the gravedigger's handbook

by idrilka

Summary

Sometimes it's the most difficult thing, coming home. They both learn that, in their own ways. (In the end, Bucky comes back to Steve. In the end, it is all that matters.)

Notes

first of all, i would like to thank everyone who read, commented on, bookmarked, left kudos on, recced or messaged me about tin soldiers. i am absolutely amazed by the response this story has received so far. your feedback has continued to be absolutely amazing, and i basically love everyone in this bar.
this is the companion piece that i promised i would write, the one that tells the story from steve's (and bucky's) perspective. to those who liked the form of tin soldiers in particular—i'm sorry, guys. this is a more traditional take on the narrative structure, but i hope you enjoy it nonetheless.
this story can be read on its own, but i would still recommend reading tin soldiers first, as it provides a lot of background information that will come in handy in the later chapters.

See the end of the work for more notes.
(In the end, it happens like this.)

It’s the end of summer when Bucky comes home—one of the last warm days before the sweltering New York summer turns into fall—and there is something in Steve that punches right through his chest at the sight of him, leaning against the wall, haggard and unmoving. The stillness looks eerie, unnatural, like he’s waiting for Steve to pass judgment, and he can almost feel his mouth taste like ash at the thought.

“Buck?” he says, keeps his distance, and it kills him slowly with every shaky breath he takes. He needs—to come closer, and he knows he can’t. Not now.

He can almost feel the three bullet wounds in his gut, long healed now, and it’s nothing more than phantom pain, a memory.

“You weren’t home,” Bucky says, his voice hoarse and quiet, like that’s explanation enough.

Like Steve didn’t spend the first four months after D.C. trying to find him before finally understanding that he had to let Bucky come to him on his own terms, that it was the only way or else he wouldn’t be that much different from them.

Like it’s the simplest thing in the world, coming home.

(Sometimes, he knows, it’s the most difficult thing you can do.)

There are a lot of things Steve doesn’t ask, things like do you remember, and are you staying, and are you okay.

He settles for are you hurt, and are you hungry, and do you want to take a shower.

Bucky stays silent, but Steve sees the blood on his ruined shirt when he lifts his hand to touch the wound, and the gesture looks automatic, almost subconscious. Bucky’s fingers press down, but he doesn’t flinch.

“Would you like me to take a look at this?” Steve asks. He knows the hospital is out of the question. He’s seen the medical equipment in the abandoned HYDRA outpost where they kept Bucky for some time between the missions, remembers the way just looking at it made him physically sick.

Bucky stares at nothing with unseeing eyes, the line of his shoulders painfully tense, his jaw tight with something that makes Steve’s skin crawl. Like Bucky is waiting for something—something inevitable. Something too horrific to put into words.

“It’ll heal,” he says eventually, like he finally remembers where he is. Who he’s with. Like he doesn’t really care if he bleeds, so long as he doesn’t bleed out. It does something to Steve, deep under his skin, in that ugly, ugly part of him that he usually tries to hide from the world, and he feels like he wants to hit something or maybe like he wants someone to hit him.

“Bucky.” It comes out more pleading than he intended, but he doesn’t care. They’ve done this
hundreds of times—patching each other up in their old apartment in Brooklyn, in Steve’s or Bucky’s parents’ apartments before that. They used to trust each other with this, warm hands on their skin, the gentle touch, the whispered words, you idiot or you punk, the unspoken world of affection behind them, and they knew it was going to be okay. That they were going to be okay.

“Please.”

When Bucky starts to undress mechanically without a single word, Steve swallows slowly, painfully, his tongue thick in his mouth, and goes to retrieve the first aid kit from the bathroom. He gives himself a moment, splashes cold water on his face, tries to get his breathing under control. This is not about him, he knows. Bucky had always been there for him in the past, and Steve has already failed him once, twice, a thousand times over. He has an impossible debt to repay.

He closes his eyes for the briefest moment and when he opens them, he almost doesn’t recognize himself in the mirror. It’s like he’s looking at a ghost. Maybe he is—after all, there are a lot of ghosts around these days.

The wound is a deep gash going from ribs to navel, bleeding in places where Bucky ripped off the fabric of his shirt. Steve knows from the file Natasha gave him, the one she didn’t upload the day SHIELD fell, that Bucky can now heal faster and endure more pain, but he also knows this must be excruciating. Abdomen injuries always are.

“Please, tell me if I hurt you,” he says, kneeling in front of Bucky.

“Why?” Bucky asks, looking down at him like he’s searching for an explanation, and Steve feels like he’s going to be sick.

“Because it’s not supposed to. Because I will stop if it does.”

There’s something in Bucky’s face that makes Steve want to scream. That makes him wonder why Bucky doesn’t.

Why isn’t he screaming?

He needs stitches, but Steve has little experience with those and no anesthetics, and he knows that if he tried to stitch him up without any painkillers, Bucky wouldn’t even flinch. That’s the thing that scares him the most.

“I can go if you want,” Bucky says once Steve finishes closing the gash with surgical glue. It’s a crude solution, but it’s the best he can do under the circumstances. If Bucky’s body heals the way Steve’s does, this won’t even leave a scar. “You don’t have to—I’m not him.”

Steve swallows, closes his eyes. “I don’t care. So maybe you are, and maybe you aren’t, this doesn’t change anything, Buck, do you understand? You’re still my friend. I still—”

I still love you, he almost says.

“You’re still my friend.”

Steve brings him a change of clothes—a soft, grey henley that smells like laundry detergent and fabric softener, and a comfortable pair of pants, because he remembers what Sam told him the last time they talked about what might happen after— if—

(Soft fabrics. Comfortable clothes. Nice smells. Don’t underestimate the little things, man. He hasn’t been cared for like that in years.)

Bucky strips down with determined efficiency right in the middle of the living room, and Steve
turns away from him as soon as he understands what’s happening. He’s still mourning for
Bucky’s memories—their memories, the lost history of shared lives—but he knows, he knows
that’s not the worst thing they did to him. He knows they made him feel like he wasn’t a person,
like his own body didn’t belong to him, like it could be used by anyone for any reason, like he
didn’t have the right to think of anything as his own. This—is this a grim reminder of that.

“You can change in the bathroom if you want,” he says, praying his voice doesn’t break. He’s
been exposed like a nerve ever since he found Bucky waiting for him outside his apartment, and
he’s exhausted, so, so exhausted, and worse than he’s been in a long time now, he can finally
admit it, but he can’t let himself think about this now. Certainly not act on it.

When Steve finally turns back to face Bucky, there’s a pile of old, ratty clothes on the floor that
Steve has no idea what to do with. He could burn them, throw them away, but they’re Bucky’s
clothes and he should be the one to decide how to deal with them. They’re beyond saving, the
shirt caked in blood and the black cargo pants torn and frayed at the seams, but Steve understands
the importance of the act. When Bucky was alone, in hiding, it was different, there was no handler
to tell him what to do and what to think, and who to kill; what to wear and what to eat, and when,
but now there’s two of them, and Bucky needs to understand that this time, he can make all those
decisions for himself.

“Are you hungry?” Steve asks again, and Bucky shakes his head even though Steve can tell he’s
starving. It’s such a small thing—that he can read Bucky, read that small part of him that hasn’t
changed and still grinds his teeth a little when he’s trying to lie and failing, making his jaw
muscles twitch, and it hits him like a blow to the head. “I could eat,” he adds with a little shrug,
like it’s no big deal, an open invitation to join him if he changes his mind.

He makes a stack of pancakes from the mix, adds a handful of blueberries and carefully places
two forks on the tabletop.

Bucky joins him while he’s already on his third one. It’s tentative, and Steve hates that, absolutely
hates that, because it’s nothing like Bucky and nothing even like the Winter Soldier he fought on
the helicarrier, all fury and anger. It makes him want to rip Pierce to pieces.

“There’s a bed in the guest room. Your room, if you want it,” Steve says and starts to get up to put
the dishes away when Bucky makes an aborted gesture that makes Steve stop in his tracks. He sits
back down, his hands still holding the dirty plate. He has no idea what this means. What Bucky
wanted to do before he thought better of it. Before the instinct Steve doesn’t remember from
before kicked in.

Sitting less than two feet from him, Bucky looks like he’s starved for touch and like he doesn’t
want to be touched at all.

He’s always been extremely tactile, ever since Steve can remember—an arm thrown across
Steve’s shoulders, his feet in Steve’s lap after a long day of hard work, his cool hands on Steve’s
forehead while he was half out of his mind with fever and hallucinating, small, everyday touches
that went almost unnoticed until Bucky suddenly wasn’t there anymore. Now, Steve can see the
conflict in him, the need to be touched and the need to get away from any human contact as far as
possible, and Steve wants nothing more than to reach out and close the distance between them, but
it’s not 1941, and this might be Bucky, but he’s had enough people touching him without his
consent to last him a lifetime. Steve’s not going to be another one.

“Do you need anything?” he asks instead, and it’s so inadequate it makes him want to scream.

“No,” Bucky says, and that’s progress, at least. He gets to his feet, clearly convinced he’s being
dismissed, and heads straight for the guest bedroom, leaving Steve behind. He doesn’t close the
door. The implications behind this gesture make Steve’s blood run cold, but he doesn’t make a move to close the door either, because he doesn’t want Bucky to think he needs to. He has no idea whether he’s made the right call.

“The loft can get a bit cold at night,” he says eventually, trying for neutral and almost, almost succeeding. “Just a heads-up.”

After that, he goes through the motions in an almost dreamlike state, except everything looks black and white, grainy like an old newsreel, and he dreams his nightmares in color.

There’s no sound coming out of Bucky’s room, but when Steve walks out of the shower, the door is now left only slightly ajar. Outside, the loft is dark and silent.

Inside, behind the closed door, Steve slumps slowly to the floor and presses the back of his palm to his mouth to keep the sound in. It’s messy and ugly, his breath hot and wet, and shaky, and he can’t remember the last time he cried like this, apart from that night in a bombed-out shell of a pub in London. Back then, he cried for Bucky, too.

“I can’t ask you to do this,” Steve says, looking up from his cup of Americano Beth brought a few minutes earlier. On the house, she said. Looks like you need it.

“I know, man, that’s why you’re not asking. I’m offering.” Sam shrugs, his face open and serious, but not grave, and it makes Steve feel better, because he knows if there’s anything he can trust these days, it’s Sam’s judgment. “You know it’s good, though, right? He came to you. He’s made that choice himself. For him, that’s huge. Just—”

“Be careful, I know.” They’ve had this conversation already. “I’m not compromised, if that’s what you’re worried about. You know I can handle this.”

Sam considers him carefully for a moment. “Would you tell me if you were compromised?”

“Yes.” Steve swallows a large gulp of his coffee, still too hot and burning his throat.

Sam laughs.

“Dude, for someone who worked for the American war propaganda effort and then for SHIELD, you’re a terrible liar. Jesus.” He shakes his head with amusement and Steve can’t help but smile, too. “How is he, though?”

“Still sleeping, hopefully. He looked like he needed a good rest.” Steve rubs his eyes, drags his hands down his face. There’s a pressure deep inside his chest that makes it hard to breathe, a tight knot where his lungs should be. “He was wounded when he turned up, I patched him up with surgical glue, because I don’t think he’d take too kindly to the idea of a hospital right now. He looked like he was starving but didn’t want to eat. He didn’t even think he deserved any privacy while he was changing and then when he went to sleep. I—”

He still remembers the desperate look on Bucky’s face and how badly he wanted to touch him in that moment.

“Listen, there’s no handbook for this, okay?” Sam leans back in his chair, crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m so out of my depth here it’s not even funny, and the closest we have to an expert on recovering from years of brainwashing is in the wind and going after what’s left of the Red Room, so we’re all in the same boat. But the most important thing is this: he needs to do this by himself. You can be there for him when he does, and you can help whenever necessary, but you
can’t put him back together. Only he can do that.”

“I understand that,” Steve says, and the thing is, he does. He understands that he can’t be the only reference point for Bucky, the person around which he rebuilds his life from the ground up, from the ruins and ashes left by Zola and the rest of HYDRA. He wouldn’t be that different from Pierce, then. It’s the last thing he wants.

“I know, I know, it’s cool, man.” Sam brings his hands up in a placating gesture. “Just covering the bases.”

Beth brings them their refills and two glazed donuts, and Sam smiles at her in that way that Steve remembers from when Bucky used to take pretty girls out on a night in town but that Steve never quite mastered, and Beth smiles back. They flirt for a moment back and forth while Steve watches, amused and oddly content. They’re sitting outside, taking advantage of the warm, sunny weather that will soon give way to the golden New York fall. The unmistakable smell already lingers in the air in the evenings.

“So how’s the testing with Stark going on?” Steve asks once they’re left alone. “Been airborne yet?”

