he did. “Yeah,” he mumbled, handing over his empty sushi box. “Thanks.”

There was a minute of nothing as Natasha folded the box and threw it away, chopsticks clinking into the can. Steve was staring at the wall.

“I’ve made a bed for you in the spare room,” she called. “The blue toothbrush in the bathroom is for you, and I got a t-shirt you can sleep in. Is there anything else you need?”

“I’d like to know how Bucky’s doing,” Steve said.

Natasha stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

“He was very shaken,” she said carefully. “But he’s been able to confirm what you told us, and now he’s with his family. They’re going to need some time to adjust, but they’ll get there.”

Steve said nothing. She walked closer to him. “What else did you want to know?”

“I want to—” Steve swallowed. He felt absolutely powerless. He couldn’t call Bucky, or email Bucky. He hadn’t realized just how inaccessible Bucky must have seemed to his family, before he found himself in the same situation. And he wasn’t sure Natasha would tell him the truth if he asked what had happened exactly at Bucky’s apartment.

“I want to see him,” he said, throat tight. “I need to see him. I need to make sure he’s alright.”

He
needs me, he couldn’t say. God, he needed me and I left him alone.

Natasha stared at him for a second longer, then said, “Look—don’t think I don’t understand. But I need you to understand what I’m saying, too.”

She sat next to him. “James is a veteran who’s just been through a fairly traumatic day, and now he’s been completely removed from his usual environment—not to mention he’s got lots of things to talk through with his family. Can you imagine the state he’s in right now?”

Steve could. In fact, it made him nauseous.

“You can’t barge in at his parents’ like that,” she said. “They don’t even know who you are, and if what I’ve seen of his sister is any indication, they’ll need a bit of time to adjust, too.”

Everything she was saying made sense, and Steve deeply hated it. He did his best to fight back tears. Crying wouldn’t help convince anyone of anything.

“Besides, you’ve got broken ribs,” she pointed out helpfully.

“I don’t care about that,” he bit out.

“I’m aware,” she said. “But we’ll need you to not be dying at the precinct tomorrow.”

Steve swallowed. Right. His deposition. That was for Bucky’s sake, too. But…

“Give it time,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

A huge, huge thanks to my beta laurie_ky for this one - even bigger than usual. Thank you for reading! Comments make me jump up and down with excitement. :D
The buckles of Steve’s backpack tinkled against the car floor.

Bucky’s brain was a screaming mess and it was all he could do to screw his eyes shut and wait for it to pass. Behind the wheel, Rebecca wasn’t talking to him, anyway. She hadn’t said a word since they’d left New York. The silence was like a gas, pervading all the cracks in the car, suffocating him.

He didn’t remember well what had happened after Steve’s escape; he’d regained an edge of consciousness locked in the bathroom, and he’d stayed locked in there the whole time, even when he’d heard Sam’s voice on the other side of the door. Another great moment of dignity. It had been four hours before a car had pulled up in front of his building; Sam had told him through the door it was his sister. Bucky had thought he might die of shame, hearing that she’d come to collect him like an unruly kid. Because he’d tried to protect her but of course he’d fucked it all up, from the very beginning, and this was how it ended. With silence. And this fucking new car which smelled nothing like the old one.

Sam had said something about Steve, about Rumlow trying to kill Steve, and Bucky had stammered assent to questions asked, he’d been able to do at least that, but he hadn’t thought to ask questions of his own. And now he could not ask anyone where was Steve—what had happened to Steve.

He was curled up in the back seat, without a seatbelt on, and hiding into his sweater—he’d pulled it over his head like a kid. But he wasn’t a kid, he was a grown adult going on thirty, he was pathetic and it was growing sweaty and airless in there, but terror was clutching at his chest and he didn’t dare come out.

And that was the fucking story of his life, wasn’t it. Unable to do or see the obvious. How could he have been so stupid? Why hadn’t he just fucking realized what was going on? He had let his family’s texts and emails pile up, even though he hadn’t been able to avoid seeing them while waiting for Coulson’s answer—BUCKY WE’RE WORRIED, yelled the messages at him, BUCKY PLEASE ANSWER. How many messages had Rebecca sent? He didn’t know—he hadn’t dared scrolling down his inbox—and now she was driving and she was not talking to him, and it was his fault, everything was his fault, he’d let this entire situation go horribly septic and now it was all fucked and it was his fault.

Where’s Steve? The thought circled back into his mind every ten seconds. Where’s Steve? Is he alright? What happened to Steve? But he couldn’t ask Rebecca. Rebecca had no idea Steve even
existed. Also, Rebecca was not talking to him.

The longer he stayed like that, pitifully holding the cloth over his head, the more horrible it was—because it was getting really hard to breathe, and it was just fucking embarrassing to behave like this, and this was why Rebecca wasn’t saying anything, wasn’t mentioning their parents or why she had their car, because they were all embarrassed about him and didn’t know what to do with him. They probably didn’t even want him home. He had ignored them for so long, they must be so fucking mad at him, and now Rebecca had come all this way to pick him up and he was hiding in his fucking sweater. He should be poking his head out and at least have the guts to apologize, for how insensitive he’d been, just letting everything go like he didn’t care.

And the worst part was—he genuinely hadn’t cared. He’d looked at them panic and worry and call, and he hadn’t answered, as though this was all a minor problem which would take care of itself if he ignored it long enough.

The car was thrumming under his body. He didn’t know this car. They’d bought a new car. It didn’t smell the same as the old one. Maybe he was making up all this. The thought made him suck in a sharp breath. No, no, he couldn’t start thinking he might be hallucinating, because if he was seeing things—then he was definitely crazy. He didn’t want to be crazy. He wanted this fucking nightmare to end. When was it going to end? He’d been back from the war for almost a year, now. When was it all going to be normal again?

Where was Steve?

He closed his eyes harder, but it was a mistake, because when he did that, he saw Steve—being dragged out the apartment—calling for him—and Bucky just stayed there—watched him leave and stayed there—until he heard him scream on the other side of the door—and even then it had taken him so long—so long—to get a hold of himself and to get up and to—

—it was his fault, it was all his fault, he’d opened the fucking door, why had he done that, when Steve looked so scared, when he’d recoiled like that, but Pierce had said come open the door and Bucky had stupidly thought, well, it’s his apartment, I can’t just not let him in—God, how could he have been so stupid, so stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid—

The car stopped, shaking him out of his thoughts. There was no way they were there already. Why had it stopped?

He realized he was hyperventilating, which didn’t help with the whole trapped-in-sweater situation. The driver door opened, then slammed shut; and then another door opened, and Rebecca slid in the back with him.

“Bucky, get out of your sweater,” she said.

Bucky curled harder on himself, terrified. “No.”

“Buck,” she said, and God, that alone almost killed him. She sounded angry and sad at the same time. “Get out of your sweater, you need to breathe.”

“I’m fine,” he rasped against all evidence. It was a furnace in there, and he was pretty sure he was mostly breathing carbon dioxide by now. Hot tears were pricking at his eyes. He was being ridiculous and he didn’t want her to see it. He didn’t want her to see he was even more pathetic than she thought.

And then her hands were on the collar of his sweater and he whined “No—no, leave me alone,” like the appalling child he was, but she harshly tugged it down and the air of the car smelled
wrong but it was fresh and filled his lungs whole. Bucky curled down to hide his face in his lap so she couldn’t see him cry. God, how lamentable, how fucking worthless he was.

“Bucky.” Her voice was softer. “It’s me. It’s Rebecca.”

“I know,” Bucky said in a small voice.

“Why are you hiding?”

Bucky shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he gasped. It was all he could say. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I let you worry and I’m sorry I didn’t answer your emails and I’m sorry you have to see me like this and I’m sorry I couldn’t hide my mess better and I’m sorry I was stupid enough to listen to Pierce and I’m sorry I’ve fucked this up and sorry I’m fucking this all up right now—”

“Bucky,” she was crying, too, how could he still be fucking this up even more, “Bucky, stop—please stop.”

The worst part was that beyond his mind-numbing panic, Bucky knew what she was feeling: this immense helplessness which overwhelmed anyone taking the full measure of what a wreck he was—what are we going to do with him? What are we going to do about this entire situation? How can things ever go back to normal? And the immense embarrassment anyone would have felt thinking these things about another person.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped again.

Rebecca had visited him in the hospital—she’d left him that small bottle of conditioner, but he had been too fuzzy to really talk to her then, and she lived in Philly, she had her job, she couldn’t be there all the time. Still—how had this happened? It sounded so stupid, so impossible, laid out like this. I just stopped talking to my entire family. It was like a weird dream: it hadn’t seemed wrong before, but now that he was seeing it from the outside, he couldn’t understand how he’d justified it to himself.

He genuinely did not remember how this had all started. Pierce must have told him he just needed a week or so to get his bearings, he could stay at his place while he transitioned back from the hospital. And the week had turned into months, and along the road somehow Bucky had let himself think this was all fine—and now here they were, parked on the side of some fucking road in Pennsylvania, and he’d left Steve behind, and the worst part was that he couldn’t even think about Steve because his sister was talking to him again and he had to pay attention, he’d hurt her enough—but where was Steve?

“Bucky, I’m not mad,” she said.

“Yes you’re mad,” he gasped. “I didn’t answer your emails. I just—I let them fucking pile up and now—”

“I was worried,” Rebecca said.

“You don’t sound worried, you sound mad.” God, did he have to sound like a fucking petulant brat?

“I’m mad because you think I’m mad and I’m not!” She caught her breath, then said, “Buck, we were so worried—we didn’t know how to reach you—but now you’re here, and it’s difficult but it’s gonna—it’s gonna get better.” He could hear the effort she made to keep an even voice. It didn’t always work. “Because now we have you back.”

He said nothing.
“I missed you,” she said. She sounded so tired. “Bucky, please.”

Bucky stayed still. He was absolutely unable to look at her, keeping his eyes glued to his feet.

She hesitated, then took his hand and laced their fingers.

Her hand felt so warm. Almost too warm, like it was pulsing with life. Bucky risked a look. His skin looked dead and grey next to hers.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, but the words sounded empty.

“We’re going home,” she said, “and we’ll sleep, and we’ll eat, and we’ll talk. Okay? It’s all gonna get better now.”

*Get better.*

Bucky closed his eyes.

“Okay,” he said tonelessly.

Rebecca let go of his hand and left. Seconds later, the car rumbled under his body as it climbed back onto the road, and Bucky thanked all the gods it was dark outside, because otherwise he would have fallen apart completely thinking of the open skies over their heads. Still, it was safer not to risk looking out the window; being in a car made him jittery enough already. So he stared at his feet and left his hand where Rebecca had left it, like some sort of dead thing.

This was how James Buchanan Barnes got home from the war.

---

Eventually, they pulled up in the alley. Bucky felt his breathing speed up at the thought of going outside. *Keep calm. We’re at night.* All he had to do was grit his teeth until he was into the house.

This, at least, he managed—he grabbed Steve’s backpack, then followed Rebecca across the lawn like a lost dog, walking onto the stepping stones he remembered from when he was a kid. This felt like a dream, like a foregone memory, the kind of thing which should be sepia-colored. Surely, it had happened in another life. It was absolutely impossible that this house had remained the same while the rest of the world fell to pieces.

And yet here it was, unchanged.


“No,” Rebecca said. “Mom isn’t either. They left just this morning for Los Angeles; they’re still on the plane, I haven’t been able to reach them yet.”

Bucky did not know what to say to that. He looked up, just slightly, as Rebecca opened the front door. She looked smaller than he remembered. He quickly lowered his eyes again, telling himself he couldn’t afford to risk seeing too much of his surroundings. Though, away from city lights, the sky was dark like he was in a box. He would have liked that, maybe. To be in a box.

What was he doing here—he couldn’t be here, why had he let them take him *all the way here*—he
had to go find Steve—make sure Steve was—

“Come on,” Rebecca said.

She pulled him inside the house, without turning on the light. Bucky felt too frail, too flaky without his usual layers to hold his body together. All he’d put on was a jacket and shoes—and he’d grabbed Steve’s backpack, which had kept him company in the bathroom. God, Bucky should have given it to Sam. But he was stupid. He’d thought, *Steve’s notebook’s in there,* so he’d wanted to protect it. As if that didn’t make him a monstrous hypocrite. It was the only thing Bucky had taken with him. All of his stuff—which was just clothes, really—had stayed behind in Pierce’s apartment.

The second he thought of it as *Pierce’s apartment,* he knew it was all over and he would never go back.

Only a few weeks ago, the thought might have vaguely relieved him, but now—now it just made his throat tight with fear. Where was Steve going to go?

He’d vanished in the staircase and Rumlow had come back saying he’d gotten away—but what if he’d lied? What if he’d—but no, no, Bucky’s frantic mind was all over the place, Steve *must* have gotten away since he’d sent Sam. And Bucky should have asked Sam—they’d spent fucking hours together in the apartment, but he could barely manage to breathe then, absolutely losing his shit in the tiny bathroom, and he hadn’t asked him, and now he was in Stroudsburg, PA, and Steve was somewhere in New York and Bucky didn’t even know where. Or how to reach him. Or whether he was even alive.

But of course he was alive, he’d *just* been over this, Steve *had* to be—

“How do you want to eat something?”

Bucky started and came back to the moment. Rebecca was looking at him expectantly. Her overgrown little brother clutching a dirty backpack to his chest in the middle of the kitchen.

“No,” Bucky muttered. “Thanks, I just—I think I just need to—to get some rest.” His mind felt like it was about to fly apart and he just needed a fucking *moment* to—to regroup. To sort things out and find a solution, find a way to know if Steve—

“Come on,” murmured Rebecca.

They climbed the stairs, brother and sister, and Bucky let himself be pulled to his old room. He kept his eyes to the floor, sat on the bed, doing his best to shut himself down. He didn’t want to notice what had or hadn’t changed. It was safer to stare at the carpet.

“Here,” Rebecca said. She pushed him, a little, and he went pliantly, lying down over the covers. “Try—try to just sleep for now. Okay. Tomorrow…” She swallowed and repeated, “Tomorrow,” like it was a full sentence.

Bucky didn’t answer. He closed his eyes, and heard her pull a chair, and realized she probably intended to stay there all night. He wanted to know if Steve—if Steve—but he couldn’t ask her and his frazzled, blurry mind could not even string two thoughts together to find another way, and he couldn’t go on—he physically could not go on, too exhausted and too overwhelmed with the screaming mess under his skull, and so he curled up around Steve’s backpack and closed his eyes and gave in to the great chaos of his mind.
“But are you sure it’s normal?”

The voice came from downstairs. Bucky opened his eyes. He hadn’t realized he’d fallen asleep.

Blinking as his surroundings came into focus, he found himself staring at the wallpaper from his teenage years, and it jarred him so much he could think of nothing more for a whole minute. He closed his eyes again.

“I mean, he’s been asleep for… almost twenty hours. Sam—isn’t that unhealthy?”

Bucky pulled himself up in a sitting position. He felt exactly like he was—gross and marinated in his own sweat. He remembered where the shower was. Of course he did: it was his childhood home. And yet it looked profoundly foreign to him, like he was an impostor, like the real James Buchanan Barnes was dead somewhere under the wreck of a car and something had taken his place.

Where was Steve? Was Steve okay?

“Oh.” The voice was his sister’s. “Okay. Thank you. No—I understand. We’ll see you soon.”

Bucky looked out the window—and recoiled a little. He wasn’t on the sixth floor anymore; the ground was right here, the sky too wide without a skyline to obstruct it. There were trees outside. For a second, he was captivated by the muddy color of the bark, by how fundamentally different it was from the greys of a city even though it was almost the same hue.

His breathing was growing quicker already. Oh, God, why had he let them take him here? He didn’t belong here, for so many reasons.

What had Rebecca said? He’d slept twenty hours. Anything could happen in such a fucking long time—deep breaths, deep breaths, but God, God, he had to find out what had happened to Steve. His mind wasn’t in a much better state than earlier, but it had settled just enough for him to realize the only way to do that would be to call Sam.

He swallowed, then slowly pulled himself to his feet. He felt unbalanced—his body both too heavy and too light, out of proportion in this room where he’d spent most of his childhood and teenage years. He hadn’t completed his degree—yet, he used to say back then—just spent a couple of months working odd jobs in New York, before he left for his tour. He’d thought it’d just be a tough few years before he came back home and could finish college on veterans benefits.

God, he could have laughed.

He shyly went out of the room, almost tripping on Rebecca’s chair—she always left stuff in the way like that. Bucky felt a sudden pang of nostalgia. He’d unlearned how to behave with people, but he’d unlearned his family most of all. He couldn’t get rid of the feeling that he wasn’t James Barnes, that there had been a mix-up somewhere.

“Becca?” he murmured.

It wasn’t loud enough for anyone to hear him.

“Becca,” he repeated. God, that, too—the most ridiculous nickname in the world, Bucky, for someone whose sister was already nicknamed Becca. How stupid it sounded, Bucky and Becca.
He wondered if this was how it would be from then on: memories exploding in his face like landmines, at every turn.

She’d heard him, but she wasn’t sure. “Buck?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m—I’m awake—I’m sorry I slept so long.”

There was a silence. Then she asked, “Will you come downstairs?”

It was the last thing he wanted, but he also couldn’t go back into his room. He had to find out what had happened to Steve, even though he had no idea how to bring it up—how to find a quick way to explain to her everything that had happened to him ever since he’d run out of food in Pierce’s apartment. It had felt like a lifetime. It had barely been a month.

She’d been talking to Sam a minute ago, he’d heard her. Maybe—maybe he could just ask her to call him again. Sam would know. So he swallowed hard and went down the stairs. One step, two steps, three steps. The fourth one always creaked, and it didn’t fail, this time either. Creak.

His sister was sitting at the table in the kitchen. There were no lights on; it looked gloomy and dark, but when Bucky looked up he still saw her, for the first time, kind of. She wasn’t pale-eyed like him—she’d always had such dark irises. They had the same hair, dark brown, almost black on a rainy day, like today. Everyone always said they looked like each other, and they’d both always vehemently denied it, like it was some sort of insult.

“Hey,” he said.

She got up, and even though they’d never been a touchy-feely family he could tell she might have wanted to hug him, but she glanced at his arm and—didn’t.

“Does,” she said, voice too even, “does it still hurt?”

Bucky blinked, then closed his right hand over his stump. “No,” he said. “Well. Sometimes. But it’s healed.”

What a stupid thing to say. It wasn’t healed; he didn’t have an arm. There was a silence, and he wondered why she hadn’t turned on the light. The room looked like a goddamn tomb.

He had to ask her about Sam, because he needed to know about Steve, but—he didn’t know where to start, how to bring it up when the silence between them was so tense and so uncomfortable.

“You—re—you’re not in Philadelphia,” he stammered out.

Brilliantly observed. But it made Rebecca smile, a thin smile, and she answered, “I was supposed to be house-sitting while Mom and Dad were on holiday. A quiet place to work on my thesis.”

“Oh,” Bucky said. “Okay.” He rubbed his stump again.

*God,* this room was depressing, too depressing, with the gloomy light of the late afternoon washing through the cold windows, and it was *stupid* to stand around with the lights off as though they had to respect some kind of pathetic fallacy thing.

“You—you wanna turn on the lights, maybe?” he said.

She stared him with a look of slight panic. “I thought we weren’t supposed to do that.”
Bucky blinked. “What?”

Weirdly, she blushed. “There was—there was a leaflet at the hospital, it said—veterans might be scared of flashing lights.”

It moved Bucky, stupidly and deeply, that she would have retained this small piece of information all these months because she didn’t want to hurt him. He felt a fresh pang of affection, and then a fresher pang of guilt; despite everything, he couldn’t help thinking Pierce had been right. His family would have been much better off if he hadn’t reappeared.

“I’m scared shitless of a ton of things,” he muttered. “But—but lights are fine.”

“Oh,” she said. She even smiled again. “Then—alright, then.”

She turned on the lights, and it wasn’t much better, but it still felt… well. A bit more like home. Even though that wasn’t saying much.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said under his breath. “About the emails.”

She just shook her head, looking tired.

“About Pierce, too.”

The tiredness fell off her face and she looked straight at him. “Why are you apologizing for that asshole,” she said.

She got up, suddenly agitated. “Seriously—look, Bucky, of course I’m pissed at you. But I’m pissed like—like I was when you climbed that damn apple tree and broke your collarbone. Because you got hurt. It’s all that matters.”

Bucky said nothing. He felt horribly guilty because—they were having this conversation and he should have focused on it, given it his best, but all he could think about was Steve. He had to find out what had happened to Steve.

“Oh, God, you have to talk to Mom when she comes back,” Rebecca went on. “She was so worried.”

Bucky looked at her helplessly. “What do you want me to say to her?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Just talk to her.”

It was so weird, because—it was profoundly awkward, this situation, and yet at times he got flashes of normal. As a teenager, he’d been required to talk with his mom a lot. He never knew what to say to her. They lived together—she already knew everything happening in school, thanks to Becca the chatterbox—what was left for him to say?

Rebecca must be reading his mind, because she sighed. “I don’t know, tell her—tell her about what you did all that time.”

“Nothing,” Bucky said at once.

“That’s not possible. You must have done something,” she said. “Gone places.”

“No,” he said. The Mansion didn’t count, not really. “I’m—I can’t. The outside. I can’t anymore.”

There was a painful silence.
“Hey,” Bucky said, and God, his heart was beginning to stutter already, “was that Sam on the phone earlier? Wilson?”

The transition could have been smoother, but thanks to whatever deity glanced his way sometimes, his sister did not seem too jarred.

“Oh—yes,” she said. “He wanted to know how you were doing. I told him you were…” She did a helpless little gesture and finished, “still asleep,” though it was clear she meant still fucked up.

Sam—Sam would know. About Steve. Right? Steve must have gone to the VA. Sam hadn’t just popped out of nowhere. God, Bucky should have talked to him instead of going fetal in the bathroom. But now it was too late, and he was in fucking Pennsylvania—

“Could we—like—call him back?”

“He’s coming to see us later in the evening,” she said cautiously. “But you can call him back if you want. You still have your phone, right?”

Bucky’s heart rate skyrocketed, and he willed it to calm down because he needed to make that phone call, dammit. Of course Rebecca would not do it for him. She didn’t know how crazy he was. She didn’t know because they hadn’t spoken since he’d been discharged from the hospital, which was his fault.

“I do but I—” he swallowed, “no—you’re right—I’m gonna—I’m gonna go do that now—I mean, right now, before I forget,” he said, and he walked out of the room.

His breathing was getting uneven, but he ignored it. He just—he just had to do it, not give himself enough time to think, just like the day he’d gone out for groceries, just like the time he’d called 911. He had to know—Steve…

He went upstairs, back into his bedroom. Even as he looked for his jacket, the imminence of what he was about to do occupied his mind, made his ears buzz and his heart beat too hard. So he tried thinking of Steve, instead—and that worked, a bit too well, because now his mind was full of Steve being dragged out of the apartment, and the look in Steve’s eyes, the last thing Bucky had seen of him, this wide-eyed look as he grabbed onto the banister, before he let go and fled and vanished, and before Rumlow’s elbow slammed into Bucky’s plexus and all he could do was rasp on the floor for long, painful minutes, with Pierce watching at the door, just standing there and watching him.

His jacket was in the goddamn closet. Typical Rebecca, tidy only with stuff that didn’t belong to her. Hand shaking, Bucky found his phone in his pocket, scrolled through for the VA’s number. As he did so, he suddenly saw the date in the corner. Today was a Sunday. The VA was closed.

But before he got to the Vs, a name flashed before his eyes. Sam Wilson. His actual, personal number. What the fuck? Since when did he have that?

Bucky pressed call and stood there, without putting the phone to his ear, staring anxiously at the screen. He didn’t want Sam to answer but he needed him to answer because what if Steve—what if Steve—

“Hello?”

Bucky swallowed and brought the phone closer to his mouth. “Sam,” he croaked.

There was a silence.
“Yes?” prompted Sam. “Hello?”

Bucky cleared his throat. “It’s—me, it’s—James,” he said haltingly.

“James!” Sam said, sounding like he was trying to refrain his excitement. “It’s good to hear your voice. Your sister told me you were asleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said, and how many times could he say that before the words lost their meaning?

“No, it’s fine, you definitely needed the rest. I’m just glad to know you’re home.”

This isn’t home, thought Bucky desperately. Home had happened before, somehow, in the blink of an eye, the time for Steve to smile at him, until it was all ripped away again.

“You know I’m coming to see you later, right?” Sam said. “Something up?”

“Yes—no—listen,” Bucky said with difficulty. “I just need to know—I just need to know about Steve.”

“Steve?” Sam said. He sounded—oddly neutral. “He’s fine. He got a little banged up but he’s alright. He’s staying with Nat.”

Bucky felt like his insides had disappeared. Suddenly, his legs were giving out, and he heavily sat on the bed. He blinked into space for a few seconds, then grabbed onto the phone, reminded himself he was talking to someone and couldn’t blank out too soon.

“He’s really fine?” he asked. “You’re not—you’re not just—”

“I promise,” Sam repeated. “He’s fine.”

Bucky blinked tears out of his eyes. “Okay,” he managed.

“Look, man, I’m sorry, we have to go to the precinct,” Sam said. “But I’ll see you in a couple hours, okay?”

“I—” Bucky said. God, he really fucking hated phone calls—every time it was his turn to speak, it was like he couldn’t think of anything normal or clever to say. “The—the precinct?”

“We’re going after Pierce,” Sam explained. “It’s kind of a mess.”

Bucky blinked. “He—he didn’t do anything, really,” he felt obligated to point out. Pierce had just made suggestions. Bucky had dug his own grave all by himself.

“I assure you he did,” Sam said in a voice which didn’t sound like him, hard and curt.

“What about Rumlow?” Bucky asked. This seemed way more important.

“They’re still looking for him,” Sam said. “I’m really sorry, I have to go—though I can stay on the phone till I get there,” he reasoned, and Bucky heard street noises in the background. “How did it go with your sis?”

Bucky shook his head with a spike of panic. “I don’t—I just wanted to know—I just needed to know Steve was okay. Sorry. Thanks. Bye.”

“James—”
Bucky ended the communication and closed his eyes.

Then he reopened them, saw the grey skies outside, the naked trees, the lifeless nature in winter. All of a sudden, he was crushed by a terrible feeling of immobility.

Steve was fine. Now there was nothing left to worry about. Nothing left he could do to help him. Bucky was sitting alone in this silent room, in this silent house, and his sister was downstairs and his parents would fly back from LA within the week and he had nothing at all to say to them.

Maybe this was why Pierce had fooled him so easily; because Bucky had wanted to be fooled. He’d wanted to stay in the in-between. But one way or another, it had to end.

What happens now, he thought. He looked at the white skies again and missed Steve, suddenly, horribly, to the point of physical pain.


* 

The hours stretched, long and grey like old glue. Bucky was still lying on his bed. Becca had called for him to come out several times, but he wasn’t strong enough and he’d just ignored her until she stopped calling. He knew it was a shitty thing to do but he was doing it anyway. Nothing new under the sun.

He let his mind drift back to Steve, to their last night together, and he let himself be permeated by all the sensations he could recall. How he’d sounded at the end. Bucky had always loved hearing people when they came, but Steve falling apart had been the most beautiful thing he’d ever heard. It wasn’t even about it being a turn-on. It was just—Bucky had experienced a lot of physical and mental pain in his life, but Steve had reminded him it was possible to feel pleasure just as intensely.

It felt so ancient already. Had it really happened to him? Less than two days ago? Honestly, the hallucination theory was more believable than the bright memory burning in Bucky’s mind, so full of life, so unlike him, with grey skin and a grey mind.

Someone knocked on his door. Bucky looked up, chest instinctively tightening already.

“Bucky?” called Rebecca.

He didn’t want to talk to her. He was being a complete asshole, he knew, but—he just wanted to be left alone and think for a little while. He wasn’t done reliving it all. Couldn’t she leave him alone for a couple more hours?

“Sam called, he’ll be here in five minutes.” She sounded uncertain. “Come down. Please.”

Suddenly, Bucky felt sorry for her. She was like him, in a way. She’d never asked for all this bullshit and she was expected to cope with it all when it was maybe too much. She wanted things to be normal. They both wanted things to go back to normal. And despite all wanting the same thing, they couldn’t have been further from it.

Bucky could not bear the thought of being more of an annoyance to her, so he dragged himself up to his feet and came out of the room. She smiled at him; he tried to smile back and followed her downstairs.
The silence between them was more awkward than ever. He thought maybe he should have been the one to speak up—at least attempt to explain who he was now, and what he’d seen, and how it had changed him; but the mere thought clogged up his throat with panic, and he had to be careful with his breathing, because he really couldn’t afford a panic attack in this silent kitchen.

There were two pizzas in the oven, probably so Sam could eat with them. Bucky did not feel all that connected to his own body, but he supposed he was hungry—he hadn’t eaten in a little while now. After five tense minutes, the doorbell rang and made them startle. Rebecca sprang to her feet. “I’ll get it.”

Bucky heard her hurry to the front door, bid a breathless hello to Sam, sounding like she hadn’t breathed the whole time he hadn’t been there. There was a suspicious silence, and Bucky thought maybe he was hugging her. He wondered if they knew each other better than he thought, and realized they must have emailed each other a lot since he wouldn’t answer either of them.