The smile Sam gives him in return is answer enough. “The guy’s ego is bigger than his building—which is great, for the record, my bathroom is the size of my first apartment—but damn, can he design amazing gear. Stopped him before he could paint it red and gold, though. And Colonel Rhodes came by to visit the first day I went airborne. That guy is amazing. Stark lucked out, I’m telling you. If he weren’t dating Pepper, who is, by the way, totally awesome and wow, you really haven’t been exaggerating about that, he definitely should be dating Rhodes.”

Steve laughs. He’s met James Rhodes a few times, and he certainly respects the man, but he doesn’t know him very well. “So what now, are you staying at the Tower?”

“I don’t know, man. I got a job back in D.C., a good job that I’m good at,” Sam says around a bite of his donut, then wipes the frosting from his upper lip with his thumb. “But you people are all clearly crazy, and you need someone to watch your sorry asses to make sure you don’t get yourselves killed in the process. So just say the word, Cap, and you know I got your six.”

Steve considers this for a moment. “There’s a VA department here in New York, too,” he says eventually. “I’d never ask you to give up your job, but it would be great to have you here. And Sam? That wouldn’t be Captain America asking. Just Steve Rogers.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I’m saying yes.”

It’s Pepper who finds the apartment, two weeks after Steve comes back to New York.

“I know you don’t want to live at the Tower permanently,” she says one evening around a glass of red wine, while Tony tinkers away with Bruce in his lab, “so I asked around, and turns out, a friend is selling a loft in Williamsburg. I have some pictures, if you want to take a look.” She passes him the tablet, and Steve starts to look through the photos. “You draw, right? Well, in that case, I think I should mention that my friend is a painter, and he swears the light is to die for.”

The place is all high ceilings and huge windows, bare red brick, and steel, and old wood, and it’s so unlike all the other apartments Steve used to live in, he falls in love immediately.

He buys an old turntable at the flea market, not out of nostalgia, but simply because he enjoys the soothing, grainy quality of sound. He decorates the walls with old sketches done in pencil and a
few original pieces from young local artists. He fills the shelves with books he wants to read. It feels like moving on.

The loft is quiet when Steve returns, and his first frantic thought is that Bucky is gone, but then he hears the quiet hum of water in the bathroom, and he feels like he can breathe again.

Bucky comes out a few minutes later, dressed in yesterday’s clothes, but his hair is wet and his eyes are red-rimmed from the water. He pauses when he sees Steve, though he must have heard him come in, and almost desperately avoids any eye contact as he moves through the open space of the apartment. There’s tension in his shoulders that must be painful to carry, and Steve can’t help but wonder what would have happened if he’d found Bucky right after D.C. If it would have been better. If it would have been worse.

Steve doesn’t think of those months they spent apart, after Bucky pulled him out of the Potomac, as lost, because he, of all people, knows there’s no loss in trying to find yourself, being on your own to figure out how much of you is still left after everything else has turned to dust.

(The waitress in Louisiana tells him Bucky had been coming to the diner for a while before he left town, and that he looked closed-off but not threatening, not the way Steve remembers from the helicarrier, when for a moment all he could see was a feral snarl. This is good, Sam tells him then, over the phone. It means he’s adjusting to being among other people again. Just gotta give him a little more time.

Two days after that, Steve comes back to New York. This time, it’s for good.)

“There was a cat,” Bucky says quietly, and his voice still sounds hoarse from disuse. Steve stops putting the groceries away and turns to face him.

“The one with the missing ear, that Becca really wanted to keep but your parents wouldn’t let her, so we fed him scraps from the table when they couldn’t see?” he asks. Steve remembers the cat—an old, ugly thing that Rebecca Barnes, for some unknowable reason, loved more than anything in the world. He remembers how Bucky held her when she found it dead one morning and cried until she almost couldn’t breathe. They buried it in the backyard, by the fence, behind the bushes so that the adults wouldn’t take notice.

Bucky shakes his head and looks down. “I only remember the cat,” he says.

Steve feels like someone poured a bucket of water over him.

“She’s dead, isn’t she,” Bucky continues, uninterrupted, in a monotone voice. “My— my sister. I had more than one, that’s what the exhibit said. And they’re dead now.”

Steve swallows painfully around the tightness in his throat. “Yeah, Buck. They’re dead.”

A moment of silence, then, “Good. At least they didn’t have to see—if…”

“Bucky, come on.” Steve shakes his head and takes a step closer, stops himself at the last moment before he can put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “They thought the world of you. I don’t think this would’ve changed anything.”

“No. It’s good,” Bucky repeats, more forcefully this time, but his face remains blank. He doesn’t look at Steve as he turns back and walks away. When the door closes behind him, Steve doesn’t follow.
He finds Rebecca Barnes three weeks after the attack on New York. It’s not difficult to track down her address once he gets comfortable using the internet, though it’s still a strange feeling, to know that these days, you can find virtually anything about anyone if only you know how to look, all in less than ten minutes. The world got bigger while he was under the ice, but also, in a way, it got a lot smaller.

Rebecca Barnes-Proctor owns a brownstone in Greenpoint, a nice, two-story building across from a Polish delicatessen that must have been here even back in Steve’s time, even though Steve could never afford to shop here back then. The sign says: Established 1925.

When Steve rings the bell, there’s only silence for a long moment, but then he hears someone running down the stairs, and a few seconds later he comes face to face with a young woman. She’s tiny, wears a floral dress with combat boots, her hair is a dark shade of teal and she has a sleeve tattoo on her left arm, and yet she looks so much like Bucky that Steve feels like someone’s just punched him in the solar plexus.

“I’m looking for Rebecca Barnes?” he says after a short moment when all he can do is stare. “I’m — a family friend.”

The girl raises an eyebrow. “So it really is you,” she says. “Grandma said you would come.”

Steve smiles, and it’s so hard and so, so easy at the same time.

“Steve Rogers.”

He extends his hand instinctually, even though his ma always taught him it’s the lady who should reach out first, but Peggy never much liked the spectacle of it. A good handshake is a good handshake, she used to say.

“Ruth Scanlin,” the girl says, taking his hand. She has a firm, sure grip. “And yeah, I figured, after they plastered you all over the news during the attack. Grandma took it, well—”

He can only imagine.

“Is she home? I’d love to talk to her.”

Ruth steps to the side and opens the door wider to let him in. Inside, the smell is so familiar, it almost makes him reel. It’s the way the Barnes apartment always smelled, the way Bucky’s mother always smelled, lavender and honey.

“Steve.” Becca Barnes stands in the living room doorway, and she looks every inch the girl Steve remembers. There are deep wrinkles on her face, and her hair is milk-white, but her eyes are still the same, and she smiles the same smile. “You came back.” Her voice doesn’t waver, but her eyes are a little watery.

“Yeah, Becca, I did.” He hugs her then, and he’s huge now, towering over her so much that she almost disappears in his arms, but she clings to him with such force he can’t doubt there’s still a lot of fire inside her frail body.

“Is— is Bucky with you?” she asks once they part, and suddenly Steve can’t breathe. “I know we got the telegram, and then the letter, but they said the same thing about you, so if you came back, then I thought that maybe— maybe Bucky did, too?”

He’s silent for a moment, and when he looks at Ruth over Becca’s head, he can see she already
knows the answer.

Steve shakes his head. “I’m so, so sorry, Becca, but Bucky— Bucky’s dead. He’s dead, Becca, and he’s not coming back.”

He swallows thickly and closes his eyes for a moment to get his bearings, make sure his voice doesn’t betray him when he speaks again.

It’s still fresh in his mind, like a wound deep inside of him that won’t close, won’t turn into a thin, white scar that only hurts with the coming change of weather. He still wakes up with the image of Bucky falling, screaming his name, burned into the inside of his eyelids. It’s been almost seventy years for everyone else, but for him, it hasn’t even been two months.

Becca nods without a word, but Steve can see there are tears in her eyes, and her hands are shaking just a little bit. She regains her composure in a matter of seconds—she’s always been strong, and there’s steel under her skin, even after all this time.

“Make us a cup of tea, would you, darling,” she says to Ruth, guiding Steve to the living room. There’s a fireplace, a series of framed photographs in sepia on the mantle, and the walls are painted the kind of green that makes Steve think about the old grandma Barnes’ apartment. He used to go there with Bucky from time to time before grandma Barnes died, and Steve always got an extra slice of apple pie, because she thought he wasn’t eating enough.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.” Steve looks at her, his hands clasped tightly in his lap. He feels too big for the room—the way he still does sometimes—and tries to take up as little space as possible. “I had— a few things to figure out. After, you know. After I got back into the world.”

“And in such a spectacular manner, too,” Becca says with a wry smile, and Steve can’t help but laugh. “They were telling me my age had finally caught up to me, you know, that obviously you weren’t real, but I’d recognize that mug anywhere. They have no business tellin’ me I can’t see what’s true and what’s not anymore.”

“People trying to tell Rebecca Barnes what to think. What has the world come to.” Steve shakes his head with mock outrage, remembering how stubborn Becca has always been, how she would never take no for an answer. Mrs. Barnes always lamented that she had raised such a headstrong child—out of the four of them, it was Becca who was the biggest troublemaker. Maybe that’s why she and Steve always got along so well despite the age difference—trouble always attracted trouble.

Ruth brings them their tea and a plate of pumpkin cookies.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save him.” He can’t look Becca in the eye, but it still needs to be said, and once he starts, the words seem to spill out all at once. “I should’ve— I should’ve grabbed him sooner, I should’ve been more careful, I should’ve told him to take his medal and get back home. They would’ve let him, he was a prisoner of war, he was tortured, he had every right to go home. But he stayed. Because of me. It was me who got him killed. It was all my fault, Becca, and now he’s dead, and I’m not, and it’s—”

“You loved him, didn’t you,” Becca says, and it’s not a question. Steve can feel his heart lodged in his throat, beating frantically. “And I don’t mean like a brother. Was that what this was, the plane crash? You trying to go after him?”

(No. Yes. Maybe. He hasn’t figured that out for himself yet. There’s no way he can verbalize that for other people, what it felt like, before he fell. What it felt like after Bucky did.)
“Yeah. Yeah, I loved him,” he admits finally, after the silence has stretched for too long. It’s the first time that he’s said it out loud. That he could say it out loud without fear. It does not feel like a triumph.

“Oh, Steve,” Becca says, covering Steve’s hands with hers. “I am so, so sorry. I can’t imagine what that must feel like. But you have to know it wasn’t your fault. None of it was your fault, and we never blamed you. And you know Bucky wouldn’t have left your side even if you’d asked. It was always the two of you, Barnes and Rogers, joined at the hip. For as long as I can remember. There was nothing in the world that could change that.”

They sit in silence after that, before Steve finally asks, “When did you figure it out?”

“Back then, when you still looked like a stronger breeze would make you keel over. You always looked at him the same way he looked at you, when you weren’t watching. At first I was too young to understand what this meant, but then I grew up and got to know things that would make our ma blush so hard she’d explode. Bucky never said anything, because he wouldn’t have, now, would he, with how the world worked back then, so he made a show of skirt-chasing and looked at you when he was sure he wouldn’t get caught. And you were the same way. Well, apart from the skirt-chasing.”

Steve huffs out a laugh, but he knows the smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“So, your granddaughter,” he says instead. “Is the name a coincidence, or was she named after Ruth?”

“Named after Ruth. You should’ve seen Nora, she was so jealous that Alice would name her firstborn after Ruth and not her, even though she was her godmother.”

“Sibling rivalry to the end, huh?” Some things, Steve supposes, really never change.

Becca chuckles. “You know how they always were, trying to one-up one another. And they said I was the trouble child, can you believe that?”

“Hey, you know what they said about me.” Steve shrugs with one shoulder, a smile tugging one corner of his mouth up.

“Anyway, poor Nora died a few months after Ruthie was born, and then Ruth a year after that, and yet, somehow, I’m still here. But you know what, Steve? It’s not a good feeling to outlive all of your siblings.” Becca’s gaze turns distant for a moment, like she’s not even there anymore. “She made professor, you know that? Ruth. Got a tenure, taught at Cornell.”

“And Nora?”

“Got married, stayed at home, same as me. The only difference is, she actually stayed married. I did a few courses, went into publishing after my husband died—editing, proofreading and such. Never remarried, eventually went back to my maiden name.” She takes a deep breath, then reaches over to squeeze Steve’s hand. “I’ve lived a good life, Steve, surrounded by wonderful people, but there hasn’t been a day that I wouldn’t think about Bucky, and about you. You were family, too, I hope you know that.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.” Steve looks down at his hands.

Ruth comes by a few minutes later to ask them if they need anything else before she has to head out for a while. Becca looks thoughtful for a short moment, then says, “If you could bring me the box from my bedroom, you know which, my dear. I’d go fetch it myself, but the hip’s been bothering me again, I think it’s going to rain. And thank you, darling.”
It’s a small, black wooden jewelry box encrusted with ivory that Becca holds in her lap for a moment before she opens it and extends her hand to Steve, her fingers closed tightly around something. When she drops it into his open palm, Steve gasps almost inaudibly, just a sharp intake of breath. In his hand, he’s holding Bucky’s old dog tags.