Sam stepped into the kitchen and said, “Hey, man.”

It was the first time Bucky saw him since he’d left, in a way—the day before didn’t really count. He would have liked to smile, but he couldn’t manage and kept staring at the table. “Hi,” he mumbled.

“How’s Steve?” he asked under his breath, eyes never leaving Sam.

He hoped he was wrong. He hoped he was completely wrong.

Rebecca looked at him. “Who’s Steve?”

Sam didn’t answer right away—Sam looked embarrassed, and Sam never looked like that, and Bucky’s heart missed several beats.

He unfolded a little from his chair, looking up from the table, urgency swelling in his voice. “Sam, what’s going on?”

“Who the hell is Steve?” Rebecca insisted.

“Steve was the one to warn us about Pierce,” Sam said, in that weird neutral voice again. “Apparently, he’d been living with Bucky for a few weeks.”

“Living with him?” Rebecca repeated, brow furrowing.

Bucky felt like a hook was ripping his insides out.
“You believe him,” he breathed. “You believe Pierce.”

Sam raised a hand. “No,” he said firmly. “I’m just saying, it’s his version against Steve’s, and of course it’s Steve I’m inclined to believe, but we didn’t get the chance to discuss your take on it. It’s part of the reason I’ve come—”

“Steve did nothing,” Bucky gasped, “nothing wrong. He’s—I wouldn’t be here without him. He went to you for help, and he’s been helping me, so much, he’s—” Bucky was breathing too fast. “He saved my life. Okay?”

He swallowed hard. “Sam, tell me what’s going on. Where is he? What happened?”

“He made his deposition today,” Sam said. “Took a detour by the VA with Nat on their way home, and—he sort of vanished. She doesn’t know where he went. She called me while I was already on my way here, I don’t know more, I’m sorry.”

Bucky felt like his mind was turning to sand.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Sam said, but Bucky was already running out of the kitchen, up the stairs, almost tripping over the last step before he barged into his room and frantically looked for his phone. He had it a minute ago, where—

“James,” said Sam, coming into his room.

“It’s Rumlow,” Bucky said, tears choking him already, “it’s gotta be Rumlow, he’s the one who told Steve about the VA, he knew to find him there—”

“Okay, James,” Sam said quickly, voice full of warning already, “think for a minute. You don’t know that.”

Bucky looked at him without really seeing anything. He didn’t know where his fucking phone was, Rumlow must have texted him, if he had Steve, he would have texted him—“I have to go back to New York.”

“This isn’t—”

“I have to go back to New York,” Bucky repeated desperately. “Drive me back to New York!”

“James, please, don’t panic—”

“I have a legit reason to panic!” Bucky yelled, “and I don’t see how calming down will help and I have to go back to New York!”

“Why?” asked another voice.

Bucky whipped round and saw his sister in the staircase. “Rumlow,” he gasped out, “I think Rumlow—”

“Rumlow,” Becca said, dark eyes moving as she thought fast. “The driver? The guy you vouched for?”

God—and this was how this whole mess had gotten started, hadn’t it. As soon as Bucky had been able to string two words together in his hospital bed, some very official-looking people had come in to ask him a few questions. Did he think the accident could have been avoided? Could this be a result of Rumlow’s negligence? Bucky had vehemently denied everything, even though he had no memory of the actual explosion.
And Rumlow had hated him for it—the way a man would hate winning the lottery after losing his family. *Why’d you say that, Sarge?* he kept asking him at the VA, grinning without any sort of mirth, eyes unmoving. *You couldn’t have known, you weren’t looking at the fucking road. Why did you fucking say that?*

“Yes—him,” Bucky panted.


“I think he’s going to—to hurt Steve.” Bucky’s hand trembled. “I think he’s got Steve. He—but it’s me he wants—he’s been texting me all this time, it’s me he’s always wanted to hurt—”

“Barnes, we don’t know that,” Sam said. “Take a minute and—”

“Call him,” Rebecca said.

Both Sam and Bucky blinked. “What?”

“Call him right now!” she repeated. “You’ve got his number and you say he wants your attention so call him! You can’t waste time going all the way back to New York, you dumbass!”

Bucky stared at her and she stared at him—it was like the shell of awkwardness paralyzing them both had cracked for a moment, and even though the uncertainty was already back in Rebecca’s eyes, Bucky felt a flash of deep, painful love for his big sister. God, if he’d just let her help him, this wouldn’t be happening. He nodded, throat tight, then finally located his phone under the pillow and picked it up, trying to unlock it with trembling fingers—

But then Sam’s phone started ringing. He pulled it out, said, “Natasha,” then raised a finger at Bucky as though to put him on hold. “Hello?”

Bucky barely remembered who Natasha was—not a therapist, but not a patient either, he didn’t think. He could hear her tinny voice but couldn’t make out the words. Listening to her, Sam frowned. “No, that’s what I thought too, but he’s not here, and James thinks maybe—”

She cut him off, talking fast, and he blinked, expression shifting from concern to incredulity. “Wait, what? *Who*?” The inaudible answer changed the look on his face to complete outrage. “Are you kidding me?”

Bucky had no idea what was going on, but then he heard the unmistakable noise of a car pulling up to a stop. His head jerked up and he looked out the window.

He dropped his phone.

And then he was running again, out of his room this time, hurtling down the stairs and almost smashing through the front door—it banged against the wall on his way out.

“Steve,” he called, running barefoot on the stepping stones. “Steve!”

Steve, still in the process of extracting himself from the car, saw him and beamed so brightly at him Bucky thought he might die in the five seconds still separating them; but he somehow didn’t, and he got onto the road, rough concrete digging into his feet, and Steve hurried towards him too, and they wrapped into each other and Bucky thought deliriously thank you thank you thank you oh thank you.

He breathed him in, felt his hair tickle his nose. *Thank you. Thank you.*
“Steve,” he gasped, tears welling up, pressing into him. “Stevie, I—I’m—”

“Wasn’t gonna leave you,” Steve said, a little muffled by Bucky’s chest. He was holding on so tight Bucky’s shirt would probably never be the same. “Wasn’t gonna.”

Bucky heaved in a deep breath, then pulled back, needing to look at him, to make sure he was real. How—? Why—?

“Steve,” he began, but then he realized Steve had blanched in a truly alarming way, despite his grin. “Steve? Are you—are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Steve said, wiping at his eyes, smiling almost too much to speak. “Just—the ribs, you know—but God, I couldn’t care less,” he laughed.

Bucky stared.

“What about your ribs?”

“I’m. Uh.” Apparently Steve had expected him to already know that. “I’ve just—broken one, you know, when… But, seriously, it’s—”

“I’m going to kill Rumlow,” Bucky enunciated very clearly. A little banged up, Sam had said. “I’m going to kill him, and then revive him, and then kill him ag—” but then Steve pulled him down for a kiss, and Bucky forgot what he’d been saying.

He wasn’t sure what to do with his hand now—fuck, he’d squeezed Steve so tight, why hadn’t he said anything, he hoped he hadn’t made anything worse—so he just pressed it against the car. He still wasn’t sure this was real.

“How are you here?” he exhaled against his mouth.

A flash of guilt went through Steve’s eyes. “I… I hope that’s fine. For me to come here. Natasha and Sam said I should stay away and give you time—but I kept thinking that…” He swallowed, then blinked a little, blue eyes anxious. “Uh. I—I guess it’s my turn to feel like a stalker. I… I don’t have to stay or anything—”

Bucky had to wrap his arm around him again, though much more cautiously. “No—Steve, thank you,” he said, and he could hear his voice shaking. “Thank you for not—” leaving me alone, he couldn’t say, so he swallowed and buried his face in Steve’s neck. “Thank you.”

Steve clung a little tighter, and it was a few seconds before they could part again, looking at each other, both stunned and breathless to be here, to be with each other.

“But I thought—I thought Rumlow had you,” Bucky said, brain still desperately trying to piece everything together.


“You went missing—”

“Well, they didn’t want me to come here,” Steve said defensively. “So I wasn’t gonna tell them.”

Bucky laughed, though he might have been crying, too, and he let go for a second so he could wipe his eyes.

“Bucky—” Suddenly, Steve was looking at him weirdly. “Are you alright?”
“Am I alright?” Bucky repeated confusedly, sniffing a little.

“You’re… we’re outside,” Steve said.

Bucky froze.

“Oh,” he said stupidly. “Uh.” He fought the very dumb impulse to look up and felt his shoulders go tight. “Uh,” he repeated, brain still freezing up. “Shit. I—I guess I didn’t realize—”

“Let’s go inside,” Steve said, taking his hand.

“Yeah, I—yeah,” Bucky said haphazardly. He was not freaking out as much as he could have, but he’d rather not push his luck. “Yeah, let’s…”

The words died in his throat as he looked over his shoulder. Sam and Rebecca were by the gate and absolutely gaping at them.

“Oh,” Steve said. “Did you—did you not mention we were, um—?”

“No,” Bucky said. “Didn’t you?”

Steve shook his head.

The car window rolled down and the driver—a vaguely familiar sandy-haired man—leaned close. “Hey, this is, like, super moving, but could you get off my car? I can tell Sam’s about to kill me, and I’d rather go back to New York so at least it can be Nat.”

“Uh—yeah,” Steve said, stepping away from the car and pulling Bucky with him. “Clint, I… Thank you. I hope you won’t get in too much trouble for this.”

He grinned. “I know actual trouble, dude. I’m pretty sure this isn’t it,” he said, starting up the car and driving off, eliciting an outraged squawk from Sam—whoever Clint was, Sam apparently very much wanted to kill him indeed.

Bucky gripped Steve’s hand tighter as they made their way back to the house. He wasn’t letting go anytime soon if he could help it.

*

“What the hell,” Sam said indignantly as soon as they were back inside. “What the hell, Steve?”

“Don’t shout,” Bucky mumbled, rubbing at his eyes. He exhaled, then looked at his sister. “Becca, this… this is Steve.”

“Hello,” said Steve, looking nervous all of a sudden. “I apologize if I’m intruding. I was… I really needed to see Bucky.”

Rebecca didn’t look openly hostile to him, but Sam was still pretty pissed off. “You could have called,” he said.

“He doesn’t have a phone,” Bucky muttered.

“He could have borrowed Nat’s! Look, Steve—” Sam was visibly containing himself, torn
between his anger and his need to acknowledge Bucky’s white-knuckled grip on Steve’s hand. Eventually, he sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Okay, obviously, there was a key element I missed here. But if you’d just told me about it, we might’ve arranged for you to come here with me. You didn’t have to—to steal away like that.”

Steve just kind of blinked at him, looking like he absolutely hadn’t thought of that. Of course he hadn’t. Bucky thought. He was too feral for that, so deeply unused to just asking for things and getting them without a fight.

“I apologize,” Steve repeated, and even though he looked more contrite, it was obvious he didn’t regret what he’d done one bit. Bucky was so glad he was here he felt dizzy.

“How did you even get Barton to drive you all the way here?” Sam asked, sounding grudgingly impressed.

Steve smiled weakly at him. “He felt bad about the vodka.”

“What vodka,” Bucky said.

“Sam, it’s alright,” Rebecca said. She looked at Bucky, her eyes too shiny. “It’s alright,” she repeated, and he could see how deeply relieved she was. It was, he realized, the first time he displayed an emotion other than dread since she’d picked him up.

She smiled at Steve, and Bucky loved her for it. “Hi. I’m Rebecca. I hear you’ve been taking care of my idiot brother.”

It was Steve’s turn to look relieved; he shook her hand, and Sam rolled his eyes as if to say I am, clearly, the only sane person in this house—and the breath Bucky took was shaky, but free.

**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you so much for reading and commenting. We're close to the end and I love comments more than ever! :D
The first pizza was ready and they all sat around on the couches in the living room, balancing their plates on their knees and trying not to burn themselves with molten cheese. Sam took it upon him to do most of the talking, to Steve’s faint relief—his deposition had taken a lot out of him, and he didn’t feel like telling the whole story again.

Sitting there, though, he quickly realized listening to its retelling was a lot worse—he could feel himself blushing with embarrassment as Sam told the story of Steve, homeless orphan extraordinaire (Rebecca’s eyes got wide) harassed by Brock Rumlow for a week (Bucky stared at him) before escaping a murder attempt mandated by the Secretary of State (they were all looking at him now.)

“You’re making it sound worse than it is,” Steve muttered, steam almost coming out of his ears. Bucky had been through so much more for him. But he didn’t know how to tell them about the other side of the story. The Mansion episode—it was impossible to explain. There wasn’t much to tell on the surface. He hadn’t even known Bucky for all that long, really.

But then Sam went on saying that he wasn’t only there to shower praise on Steve—he was also interested in knowing exactly what the hell had gone through his mind, Rogers, when he’d decided to just get into Barton’s car without telling anyone. And how, exactly, did he know where the Barneses lived anyway? Ah, he’d looked it up on Nat’s computer. So he’d been planning this, it hadn’t been an impulse thing?

For some reason, Sam’s glowering seemed to amuse Bucky, the bastard.

“What,” he mumbled when Steve gave him a betrayed look, “you’re usually sorta impulsive.” He nudged his thigh and gave him a shy smile. “M’ glad you are, though.”

It was kind of worrying, how Steve could never stay mad at Bucky for longer than a half-second.

Sam was still waiting for an answer, though, so Steve gave him a little wince. “Look—I didn’t mean to scare anyone. And—I did agree with Natasha’s reasons for me to stay put. But I still had to come.”

“Well, this is so stupid it’s almost circling back to making sense,” Sam mumbled, but then Rebecca gave him a second helping of pizza and he looked a little pacified.

“I’m glad,” Rebecca said, sitting back on the couch. “Apparently Bucky can’t ask for things now,
So if you hadn’t showed up he’d still be writing sad poetry in his room.”

Steve was a little shocked and Sam looked unsure as well, but Bucky’s lips twitched, even though he kept his eyes down when he muttered, “Fuck you too.”

Siblinghood was something Steve was not familiar with, but he decided to trust them both with that dynamic and reached out for more pizza, wincing a bit as he leaned forward.

All three of them instantly reached for it instead. “I got it,” Rebecca said while Sam went “Whoa, lemme get that for you,” and Bucky growled “Stevie, your ribs.”

“My ribs are fine,” Steve protested in disbelief.

If he was being completely honest, he did feel a dull ache—he’d been a bit jostled by Bucky’s embrace, not that Steve would ever tell him that. But he had a few more of Bruce’s painkillers in his pocket. He could take them after dinner, he would be fine.

“Sure they are,” Bucky answered, dumping his now-full plate in his lap. “Eat up.”

“You eat up,” Rebecca said with a Big Sister glare, “I could cut glass with your cheekbones,” and Bucky scowled at her but then got up to go get the second pizza from the oven. Rebecca followed with a few tasteful commentaries about how his hair looked like a rat’s nest and how she’d always wanted to practice her braiding. Sam looked like he wanted to exchange a commiserating look with someone, but remained the only sane person in the room.

“This is kind of a mess,” Steve told him, “sorry.”

But at last Sam smiled. “Nah, you can stop apologizing. This is actually the best homecoming I’ve had in ages.” He glanced towards the kitchen, where Rebecca and Bucky kept bickering, even though their rhythm was still off and not all of their jabs sounded natural. “Vets coming back to their families can be... difficult. And—I won’t lie, the atmosphere was slightly less lively before you showed up.” He scowled. “So, thank you and don’t you ever pull something like that again.”


Sam finished his pizza, then put down his plate when Rebecca came back, asking, “So what about Pierce and Rumlow? They’re not getting away with it.” She paused. “Are they?”

“Rumlow sure isn’t,” Sam said. “We’ve got Steve’s and Bucky’s testimony, plus he fled the scene—the police are still looking for him. Pierce though—he’s been released from custody, that was kind of inevitable, and we’re unsure whether the fight will move to legal ground yet.”

Rebecca crossed her arms, dark eyes glowering. “How can he possibly come after us?”

“Oh, defamation of character, abuse of power, I’m sure he’ll find something,” Sam said. “It all really comes down to what we can prove, and right now we don’t have much, so he’s free to bully us. Natasha and Steve will meet with an Assistant District Attorney tomorrow, actually. I’ll be sure to keep you updated.”

“This isn’t your job,” Bucky muttered from the kitchen.

There was a silence.

Suddenly, Steve wondered what had happened between the moment he’d run out of the apartment, and the moment Sam, Natasha and Carol had burst in. He remembered Pierce’s fatherly tones, the way Bucky flinched whenever he said his name. He’d been left alone there
with him for… how long? Forty minutes? An hour?

But he was back with his family now, thought Steve a bit unsteadily. They’d gotten him out, and he wouldn’t have to go through anything like that again.

Sam shrugged. “We started this, James,” he said, “now we gotta finish it.”

Bucky walked closer and sat on the couch, next to Steve but without touching him. “But it’s finished,” he said, his voice even lower. “I’m home.” He rubbed at his face, slowly. “You have to stop Rumlów. But Pierce—he’s not just anybody. He could give you real trouble. You have other patients, and you’re not even my therapist anymore.”

“Speaking of therapy,” Sam said, voice softer.

Bucky shook his head, quickly and tightly. “Not now. Please,” he said, and he sounded so tired.

Sam looked like he wanted to sigh, and Steve remembered what he’d told him on the phone. Bucky did not want to be helped; did not think he deserved it. Sam leaned back on the couch. “I suppose it can wait until your parents get back. But this is my job, and I think it’s a conversation we should be having.”

Bucky said nothing, still rubbing his palm against his face. There was an uncomfortable silence, then Sam clasped his hands together. “Alright. It’s getting late, and you probably need some time to absorb all that. Rebecca, I’d like a word if you don’t mind—then we’ll be heading back.”


Steve was torn between the deep-drilled need to protest he must have overstayed his welcome, and the desperate urge to crawl under Bucky’s shirt and hide there forever. He could feel himself tremble with it. He was so tired, too.

Bucky saw him hesitate and looked pleadingly at Rebecca. “He can stay. You don’t mind. Right?”

Rebecca looked unsettled and tried to hide it—Bucky must not have been in the habit of begging before. “You can invite whoever you want, Jesus, you’re a grown man.”


“No, he can stay the night, it’s okay,” Rebecca said. “I’ll drive him to the station in the morning.”

Bucky’s look of desperate gratitude made her give a little scowl in return. “God, stop that.”

Sam smiled a bit and shook his head. “Alright then.” He got up. “Steve, I’ll meet you in front of Penn Station at noon. Don’t you dare head off on your own. Or decide to stay here. Or get kidnapped. Understood?”

“Yes,” Steve said a bit hurriedly, “yes, I’ll be there, I—thanks,” he told Rebecca, “thank you.”

“You all need to stop thanking me or I’ll start screaming,” Rebecca said, and she was clearly only half-joking. “Bucky, whichever bed he’ll be sleeping in, you have to go change the sheets on it ’cause I’m still not doing that for you.”

“It’s been years, you need to let that go,” Bucky muttered, but he still took Rebecca’s rather
unsubtle hint and got up to leave. Steve followed him out of the room with a few awkward goodbyes.

The door closed, and suddenly they were in the darkened hallway, and Steve exhaled shakily—realized he was shivering.

Now that he was alone with Bucky, now that he’d been allowed to stay the night, he let himself realize how scared he had been—the kind of fear Pierce embodied when he’d said, calm and reasonable, I have to ask you to leave. Because Steve had taken advantage of Bucky, technically. He was a homeless nobody, and now Bucky was back to his family, to his life—all those private jokes he shared with his sister, Christ. Steve had thought—it was irrational, but he’d been thinking, when Natasha had told him to give it time, that he’d never get to see Bucky again. And suddenly he thought maybe he hadn’t been too far off. Without his sob story to make up for it…

Bucky, who’d been turning towards the stairs, stopped too and glanced at him.

“Steve? Are you okay?”

Steve stepped forward without a word and pressed against him, clutching onto his shirt.

Bucky stilled for a beat, then carefully wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders. He must feel them shaking. They stayed like this for a while, without speaking, without even really hugging, and Steve listened to Bucky’s heartbeat, felt him breathe, and secretly wished he could stay here for good, just ignore everything and everyone else, pretend this was his home. He didn’t want to go back to New York, ever. He was exhausted.

Eventually, Steve felt like maybe he could smile at Bucky without turning into a blubbering mess, so he stepped back and tried, and was mostly successful.

“So,” he said, trying to keep a steady voice. “I hear I get to see your room?”

Bucky gave him a tiny smile. “S’not much to look at.” He turned round, his hand slotting in Steve’s. “Come on.”

Steve sort of adored Bucky’s room. It had retained a lot of his childhood, old wooden shelves with soft corners he’d never bothered to change, pastel-colored wallpaper; but there were also traces of the teenager he’d been, a Rolling Stones poster on the wall, tons of sci-fi and fantasy books gathering dust in every corner, a few D&D guides. It was so blatantly different from the depressing apartment he’d stayed confined in.

Bucky sat on his bed. “So, yeah, here it is,” he mumbled, “make yourself at home,” and Steve wanted to tell him he loved him.

He put a lid on his overflowing emotion and sat next to him. “Are we actually going to put on new sheets?”

Bucky glanced his way. “I mean—if you really want to…”

“No,” Steve smiled. “No, I was really just kinda hoping to lay down for a little while.”

Bucky gave a little laugh back, but he did not actually lie down. Steve kept looking at him, waiting. The sun was setting, and they should have turned on the lights, probably, but Bucky seemed to be gearing up for something.

“Steve—” he managed before shutting up again.
Steve waited.

After a while Bucky said, his voice wan and small, “Do you think I should go back to therapy?”

Steve swallowed. This was a hell of a question, and he tried not to let his trepidation show; yet Bucky must sense it because he quickly said, “I’m sorry—I shouldn’t be asking you—with Sam downstairs and all… I don’t want—”

“No, let me speak,” Bucky insisted. “This is important. I don’t want you to feel like you’re in charge of… healing me or fixing me or whatever. I don’t want this to be your job. I don’t want to be your job. I’m definitely not asking you to decide for me here, I just wondered—” he swallowed. “Just wanted to know what you think. Just an opinion. That’s all.”

“I get it,” Steve reassured him, “I do.”

Then he realized he still had to answer the question. “So, well—it depends;” he said cautiously, “what made you leave the first time around?”

Bucky shrugged nervously. “I don’t know. I just…” He rubbed a hand over his face again. “We—look—we, um, slept together—right?” he said, suddenly stammering a lot, “and it—it made me feel—normal for a while and I don’t—I don’t see myself sitting in someone’s office and telling them about it and watching them take notes as an indication to whether I’m crazy or not—” He had to stop for a second. After a few shuddery breaths, he went on, “It makes me feel like a little kid. It’s like—Sam brought me here without asking—and that’s not his fault, I wasn’t all there and I know it was for the best, but then all that talk about greenlighting you, that’s—” He gritted his teeth. “Pierce was the same. Said I couldn’t trust my own judgment. I don’t want to deal with that anymore. With people deciding everything—I know I’m fucked up, I know. But goddammit, I’m not five.”

He exhaled, then he looked at Steve. “Uh, am I… am I making any sense at all?”

“You are,” Steve said, a bit emotional. He shifted closer to Bucky. “I feel you. Sam and Natasha were there telling me I had to give you time and all I could think was, excuse you, I know him better than you do. ” He let out a little laugh. “Uh, I’ve been called presumptuous before.”

That, at least, made Bucky smile a bit.

“Look, since you’re asking me, I do think it’s worth giving it another shot,” Steve said. “If you tell Sam what you just told me, he’ll listen. He won’t just wave it off—he’ll actually hear you, he’s a good man.”

“He’ll want to put me on meds,” Bucky murmured.

Steve hesitated. He felt like he was walking on eggshells, but he couldn’t back out of this. He ran several sentences through his head, then decided on, “Why is that a bad thing?”

“I know I need them,” Bucky said bluntly. He was picking at his pants again. “I guess I was… All this time, I was still holding onto the hope that I’d grow out of this. That it’d pass. That I just had to grit my teeth and duck my head and weather it. You know? But I have to take them.” His voice was unsteady. “I need them. It won’t go away on its own.”

Steve fell silent for a little while.

Then, slowly, he said, “Do you know for how long I have to take hormones?”
Bucky looked at him, a bit surprised. “Uh,” he said. “No. You know I don’t know shit about…” He licked his lips. “I don’t know. Ten years?”

“All my life,” Steve said.

Bucky kept staring at him for a second. Then he looked down. “It’s not the same thing.”

“It really isn’t,” Steve agreed. “But my point is, if you need a crutch to walk, then you get one. And maybe you’ll need it for a long time, maybe forever, and that—that sucks. I know.” He squeezed Bucky’s hand. “But it’s always gonna stay a damn crutch. It’ll never fuse with your body. It won’t ever be who you are.”

Bucky smiled a bit more. “Do you have this shit written down somewhere?”

“Some of us are just naturally talented.”

Bucky huffed a quiet laugh. Then he leaned in and slowly, very carefully hugged Steve.

Steve smiled and held onto him, closing his eyes, breathing in. He would have been content staying like this forever—but then Bucky inched away, leaving him cold again.

“Wait,” he said, “wait, shit, I forgot,” and Steve wanted to whine in a very undignified way and pull him back; but then Bucky leaned down and tugged Steve’s backpack from under the bed.

Steve gaped at him.

“Here,” Bucky said meekly. “I grabbed it on my way out. Sorry I’m only thinking of it now.”

Steve couldn’t move for a few seconds. Then he grabbed Bucky’s face, kissed him, and then kissed him again and again, pressing against him and making him lean down, braced on the bed until he made a surprised noise and they half-fell backwards onto the mattress. Bucky laughed in his mouth, and Steve held onto him as tight as his ribs would allow, and wished they could mold into one, wished he never had to leave him again, not even for a single second.

* *

Now that they were lying down, fatigue weighed them both into the mattress and they realized they were both too tired even for a brief trip to the bathroom. Bucky tugged the quilt from under them, kicking it away until it was entirely off and he could draw it back over their bodies.

If Steve lay on his right side—the uninjured one—he wasn’t too uncomfortable, and he was about ready to conk out for three days straight, anyway. The night at Natasha’s had been miserably lonely; he couldn’t stop thinking about Bucky, and he’d tossed and turned and hardly slept at all. His deposition hadn’t been exactly a walk in the park either, despite Carol’s friendly professionalism. He’d already decided to go find Bucky then, had looked up his address on Natasha’s computer, but he wasn’t sure how to get there—he’d been thinking of taking a train without paying, before Barton offered his help.

Now he was here, on this old mattress with a hollow in the middle which brought their bodies closer together. It had started raining, and Steve could hear it patter on the roof, and he was so warm and so comfortable and it was such a relief he ached with it.
He carefully nestled in Bucky’s embrace and sighed out as his body finally relaxed. Bucky’s hand came up and started rubbing circles into his neck, which made him hum and press closer to his chest.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Bucky murmured.

“M’ so glad to be here,” Steve sighed. “So tired.”

There was a long silence. Just as Steve began to fall asleep, Bucky mumbled, “Hey, I was thinking about something earlier.”

Steve nuzzled into his neck. “Mwhat?” he said, drowsy.

“I want you to take my disability pension,” Bucky said.

The tendrils of sleep retracted from Steve’s mind, and he pulled back to look at him. “What?”

“I’m going to stay at my parents for a while, by the looks of it,” Bucky said. “I don’t need that money. You do.”

“Bucky,” Steve protested, “I can’t accept—”

“Don’t—Steve,” Bucky bit out. “Don’t say no on principle, just listen. I’m a mess, but I’ve got a roof over my head and I don’t have to worry about starving to death for the foreseeable future and I’m surrounded by people trying to help me. But you? You’re not out of the woods yet. So you,” he inched closer to Steve’s face, “are not gonna let my money go to waste, or else you’ll have to live knowing I’m dying of anxiety every second of every day because of you.”

Steve huffed. “Well now that’s not playing fair.”

“Hey, if I’m gonna be fucked in the head, at the very least I’m gonna use it for blackmail purposes,” Bucky said.

Steve rubbed his face, wincing. “Bucky, I…”

“Steve, I want to help you,” Bucky went on, and he suddenly he sounded at the end of his rope, almost desperate. “You have never, ever taken advantage. Shit, I had to fight tooth and nail for you to accept the smallest things. And I know you can do it alone, but you don’t have to, so please, please, let me help you. Just for a little bit.”

Steve exhaled and listened to the rain.

He thought again about how tired he was, how alone and scared he’d felt. He stepped back and took a look at his own pride, and how it had almost killed him already. He thought of how he was making Bucky beg. Out of worry. He thought of how he insisted for Bucky to accept help, and what a hypocrite that made of him.

“Okay,” he mumbled, though he had to pry the word out.

Bucky blinked at him a bit. “Did you say—”

“I said okay,” Steve repeated in a small voice, even though he kept hearing Pierce in his head saying taking advantage, kept thinking of what Sam and Rebecca and everyone were going to say —“okay, Buck.”

Bucky huffed a shaky breath and pressed against him. “Thank you,” he said with such
overwhelming gratitude Steve felt stupid for having been so stubborn.