“You should take them,” Becca says, and before Steve can get so much as a word of protest out, she shakes her head vehemently and continues, unperturbed, “Steve, they’re yours if you want them. Please, take them. He sent them back home when he got issued new ones, as some soldiers did, to give their families something to hold onto. He sent them to you. Only you weren’t in Brooklyn anymore, but the postman knew us, and he brought the package back to us. We only opened it when we heard about you—”

James Buchanan Barnes. 32557038. Steve stares at the letters engraved in the metal, slightly bent out of shape.

“Thank you,” he says, then slips them on, covers them with his shirt.

He doesn’t take them off.
once, again, i'd like to thank everyone for the amazing feedback. you guys rock, and i continue to be absolutely gobsmacked at the response to this series. thank you, guys, so much.

(Sometimes memory is like dredging up pieces of a corpse. You put both hands into the bog and pull, and you come away with only little fragments of bone that cut your palms with their jagged edges.)

(When he remembers, it’s in flashes—a shadow of a smile; woman’s gentle hands; a man in a bowler hat; murky river water, warm like soup. Blond hair; blue eyes. Steve. Steve, Steve, Steve. Steve, Steve, Steve. Steve. He’s everywhere, golden and blinding, and Bucky shines only with reflected light.)

Most of the time, Bucky is quiet. He moves through the apartment like a ghost, and Steve recognizes the movements, the intent behind them—the need to take up as little space as possible. It’s such a sharp contrast with the Bucky from before, the one who filled every space he occupied with a warm, confident presence, who made it impossible to look away from him.

When Steve is at home, Bucky usually doesn’t leave his room, unless it’s to eat and go to the bathroom, and keeps his door closed. Steve tries to give him his space, but there are moments, just brief moments that pass in the space between two breaths when he fears that one day he will wake up, and he will be back in that sterile room at the SHIELD facility, with the baseball game he’d been to in 1941 playing on the radio, and Bucky will still be dead.

“I went to see the museum exhibit,” Bucky says unexpectedly on the fifth day since he came home, coming out of his room even though they have already eaten. It’s new. New is good.

Steve is on the couch with a big mug of tea, trying to read a comic book, of all things—graphic novels, that’s what they call them now—and he can only imagine how hard Bucky would laugh, back then, asking him if he hasn’t had enough yet and if he had a stash of Captain America comics somewhere, too, hidden better than his dirty pictures.

It’s something called *The Dark Tower*, he’s just picked it up. Sam tells him there are books, too.

Bucky stands at a distance, unmoving and silent again, and Steve can’t figure out if it’s him who doesn’t want to come closer, or if he thinks Steve doesn’t want him to.

“Find anything interesting?” Steve asks, keeping his tone light, and Bucky takes a few steps closer to finally sit in the armchair across the coffee table, still keeping his distance.

“There was a man wearing my face,” he says after a moment when he looks like he’s struggling to put his thoughts into words. “Or maybe I was wearing his. But I knew it was more than that. You told me that you knew me, that you were my friend. I don’t know why, but I knew you were telling the truth. The exhibit said that, too. That I was your friend. So the rest must’ve been true,
too, but it wasn’t, not all of it. I don’t know how I knew this, but I kept coming back again and again, because they got so much wrong, and I didn’t know why, and I wanted to know. But it felt wrong, and I had to understand. There was an old guard. He looked at me like he recognized me, once. I didn’t come back after that,” he finishes, and looks so lost inside his own head, it physically hurts to look at him.

“What did they get wrong?” Steve asks. “If you can tell me that, maybe I can tell you why.”

Bucky shakes his head. “I don’t know. I just know they did.”

“Okay.” Steve takes a deep breath, then another. “Okay. We’ll figure it out.”

They sit in silence for a while, punctured by the sounds of the busy streets below them coming through the open window. The evening chill hasn’t set in for good yet.

“You screamed last night in your sleep,” Bucky says unexpectedly, and Steve almost drops the tea mug he’s lifting to his lips, and, fuck, he doesn’t even remember that, he must’ve never woken up from the nightmare, he doesn’t even remember the nightmare.

“I’m sorry I woke you up, Buck. I’ll—” He doesn’t know how to finish that. I’ll try not to have more nightmares? I’ll try not to scream?

“We slept in the same bed,” Bucky says, his expression blank, but there’s something in his voice that sounds almost desperate, just like before, when he was talking about his visits to the Smithsonian. Steve swallows thickly and tightens his grip around the mug.

“Sometimes,” he says. “When it was cold. Or when I stayed over at your folks’ place.”

At this point, everything in this conversation feels like a non sequitur, and Steve has no idea what to do with that. Maybe it’s just another fragmented memory, a flash of something buried deep under years of torture and perpetual forgetting. Maybe it’s something else entirely. What he does know is that he can’t act based on a guess, on the off-chance that he guesses right.

“Buck,” he starts, his voice thick and raspy. He clears his throat. “You know you can ask me anything, right? If you want something, all you have to do is ask.”

“They had your sketchbooks,” Bucky says instead of answering, another non sequitur. “The museum. You said they were private.”

Steve almost chokes on this, on the memory of that hot day in the middle of summer when Bucky, bored and overheated, and utterly insufferable because of this, asked if he could look through his sketchbook and Steve said, that’s private, Buck, and then went and hid it better. He didn’t know what he would’ve done if Bucky had found out.

Some of them are in private collections, too,” he supplies and watches the small crease between Bucky’s eyebrows grow more prominent. “They thought I was dead, Buck. Keeping my personal effects private wasn’t very high on their list of priorities. And it’s been almost seventy years, so I’m not surprised they went to the museum.”

“You should ask for them back,” Bucky says, and that’s a real answer, at least. It feels like progress, one tiny step forward that, Steve hopes, won’t be followed by two huge steps back.

He smiles and shrugs with one shoulder. “Yeah, I probably should. Can’t imagine they would be too fond of the idea, though. Still, doesn’t hurt to try.”

The silence returns for a long while after that, before Bucky eventually rises to his feet and starts
to walk back towards his room, only to stop and turn around once he reaches the doorway. He looks at Steve and opens his mouth, like he wants to say something, then closes it without a word. His face is a mask. Steve wants to punch something.

“Yeah, Buck?” he asks instead, keeping his voice level, because as angry as he feels right now, his anger is not directed at Bucky, never at Bucky. “Wanted something?”

He doesn’t think he’s getting an answer.

“Should I wake you up if you scream again?” Bucky asks, and it surprises Steve so much he almost doesn’t know what to say to that.

Eventually, he nods. “Please,” he says in a quiet voice.

When he wakes up, it’s already morning. He doesn’t know why he’s suddenly oddly disappointed that he’s slept through the night.

The package arrives on Sam’s doorstep three days before they’re scheduled to head out. It’s a thick yellow envelope addressed in a handwriting that Steve doesn’t recognize but is positive belongs to Natasha.

Inside, there is a note.

you might not like what you find.

—n

She’s right. The file makes him feel like he’s going to be sick, and when he hands it to Sam, he can see the way his face falls the further he reads it. This documentation is much more detailed than the data Natasha obtained from her contact in Kiev. Steve almost wishes it weren’t.

“Jesus,” Sam says eventually, closing the manila folder and putting it back on the table. “This is sick, man. Fucking. It’s a miracle he’s still alive. You know he shouldn’t be. Not after this.”

“He was experimented on, before, during the war,” Steve explains. “And then they pumped him full of the serum after they perfected it. I guess that’s what’s kept him alive.”

“Yeah, I know.” Sam looks up at Steve and doesn’t look away when he says, “I’m just not sure that was a kindness.”

The thing is, Steve understands what Sam means by that. He’s not the only one thinking it. That, too, makes him feel physically sick.

Natasha comes back on the tenth day since Bucky’s return. She’s waiting for Steve and Sam at their new favorite breakfast place, the one they always visit after their morning run. She’s dyed her hair a darker shade of red, and it’s cut completely short, but apart from that, not much has changed. Maybe it’s just that she looks more open, less haunted. More at peace.

She kisses Steve on the cheek when they come in, rising from the table in the corner that’s she’s commandeered prior to their arrival. It’s private enough that they won’t be overheard.

“Hey, boys,” she says with a small smile. “Miss me?”
“Yeah,” Steve says and realizes that it’s actually true. There are many things that Natasha is, and there are many things that Natasha isn’t, but the one thing that she definitely is, now, is a friend. “How was Europe?”

“Eventful. Not as eventful as I thought it would be.”

Sam brings her coffee and a sesame bagel with cream cheese. They are still waiting for the rest of their order, but the grilled sandwiches in this place are well worth the wait.

“So what’s that supposed to mean?” he asks, taking the plastic lid off his own cup.

“Someone cleaned up a lot of the mess I expected to clean up myself,” she says, playing with the plastic stirrer. “Fury wasn’t thrilled when he realized what was happening, because we lost a lot of good intel, but I still managed to retrieve enough data to get him off your boy’s back. Because he’s back, isn’t he.” It’s not even phrased as a question.


“You think he got some closure this way?” Sam asks, and Steve can’t tell if he’s addressing him or Natasha.

Natasha shrugs.

“I think it depends on the person. For me, it was about closure, about all the loose threads I left behind when I defected. For him, I have no idea. He must be better, though, if he came back on his own. He’s making his own decisions, wanting things. That’s good, Steve. You never know how important it is to be able to want things until they take that away from you. So I guess it helped. It can be cathartic, you know.”

Steve sighs. “He’s— trying. But I guess that’s all that matters, at the end of the day.”

She nods and bites into her bagel as she furiously types away on her phone with her other hand, smiling with the corner of her mouth.

“Pepper says hi,” she adds after the phone chimes with new incoming message.

“So how are you?” Sam asks. “For real, though, no bullshit.”

Their sandwiches finally arrive, and they wait for the waiter to go away before Natasha starts to speak.

“Better,” she says. “Turns out, sometimes the clean slate really helps. With nothing to hide about your past, you suddenly have a lot less to worry about. Sure, more people might want to come after you, but at least you know they’re coming and why. Very liberating, you should definitely try that. I highly, highly recommend it.”

There’s a smile playing on her lips, and Steve laughs quietly under his breath while Sam just shakes his head in amusement. It’s good. Steve is glad for her, can’t imagine what it must feel like, living like this for years, never really belonging to yourself.

They eat their sandwiches in relative silence after that, and Steve glances at his watch from time to time. He should be getting home soon.

Just as they’re about to walk out, Natasha reaches her hand out to touch his wrist, suddenly somber. “Steve. You know that if you need anything, either of you, that you can trust me, right?”
This time, when he answers, there is no hesitation. “Yeah, I know.”

He wakes with a start and a scream. In his dreams, it’s always cold and dark, but all he can feel now is the tentative, gentle touch, warm fingers closed around his wrist.

“Bucky.”

Bucky flinches, yanks his hand back like he’s been burned and moves out of Steve’s reach, perched at the foot of the too-big bed.

“Hey, Buck, it’s okay,” Steve says, sitting up, propped against the pillows, and his throat feels like sandpaper, his voice thick and raspy. “Sorry I woke you up again.”

“You had another nightmare.” Bucky’s words are quiet in the intimate darkness of the room.

Steve moves to turn on the bedside lamp and stops when he sees Bucky’s expression, reflected in the faint city lights filtering in through the curtains. Maybe it’s easier to talk like this, in the dark.

Bucky sits so close that all Steve would have to do would be to reach out and touch, but for all it’s worth, he might as well be on another planet. Bucky’s face is completely closed off, and his body language still signals the simultaneous need to get as close to and as far away from any human touch as possible. Steve can’t imagine that—living for years without being touched with any purpose other than to hurt.

(Everything else was— maintenance.)

“Thanks for waking me up,” he says instead, pushing himself further up. His eyes don’t leave Bucky’s face even for a second, and in that moment he realizes he has never, not even once, heard Bucky scream in his sleep.

Maybe, Steve thinks, he just doesn’t dream. He has to cling to that thought, because the alternative is too horrifying to consider.

“We should probably go back to sleep,” Steve says after a long moment has passed in silence. “You need to get your rest, Buck.”

Bucky hesitates.

“What if you have another nightmare?” he asks. “I don’t sleep much. Don’t need much sleep anymore. I could— watch you. Just in case.”

“Buck, come on, you need your sleep. Please.” Steve reaches out, and his fingers curl around the sheets a few inches away from Bucky’s thigh.

“What do you dream about?” Bucky asks, and Steve knows he’s stalling. He just doesn’t know why.


A beat—one, two.

“Me too,” Bucky says.

(The world below them is white white white.)
Steve’s jaw is hurting from how hard he’s gritting his teeth, trying not to choke on his own guilt.

“I could stay here,” Bucky proposes tentatively and looks at the floor. It takes Steve a moment to figure out what he means.

“No, Bucky, no,” he says, horrified, and Bucky flinches again, rises to his feet in one fluid motion, and Steve follows him with his body, the momentum pushing him forward, as if he’s trying to close his fingers around Bucky’s wrist, mirroring the gesture from earlier. He feels his stomach drop at the thought that Bucky might think Steve doesn’t want him here. (He wants him everywhere, always. He wants him so much it hurts.) “Wait. I meant, the bed is big enough for both of us, you don’t have to sleep on the floor, Jesus. We can share the bed, just like the old times. If that’s what you really want, to stay.”

Bucky looks hesitant, his eyes flicking between the empty side of the bed and Steve, before he finally makes a decision and lies down on top of the sheets, facing away from Steve, curled in on himself like he’s trying to leave as much space between them as possible. He’s so quiet he might just as well not be there at all, and Steve can’t force himself to turn away, can’t force himself to close his eyes, because if there’s one thing he needs right now, it’s the confirmation that there’s another living being just within his reach, breathing the same air.

When he finally drifts off, he sleeps without dreams.

The worst thing is—it would be better if he were screaming.

On the fourth night that Bucky crawls into Steve’s bed, Steve discovers that Bucky does dream, after all. He wakes up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and when he opens his eyes, he can see Bucky next to him, rigid and unnaturally still, his fingers closed desperately around a fistful of sheets, but there’s no sound coming from behind his painfully clenched teeth. Steve’s seen this look before, on soldiers who were slowly bleeding to death in a foxhole somewhere and knew they wouldn’t make it.

It would be better if he were screaming, but Bucky just lies there, without moving, and looks like he’s dying. That’s the worst thing.

Steve leans over and slowly touches his hand, squeezes gently around the white, tightened knuckles and says, “Bucky, Bucky, you’re having a nightmare, Buck, please, wake up.”

A metal arm closes around his throat in a split second, almost crushing his windpipe, and Steve struggles for breath for a moment, until he hears a horrified, Steve, and then Bucky is up and out of the bedroom before Steve can even catch his breath. Steve goes after him, knocks on the bathroom door once, twice, hears the unmistakable sounds of retching, then nothing.

“Bucky,” he says, his cheek tucked against the cold grainy texture of the wood. “Buck, please, are you okay? Please, open the door. It wasn’t your fault, I startled you, so that one’s on me, okay?”

More silence, the quiet rustling of fabric, the sound of running water, violent dry-heaving noises. The door is locked when Steve tries the handle, and he knocks again.

“Bucky. Please. Please, open the door, you’re not okay, I just want to help.” He knows he sounds helpless and pleading, but he can’t stand the thought that Bucky is on the other side, sick and alone. “You used to tease me about holding your hair back every time you went a bit too hard on the liquor, and now finally you have the haircut for it,” he says next, trying for a different tactic. “Buck, please. I just want to help.”
“Get the hell away from me,” Bucky snarls at that, and he sounds utterly wrecked.

“It wasn’t your fault, it was a reflex, I know, it’s happened to me, too.”

He still remembers the SHIELD employee who tried to wake him up one morning, soon after they found him. He remembers his fingers wrapped around the man’s throat, his other hand searching for a knife.

“Go back to your room, Steve,” Bucky says on the other side of the door.

Steve takes three steps back, then sits down, propped against the wall across the hallway, with his legs pulled up to his chest, his arms resting limply on his knees. He can wait out a lot, but this is something they need to talk about as soon as possible.

Bucky comes out after another ten minutes and tenses immediately when he spots Steve, sitting by the wall just a few feet away. He takes a step back. “You shouldn’t be near me. I’m dangerous.”

“Bucky,” Steve says and rubs his eyes with a deep, tired sigh. “I accidentally attacked a SHIELD agent who came to wake me up, a few days after they found me. He caught me in the middle of a nightmare, I went for his throat. I was looking for your knife. You snapped back, nothing happened, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Bucky says, still hovering in the doorway. He looks angry, but it’s more desperate than anything else. “I’m a danger to you, and you won’t even admit that.”

Steve slowly rises to his feet. “You’re not. I’m not afraid of you, Buck, and what happened earlier was my fault. I shouldn’t have touched you, I’m sorry.”

“I should leave,” Bucky says, and Steve could recognize that stubborn line of his jaw anywhere. “I will leave if you want.”

Steve takes a step forward. “What do you want, Buck?” he asks.

Bucky stares at him for a long moment without a word, and he looks lost and confused, like any fight he had still in him has finally left him.

“Come on, Buck, what do you want?” Steve asks again, and takes another step towards Bucky. Bucky licks his lips.

“Tea,” he says, and it’s so quiet that Steve almost misses it. “Can we have some tea?”

Steve makes two cups of chamomile tea and sets one of them in front of Bucky. It’s four thirty in the morning.

“Drink up,” he says. “How’s your stomach? Maybe I should make some mint tea instead?”

“Fine. It’s fine.”

That didn’t sound fine, Steve wants to say, but he keeps quiet.

“You should go back to sleep,” Bucky says eventually. He’s looking everywhere but at Steve.

“Don’t need much sleep, either.” Steve shrugs, keeps his tone light.
“They didn’t want me sleeping,” Bucky says after a moment of silence, in a detached, indifferent tone that makes Steve want to punch things. “Kept me up between cryo.”

He knows why they did that. Or at least suspects. He has read the file.

“They didn’t want your brain to heal itself,” he says, trying not to think about the damage that days or weeks of sleep deprivation would inflict. “The serum would— It would eventually rebuild whatever they damaged, or at least parts of it. Sleep would help with that. That’s why they never kept you out of cryo for too long. Eventually, you’d start fighting their programming.”

Bucky keeps his eyes on his mug, still warm and steaming between his hands, the long sleeves of his henley stretched over his palms. Steve has noticed that Bucky never wears anything that would expose the scar tissue around the joint, and he now carefully avoids him when he’s getting changed, like he’s afraid Steve would look at him with disgust.

“I think I saw my sister once, in the early fifties. Becca,” Bucky says, a propos nothing, another fragment dragged to the surface from the murky waters full of horrors. “Went after her, lost her in the crowd, went AWOL for two days. They— That didn’t happen again. They upped the dosage after that. I think it was the last time I remembered something from— from before. Until you.”

Steve swallows painfully around the tightness in his throat. “I went to see her once, after they found me, y’know? Her granddaughter looks a lot like you.” He smiles and looks straight at Bucky when he says, his tone teasing, “See, I always knew you’d make a pretty gal. And you never believed me when I said that.”

Bucky doesn’t smile back.

“Did she— did she have a good life?” he asks eventually.

“Yeah, Buck, she did. Never forgot about you, though.”

Bucky shakes his head. “She should have.”

Rebecca Barnes dies on a sunny day in November.

Steve goes to the funeral, but he keeps his distance from the rest of the crowd as they put her to the ground. He hangs back after the ceremony is finished and the grieving friends and relatives start to leave, hurrying to get to the wake. Steve had received the invitation, but he politely declined.

The sky is overcast, and it’s been threatening rain since the early morning, but Steve’s mind goes back to another day like this, sunny and warm. Now, with Becca gone, he’s the only one who still remembers the day they buried his mother.

He can still see it clearly when he closes his eyes—Becca, all of eleven years old, wearing a black dress and standing next to Bucky, her eyes red and swollen; Bucky, his hair slicked back, dressed in his best suit, stealing glances at Steve, who stood ramrod straight with a stony face, his throat parched and aching, his eyes completely dry.

“You should’ve come closer, said goodbye with the rest of us,” Ruth says, slowly walking over to stand next to him. “They wouldn’t have minded. Grandma told them you were family. You still are.”

“Didn’t want to intrude. It wasn’t about me, and sometimes, when there’s a lot of people, well,
things tend to get that way,” he explains.

“You sure you don’t want to come to the wake? Mom said I should try to convince you.”

Steve shakes his head. “Thank you, but—I really don’t think I should come.”

“She left me the house, you know,” Ruth says unexpectedly.

“Think you’ll stay there?” Steve asks, and finds out he genuinely wants to know. He hasn’t met any other members of Bucky’s family, but this—this is a familiar thread that he wouldn’t want to lose.

“Yeah,” Ruth says, “I think I will. Grandpa bought that house soon after they married, would be a shame to see it go.”

They wave at her to hurry up—a tall, middle-aged woman who must be her mother and another woman, short and redheaded, whom Steve has never met and has no idea who she is.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Ruth says before she leaves, and Steve just nods with a small smile.

He doesn’t exactly keep that promise.

He gets called away on a mission next day—or the same day, really, when he thinks about it.

Steve is running on too few hours of sleep and far too much coffee, and he has no idea if Bucky will still be there when he comes back, but Natasha called, and she sounded urgent over the phone. He suits up and leaves a note for Bucky, who has gone back to his room, then he’s out the door, weaving through the morning traffic to the rendezvous point.

It’s a HYDRA facility, deep underground, a lab belonging to the science division. Inside, they’re met with minimal resistance, and they’re almost leaving when a bomb goes off, knocking Steve out for a short while. When he comes to, he’s in a world of hurt, and there’s dust in his eyes, his throat. Next to him, Natasha is coughing up a lung.

“What the hell was that, Rogers?” she asks. “Amateur hour?”

He tries to get up, and okay, that’s a broken rib. “I checked,” he says. “The perimeter was clear.”

“Okay, so when is a bomb not a bomb?” Natasha shakes the dust out of her hair and stands up, clearly favoring her left foot.

Steve shoots her an incredulous look. “Are you seriously joking right now?”

Natasha shrugs. “Just trying to defuse the tension.”

From behind them, Sam groans.

“See, this is exactly why my mama told me not to get in with people like you.”

Steve laughs despite himself, and the cracked rib comes back with a vengeance; every time Steve moves, it hurts like hell, sending sharp spikes of pain down his side.

“Okay, we should get out of here. Natasha, you got the intel, right?”

“Yes, Steve, I got the intel,” she says, sounding unbearably smug for someone who looks like the
“Lay it off, okay?” Steve grunts, but there’s no real bite to it. He thinks he must be coming off the adrenaline high, because he can suddenly feel every bruise and cut in his body. “I’m injured over here, it’s not nice to kick someone who’s already down.”

“Okay, then,” Natasha says, reaching her hand out to help him up. “Come on, grandpa, up and at ‘em.”

It says a lot about their relationship that Steve doesn’t even roll his eyes at her.

After Natasha hitches a ride with Sam back to the Tower, Steve doesn’t go back to retrieve his motorbike, parked in an underground parking lot a few blocks away from the facility, and takes a cab home instead. The driver, thankfully, doesn’t ask any questions. God bless New Yorkers.

When he comes inside, the apartment looks deserted, but then a soft noise comes from the direction of the couch, and as Steve approaches carefully, Bucky slowly comes into view, curled up on the cushions with his metal hand resting protectively over his abdomen, sleeping.

Steve retreats to the bathroom without a sound.

He’s still scrubbing himself under the hot spray, taking slow, deep breaths that SHIELD doctors told him are now preferred to bandaging in cases of rib fracture, when he hears quiet knocking on the bathroom door.

“Steve?” Bucky asks, and Steve turns the water off. He can feel the cool air hit him all at once.

“Did you need something, Buck?”


Steve takes another deep breath, holds it in, then slowly exhales.

“I’m fine, mostly. Some bruises, a cracked rib, nothing serious. A bomb went off as we were leaving, but I’m fine.” When Bucky doesn’t respond, he adds, “Could you check if we have ice in the freezer? I need to ice this or it’s gonna get worse.”

When he comes out of the bathroom, there’s an ice pack lying on the coffee table. Steve presses it to his side with a sigh of relief and closes his eyes for a moment.

“Did I wake you up?” he asks. “Was I too loud?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Would’ve woken up anyway. Reflex.”

“Did you get any rest?”

Bucky shrugs, and Steve has no response to this, so he continues, “I think I might turn in early. I suddenly feel my age.”

“Did you have backup?” Bucky asks, and his face is serious, determined, but it’s a familiar expression for once, one that Steve remembers from before. Bucky wore it every time he thought Steve did or was about to do something reckless and dangerous.

“I did,” he says, wincing when he moves too quickly and pain blossoms under his eyelids.
“Natasha and Sam were with me.”

“The Widow,” Bucky says, his mouth a hard line.

“Yes, the Black Widow. She’s a friend, you know. Not an enemy.” He shifts again, more careful this time. “And you remember Sam? He was the one flying the winged suit.”

He sees Bucky’s eyes widen a bit. “I tore one of the wings off.”

“He had a parachute,” Steve says. “He’s okay.”