“Not for long, though—just a few months, until I find a job—and I’ll pay you back eventually,” he muttered, muffled against his shirt. “You have to let me pay you back.”

“That’s fine,” Bucky whispered, “whatever you want, Steve,” and it was heavily raining outside now but they were both safe, both warm, in this dark little room, curled together under the heavy quilt in Bucky’s small teenage bed, and sleep came upon them like velvet.

*

But then of course the morning came, bright and cutting like glass.

“Guys.” Rebecca was knocking on the door. “Are you awake?”

Bucky’s hold tightened around Steve. “No,” he rasped. “Not already. Christ.”

*

Steve took a shower, and ate breakfast, and found himself ready to leave way too soon, because he’d done such a good job ignoring the inevitable that the minutes had blurred by, and now he was all out of time.

He felt very cold again. Even Rebecca didn’t look too cheerful. As for Bucky, he’d looked murderous and jittery during the entire breakfast, hadn’t eaten a single thing, and then he’d gotten up and gone upstairs—and he hadn’t come back since.

Steve was lacing his shoes, which was a slow and painful affair when you had a broken rib; he knew Bucky would have hovered, frustrated that he couldn’t even offer his help, but Steve still wished he was here. He hoped he’d come say goodbye.

Maybe he wouldn’t, though. It was too easy to guess why he was so angry instead of only sad. I’m not five, he’d said through gritted teeth, and yet he couldn’t go with Steve, not even ride with them to the station because it was such a beautiful day outside, with wide open skies. I’m not five, and yet Steve was going away and there was nothing either of them could do about it. The choice was out of their hands.

Steve finally got up, slowly, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder.

“Alright,” Rebecca mumbled, “if we’re ready, then—Bucky?” she called towards the stairs. “We’re going.”

There was no answer. Rebecca clenched her jaw.

“Bucky, God, we’re gonna be late,” she yelled.

But then Bucky was there, going down the stairs and marching straight for Steve. He looked a little manic, his hair more disheveled than ever, his eyes wild.
“There’s one thing from therapy that stuck with me,” he said without preamble, as if they’d been having a conversation all that time. “Something about setting goals for yourself.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “Okay?”

“I’m gonna take the meds,” Bucky went on hoarsely, “I’m gonna go to therapy. I’ll let everyone tell me what to do, I’ll be a good patient, I’m done making everyone else miserable. But do you—”

He couldn’t get out the words for a second. Steve heard Rebecca say something about waiting in the car, heard the click of the door, and only very vaguely registered it.

Bucky stared at him a few seconds after she was gone. Then he blurted, “Do you want to move in with me?”

Steve just stared.

“No right away,” Bucky said, “but eventually, you know—I liked it, this, this roommates sort of thing we had going on,” he went on, still sounding a bit unhinged. “And it’s not like I plan on staying here forever, I haven’t been living with my parents for six years, I was kind of hoping to keep it that way, and I know neither of us has enough money yet, and I’m not sure Sam will greenlight me right away, after the whole Pierce debacle, but like I said, I’ll be good, and eventually they’ll have to release me back into the wild and you’ll probably be a famous artist or something by then,” deep breath, “do you want to move in with me, Steve, I don’t want you to feel obligated, I don’t want you to be a crutch, I just like—when you’re here, I—”

Steve grabbed his collar and tugged him down for a kiss.

Bucky’s mouth was hot and feverish, and he sighed a bit in relief when they parted.

“Thank God,” he muttered, “wish you’d done that sooner, I was about to embarrass myself here.”

“That sounds like a great goal,” Steve breathed.

Bucky blinked, then gave him a wide smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Steve kissed him again.

When they parted, Bucky said, “Email me? I’m—I’ll do my best to answer.”

“I will.” Steve wrapped him in his arms. “I promise.”

“This is ridiculous,” Bucky muttered in the crook of his neck, “I’m being ridiculous, I just have to be dramatic about everything—”

“Don’t make me bust out the safewords.”

Bucky laughed and released him. “Go, just—I don’t want you to miss your train—”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “okay—” though he kept holding onto him, but this time Bucky backed away, said, “No, Jesus, this is like a soap opera, I’m ridiculous, this is not that big of a deal, just go—” he was retreating into the living room, blinking fast, “I’ll see you soon, Steve, bye—” and then he was gone, and Steve had no choice but to leave, too.
The ride to the station was silent and awkward. Steve didn’t know what to say, and Rebecca looked like she was in a somewhat dark mood.

“So,” she finally said, making him startle. “When are you planning on coming back?”

Steve blinked at her, dread clutching at his insides all of a sudden. “Um,” he said. “Well, I… I wouldn’t want to intrude some more—I’d understand if…”

But she looked at him so strangely he shut up.

“So—” she scoffed, but then her scoff turned into laughter. “Oh, God,” she mumbled, rubbing her face, “I’m just like Bucky. I’m mad at him for being gloomy, and I’m worse than him.”

She dropped her hand and smiled at him, suddenly. “Steve, this—this isn’t a trick question. You saved my brother. You got hurt doing it. This, right now—” she made an encompassing gesture, “God, did you think this was me seeing you out for good?”

Steve didn’t know what to say.

“We owe you,” she said. “The whole family owes you. My parents will want to meet you.” Her smile got a bit knowing. “They always made a point of meeting Bucky’s boyfriends after he came out.”

Steve blushed a little.

“And you’re way better than the last one,” she went on.

Steve blushed more, and she grinned. “Am I making you squirm? Oh, you’re gonna be fun. Bucky never went for the shy types, he always liked ‘em bouncy and chatty and cocky just like him.”

“I, um,” Steve said. “Can’t really picture Bucky as… um… that.”

Rebecca’s smile faded. “No, you can’t, can you?”

She looked at the road for a second.

“It feels so odd,” she said. “He’s changed so much. I want to be more patient but it’s all so jarring. It feels like he’s being difficult on purpose. You know? Just moody and grumpy like when he was a kid. Like it’s all an act. I know it isn’t. That’s the worst part. I know, and yet I’m still here waiting for it all to be normal again.”

She was gripping the wheel too tight. “He told me—he’s scared of the outdoors, and Sam told me about anxiety and depression and PTSD and…” She swallowed. “I’m so scared. I shouldn’t be. It’s him going through all that, not me. But I’m—”

She exhaled, still staring at the road.

There was a long silence, then Steve said, “He’s kind, you know? He’s the kindest person I ever met.”

Rebecca gave a very weak smile. “Yeah, he’s kind. He always was.”

“And he’s so brave,” Steve said. “It’s sort of astounding. If you’re anything like him, you’ll be
just fine.” He looked at the road. “And I think you are.”

Rebecca stayed silent for a while. Then she said, “Now you’re just sucking up.”


“You totally are,” she grinned. “Nobody’s that earnest. Starting up early on the in-laws, you’re a clever one.”

Steve floundered a bit more, then he decided on, “You’re just messing with me.”

He wished he didn’t sound so defensive but she was still smiling, like he’d somehow found the right thing to say, and though the rest of the journey was silent, it was not as tense.

*

She insisted on paying for his ticket, and Steve had to let her since he didn’t have enough anyway—he had maybe twenty dollars in his backpack. But he had his notebook back, and three weeks’ worth of T. That was something.

He wondered if he should tell her about Bucky’s offer of giving him his Army pension. He’d accepted the day before, and part of him did want to take it, but—it wasn’t right. He almost did tell her, so someone else could make this decision for him; but then she’d be making it for Bucky, too, and Steve couldn’t betray him like that. Maybe he could email Bucky and ask that he talk it out with his family. But wouldn’t that make Bucky feel like Steve didn’t trust him?

“You’re a little pale,” Rebecca said. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” Steve said. He wasn’t sure how he sounded.

“Steve.” And suddenly she was hugging him, the same way Bucky had at the bottom of the stairs, her arms around his shoulders so she wouldn’t put pressure on his chest. “I’ll see you soon. Thank you for bringing him home.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, stiffly, stupidly, and he wished he could say something better but then he had to get into the train.

*

By the time he arrived in New York, he felt very nervous—what if he and Sam didn’t find each other? Could he walk to the VA? Was twenty dollars enough for a taxi?—but as he came out of the train, he saw that the skies had morphed from a monotonous grey into a bright blue, and Natasha was waiting for him right out the door, wearing a dark coat lined with silver fur which made her look like a Russian princess.

“Hey,” he said, uncertain.

“Hi there,” she said. “Have you come to lead more of our veterans astray?”
Her tone was joking, but he still stiffened. “Look,” he said, “I wanted to say, I’m... I’m sorry I bailed on you at the VA. I just had to—”

“I understand,” she said. “It’s fine.”

Steve blinked a little.

“What?” she asked.

“I don’t know, it’s just—that’s it?” Steve said hesitantly. “I thought... Sam kinda chewed me out.”

“People are complicated,” Natasha said. “Sometimes we think we’re helping them and we’re only making things worse. Sam has been taught how to help, and so he tries to help everyone the way he’s been taught. Even though he knows it’s not that simple.” She shrugged. “He did what he thought was best, and so did you. I’m not here to yell at anyone.”

Steve nodded, and the knot in his chest loosened a bit more.

“Except for Clint,” she added.

Steve had to smile. “He’s—he’s a good guy,” he said. “Don’t be too hard on him.”

“Too late,” she deadpanned. “Now c’mon, let’s go have lunch with Matt. I have a feeling you guys will get on like a house on fire.”

Steve knew Bucky’s email address already; it had burned itself into his brain the day he’d taken an accidental peek at his inbox. He sat at Natasha’s computer, even though he was so tired he could barely see, and opened a new message.

Dear Bucky

Too formal.

Hey Buck

Too casual.

Bucky, I’m not sure you’ll read this but

Jesus fucking Christ, is that why you can’t deal with emails, because I understand you 100% all of a sudden

He screwed his eyes shut and exhaled.

Hi, it’s Steve. I’m back at Natasha’s for the time being. We met up with her attorney friend for lunch. He’s blind, which I didn’t realize right away, and I may have made a fool of myself but I think he was mostly amused about it.

Sam tells me your parents are flying back today. Maybe you’ll have already seen them by the time
you read this? In any case I’m sure they’ll be happy to see you.

He hesitated for a long time before writing the rest.

I really miss you. But I don’t want you to feel like you have I kept thinking about you on the train. I wish I can’t wait I hope we can see each other again soon. But please, don’t feel obligated to answer if it makes you uncomfortable.

I love you, he wanted to write, please don’t forget about me, I don’t have anybody but you. He would have died rather than to put that kind of pressure on Bucky, though, so he stopped typing.

He wondered why he felt so terribly alone now—when things were arguably looking up—rather than before, on the freezing streets, when his mother had just died. Maybe he’d been numb and he hadn’t really noticed. Now, he felt like the funeral had happened just the day before. He still felt cold and more unsure than he’d felt in weeks. He was afraid, and he wanted to be home.

He clicked send and decided to go take a shower. Maybe it wouldn’t help, but it couldn’t hurt either.

* *

When he came back, slightly warmer and wearing some of the clothes Natasha had put out for him, he saw that he had a new message and his heart did a somersault in his chest.

He was almost scared to open it at first. Eventually, he swallowed and clicked on it.

God I miss you too Steve. My parents did come back. My mom almost cried. My dad actually cried. Which was weird and uncomfortable and I still feel guilty as all hell. And panicked and awkward. But I feel okay also? I’m not sure. I don’t know how I feel about everything. Probably I need to wait till I’m not in the middle of it anymore.

I’m worried about you though. I wish you were still here. Did you never have this fantasy when you were a kid that your best friend would come live in your room? And you’d secretly bring him food and you’d have lots of fun and your parents would never find out? I keep wishing for that now even though I know it’s sorta stupid.

I hope Rebecca doesn’t find out because probably she’d be hurt. It was too hard writing back to her. It’s almost too easy writing back to you. Maybe one day that’ll make sense too.

Don’t think I didn’t notice how you didn’t say a word about my disability pension thing. You said yes, I heard you, I was there. No takebacksies. I’ll talk about it with Sam so he can help me set it
up because I know fuck all about banks and shit.

I wish you were here. I think I said it before but I’m not rereading this or I’ll never stop editing every damn sentence. This is me unedited. Stream of consciousness style. I hope this makes some sort of sense and I’m just gonna press send now.

Steve realized he was grinning like a loon, and also had to wipe his eyes a little.

* *

Hey Buck,

It’d be nice to live in your room. I miss I wish I really miss I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’ll keep you updated on that, and also all the legal stuff.

* *

Hey Buck,

Long day today. They caught Rumlow.

Apparently he was hiding in that building where he’d taken me once, which I’d described to them in my deposition. They say he didn’t put up any sort of fight. I had to go to the station again to identify him, and I was a little nervous, but he just looked tired. Sam said something about survivor guilt. He hopes they can have him committed instead of just imprisoned. I don’t know if they can help him. I hope I guess I hope so.

More importantly, he’ll testify that Pierce ordered him to murder hurt me. I don’t know what that means for Pierce, if he’ll find a way to slither out of that one too, and it’s probably gonna be a long battle but the way Matt smiles, we might have a fighting chance this time.

Natasha took me to go see a movie afterwards. I was a bit surprised and asked her if she didn’t have more important work to do and she just sort of laughed at me. I can’t even remember what we saw. Some kind of superhero thing. It was very dumb and kinda offensive and we bitched at every single scene while eating popcorn. The people around must have hated us.

I felt better afterwards.

It’s weird going to see a movie after so long. It’s weird doing normal things when so much not-normal stuff has happened. The whole time I kept thinking of how I wanted you to be here.
THEY CAUGHT RUMLOW?? Nobody tells me anything. “A little nervous.” You were “a little nervous” to see him again. And then you go on telling me about superhero movies, I can’t believe it. YOU’RE a stupid superhero, Rogers. Sometimes I wonder how you even exist. Most of the time.

How’s Natasha treating you? How are your ribs? Any word on the job hunt? What about the Mansion? Are you done with legal stuff for now? I know I sound like a mother hen and I don’t care.

In other news I started therapy today. Also meds but it doesn’t do anything. Also meds. For now they just make me feel fuzzy. Guess we’ll see.

*

Hey Steve – to answer your question, no, it’s not with Sam, he said he was too involved to be my shrink and that’s not his training anyway. Also there’s the little fact that I still can’t leave the house. So it’s just Skype sessions for now, with Dr. Althea Smith. It’s not awful I guess. She’s not trying to make it last hours.

I’m glad to hear that Natasha’s taking care of your reckless ass. Someone’s gotta. In other news Rebecca and I told our parents about you and they really really want to meet you now. They say you can come by this weekend. Would that be cool with you?

Also: I told Sam about giving you my pension. Since you’ve been avoiding the subject. Punk.