They order in—two large pizzas from a local place—and settle for the evening. The less severe bruises start to fade already, and Steve can breathe more freely, but the rib still hurts every time he moves around too much or shifts too rapidly, and he knows he’s in for one hell of a night. The painkillers help, but his metabolism goes through the drugs at a record pace, and he doesn’t have anything stronger than Advil.

“Think I’m gonna go hit the sack,” he says finally, a little after ten. “You coming?”

Bucky shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Buck, come on, if this is still about last night—” Steve sighs with exasperation. “I told you, it wasn’t your fault. I trust you. You’re my friend, and I trust you. So please, come to bed. Unless you don’t want to. Then that’s your choice. But, please, don’t think you have to do this out of some sense of obligation.”

*Don’t think I don’t want you there,* he almost says.

They sit in silence for a moment, then Steve walks gingerly back to his bedroom and leaves the door wide open.

When he wakes up in the middle of the night to take another painkiller, the other side of the bed is cold and empty.
Chapter 3

Steve turns fifteen the summer he finally realizes he’s in love with Bucky.

Inside the apartment, the oppressive heat is unbearable, but outside it’s even worse, the height of the New York summer, and he can feel sweat dripping down the column of his spine, making the thin fabric of his undershirt cling to his skin unpleasantly. The window in the room is wide open and the dark curtains are closed, but even so, the unmoving, sweltering air lingers, and every time Steve takes a breath, it seems like his lungs are not getting enough air, drowning slowly in viscous fluid.

It feels like there is a storm building up on the horizon, but there has been no rain for almost two weeks now, and the sky only threatens them with the distant rumbling but never follows through.

It’s a Sunday, and Bucky’s parents are out with his sisters, meeting with a visiting out-of-town cousin, and Steve has no idea how Bucky managed to get out of this one, but here they are, in an empty apartment on a hot July day, undressed down to their undershirts, drinking lemonade that Bucky bought with the last of his money.

There’s a pack of smokes on the bed that Bucky hides from his mother and never lights around Steve on account of his asthma, but still likes to carry around to impress the girls.

Steve is fifteen, and he has never kissed a girl, but he knows that Bucky has. He’s been going steady with Mildred Connelly for close to a month now, longer than he had with any other girl in the past, and Steve knows she let him do a lot more than just kiss.

(He sees them by accident, just once, Bucky’s hand under her skirt and his mouth on her neck, and from where he stands, Steve can hear the soft noises she’s making. He can’t force himself to look away, but as much as he tries to deny it, he doesn’t look at her at all.

Bucky tells him all about it when he comes into Steve’s room through the window later in the afternoon, and there’s something in Steve that punches right through his chest at the memory of the two of them together.

“Yeah, Buck, next thing you know, she’s gonna invite you to meet her folks over dinner,” he says dryly, not looking up from his comic book. Bucky shoves him playfully in the arm.)

Bucky disappears for a moment, and when he comes back, he carries a bottle of gin, a smile spreading on his face. He sits down on the floor next to Steve, his back propped against the bed, and opens the bottle, takes a swig, then passes it to Steve.

“Your folks—” Steve starts to protest but still takes the bottle, holds it up to his lips.

“Won’t be back until late,” he says with a shrug. “The girls are staying with aunt Norma for a few days. We can already be in bed by the time they come back, I mean—you’re staying, right?”
Steve’s mother won’t be home until tomorrow, and with the school out, he has nowhere better to be. “Yeah,” he says and takes a drink from the bottle. It burns his throat on its way down. “Yeah, I’m staying.”

“Drink up, then,” Bucky encourages as he presses closer, their arms and thighs touching, and Steve takes another big swig just to start coughing uncontrollably a second later.

“Hey, whoa, easy there, pal.” Bucky pats him on the back a few times and massages gently, waiting for the fit to pass. It’s a familiar routine, something they’ve done countless times in the past, only now it’s the gin, not the asthma or the whooping cough. “Take it easy, okay? C’mon, pass me the bottle.”

Steve does, and he makes the mistake of looking at Bucky as he drinks, his head thrown back and his throat working, the Adam’s apple rising and falling, his lips wrapped around the bottleneck. There’s a familiar aching feeling that tugs at Steve as he watches, and suddenly he feels too hot all over, and just a little short of breath, because Bucky is there, right there, sixteen, broad and muscled, and he smells like a man, strong and musky, and Steve can’t look away.

It burns inside of him, and he knows it’s not just the alcohol. He knows, in that moment, what this feeling is—what he wants and what he can never have.

The world doesn’t get nice and mellow after that, like he’s expected after seeing Bucky drunk a few times, when he got giggly and sleepy, and just a little bit more handsy than the usual. Steve feels like he wants to crawl out of his own body, and there’s an insistent buzzing just under his skin that makes him want to do something stupid and reckless, something that he can’t quite name.

“Hey, Steve, wanna see something nice?” Bucky asks after a long while they spend sitting next to each other, their shoulders and thighs still touching, the touch almost burning against Steve’s skin.

Steve can feel the heady rush the alcohol has left behind—he hasn’t had a lot, just the three swigs, but he’s never been drunk before, and he doesn’t quite have the constitution for it.

“Mm?” he asks, resting his head on the edge of the bed and stretching his neck to look back at Bucky. His eyes are half-closed, but he can just about make out Bucky’s warm, solid form.

Bucky shifts to reach under the mattress and feels around for a short while before he pulls out a thin brochure in a nondescript black cover and hands it to Steve.

When he opens it, there’s a slightly blurry photograph of a naked woman lying on a chaise longue with her legs spread, one of her hands tangled in the curly hair between her thighs. The rest of the pages, when Steve flips through them almost automatically, are more or less the same—more naked women, some alone, some with other women, some with men. Some of them are dressed in lingerie, some of them are completely naked.

His throat feels dry.

“Like what you’re seeing, Steve?” Bucky asks, shifting closer and taking the magazine from Steve’s hands.

Steve is fifteen, and he has never seen a naked woman before, except that one time when he was ten and Mrs. O’Rourke went into labor on his mother’s couch during a snowstorm—his mother sent him to fetch the towels and boil the water, and he didn’t look away quick enough as Mrs. O’Rourke lay down with her legs spread to push. But that—that was different.

This is dirty and obscene, and in the corner of his eye, Steve can see that Bucky wets his lips with
his tongue, shifting a little uncomfortably, and his breath on Steve’s neck and cheek comes just a little faster.

Steve is reeling—he needs to go, he needs to not be in the room, needs to go back home and close the window that looks out on the fire escape and that Bucky uses to come in when the door is locked, because it’s clear Bucky is getting off on this, looking at the photograph, at the soft curves and the pale, milky skin, and Steve—

Steve is painfully hard in his pants, but he’s not looking at the picture, at the girl’s spread legs and her soft breasts. He’s staring at Bucky, flushed pink and biting into his lower lip, and so, so beautiful it hurts to look at him. Steve really wants to know if his lips are as soft as he imagines.

It hits him all at once, like a bucket of ice-cold water poured straight over his head, and he feels like he wants to lean in and kiss Bucky right on the mouth, and he feels like he wants to throw up.

“Steve? You okay?” Bucky asks as Steve almost works himself into a panic attack.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Steve says, and he’s a liar, he’s a liar who cannot lie, but Bucky, thankfully, doesn’t press further. “Where did you get this? Isn’t that sort of thing banned?”

“Got it from Johnny Carter for three packs of smokes,” Bucky says, clearly proud of himself. “He nicked it from his older brother. So, what do ya’ think?”

Steve almost chokes on his words. “They’re real nice, Buck,” he manages to say. “Real nice.”

It sounds hollow even to his own ears, and Bucky misinterprets that entirely.

“Don’t worry, pal, we’ll find you a proper girl, y’know?” he says reassuringly, patting Steve on his thigh while Steve prays please don’t look please don’t look please don’t look over and over again, trying not to hyperventilate. He’s so ashamed and mortified, and he feels like wants to die.

Bucky, still blissfully oblivious, leans against Steve, loose-limbed and mellow, and when he turns his head, he almost nuzzles his lips against Steve’s neck. Steve’s heart beats so fast he can hardly hear anything else, the frantic pounding like the sound of drums in his ears. He’s still so hard he could cry, and Bucky sits next to him, close enough to touch, and doesn’t even suspect his best friend is in love with him so much it hurts to breathe.

Steve wants to run and he wants to never, ever move from this spot.

He understands that Bucky—Bucky, who likes pretty girls and soft breasts, and nice curves, and all the things Steve isn’t—can never know.

He takes the subway when he goes to retrieve his bike. He doesn’t do that as often as he’d like, because he knows that people tend to stare and take pictures of him on their phones when they think he doesn’t notice.

He doesn’t mind those who sometimes stop him in the street to ask for a photo or an autograph—he understands it’s something that comes with the title, and besides he knows it’s hard not to stand out from the crowd when you’re almost a head taller than anyone else, so there’s not much anonymity he can count on either way—but those who snap his pictures and then sell them to the papers which speculate if he’s mentally fit to serve the country, those he does mind. So he avoids the subway and keeps his head down, and he can still hear the telling click of a phone camera, not nearly as inconspicuous as the owner thinks he’s being.
Steve is tired. He is so, so tired, but he still sits ramrod straight, staring out the window, and tries to keep it together.

He starts to text Sam when he’s halfway there, then remembers that Sam has a group this time in the morning. The VA is not far from where he’s left his bike.

Steve waits outside until the meeting is over, and it’s such a familiar scene, almost a déjà vu, from when they met for the second time, when they were still practically strangers to each other. They have come a long way since then.

Sam stays behind for a moment, talking to a woman in a wheelchair, and Steve hangs back in the hallway, watching as the other group members slowly start to leave the meeting room. Some of them pass him by without a second glance, but some of them look at him in that way that tells him he’s been recognized. He keeps his expression neutral, nods back when some of the regulars he’s seen around acknowledge him first. He doesn’t want to seem presumptuous or overbearing. He’s only a guest here, an intruder—this is their time, their space.

“Hey, man, what’s up.” Sam finally joins him in the hallway, after he has said the last of his goodbyes. “Not that I’m not glad to see you, but I didn’t expect you to show up today. You okay?”

Steve shrugs. “I was in the neighborhood,” he says. “Left my bike a couple blocks down yesterday before the mission, thought I would come by.”

Sam considers him carefully for a moment. “How are the ribs?” he asks as they walk down the hallway.

Steve winces at the memory of the almost sleepless night. “Bruised like hell,” he says.

“Yeah, I bet that’s nothing compared to your bruised ego, though.” Sam bumps into his shoulder playfully, and Steve lets out a breathy laugh. “Yeah, but they hurt more,” he says.

They walk in silence for a moment. It’s Sam who breaks it first. “Okay, question,” he starts. “If I ask how you’re feeling, are you gonna feed me crap?”

They pass a confectionery store, and Steve entertains the thought of buying some chocolate before he heads back home. He remembers Bucky used to love salt water taffy and nougat.

They go inside. “I’m— tired,” Steve says in a rush of breath as they stand in line. “I’m trying my best, but I have no idea what I’m doing most of the time, and I’m just— tired.”

Sam looks at him, assessing. “Okay,” he says. “Fair enough. Just remember that the invitation still stands. If you ever want to talk about it. Or if your boy ever wants to talk about it.”

Steve nods. “Yeah, I know. Thanks, Sam.”

They walk out of the store when they bump into a couple of kids, who stop in their tracks and stare at them, wide-eyed and star-struck. Steve plasters on his best Captain America smile while
Sam just watches with raised eyebrows. Then the girl elbows the taller boy in the arm and whispers, “Ian, that’s the Falcon.”

The boy just sighs in that long-suffering way that signals a particularly exasperated older brother. “She wants to be a pilot when she grows up,” he says by way of explanation, clearly trying to cover his earlier excitement with badly faked indifference.

The girl asks for an autograph, then asks if Steve could take a picture of, as she puts it, her with the Falcon.

Sam laughs all the way to the parking lot.

Bucky reads a lot these days. He’s always loved books, and back when they lived together before the war, he would sometimes bring a stack of old paperbacks, crumbling with age and use, and then read them over and over again until they fell apart.

There was a time he could quote whole passages from Poe and Dickinson, and he loved H.G. Wells but hated Hemingway with a passion.

Now, he reads anything and everything he can get his hands on. He starts with the books in Steve’s apartment. There’s a lot of history books, from the time when Steve was still catching up on everything that he’s missed over the last seventy years, some novels (a lot of science fiction, a bit of everything else), some biographies he’s been meaning to read for ages, some books about art. Bucky reads all of it.

Steve notices the books going missing pretty early on, but he doesn’t comment, happy that Bucky is making his own choices, however small. Instead, he starts to buy the ones that he thinks Bucky might like and casually puts them on the shelves, next to those he’d bought before he moved in.

Bucky, in turn, doesn’t comment on that, if he notices the changes, but the books still end up in his bedroom.

When Steve comes back with his bike, a small paper bag filled with taffy and nougat in hand, Bucky is sitting on the couch with a book in his lap, his back propped against the cushions, ramrod straight. He’s wearing an oversized hoodie that belongs to Steve and looks even more withdrawn than yesterday evening—there are dark circles under his eyes, and he’s gripping the book so hard his knuckles have gone white.

It’s the eerie stillness in his posture that catches Steve’s attention—it looks unnatural, and it reminds Steve of that first night, when Bucky looked like he wasn’t even there most of the time.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve says in a light, even voice, putting the small, brown bag on the coffee table and pushing it slightly towards Bucky. “I brought you some sweets. Hope you still like salt water taffy.”

Bucky doesn’t respond, keeps staring straight ahead with unseeing eyes, and he looks gone gone gone.

“I killed Howard Stark,” he says after a few seconds have passed, and Steve can feel his stomach drop. He’s been waiting for Bucky to start remembering his targets—waiting and dreading the moment—but he couldn’t predict that would be the first one. It still feels like a punch to the gut.

There is not much he can say to that without outright lying, so he settles on, “Yeah. I know.”
The change in Bucky’s demeanor is almost immediate.

“You know?” He sounds angry, and Steve feels almost, almost relieved, because angry is better than catatonic.

“It’s in the file.”

“You knew that I killed someone we knew, a friend, and you still let me near you?” Bucky stands up and squares his shoulders, like he’s getting ready for a fight, then visibly forces himself to take a few steps back, putting as much distance between Steve and himself as possible. “You knew all this and you let me sleep in the same bed? Are you fucking insane?”

He looks horrified and confused, and a little bit like he wants to cry. Steve swallows painfully around the tightness in his throat.

“It wasn’t you. It was them. I’m not afraid of you, Buck,” he says, and it takes everything in him in that moment, every ounce of willpower, not to take a step closer. Bucky looks down, his mouth a thin, tight line. “They used you, but it wasn’t you, it was all them. You are my friend, and I trust you. You know me. You’re my friend, and you’ll always be my friend, and I’m not afraid of you, so please, please, would you look at me?”

He desperately needs Bucky to understand—he needs him to understand that there’s nothing in the files he’s read that would make Steve love him less, that would make Steve not care about him, not want to be near him. They’ve been kept apart for more than seventy years, and now Bucky is here, a little more himself every day, not that empty shell of a man HYDRA left him, and Steve is still wearing Bucky’s dog tags under his shirt, and he loves him so much it hurts to breathe, and there’s nothing he wouldn’t do to make these horrors go away, and he can’t even touch him, because Bucky flinches every time Steve gets too close, and he will not be that man.

“I—” Bucky says, still looking down, and his voice sounds wrecked, gravelly and thick, like he’s choking on something. “I think I want to be alone for a while.”

Steve takes a deep breath, then another, and he holds it in for a moment before he exhales. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. Just remember that you don’t need to.”

Bucky nods—a gesture so small Steve almost misses it—and disappears behind his bedroom door.

It’s the most difficult thing in the world, not to go after him.

(He pulls on it. He pulls on the thread, and it’s like watching it emerge from under his skin, red and thick and bloody, but he can’t stop pulling, not until he gets it all out, until it leaves a small wound that doesn’t close, and he remembers.

There are screams in his throat that he can’t let out, and he claws at it with his fingers until they, too, come away bloody.)

Steve wakes up in the middle of the night to a text from Sharon—telling him about her new assignment and asking him how he’s doing in that particular way which suggests she already knows what’s going on—and a missed call from Natasha. He sends her a message, because Natasha appreciates a quick response no matter the hour, and decides to wait until morning to text Sharon, who’s probably already asleep and won’t be up for another few hours.
The pain in the fractured rib is almost a distant memory by now, though half of his left side is just one big, purple-green bruise, and Steve presses against his skin with his fingers to see if it still hurts to the touch. It’s still a little tender, and Steve takes a couple of deep breaths, just in case.

It’s quiet, save for the sounds of New York at night filtering through the window, and for a moment Steve almost misses the noisy barracks and cramped tents pitched in the middle of the woods, he misses sleeping next to each other in makeshift camps and the sounds of Morita’s soft snoring, but most of all, he misses the comfortable weight of Bucky next to him, sleeping in his own bed roll, always close enough to touch.

The Commandos used to tease them about it sometimes, how Steve and Bucky seemed to be almost joined at the hip, but beneath all that, they all knew the value of the comfort that physical and emotional closeness brought this far behind the enemy lines, away from their families. The only difference was, Steve had his family right beside him.

Now, Steve twists his hands in the sheets and pushes his legs up to his chest, rests his head on his knees and breathes. It’s hard. It’s so, so hard for him to be here, alone in the dark, in a too-big, too-empty bed, while Bucky is just on the other side of the wall.

He can’t even begin to imagine how hard it must be for Bucky, who dreams his nightmares in silence and blood.

Steve doesn’t turn on the light when he gets out of the bed, just pads to the door in almost complete darkness, his feet bare, toes curling against the cold hardwood floor. He walks to the kitchen, taking in his surroundings—the bathroom door is ajar where it had been closed before, and there’s an apple missing from the fruit bowl, but Bucky’s door remains closed.

He reaches for a glass in the dark, and it slips out of his fingers, shattering into pieces on the tile. Behind him, there’s a sound of a door opening, bare feet pounding against the wood.

“Don’t come any closer, there’s glass on the floor,” Steve says, turning, and when he looks at Bucky, he has a knife in his hand. Steve takes another step back, and he can feel a shard of glass pierce his skin. “Fuck,” he mutters.

Bucky stands in the middle of the living room, and he seems to be absent from his own body, his eyes glazed over and his fingers clenched painfully around the knife handle.

“Hey, Buck, it’s okay, it’s fine, you’re okay, we’re safe,” Steve says reassuringly and watches as Bucky comes back from wherever his mind had gone and reluctantly lets go of the knife, which falls to the floor with a loud clatter. “I just broke a glass, that’s all.”

He turns the light on to inspect the damage. The kitchen is a mess, there’s glass everywhere, and when he lifts his foot—

“You’re bleeding,” Bucky says.

There is a piece of glass firmly lodged in Steve’s arch, and blood is trickling slowly down towards his heel, making a mess on the cream tile.

“Yeah, I know, shit, let me just—”

He yanks the piece of glass out and takes off the tank top he wore to sleep to stop the blood flow, because to get to his first aid kit, he’d have to walk to the bathroom, and that is not an option right now, then sits with his back against the fridge, waiting for the bleeding to subside. After a moment, Bucky comes closer, stepping around the glass, and kneels in front of Steve.
“You’re wearing my dog tags,” he says.

He doesn’t look up to meet Steve’s eyes, but he must hear how fast Steve’s heart is beating—Steve can feel it all the way up to his throat, and it’s threatening to choke him, because there is no reason for him to be wearing these dog tags, except one, and he feels like he’s fifteen again, trying not to drown in Bucky’s glow and failing, and it’s so, so hard to breathe.

“Your sister gave them to me,” he says eventually, taking them off to drop them into Bucky’s hand. His voice sounds unnatural even to his own ears. “She said you sent them back to me, but I was already at Camp Lehigh. You should have them, they’re yours. I was just—keeping them safe for you, I guess.”

He stands up gingerly, noticing that he’s mostly stopped bleeding somewhere in the middle of this, and Bucky follows suit, still gripping the dog tags in his left hand. Steve feels strangely naked without their familiar weight around his neck, but it’s only right that Bucky should get his old dog tags back. They belong to him.

“Okay, I need to clean up this mess,” Steve says, and he manages a small smile. “You can go back to sleep now, sorry I woke you up.”

“Wasn’t sleeping.” Bucky takes two steps back, but he doesn’t disappear in his room. Instead, he lingers just out of Steve’s reach, waiting while Steve gets rid of the glass and scrubs the blood from the tiles.

Outside, it starts to rain, a quiet pattering of the drops against the windows.

“You drew me like this, once, while it was raining,” Bucky says. It’s quiet, almost intimate; it makes Steve stop in his tracks for a short moment, frozen with the sharp pain the memory brings. “You never wanted to draw me, for some reason.”

Steve almost laughs, an ugly, throaty laugh, because that, too, is a lie. There was a sketchbook, hidden better than anything else Steve has ever possessed, filled with nothing but Bucky. (Steve destroys it the night before he leaves for basic. He burns it in the backyard, waits until the wind scatters the ashes, pretends it’s only the smoke that makes his eyes water.)

“She was just a girl, couldn’t have been older than sixteen, but I did everything they asked. They didn’t have to say anything, they could’ve just prepped me and dispatched me after. But they did, and it makes no sense, and I just
— I keep getting *stuck* on those moments, and they *make no sense.*”

Steve bunches up the bloodied tank top in his hands and takes a few steps closer. This time, Bucky doesn’t flinch, doesn’t step back.

“I don’t know, Buck,” Steve says with a sigh. He can feel the crease between his eyebrows deepen, turn into an unhappy frown. “I don’t know why they did what they did. Maybe they enjoyed their power. Maybe it was all a joke for them. But if you ever get stuck on a memory from before, from the war or when we lived together, or from your childhood, you know you can ask me, right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky admits after another moment of silence. “Yeah, I know.”

This time, when Steve turns in the doorway, a silent invitation in his eyes and his heart beating just a little bit faster, Bucky follows him into the bedroom.

When Steve wakes up in the morning, the bed is cold and empty again, but on the pillow next to him, there are Bucky’s dog tags and a small note, written hastily on a scrap of paper.

*They belong to you.*
Steve finds him at the end of the bar, away from the crowds gathered around the tables, loud, rowdy soldiers enjoying a night of well-deserved leave. They’re in the Netherlands, close to the Belgian border, in a small town that looks just like a tiny dot on the map—insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

They are on their way back from Poland—they destroyed a HYDRA munitions factory near Poznań, and it was a hellish mission, more than three days of march from their drop zone, slogging through three feet of wet snow, short days and long nights, temperatures falling well below ten degrees.

Some nights, Steve thought he would never be warm again.

Here, in the Netherlands, the winter is much less harsh, less furious, less determined to make them pay for braving the outdoors, and there’s only slight chill in the air that reminds them it’s still January.

In the middle of the bar, warm and brightly lit, Dum Dum and Gabe are dancing with the local girls while Morita and Dernier shout at them from their table. Falsworth only observes them with amusement, and Bucky—Bucky sits alone, away from the rest of the crowd.

“Don’t care to join them?” Steve asks, watching as Bucky hides his wry smile in the rim of the glass.

“You wouldn’t dance with me anyway,” Bucky says, elbowing Steve lightly in the arm, like it’s an old, tired joke, like Steve didn’t kiss him just a few days ago.

“Look, you don’t gotta pretend—” Steve starts, exasperated, and there’s so much that he wants to tell Bucky, and there’s so much that he can’t say. Not here, not now. “I get it, Buck, okay? I get it. So lay off.”

Bucky looks at him for a second, then his eyes dart back to his almost empty glass of whiskey.

“We got some leave coming up,” he says eventually, and his voice sounds like he’s pleasantly mellow and strangely on edge at the same time. “I bet you miss sleeping in a normal bed real bad, just like the rest of us. I’m so done with bed rolls and cold gruel for breakfast. And you’re gonna see Agent Carter again pretty soon. Ain’t that great, Stevie?”

It all sounds forced. It sounds false, and Steve has no idea how to fix it, but he knows he has to, because it’s all his fault.

He desperately wishes he could get drunk right now.

“Yeah,” he says, puts a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and waits for him to move away, but he
doesn’t, he just leans into the touch. “Yeah, it’s great.”

The thing is—Steve knows he’s in love with Agent Carter like he has never been in love with a woman before in his entire life.

This doesn’t mean that he has stopped loving Bucky.

It’s just another thing he knows—he will love Bucky for as long as he breathes, it’s in his blood, deep in his marrow, carved into his bones, and it’s never, ever going away. He’s lived with this truth for the last ten years, and he knows this better than he has known anything else.

It’s selfish, he understands, but he’s never claimed to be a virtuous man.

He passes Bucky the pack of cigarettes he got from one of the Dutch soldiers, watches as Bucky’s eyes widen and a more genuine smile appears on his lips. Steve knows Bucky has taken up smoking again, a habit he’d kicked as soon as they moved in together after the funeral, but now he doesn’t need to mind Steve’s weak lungs, and Steve looks at him as he lights up the cigarette, takes a deep drag and exhales, the smoke curling upwards in a grey ribbon.

“We need to be up by oh five hundred tomorrow for the transport,” Steve says then, signaling the bartender for a beer.

Bucky takes another deep drag of the cigarette and nods. “Yeah, I figured they’d have us up and at it pretty early. I bet Phillips can’t wait to have us back in London. Stark, too.”