*

Hey Steve, this is Sam. I hear you’re going back to the Barneses on Saturday? Thought I might tag along.

James told me he wanted to give you his disability pension, and I can understand why you didn’t tell me about it. I’m sorry I made you feel like But you know? I don’t think that’s such a bad idea. If you’re worried about it being selfish, I can assure you – it’d be good for him, too, to be able to really help someone he cares about.

His parents should know, though, so that’s something we can all talk about on the week-end.

I wanted to apologize for

I hope you don’t think I’m still mad at

Sometimes it’s really hard to be sure we’re doing the right thing. I’ll see you soon.
Steve, I wanted to talk to you about hormones. Do you know Bruce can prescribe them to you? I don’t know how much you have left, but based on the time you’ve spent on the streets, you might already be out and it’s probably bugging you. You just have to ask, you know? But you’re such a stiff upper lip kind of guy. Oh well I guess I’ll say it to your face another day, when you don’t stare at me like I’m an alien for taking you to see a movie after facing your near murderer. Oh wait, no, you know what? I’m going to give your address to Bruce directly. Damn, I’m a genius.

Hello Steve, it’s your friendly neighborhood Natasha, can you not hear me SHOUTING from the other room that it’s time for motherfucking DINNER, I have chicken salad with a side of painkillers, get your bony ass off my computer. Chop chop

*

hey rogers its barton clint from the va. (nat gave me your address im not a stalker) im to tell you that since you insist on wondering the city under the shifty pretense of looking for a “job”, ive been appointed as you’re bodyguard slash friend slash nanny slash don’t even try to say no because im showing up tomorrow super early i used to be in the military you can’t compete bye.

also do you want to hang out later. nat’s still mad at me and i desperately need a player two in halo

*

Hello Steve,

This is Bruce from downstairs. I hope your ribs are getting better. Natasha told me I hear you’ve been staying at Natasha’s. If you don’t mind me giving you a check-up, I rarely get the chance to see any of my patients again that’d put my mind at ease. And if there’s anything else you need from me, please, don’t hesitate.

*

Hey Steve,

God I’m so fucking happy that you’re coming back this weekend. Apparently Sam’s coming too? I can’t wait. Things are getting – better isn’t really the word I’d use. But it’s been a week. I’m trying. I can tell Rebecca’s trying, too. And my parents – is it really stupid that I’d forgotten they loved me? No that’s not what I mean. I’d forgotten – I think at some point I’ve decided that was it now. I was a grown-up and I couldn’t rely on them anymore. I just had to go through anything and everything on my own. But I’m still their kid? Even after the Army and everything. I feel so old but I’m only twenty-six. They still want to help me. And I have to let them. Because I do need help. And it’s shameful but maybe not that much. Maybe this, I can get over. Maybe it’s a relief too.
Okay I’ve debated erasing that for the past ten minutes. (Maybe I should stop writing to you fresh out of therapy.) But I think I’ll leave it. Because I need to tell you something I probably couldn’t say out loud. Here goes: you’re not alone either, you know? You have us. Sam and Natasha (and that guy Clint I guess? I’m still not sure who he is) and me. And if you have me you have my family too. For as long as you want it. That’s what I wanted to say.

See you Saturday. Love

*

Dear Steve,

Would you be free for lunch this week? As it so happens, there are a few things we should talk over.

Looking forward to hear from you,

Cpt. Peggy Carter

Coordinator for the ARC Foundation, NYC.

Chapter End Notes

I can't thank you guys enough for the amazing support you gave to this fic. See you next week for the last chapter. Comments give me a writing boost! ^^
A week into Bucky’s treatment, things hadn’t gotten better. They’d just gotten infinitely more confused.

“Bucky, phone call!” Rebecca called out from downstairs, and instead of wondering who the hell it even was, Bucky lay on his bed staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out if he was panicking about this.

He didn’t know. That was the thing. He found himself literally unable to identify the motions his own brain went through. His emotions were constantly shifting, like paint in water; and whenever he managed to appraise one, it was quick to turn into something else—usually its complete opposite. He could feel tentatively hopeful one moment, and dreadfully depressed the next. Hesitant relief regarding the present morphed into paralyzing terror regarding the future. He had no idea what was going on in his head.

At least he had distractions, which gave him something else to focus on when panic constricted his throat. Distractions was his mother asking him to set the table. Distractions was a short, pointless conversation with his father about a movie they’d seen five years ago. Distractions was Rebecca making good on her threat of braiding his hair and making him sit through half an hour of inane Youtube tutorials. Distractions was being home.

He wasn’t a kid. But being home had meant being safe for the longest time—still did.

Sometimes Bucky fully relapsed into terror and hopelessness. He thought of how he could never have a normal life—thought of how he’d never again feel at home in his body or mind. The smallest difficulties seemed unsurmountable to him; he felt small and miserable and pathetic, like he could never avoid becoming a charity case for the people who knew him—for Steve. During those moments, no light shone to save him; no reassurance carried through; the horizon remained dark and starless.

But then it passed.

It just passed. A minute later, Bucky’s emotions shifted again, as though his despair simply lost interest and went to play somewhere else for a while. It was so confusing. Now that he had no immediate reason to panic, his panic had not disappeared at all. It had just become… fickle.

And so Bucky tried not to trust it. Whenever he felt there was no hope, he tried to remember it had just happened to him five minutes ago, tried to tell himself: it’ll pass. It did not help at all. Not at the moment. But then it passed.
“Bucky?” his sister called again. “It’s Steve on the phone.”

That made Bucky glance at the door. Still he didn’t get up—his heart had started hammering, and he took a few deep breaths to get it under control. He hadn’t had a true anxiety attack since he’d left New York; only this odd, everlasting stress which sometimes clutched him tighter in its claws, and sometimes almost released him. Going sane, Bucky found, felt about the same as going crazy. Shifting from one state to another. Great confusion either way. Transitioning. Maybe Steve could relate to some of those feelings, if Bucky told him about it.

This was progress, probably. None of this one-step-at-a-time bullshit, though. More like two steps forwards, three steps backwards, just a jump to the left, and then a step to the right. This was how James Buchanan Barnes was getting home from the war.

Well, he thought, whatever works, and finally he called, “Yeah—coming,” and he got out of his room, meeting Becca half-way down the stairs and reaching for the phone she handed to him.

Once he’d grabbed it, he quickly retreated while holding it to his ear. Closing the door, he had to clear his throat before he spoke, hoping he could keep a modicum of dignity through the whole thing.

“Hello?” he said. “Steve?”

“Sorry,” was the first thing Steve said. “I—I really needed to talk to you. Is this okay?”

Bucky felt awash with warmth at the sound of his voice, and he managed to take a deeper breath. Closing his eyes, he said, “Yeah—actually, yeah. It’s… it’s good to hear you.” Anxiety pricked at him for a different reason, and he reopened his eyes. “What’s up, though? Something wrong about tomorrow?”

“No!” Steve said at once, a bit hurriedly, “no, no, I’m still coming—don’t worry. There’s nothing wrong. It’s just—it’s about the Mansion.”

Bucky sat on his bed.

“The Mansion,” he repeated.

“Yeah.” Steve sounded shaky.

“Did they—did they get back to you?”


“Christ.” Bucky clutched at the phone, trying not to get too excited. “What did she say?”

“She said she thought it was an exceptional piece—”

Bucky didn’t need to hear more; already his hopes were deflating like an old balloon.

“You’re not in,” he said, incredulous.

“I’m not in,” Steve confirmed. “Only one drawing—it wasn’t enough.”

Bucky still didn’t know how he felt. Numb, maybe. It was strange, to think of how much of themselves they’re poured into this—only for it to fall flat.

“Oh,” he said, a bit haphazardly. “Well. Okay then.”
“Oh,” he said, a bit haphazardly. “Well. Okay then.”

“No—but wait,” Steve said. He sounded weird. A bit feverish. “She said the committee hadn’t found a way to get me into the scholarship program, yeah—but she asked for permission to put us on the shortlist for the Maria Stark Prize.”

Bucky blinked. “The what?”

“The Maria Stark Prize. It’s awarded for a young artist’s debut,” Steve explained. He was breathless, words a bit jumbled. “All contestants need a sponsor to get in. And she wants to do that. To sponsor me.” He swallowed. “It’s crazy. I’m not even in the school. Or affiliated with anyone. She’s only seen one sample of my work—”

“Steve,” Bucky said, head spinning, “Steve, wait, just hit pause for a second.”

Steve was still breathing shakily on the other end of the line.

“The Maria Stark Prize,” Bucky repeated.

“Yeah,” Steve breathed.

“Is that a big deal?”

Steve sounded strangled. “It’s—kind of, yeah.”

“Kind of,” Bucky repeated. He realized he was grinning. “So what you’re telling me is, you bypassed the school and went straight for the award?”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Steve said. “I just—I’m still not sure I didn’t dream up all this. I can’t believe it.”

“I can,” Bucky murmured. He felt really good all of a sudden, filled with something he hadn’t felt in years—the need to celebrate. He could feel it swelling in his blood, like his veins were filling with sparkles.

Steve laughed a little. “You can?”

“Well,” Bucky said softly, savoring the feeling. “It was one hell of a drawing.”

*

The next morning, of course, Bucky’s well-being had already deserted him—he was terribly nervous. This emotion he could identify without too much trouble.

Steve was coming back today. To spend the weekend here. Any minute now—Rebecca had gone to collect him and Sam at the station, and Bucky’s parents were busying themselves in the kitchen, and Bucky was sitting at the top of the stairs, looking anxiously at the front door. He wanted to see him but—what if they didn’t know what to say to each other? What if Steve felt awkward around him now? He’d spent a week surrounded by normal people; surely the comparison would not be to Bucky’s advantage.

Shadows and voices moved on the other side of the door; Bucky tensed and swallowed very thickly. Please calm down, he implored his restless brain, just stop running around for a second,
The door opened. Rebecca was first, cheeks red with cold, smiling and talking over her shoulder to Sam. And—oh God Steve was there, between them both, Bucky hadn’t seen him right away, but now he was here and Bucky fought the impulse to go hide in his room. Instead, he stood up, a bit unsteadily.

He went a few steps down, stiff with apprehension, not knowing what to say to get Steve’s attention. But he didn’t need to; Steve looked up, saw him, and for a moment Bucky saw his own fears mirrored there.

Then Steve smiled at him—and Bucky couldn’t help smiling back, despite the parts of himself still pumping stress into his system.

“Steve,” Sam was saying, “gimme your coat, I’ll go put it in the—or go kiss your boyfriend first, sure, let’s do that instead,” he said when Steve wedged himself past him and hurried to the stairs as Bucky went down the last steps.

“Hey,” Steve said, a bit breathy, and Bucky mumbled back “Hey,” just as they wrapped into each other. Suddenly, Bucky had his nose in Steve’s golden hair, and his arm around Steve’s narrow shoulders, and for a blissful second, everything was certain and quiet.

“Hi,” Steve repeated, and there was some raw relief in his voice when he added, “it’s good to see you.”

Bucky smiled and tilted his head to the side. “Kiss?” he asked, and Steve nodded with a smile, winding his arms behind Bucky’s neck, pulling him down. His lips were as soft as Bucky remembered, a bit cold from the outside. The wet, warm contrast of his mouth still made Bucky weak in the knees.

“Congratulations on being shortlisted for the Maria Stark Prize,” he murmured when they parted.

He’d looked it up. Kind of a big deal, Steve had said, and Steve was too fucking modest.

Steve huffed a laugh, shook his head, still staring at Bucky like he was better than all the art prizes in the world. “You know this is thanks to you, right?”

Bucky snorted a bit. “C’mon, I was just the model.”

“You seriously think I would have drawn like that if I hadn’t been drawing you?” Steve said under his breath, looking him in the eye.

Bucky didn’t know what to answer. There was an erotic echo to Steve’s words which left him unexpectedly flushed. He licked his lips. “I…”

“Ahem,” Rebecca said. “Mom and Dad incoming. Just FYI.”

“Sorry,” Steve told her, pulling back just a bit—though he didn’t let go of Bucky. He looked at him again and asked softly, “So how have you been doing?”

Bucky had been afraid to be asked this question, but he wasn’t anymore. All he had to say was the truth.

“Well,” he said, truthfully, “I really have no fucking idea,” and Steve laughed and hugged him again.
“God,” Steve said, dropping his bag on Bucky’s bed—his bag, Bucky thought with secret delight, his bag with his stuff, because he was staying the whole weekend. “I feel gross. Gonna take a shower before bed.”

This time, Bucky said it out loud—maybe because he felt that was alright now, even if the answer was no.

“Wanna go with me?”

Steve stared, evidently a bit taken aback. “In the shower? Together?”

“You don’t have to,” Bucky said at once, but Steve looked mostly intrigued.

“I’ve never done that,” he said. He thought for a second more, then smiled a bit shyly. “Okay. Yeah.”

In the movies, shared showers were always erotic gropefests of wet bodies sliding together; but right then, despite the prickle of arousal he’d felt downstairs, Bucky couldn’t have gotten hard to save his life, and Steve didn’t look interested in anything like that either. They just stripped together in the bathroom then stepped into the stall, and then it was just warm water and awkward jokes, and Bucky ducking his head so Steve could wash his hair, while his hand rubbed soapy circles between Steve’s shoulder blades. It felt even more intimate, somehow—to be naked together without even the excuse of sex.

“Doing okay?” Bucky asked sometimes, just to be sure this wasn’t getting weird for him, and every time Steve smiled up at him, droplets of water catching in his eyelashes, and said, “Yeah.”

It could have felt strange to see him there, drying with a towel too big for him, in Bucky’s bathroom, but it just felt right—like he could have been a part of Bucky’s life all along. Like he might always be.

Bucky realized right then, with a distant surprise, that he felt normal. No spiraling thoughts, no tension or numbness. He just felt normal. As though whatever happened next, he could figure it out as he went. He remembered feeling like this before—a long time ago.

He knew better than to rejoice right there and then. He was still fucked up, well and truly, and he suspected his lack of arousal was partially due to his medication, which was a whole new can of worms waiting to be opened; and he knew he’d probably drop back into cold discouragement in five minutes. But right now he could hang onto that long-forgotten feeling, and think maybe, just maybe, things could turn out okay.

And even though Bucky’s thoughts did spiral again into depression later that night, all he did was think Called it and nuzzle into Steve’s hair and close his eyes and repeat to himself, even though he couldn’t feel it at the moment, things will turn out okay.
And, well, he couldn’t speak for the rest of their lives, but that weekend was pretty damn fine.

“You look like two ninety-year-olds,” Rebecca said, on her way to the kitchen.

Bucky mumbled something unintelligible but clearly rude in answer. It was true that they didn’t do much; even when they played a video game, or helped with the chores, or did anything at all—they always gravitated towards each other until they dropped all else and just cuddled in a corner, like they weren’t done absorbing the chaos of their lives just yet.