“They’ve already loaded the crates,” Steve adds. “I made sure there would be guards posted around the clock until we get those weapons back to Stark.”

They have rooms upstairs, all of them, just for the night. He could just slink away right now, and they wouldn’t even miss him, well on their way to drunk and flirting with all the pretty girls, but there’s an impatient feeling that he can’t quite name gnawing at him, and Steve knows, if he went to bed now, he would just toss and turn until morning, trying to chase the insistent buzzing under his skin away. So he stays, with Bucky at his side, their thighs touching comfortably under the bar, and it feels like even this simple touch manages to ground him, silences the noise in his head. After a long moment, Steve reaches over to where Bucky keeps his hand on his knee and slowly, cautiously, tangles their fingers together, away from the prying eyes. To his left, he hears a sharp intake of breath, then nothing.

When he looks over at Bucky, Bucky doesn’t look at him at all.

(It’s like digging up the grave they buried you in, and when you open the coffin to look into the face of the person who used to be you, the only thing you can see are the bones, everything else turned into dust.

In this dream, the skull has no eyes, only two bottomless holes that gape at you, and you’re empty, so empty inside, even though your mind is reeling, full of half-formed memories that slip through your fingers like the dry soil they scattered on your grave, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.)

Steve comes back from his morning run late. After he parts ways with Sam, he decides to come by his favorite breakfast place and pick up something for Bucky and for himself, and then the new cashier is so flustered at the sight of him that he writes down the wrong order, so Steve has to wait longer than he usually does, and then he bumps into Colonel Rhodes, of all people. This ends up
with the two of them sharing coffee at the café by the Tower and an invitation to come visit Tony who, in Pepper’s absence, is apparently not only cranky, but also bored out of his skull.

“That’s always a dangerous combination,” Rhodes informs him, but there’s a lot of affection hidden behind the long-suffering expression.

“Sorry to hear that, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to provide any entertainment today,” Steve says with a smile, finishing off his Americano. “And it was really nice to see you, sir, but I should probably be going now.”

“Rhodey, please,” Rhodes insists, not for the first time, but there’s something in him that screams authority in that quiet, understated way that makes Steve stand to attention despite the fact that he is no longer in the military.

They finally part ways at the public entry to the Tower, and Steve takes the subway home. By the time he unlocks the door, juggling a paper bag with their breakfast and another paper bag containing groceries he’s decided to pick up along the way, it’s almost half past ten.

Steve rarely sleeps in, jokes that he’s had enough sleep to last him a lifetime or two, but the truth is, he misses it sometimes. Back then, they couldn’t afford to get up late during the week, but on Sundays, they would sometimes lie in bed for hours, deep-seated Catholic guilt washing over them whenever they heard the church bells ringing for Mass.

When Steve comes in, Bucky is sleeping on the couch again. He does that a lot these days—there are naps during the day, and he always goes to bed early, even though before the war, he’d loved to stay up late, out dancing, or drinking, or just reading by the lamp at home. Steve knows that it’s good for him, that it’s his brain signaling the need to repair itself after years of torture and repeatedly inflicted damage, that it’s making him better.

The other thing is—he doesn’t wake up anymore when Steve comes in. Like Bucky trusts him enough to allow himself to be vulnerable in Steve’s presence. It makes something in his chest tighten every time.

There’s something in Bucky’s sleeping form that makes him look younger and ancient at the same time, and Steve wants to smooth out the lines around his eyes and mouth, wants to tuck the hair that keeps falling across Bucky’s face behind his ear. He wants to touch him so bad it hurts.

He likes to think that he’s doing fine, considering. He also knows Sam would tell him that he’s full of shit, but this is a level of honesty with himself that Steve really can’t afford right now—that brief moment of clarity the night Bucky came home aside. It’s not about being oblivious or stubborn—dogged, Bucky used to say—it’s about compartmentalization. If he doesn’t think about it, then maybe he won’t crumble under the weight on his shoulders, and he will be there when—if —Bucky needs him. He knows he won’t make himself okay through the sheer force of will, but he sure as hell can try.

Steve is putting the groceries away when Bucky finally wakes up, and it’s different from all the other times Steve has seen him come to in the last few weeks; it’s gradual, unhurried, and Bucky snuggles into the warm blanket for a moment, taking long, deep breaths.

“I bought us breakfast,” Steve says when Bucky opens his eyes after a long moment. “Coffee?”

Bucky clears his throat. “Yes, please,” he says, then, “Did you get my note?”

Without thinking, Steve touches the dog tags hidden under his shirt with the tips of his fingers and smiles, ducking his head to hide it. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. Thank you, Buck.”
There’s a look in Bucky’s eyes that passes almost instantly and that Steve can’t, for the life of him, decipher.

“Turkey or beef?” he asks instead, holding up the pastrami, even though he knows Bucky will pick beef anyway.

Steve turns on the news while the coffee is brewing, and they eat with the low hum of the tv serving as background noise. There’s apparently a new homeless shelter being built in one of the neighborhoods Steve remembers from before the war.

“Didn’t we get kicked out of a bar there, once?” Bucky asks after the anchors have moved on to the next story. Steve smiles into his coffee.

“Well, technically, we didn’t get kicked out,” he says. “I got kicked out and dragged you down with me. Not the first time and certainly not the last.”

He came home that night with a bruised jaw and a giant shiner, but Bucky almost got his nose broken by a guy three times Steve’s size.

“Good times,” he adds after a beat. The uncomfortable tightness around Bucky’s mouth disappears a little. Steve counts that as a win.

Natasha calls him just as they’re about to turn in for the night.

“Suit up, soldier,” she says without any preamble. “I got a lead on a sleeper cell, but we need to act fast. I’m sending you the coordinates for the rendezvous, and Sam’s already on his way. I’m bringing Clint, too.”

“I’m on my way,” he says and disconnects.

When he turns around, Bucky is there, looking at him.

“You’re heading out, aren’t you.” He doesn’t even phrase it like a question.

“Yeah, we got a tip on a sleeper cell, small team, in and out, shouldn’t be too complicated. I got backup,” Steve says before Bucky can ask, strapping on the Kevlar and reaching for his shield. “Don’t wait up, okay? I might be late.”

He’s already halfway out the door when he hears Bucky say, “Steve—”

“Yeah?” Steve turns around to look at him.

A beat of silence, then Bucky shakes his head.


In the end, they find an empty warehouse, some old, outdated equipment that definitely belonged to HYDRA but has been rendered absolutely useless, and next to no usable intel.

“What the hell, Natasha,” Steve says, and it comes out harsher than he’s intended. “You said the intel was good.”

Natasha takes it all in stride. “Clearly, I need to reevaluate my sources. But hey, at least there were no surprise bombs this time, so that’s a plus.”
Steve groans a little, all the anger seeping out of him in a matter of seconds. Behind him, he can hear Clint snicker.

“You guys have been getting blown up without me?” he asks. “Aw, that’s not fair.”

“Believe me, man,” Sam says then, “next time we do that, you can have my spot. Because getting blown up? Not the greatest feeling in the world, let me tell you. I could do without the excitement.”

Steve is about to head back when Natasha calls him over to the side with a small gesture.

“Listen, Steve,” she says once they’re close enough to whisper. “I’ve been hearing a lot of chatter, they’re getting impatient with you up on the Hill. My guess is, you’re gonna get subpoenaed, and sooner rather than later. Until then, you have to figure out what to do. Both of you. You can’t keep him hidden away forever, not if you want him to have a stab at a normal life, whatever normal means.”

Steve’s jaw clenches painfully. “You know there are people who will be calling for his head,” he says pointedly in a hushed voice, feeling the tension in his muscles. It’s not the first time he’s thought about it, it’s just that he doesn’t have many illusions left, and he’s already read the back of this book, he knows how it ends. “You know how many people HYDRA had him kill over the years, and they want someone to blame, someone other than Pierce, so they will find a scapegoat and call it justice. And I won’t let this happen. They will have to come through me before they get to him.”

Natasha considers him carefully for a moment.

“I still have a few strings to pull. And so do you,” she says. Steve looks at her, waiting for an explanation, although he suspects he already knows what she’s about to say. “Don’t forget you still have that standing invitation to the White House. If worse comes to worst, you’ll know how to use it, right? And besides, Ellis still owes Rhodey. All it would take is one word. You know Rhodey will do this if you ask.”

Steve nods. “Yeah, yeah, I know,” he says, then adds in a rush of breath, “He’s not going to prison, Natasha. He’s not going to spend the rest of his life in the solitary, caged like an animal, for something that was done to him.”

By his sides, his fists are clenched so hard he thinks he’s about to break his bones.

“Whatever happens, just remember you have people you can trust, Steve.” Natasha looks up at him and touches his arm lightly with the tips of her fingers. “And so does he.”

Steve takes another deep breath.

“I will.” He kisses her on the cheek. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

Bucky is still up when Steve comes back, watching tv and looking through one of Steve’s comic books at the same time.

“They’re making a show about us,” he informs him, instead saying of hello.

Steve puts his shield away and starts to undo the zips and straps on his Kevlar.

“Two,” he says, already stripped down to his undershirt. “Well, one of them is about Peggy, but
we have a part, too. They tried to get me to give them an endorsement. Or a quote. Or anything, really. But don’t worry, Buck, you’re handsome enough in both of them. I checked, just for you.”

Bucky doesn’t answer, just continues to leaf through the comic book.

Steve still feels on edge after his conversation with Natasha, and his back muscles are screaming in pain from the tension he seems to carry everywhere he goes these days.

“I’m gonna go hit the shower,” he says, and Bucky finally looks at him, and there it is again, that strange look that Steve just can’t figure out.

Once he steps under the hot spray, he allows himself a few moments when he just stands there, letting the water wash over him, his eyes closed and his face turned up into the steady, warm stream. He feels at the same time boneless and stiff, tired and restless, and—he discovers with no small amount of surprise—just a little bit turned on, the way he sometimes does when he’s been on edge for too long. After a moment’s hesitation, he braces himself against the tiled wall, wraps a hand around himself and clenches his teeth to keep the sound in as he strokes himself fast and rough, desperately trying not to think about Bucky and failing miserably. He can’t even remember the last time he did this, too preoccupied with everything else that’s happened to think about his libido, but now the floodgates have opened, and Steve bites into his lip so hard he almost breaks skin, muffles the sound of his breathy little moans with his hand and comes all over the tiles in absolute silence, with the image of Bucky carved under his eyelids.

He cleans the mess quickly, burning with shame and guilt. He knows he shouldn’t have done it, not like that, because he desperately, desperately wants to do the right thing, and this—this doesn’t feel like it at all.

When he walks out of the shower, he doesn’t feel better, just bone-tired and frustrated with himself, and Bucky must pick up on this, because he gives Steve a wide berth and hesitates for a moment when he crosses the door to Steve’s bedroom.

Steve gives him a tired smile. “Everything okay?” he asks.

Bucky shakes himself out of his reverie. “Yeah,” he says, “yeah, I’m okay. Are you?”

Steve sits there for a moment in stunned silence, unable to give the automatic response that’s expected of him, and Bucky frowns, then takes the last few steps that separate him from the bed and sits on the edge of the mattress, putting a bit of distance between Steve and himself.

“Steve?” he asks. “Are you okay?”

Steve swallows and takes a deep breath. “Yeah, I’m fine.” This time, the answer comes easily.

Bucky looks at him for a second, two seconds, five.

“You’re lying,” he says eventually. “Why are you lying to me? Are you hurt?”

“No, Buck, I’m just tired.” Steve rubs his face and sighs. “Can we go to sleep?”

There’s just more silence for a while, and Steve thinks the conversation is over and he can finally try to get some rest when Bucky says, “You never touch me.”

For a moment, the only thing Steve hears is the ringing in his ears.

“What?” he asks, even though his mouth feels like cotton.
When Steve turns to face Bucky, Bucky doesn’t look at him at all.

“You never—” he starts, and he looks exasperated and hesitant at the same time. “I’ve been here for almost six weeks, and you’ve— You never touch me. At all. I know I’m not—” Bucky’s mouth is a thin line and he keeps looking to his left. “I know it must be repulsive to you, I know that, and that’s okay, it’s okay, I get it, but—”

It hits Steve like a punch to the gut, and when he realizes what Bucky is talking about, he feels like he wants to throw up.

“Bucky,” he interrupts in a hoarse voice, because he needs him to stop talking, he needs Bucky to understand how utterly wrong he is about this. “Bucky, please, look at me. Please.”

When he does, his eyes are glassy, and his lips look bitten raw.

“It’s not— Christ, you’re not repulsive, that’s not what I—” Steve chokes out. “There’s nothing about you that I could ever find repulsive. But you’ve had enough people touching you without your permission. Without your consent. I didn’t want to be another one who violated that trust, because then I wouldn’t have been any better than Pierce. Than HYDRA. I— God, Bucky, I missed you so much, and then you came back, and then you came here, came home to me, and suddenly I wasn’t so angry that I was alive anymore.” He takes a deep, shaky breath. “I haven’t been doing too good, Buck.” He smiles, and that smile, too, is shaky and watery. “I haven’t been doing too good for a long, long time.”