Right now, they were curled together in the loveseat in the living room, lazily waiting for lunch. Bucky’s therapist encouraged him to try and associate the outside with positive feelings; at the moment, that just meant sitting by the French door with Steve wrapped around him. Bucky was a bit tense, sure, but he could breathe through it. When it was too much he just closed his eyes.

Steve was leaving again in the morning, which still really sucked, but didn’t tear through Bucky’s chest like the last time. He’d be back the next weekend. Maybe every weekend from now on. If he wanted. If Bucky could help it.

“So,” Bucky said, “any plans?”

Steve hummed. “Well,” he said, “I was thinking I can’t stay at Nat’s forever.”

“Oh-huh.” Bucky focused on the slow rise and fall of his chest. “You start looking yet?”

“Actually, I might’ve found something already.” Steve’s voice was a bit muffled by Bucky’s shirt. “It’s in Clint’s apartment building.”

Bucky’s brow furrowed a bit. “His what now?”

“I was surprised too.” Steve chuckled. “He says it’s a family heirloom. Natasha says not to ask.” His fingers were playing with the hem of Bucky’s red henley. “He’s got a room free on the third floor.”

“Okay,” Bucky said cautiously. “How much’s the rent?”

“Eight hundred a month. Two roommates—two girls,” Steve added. “Chavez and Bishop. We emailed a bit already, they sound okay.”

“Mm,” Bucky said, wading through a flow of worry and jealousy and anguish he tried to tune out. His heart rate was slow, his breathing deep and regular, despite the white noise at the back of his brain. “You gonna take it then?”

“I think so.” Steve spoke so softly. “Be nice not to be homeless anymore.”

Bucky tightened the loop of his arm around him, just a bit, and Steve pressed into him with a sigh. For a second there was nothing to say or do—just the deep awareness of how far they’d come, since the day Bucky had stumbled out into the icy night to pick up a frozen stranger off the streets.

“It’s just temporary though,” Steve said after a while. “Eventually I’m gonna find a job.”

A smile crept up his voice. “And then I’ll be looking for another place. Maybe with just one roommate.” His thumb followed the line of Bucky’s jaw.

“Yeah?” Bucky murmured, lips ticking up. “Careful not to end up with a creep.”
“S’okay,” Steve said with a little grin, “I know a guy.”

Bucky wasn’t that guy yet, not by a long shot.

The problem with recovery, he mused, was that it was lame. Misery you could wallow in. But betterment? Even on the days he felt good, it only made him feel ashamed of having felt bad before. Whenever his anxiety left him alone, he got anxious anticipating its return. Whenever he wasn’t depressed, he stressed himself out trying to enjoy every second of it. Whenever he relapsed, it felt like the end of the world.

Betterment fucking sucked.

He took a number of separate pills, some of them with every meal, some only in the morning, some only at night. Sam had discussed them with him at length, explained what they did and how, and reassured him that he would not necessarily need them forever. He should make a conscious effort not to worry about that part.

So Bucky made efforts. Most of it went unseen; it was a matter of recognizing a downwards spiral and forcing himself to think of something else, and it felt artificial and stupid—and it was fucking hard; Bucky’s brain would not let itself be distracted so easily. It jarred Bucky out of focus whenever he attempted to read a book or watch a show. It made his attention slip during conversations. It kept trying to go its own way, insisting its problems were real and Bucky should devote his entire attention to them. So in the end, Bucky’s vicious internal battles translated into a hell of a lot of silent thousand-yard-staring.

He knew he was lucky. He had his family to support him; he had Sam; he had Steve. But none of that kept him from feeling like the most miserable man on Earth sometimes. And after it passed he was furious at himself for it.

Feeling awkward in recovery was normal, Sam told him on Skype. (For some reason, Bucky handled it a lot better than phone calls—even though the anticipation of a call freaked him out the same.) He could only deal with the shortcomings of his mind using that very same mind; kind of like trying to put a broken arm in plaster using only that very same arm.

In other words—yes, it hurt and it was fucking frustrating and a lot of the time it felt like he was only making things worse. Yes, Bucky’s brain was starting to function normally again, and as it surveyed itself, its first reaction was naturally Christ, what a mess. Hence shame and guilt and a thousand little regrets every time he did or said anything, like thorns in his side.

There was no epiphany, no sudden surge of positivity, no waking up one day feeling cured. There were only bits and pieces of himself putting themselves back together. And sometimes a milestone.

***

(And oh, the story could stop right there and then, with snapshots of Winifred and George Barnes
getting to know Steve with only a bit of surprise—evidently they’d thought he’d be taller—and a lot of warmth. The screen could fade to black as they all sit together around the kitchen table, the credits could roll right after Sam brings up the subject of Bucky’s disability pension going to Steve. The blush on Steve’s pale cheeks would make for a good last shot, just like Bucky’s distant staring as the conversation glides around him, shaking himself up only to counter Steve’s feeble protests and squeeze his hand under the table.

But life doesn’t break off so neatly, and maybe that’s just as well.

***

“This is crazy,” Steve said, closing the door. “I can’t believe we’re in December.”

“I know, right?” Rebecca said. “That’s global warming for you. It’ll be more consistently cold after Christmas.”

She was only wearing a light coat; the short walk from the car had been enough for the sun to warm their faces. She helped Steve take his jacket off and hung it in the closet—his ribs were much better, but she liked to help him with the little things. And because she liked it, he let her.

“Steve!” Winifred called from upstairs. “Come in, dear.” She came down into the hallway and kissed him on both cheeks. Her perfume moved around her like a glow. “You look great. How are your ribs?”

“I’m good, Mrs. Barnes, thank you,” Steve said with a smile. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, we’re all fine, God bless,” she answered. “Becca, are you going to work on your thesis a bit more before lunch?”

“Think so. Where’s Dad?”

“In here,” called George from the kitchen. “Is that Steve I hear?”

Winifred rolled her eyes. “Can’t stop himself from shouting across the house. Oh,” she said, “Bucky’s waiting for you, of course. He’s on the veranda.”

“Okay,” Steve said automatically, and then he said, “Sorry, what?”

Bucky was breathing slowly, with purpose, and his hand was maybe gripping the plastic armrest a bit too tight; but otherwise he looked calm enough.

When he heard Steve, he said, “Hey.” He opened his eyes, then squinted up at the sun. “Been here for six minutes. It’s my new record.”

Speechless, Steve stepped under the interpersed panels of wood and glass. Bucky took another slow breath, let it out just as slowly. The sunlight made his eyes an incredible translucent blue, his lips a deep pink; it touched his pale face with a rosy glow, lit up golden shadows in the deep brown of his hair. Steve stared, and stared, and physically ached for watercolors.

Then Bucky smiled at him, and Steve completely forgot what he’d been thinking about.
“I wanted to hold out till you got here,” Bucky said. He shuddered—it wasn’t that warm out, even under this relatively enclosed space—then huffed a wry laugh. “Think I’m done for today, though.”

He got up from his garden chair and stepped back into the shade. His feet were bare; he was wearing only one layer—that red henley he liked—and dark jeans. His scruff was trimmed, the ends of his long hair too. Steve’s heart was overflowing.

“Staying under the veranda is cheating, I know,” Bucky muttered. “But I can’t do completely open spaces just yet. Still need something over my head.” He grimaced a little smile. “Sort of a milestone, though, right?”

Steve put both hands over Bucky’s chest—felt the hammering of his heart—then slid them up to cup his face. He opened his mouth to say the words, but then just kept his lips parted, because he didn’t know how to properly translate the emotion swelling inside him, the deep beating of it.

“What?” Bucky said, very softly, almost shy.

“You know what,” Steve murmured at last. He pulled him down so their lips would brush together, wrapping his arms around him. “You gotta know already, or else you’re blind,” and Bucky smiled so radiantly at him Steve realized he knew, too. Had known for a while.

*

The next morning, Bucky couldn’t get out of bed.

“Today sucks?” Steve asked, coming back from breakfast to find Bucky still curled under the quilt.

“Today sucks,” Bucky muttered in confirmation, clutching at the pillow.

“Move.” Steve climbed into the bed and Bucky obligingly inched away so they could rearrange themselves—Steve sitting up with Bucky’s head in his lap, his notebook propped onto it.

“What’re you doing today?” Bucky mumbled, eyes already closing.

“Pastels.”

Twenty minutes later, Rebecca poked her head through the doorframe. “Hey, guys.” She wrinkled her nose in sympathy. “Today sucks?”

“Yeah,” they said in unison.

“What are you doing?” she asked, nodding at Steve’s notebook.

“Pastels,” Bucky answered from under it.

“Neat,” she said.
Steve hated leaving Bucky’s house.

Bucky always looked torn up watching him go, still unable to accompany him to the station, and Steve himself had a hard time fighting back tears. The days without him were necessary—he had so much to do—but they were also so goddamned long.

They’d been doing this for a while, now, and it had become pretty obvious that Bucky’s parents didn’t like sending him off, either. Steve supposed it was still tough for them to deal with the new Bucky; so it would make sense they’d enjoy the respite of the weekends, when Steve was around for extra support. Nobody seemed to understand—or acknowledge—how deeply Steve needed Bucky around, too.

His first night in Clint’s building was rough.

The worst part was that technically, he was glad; even if he was effectively living on Bucky’s charity, he had his own place now, and he was drawing all day to get back on the online saddle—his Tumblr followers had been delighted to have him back—and the job hunt was finally starting to look like it might end up somewhere. Things were looking up. He knew this.

But another place which wasn’t home—at the Hodges, the shelters, the streets, Pierce’s apartment, Natasha’s spare bedroom, it suddenly was too much to bear and homesickness washed over Steve like an icy wave. He felt so forlorn he could barely breathe, and he hugged his pillow and closed his eyes and wished he was still a kid, wished for better times to return, wished it was morning.

Morning, strangely enough, did not fail to come.

When he woke up—and when had he fallen asleep?—there was sunlight, and he could hear his new roommates chatting sleepily in the kitchen, and he let himself be permeated by the thought that he could stay in all day if he wanted. Just add to his portfolio, and know he didn’t have to worry about what to eat or where to sleep, and know he would see Bucky again in only a few days, and be welcomed.

* *

And on the weekend, well—

“No way,” Bucky said, hiding embarrassed laughter under his hand. “Jesus, Steve, I didn’t think you were serious. Don’t spend your money on that.”

“You literally bullied me into buying art supplies and a phone and a laptop with your money—and it’s Christmas in two weeks, anyway. C’mon, look at the screen, I need you to pick the size.”

“We are not having this delivered at my parents’ house.”

“I’ll have you know, I have a place now,” Steve sniffed haughtily. “I can order all the questionable items I want.”

“Oh, God save us all.” Bucky peeked through his fingers, then nodded at the screen. “This one.”
“Steve—hello! How are you?”

“I’m—”

“Who is it?” yelled Kate from the other room.

“Shut up, Bishop, it’s for Steve,” America said in her long-suffering drawl.

“You guys have a landline?” Clint said, sounding honestly thrown. “I didn’t know this building had landlines.”

“Barton,” Kate said in disbelief, ”this is your building—”

Steve got up to close the door.

“Sorry about that,” he mumbled into the phone, cheeks heating.

“It’s fine,” Peggy said with a laugh. She always sounded so pleased speaking to him, and there was something excited about her voice today. “Do you know why I’m calling? Three guesses and the first two don’t count.”

“I’m off the shortlist?” Steve ventured wryly—he knew his pessimism made her laugh.

And indeed she laughed. “You could put it that way, certainly,” she said. “Or you could say you’re among the nominees for the Maria Stark Prize. Whatever suits you best.”

And so that weekend, there were celebrations and champagne, and Sam and Nat were invited, and Bucky glowed with pride all night, and after they all went to sleep, in the hushed darkness, in the warmth of his narrow bed, bodies pressed together and—

“I can’t,” he whispered all of a sudden. “I can’t, sorry, I can’t.”

He inched away, rolled to his back and sat up on the edge of the bed. His sweaty skin gleamed silver under the moonlight seeping through the window.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, and his voice sounded thick like he was fighting tears. “I’m sorry, it’s just not happening. I want to, but—” He made a helpless, frustrated gesture. “Not cooperating.”

“That’s fine,” Steve murmured. He knelt up and plastered himself against Bucky’s back. “Is cuddling naked still an option?”

Bucky huffed a shaky laugh. “Yeah,” he said. He swallowed thickly. “I’m sorry, we were supposed to celebrate—”

“We did celebrate,” Steve said. “Do you not remember your dad opening a bottle of champagne? I
seem to recall a lot of people being there, too, it was almost like a party—"

"You know what I mean," Bucky bit out.

"Yeah, and I’m trying to tell you that I don’t care," Steve said.

Bucky said nothing for a few seconds.

"I care," he muttered eventually.

"No shit. I’d be frustrated too." Steve kissed his neck. "Just don’t apologize for it."

Bucky’s shoulders finally relaxed a little, and he pushed back against Steve’s chest.

"I don’t want you to think this is because you don’t turn me on," he said, voice small.

Steve wrapped his arms around him, hands falling loosely over Bucky’s torso. "I don’t think that."

"Didn’t mean to snap at you," Bucky added, barely audible.

"It’s okay." Steve kissed his neck again.

Bucky sighed, then rubbed his face. "It went so well the first time," he said. "I thought I got to fall through the cracks for that part, at least."

"Hey." Steve smiled. "Bright side is, we’ll get plenty more opportunities to try."

Bucky’s answering smile was wan, but genuine. "Yeah." He swallowed. "I just…" He was silent for a few seconds, then craned his neck to look at Steve. "I’d just really like to have sex with you in this bed."

Steve blinked, then cracked up.

"Seriously," Bucky insisted, "stop laughing, I was a virgin till I left the house, I spent so many miserable horny years in this room—putting this goddamn mattress to good use is, like, the ultimate fantasy for me," and Steve was laughing so much he had to muffle himself not to risk waking up anyone.

* 

The next morning, Steve woke up to find Bucky lying on his belly, having kicked off the covers in his sleep.

The expanse of his back was mesmerizing—smooth skin only marred by a few pockmarks, which were oddly moving to Steve; the faint ripple of muscle as he breathed, the full, edible curve of his ass, and the coiled strength of his thighs, the round density of his calves, the delicate, subtly complex shape of his feet. His legs were parted, just a bit—he’d hitched up his right knee, and it opened him up just enough for Steve to flush a bit too hot.

Bucky groaned, then pushed his face into the pillow. "What time izzit," he mumbled.

"Early," Steve said without thinking.
There was a silence.

Steve swallowed. “Bucky?”

Bucky snuffled. “Wha’?”

“Can I… can I draw you again?”

Bucky shifted just enough to look up at him. The faint furrow of his brow smoothed out when he saw Steve staring at him.

He smiled, a bit lopsided, then let his eyes close again. His hand raised and waved in a vague circle. “Obligatory Titanic reference,” he mumbled into the pillow. “Go on, knock yourself out.”

*  

After a long, lazy while, Bucky spoke again.

“Hey.”

Steve was so engrossed in his drawing he almost didn’t hear. “I—yes?”

“If you do get that award.” Bucky still sounded half-asleep. “What does it mean? What will you actually get?”

“Oh. Um.” Steve scratched the back of his head with the pencil. “Well—for one, enough money that I could pay you back for the past two months.”

Bucky snorted into the pillow. “Fuck the money, Rogers. What does the prize mean for you? As an artist?”

Steve tried to focus on his drawing, but Bucky’s actual body—so lazily erotic, so open—kept catching his eye and slowing his hand. “I… Well, I’ll be first in line for the scholarship next year.”

Bucky smiled, eyes still closed. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And probably just, you know—some attention from the art community. Which—technically, as a nominee, I’ll be getting that anyway. Already am. I kind of…”

Bucky moved just a bit, like he’d been minutely stretching his whole body, muscles shifting as he rolled his hips against the mattress. Steve tried to pick up the end of his sentence. “I… I, um…” He’d completely forgotten what he was saying. “I was thinking of… going the other way at the same time… picking up my Tumblr and um… Doing both classical work and comic stuff…”

“Going the other way, huh,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve put down his notebook and hid his face in his hands. “Bucky—do you have lube in here somewhere?”

Bucky grinned at him, crinkling eyes opening like slivers of grey. “Now where is that coming from?”

“Fuck you,” Steve mumbled, cheeks heating.
Bucky’s smile went softer. “Yeah,” he said, “actually—I’d love that right now.”

It was too bad the strap-on hadn’t arrived in the mail yet—but maybe it was just as well, for a first time.

Bucky hummed and panted as Steve’s fingers went deeper into him, and thrust slick and hot into Steve’s other hand, and arched, and shuddered, and mumbled that it felt so good, so good, so good, and he’d missed it so fucking much, oh God—Steve—fuck, Steve.

He didn’t come. Just said that he was done, and let out a long, happy sigh, before crawling down and burying his head between Steve’s thighs. He spent a pleasant time there, and Steve—didn’t come either, too much build-up fizzing out like it often happened.

“Fucking copycat,” mocked Bucky when Steve pulled him up to kiss his own taste off his lips, and then they just lay entwined, catching their breath, grinning at each other like idiots.

“Christened your bed,” Steve said eventually.

“About time,” Bucky murmured.

He was looking at the drawing left on the nightstand, his fingers tightly threaded with Steve’s.

* *

On the weekend before Christmas, Sam helped Steve pull down a bigger suitcase than usual from the train—this time he was staying the whole week, and he’d been looking forward to it so much he was a bit dizzy now that it was finally happening. Rebecca was waiting by the door as usual; she waved, and when Steve looked up he saw Bucky next to her, wearing a baseball cap to shield his sight from the sky, his back ramrod tense and his face very pale, still managing to smile a bit when he met Steve’s eyes.

Steve had never before in his life run at someone to throw himself in their arms. He’d never seen anyone do it. He’d always thought it wasn’t a thing people actually did.

Bucky let out a little ‘oof’ when Steve collided with him, and said “Well, s’pose your ribs are all better now,” and Steve kissed him, heard Sam’s and Becca’s wry comments in the back (“Can you believe how cliché”) and kissed him again.

* *

Christmas couldn’t be ruined because nobody wanted it ruined, and Steve was desperately grateful to be here, with these people who liked him—loved him—and he teared up a little at dinner seeing how many presents under the tree were for him, and they all laughed gently at him while George kept refilling his glass, Winifred exclaiming “It’s a Christmas miracle!” when Steve didn’t refuse the alcohol like he usually did.

But at night he still lay awake, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that exactly a year ago, he’d been celebrating with his mom, happy to be home after his first few months as a sophomore
in college.

Eventually, his wet, hitching breaths woke up Bucky, who didn’t say a word, just pulled him close and gave him something to hold onto.

*

“What’re you thinking about?” Bucky asked him in the morning.

“Nothing. Just…” Steve was staring at the ceiling. “It’s Christmas.”

Bucky must understand exactly what he meant—how absurd it felt that life went on, how stunned he was by the leap his existence had taken, how achingly grateful he was to be here, right now, in this bed—because he nuzzled into Steve's neck and said, “Yeah. Now there’s a miracle.”

***

(Bucky spends a whole afternoon outside, then stays in his room with the blinds shut for a week.

Steve’s followers count stagnates just under a thousand people and his Patreon doesn’t exceed thirty dollars per month.

The Maria Stark Prize will be awarded in June, and June is on the other side of winter, on the other side of spring, and time is so slow, slow like molasses.)

(Then the new Star Wars movie comes out and Steve’s fanarts make the buzz, bumping him up to seven thousand followers and his Patreon to one hundred dollars and climbing. Bucky goes back to New York for the day to attend a session at the VA—Clint and Sam and Natasha are with him, and it goes well, and time speeds up and suddenly they’re on the brink of April.

And it’s cloudy and sunny and rainy and cloudy again, and sometimes there’s only just enough strength in them to go through one day more, but by the time they’ve gone through it, it’s one day less.

And there are bad days and good days and bad days and good days but the important thing is eventually they stop keeping track of which is which—)

***

“Last one,” Clint said, putting down the box and stretching with a groan. “What the hell, are you unpacking already?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, elbow-deep in cutlery and assorted bottles of dish soap. “ Might as well get a
head start.”

Clint crossed the room and gave the box a little kick. “Dude. You’re both moving in, he’ll want to help. Cut it out.”

The open window let in a warm May breeze which ruffled Steve’s hair a little. He grimaced a little smile, then sat on the bare floor. The room wasn’t empty—even though there was no furniture—but it wasn’t full either, despite the cardboard boxes littering it.

“It’s really a goddamn shame there were no free apartments left at mine,” Clint said. He’d been grumpy about that for weeks. “Would’ve gotten you a better deal.”

Steve’s smile was more genuine this time. “Hey, we’re still practically neighbors. And, y’know, this place is closer to the subway.”

“I thought Barnes could deal with open spaces now.”

“Yeah, doesn’t mean he enjoys it.”

Clint smiled and sat next to Steve on the shiny floorboard. “Well, fine, maybe this is a nice enough second choice.” He peered at Steve and suddenly said, “Hey, you look great, dude.”

Steve blinked, then laughed. “What? Where is that coming from?”

“No! Gawd,” Clint said, throwing his hands up. “Can’t us straighties pay anyone compliments anymore? I’m just saying, you look—ah, forget it, I don’t know.” He got up, flapping a hand about. “Think I forgot one last box in the van.”

He left the room and Steve sat there, wondering what that had been all about. But then it hit him. Pushing up to his feet, he dusted his jeans then crossed the sun-lit room. Ironically enough, this apartment was similar in size to Pierce’s—probably even a bit smaller. But no room was windowless.

The bedroom door was ajar; the actual bed was yet to be bought, but a big mattress sat on the floor between two bedside lamps tottering on piles of books. In Bucky’s pile were both volumes of Simmons’ *Hyperion*, L’Engle’s *Swiftly Tilting Planet* and some obscure paperbacks Steve had stacked lovingly—it was the first thing he’d done bringing up Bucky’s boxes earlier in the week.

In his own pile were the glossy art books Peggy had lent him and the huge *Drawing in Motion: A Study of Movement in Comics and Mangas* which George and Winifred had gotten him for Christmas. The blinds cut the sunlight into clear stripes cast across the sheets, particles of dust glowing golden in the air.

Steve smiled, then turned away and pushed open the bathroom door. He’d started unpacking boxes for that one too—the medicine cabinet was half-filled with toothpaste, vitamins and his T shots. He closed it and looked at himself in the mirror. He *did* look good, in a way which he hadn’t noticed before, which had happened while he wasn’t watching.

A year on testosterone would do that to a guy.

“Admiring yourself again?”
Steve turned round, a huge smile already on his face. “Bucky!”

“Hey,” Bucky said, smiling as he put down his backpack to properly embrace Steve.

“I didn’t think you’d be here so soon!” Steve said, wrapping him in a hug.

“Yeah, Becca got fed up with Mom’s and Dad’s emotions and made us hurry through it,” Bucky said, squeezing him. “She’s downstairs chatting with Clint.”

Steve laughed a little and stepped back to look at him. Bucky didn’t seem too tense—he’d gotten better at hiding it, sure, but Steve had gotten better at reading him. His eyes were soft, his smile easy.

“S’the second time I moved out, you’d think they’d be used to it by now,” he went on. He looked around. “Aw, you started unpacking already?”

“I was waiting for you to really start digging into it,” Steve said, grinning as Bucky wandered into the other rooms. He made an appreciative noise seeing the bathroom, then glanced into the bedroom and laughed a little at the minimalist arrangement. “Oh, I like what you’ve done with the place.”

Steve got a good look at him. He was wearing his combat boots with black pants, and two zip-up hoodies over his red henley, complete with the All Star baseball cap he hadn’t taken off yet. His sleeve was pinned up, and he’d gained a bit of weight in the past few months—mostly muscle, since working out helped clear his head and balance his mind. His poise was unmistakably military; maybe the result of more confidence, or of the fact he went to the VA more often.

Bucky glanced at him, and his lips twitched with the hint of a grin. “What’re you smiling at?”

“I want to draw you,” Steve said wholeheartedly.

That made Bucky huff a laugh. “Again?”

There was a huge portfolio behind the bedroom door, in which Steve kept all the drawings he’d done of Bucky—watercolors and inks and sanguine, flimsy sketches and hour-long portraits, contemplative portraits in aerial pastels, erotic studies with white pen on thick gray paper. Bucky, Bucky, Bucky.

“You’re obsessed,” Bucky smiled, moving closer.

“I love you,” countered Steve.

“Mm. Same difference.” He leaned down to press a kiss onto his lips. Steve leaned into it, arms raising of their own volition to wrap around him.

“So,” he breathed when they parted. “You ready for this?”

Bucky laughed again. “Not really,” he said. “I almost had a panic attack in the car.” His smile grew lopsided. “But hey, look at me. I’m here.”

Steve had to smile back. “Yeah,” he echoed, throat a little tight. “Yeah, you’re here.”

***
It’s past midnight and Bucky will sleep soon, but he’s been rather obsessed with the VA’s online forum lately—he’s gotten pretty good at typing one-handed, and Sam has been throwing prosthetic options at him since March but Bucky doesn’t have the guts for some long-winded physical therapy right now, and it felt good to say it out loud, to say no, I don’t have the courage to get into this right away, and to be left alone, to be left on vacation for a while longer.

That’s what it’s started feeling like: a vacation. One day maybe this will feel like he’s procrastinating, like maybe he should get a goddamn job, especially since Steve has one now—has three of them, actually, something inane in a clothing store and two freelance gigs drawing banners and thumbnails (courtesy of Peggy Carter and Phil Coulson, who seem to have turned respectively into Steve’s personal agent and Steve's number one fan) not to mention his steadily growing Patreon attracting comic fans and art hipsters alike, thanks to his hard work and constant posting and also maybe the small Maria Stark Prize Nominee official logo stamped in the top right corner of his Tumblr.

But Bucky isn’t feeling guilty about himself yet, which is a nice change for once. His disability checks are more than enough to uphold his half of the rent and most of their grocery shopping. Hey, sometimes he even goes to the grocery store himself.

Bottom line is, it’s the middle of the night and he’s on the VA forum and picking his way through anxious threads from people who desperately want to know—does it get easier?

And he’s introduced himself and he’s answered questions and he’s gotten noticed and he’s just been asked to tell his story. A lot of people in the thread are stating their interest, and Bucky can almost visualize them flocking to him, like frozen people huddling around a fire. It’s intimidating, but the anticipation isn’t all bad. He thinks maybe he can help them a little. If he just finds the words.

And Steve’s curled into him with the sheet twined around his legs, uncovered just the right amount to strike a perfect balance with the hot night air. He’s breathing peacefully, and the city’s humming outside, and they never did buy an actual bed and their nightstands are still piles of books which Bucky has been rereading with unexpected pleasure. There are thick, colorful curtains on every window for when he needs the sky to go away for a while, clothes overflowing from the shelves, the strap-on lying in a corner from the night before—God, they oughta clean it, shouldn’t leave it there on the floor.

They left the radio on in the kitchen; the late night news is just wrapping up—there are a lot of candidates lining up for the presidency and Alexander Pierce isn’t one of them—and a distant tune carries through the half-open door, strewn notes Bucky knows from somewhere. Gimme Shelter by the Rolling Stones, he’s almost sure, hums a few disjointed notes under his breath.

And he’s been going to the VA three times a week and Skyping with Dr. Smith a lot, and his medication sits next to Steve’s hormones in the medicine cabinet, in reduced doses now; and the background noise of his mind is still there but it’s gotten a lot less loud, a lot more manageable, and he can hear Steve breathe, with that soft snuffling sound he makes when he’s deeply asleep, and sometimes he feels overwhelmed with his own fucking luck when he thinks back upon—everything, so dizzy about how utterly unpredictable life can be, and he now stares at the screen wondering how to explain it to people he doesn’t know. How to tell them reality is infinitely richer and weirder than what grey despair would have you believe.

In the end, he brushes strands of hair off his face—Steve tied it into a bun earlier and it’s beginning to unravel—balances the laptop a bit better on his knees, and carefully types out the beginning of his answer.
One day I looked out the window, he writes, and there was this tiny homeless guy burrowing under an awning.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. It's been quite the ride. Readers, thank you for coming along - I can't wait to hear your thoughts.

Here's a small playlist in lieu of credits:

A song for Steve, who listened to it while he was drawing and felt it getting under his skin until he had to dance: Orphan - Savant

A song for Bucky, who heard it on the radio and sang along in the shower until he was screaming with it: Alive - Sia

Two songs for everyone and especially you (yes, you): Open Season - Josef Salvat and Demons - Fatboy Slim feat. Macy Gray

And of course, this fic's anthem: Gimme Shelter - The Rolling Stones

I love you guys. :)

P.S.: MORE FANART! Cute, gorgeous, amazing fanart!!

P.P.S: EVEN MORE FANART!

P.P.P.S: AAAAAAAAAAAAAH LOOK AT THIS FANART BY HOPELESS GEEK AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH

P.P.P.P.S: More GORGEOUS FANART by magniloquentChanteuse, here and here and here and here!

Also: wanna support my real-life writing career? You can follow me on Tumblr about it.
Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!