It’s impossible to tell, in retrospect, which one of them closes the distance, but then Bucky just crumples in Steve’s arms, and it is shattering to watch.

Steve holds him for a long, long time, until the violent shaking starts to subside. He knows his own eyes are red and swollen, and he can feel Bucky’s hot, wet breath in the crook of his neck, ghosting over his skin with each quivery inhale and exhale.

“It’s okay,” he whispers, over and over again. “It’s okay, I got you.”

It’s okay, he thinks. We’re gonna be okay.

For the first time since they started to share the bed, when Steve wakes up, Bucky is still sleeping, curled up next to him, his hair falling into his eyes, his fingers wrapped loosely around Steve’s wrist.

Steve knows it is an act of trust—to be so open, so vulnerable with another person after what Bucky has been through shows that he has faith in Steve to do the right thing.

The wave of guilt that washes over him almost threatens to choke him.

Bucky must sense the change in Steve’s breathing, his transition from sleep to consciousness, because he makes a soft noise in the back of his throat and shifts closer, hiding his face in the crook of Steve’s neck again, breathing slowly and steadily. It would be so, so easy in that moment to fall into Bucky completely, to press dry lips to his forehead and stay like this until the morning sun finally reaches the windows, bathing the room in a soft glow. It would be so easy to tell Bucky everything Steve has kept hidden for more than eighty years, to tell him the dog tags around Steve’s neck feel almost like a wedding ring.

Steve takes a deep, steadying breath and feels Bucky stir. When he finally looks down, Bucky is looking up at him.
“Sorry I woke you,” Steve whispers in a low, sleep-rough voice. “You should go back to sleep, ’s still early.”

Bucky blinks a few times. “What time is it?”

Steve reaches blindly for his watch and clears his throat as he checks the time. “A little after six. We should both go back to sleep. I don’t intend to be up at least for another hour.”

Bucky licks his lips and pushes his hair back. “Need to do something about it,” he mutters with annoyance. “Will you cut it for me later? Like we used to?”

Steve just nods, overcome with the memory of all those times he sat in the middle of the kitchen, staring into the old, stained mirror as Bucky cut his hair, just for him to return the favor later on. There was always something incredibly intimate about it that Steve couldn’t put his finger on.

“Good,” Bucky says then, and Steve expects him to scoot away now that they’re a bit more awake, but Bucky stays where he is, curled around Steve, and his hand moves up until Bucky’s fingers close around his old dog tags. “You’re wearing them,” he says, like he can’t quite believe it.

“Of course I’m wearing them, Buck,” Steve tells him in a soft voice. “Have been for the past two years, don’t intend to stop now.”

Bucky falls asleep after a while, but Steve stays awake, almost painfully aware of Bucky’s closeness. It feels like he belongs there, in this bed with Bucky on a warm day in autumn, like he’s finally got back that part of himself that he didn’t even realize he’d been missing all along.

This, of course, doesn’t mean anything, because the fact that Steve loves Bucky doesn’t mean Bucky loves him back. Not like this. And Steve will love him in any way Bucky will let him, but he knows that the longing, the ache—that’s never going away. It’s been more than eighty years since that afternoon in July, and it’s still here, that little tug deep in his chest every time he looks at Bucky, the painful twist just behind his heart which he’s learned to keep hidden at all cost. Steve might not be a good liar, but this—this is different. This is self-preservation, and if there’s anything that can be said about Steve, it’s that he’s a survivor. He perseveres, against all odds. It’s just a part of that, one way Steve ensures he can go on, day after day.

He remembers that one kiss in the corner of an abandoned factory somewhere in Denmark, the way Bucky went rigid under the soft press of Steve’s dry lips, the way he gently pushed him away, the way he said, Steve, you know it’s not like this, even though it sounded false, even though they both knew that this, too, was a lie, and Steve remembers that he kissed him then because Bucky looked so, so lost inside his own head.

He knew they did something to him back in that lab, something ugly and dark, and twisted, something that lived just under Bucky’s skin and sometimes, just sometimes, pushed its way up to the surface.

Now he knows everything. It doesn’t make him feel any better.

Bucky wakes up for the second time quarter past seven and rolls away to lie on his back, throws a hand across his eyes, and Steve can see that he’s still a little soft around the edges, sleep-warm where their thighs are still touching and open in a way he hasn’t been in a very long time.

“Breakfast?” Steve asks, ignoring the way Bucky stretches, exposing his neck.

“Not yet,” he says, the words a little slurred.
“See, it’s just like back when we lived together before the war,” Steve says, his tone light and playful. “You lazing about in bed all day, me doing all the work around the house. It’s like we’ve never left.”

Later, Steve goes for his morning run—this time without Sam, who had some important business at the VA to attend to—and runs until he almost keels over from exhaustion, until he can’t think about anything besides the comforting pain in his muscles.

He grits his teeth as he stretches. He has this under control.

When he comes back, Bucky is there, with a pair of scissors in his hand, and he passes them to Steve, handle-first. “You promised,” he says.

They move to the bathroom, and Bucky sits down on the edge of the tub, facing away from Steve.

“How short do you want it?” Steve asks, wiping his hands down on his running pants. He feels strangely nervous. “Like before, or—?”

“Not that short.” Bucky shakes his head. “Not yet. More like— up to here.” He points to the line of his ear, and Steve nods.

“Okay, I think I got it. Haven’t done that in a long time, though,” he says, half-joking. “You sure you want to trust me not to make you look like an idiot?”

“There’s no one else I trust,” Bucky says then, and it lands a clean hit straight into Steve’s chest.

“Okay.” He takes a deep breath. “Okay.”

Steve steels himself and starts cutting.

Once they’re done, Bucky looks at himself in the bathroom mirror for a long time. He looks different—different from the Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes of the Howling Commandos, and different from the Winter Soldier, his hair reaching just past his ear, parted to the side and curling a little at the ends, still slightly damp from where Steve wet them before they started.

“You look good,” Steve says.

After that, he leaves Bucky in the bathroom and starts to rummage through one of the drawers in his bedroom for a moment until his fingers close around a familiar shape. When Bucky pads slowly over to the bedroom, Steve reaches out and pressed his own dog tags into Bucky’s hand before he can think better of it.

“It’s only fair,” he says.
For the next few days, things are quiet—the city is drowning in rain, grey and dark, the red and golden leaves turning to brown sludge on the sidewalks, pedestrians faceless in the sea of umbrellas.

Bucky is more silent again, a little more withdrawn, but it’s different now, somehow; he might be silent, but he’s not absent, and Steve knows that he could reach him if he needed to. He doesn’t mind the quiet, though, and for those next few days, Steve mostly reads and draws, sprawling on the couch, while Bucky sits beside him in an oversized hoodie that smells like Steve, leaning into him, warm and solid at Steve’s side.

He’s wearing the dog tags.

It’s such a small thing, so simple and mostly insignificant, Steve thinks, but it still feels like someone has knocked the air out of his lungs every time he looks at the shape of them disappearing under Bucky’s shirt.

There’s a blanket wrapped around both of them, Steve’s arm slung around Bucky’s shoulders and a book in his other hand, a half-empty cup of coffee on the table. He could get used to it, he thinks.

Steve knows Bucky isn’t sleeping, because his breathing is more shallow and less regular, but he still curls up against Steve’s side with his eyes closed and his head resting against Steve’s collarbone. It’s like he’s trying to make up for those lost weeks when he didn’t touch Steve at all, and it’s so, so easy, for once, because this is something that Steve can give him—the sense of closeness, the comfort and the familiarity of the human touch. He knows what it’s like—to want to touch another human being, reach out and close a hand around nothing.

“We used to do that, didn’t we?” Bucky asks in a husky whisper, and Steve can feel his warm breath against his skin.

“Sometimes,” he admits. “It mostly used to be the other way round, though, since I was smaller back then. Easier that way.”

The silence stretches between them after that, but it’s easy, comfortable, bred from long years of familiarity that runs bone-deep, deeper than torture and brainwashing, and loss of identity, and seventy years spent under the ice.

“I asked Peggy to marry me,” Steve says then, the words escaping his mouth before he can stop them. “After I came back. You should’ve seen how hard she laughed. She thought I was so funny, asking an old lady like her to marry me. We could visit her, if you wanted, when you’re feeling up to it. I’m sure she’d be glad to see you.”
Bucky looks away. “I doubt it,” he says.

“We don’t have to,” Steve backtracks carefully. “But I remember you really liked her back then, spent a lot of time with her at the shooting range whenever we had some downtime in London. And she liked you, even though you tried to sweet-talk your way under her skirt when you first met her and she completely shut you down. You were real sore about that one, said you were turning into me.”

“God forbid,” Bucky says in an even, deadpan tone, and Steve laughs under his breath.

“I couldn’t get into the shower for the first few weeks,” Bucky confesses after a moment of silence, and Steve goes rigid under him; Bucky must sense this, because he catches Steve’s wrist and touches the inside of it in a reassuring gesture. “It was the pressure, reminded me of— They would hose me down, after a mission, and the water was so cold, and I knew I’d be put in the ice again, I don’t know how, but I knew it, even when they wiped me. I just couldn’t stand it, after, and then I forced myself to do this, and it turned out I forgot you could shower in hot water. How fucked up is that?”

“It’s not,” Steve says with conviction. “It’s what your body remembered, like muscle memory.”

“Yeah, but— It’s a shower, Steve. It’s a fucking shower.”

“I couldn’t sleep in the dark after they got me out,” Steve admits in return. “You know how hearing is the last sense to go? Yeah.”

It takes Bucky a moment to register the meaning of Steve’s words, then he’s up from his position at Steve’s side, eyes wide in horror. “You were conscious? When you fell? When you— Jesus, Steve.”

Steve needs to steel himself for a few seconds before he can ask, “Were you?”

It’s one of those things he needs to know, to tally up his debt.

“Not when I hit the ground,” Bucky says quietly, his mouth twisted in a bitter grimace. “Later, when they found me. But not when I hit the ground.”

Whatever Steve feels then, it’s not relief.

Bucky meets Sam a week later. He comes by in the afternoon with a box of cookies, of all things, and smiles when he sees Bucky, whose apprehension is betrayed only by the tight set of his jaw.

“I’m sorry I ripped your wing out,” he says in a quiet voice instead of saying hello.

“Not your fault,” Sam says, his tone calm and sympathetic, and he reaches a hand out for Bucky to shake, testing the boundaries of physical contact. Bucky stares at it for a moment, but eventually takes Sam’s hand and shakes it a little tentatively. “It’s all good. Now, Rogers, c’mon, take those off me, they should still be warm.”

“You baked those yourself, soldier?” Steve teases as he wanders into the kitchen to put them on a platter.

“It’s my momma’s recipe, so you better be careful what you’re saying, Cap.” Sam looks at him sternly, but the upward curl of the corner of his mouth betrays him completely. “Also, Tony sends his love.”
“Tony… Stark?” Bucky asks at the same time as Steve says, “Yeah, I bet he does,” and when Steve turns to look at him, he notices that Bucky has taken a seat in the armchair instead of on the couch. It’s about distance and boundaries, he understands, even though he’s grown accustomed to being right next to Bucky, feeling his comforting weight and warmth against his own body. It’s only now that Steve realizes Bucky wasn’t the only one who was starved for touch.

“Yeah, Tony Stark,” Sam says, and Steve knows Sam is aware of the meaning implied in Bucky’s question. He’s read the Winter Soldier file, too.

“He knows I’m alive?” Bucky looks straight at Steve, his hands clenching into fists where they’ve been resting on his knees. “And he— He doesn’t want to— Doesn’t he know?”

Sam shakes his head a little. “He knows. He just— Listen, the thing is, he’s made his peace with it. Now, I’m not gonna tell you that you should make yours, too, because I know it’s not that simple, but you should know where you stand. I’m just telling it like I see it.”

Steve can see the struggle in Bucky’s face.

“All right,” Bucky says eventually, then takes a deep breath, almost like the words cost him too much air to even speak them out loud. Steve knows that feeling too well. “Fair enough.”

He seems to relax after that, even if just a fraction, but Steve recognizes the way the tense line of his shoulders sags just a little bit, the way he holds himself, like he’s not ready to bolt at any second anymore.

Steve drinks his coffee and eats some of the cookies in silence, letting Sam talk for the most part before he puts on his leather jacket and leaves, just like they’ve agreed. It’s about Bucky and what he needs now, not about Steve, and what Bucky needs is to talk to someone who can deal with psychological trauma, who can help him in ways that Steve will never be able to. And Steve trusts Sam more than he trusts himself, in a way—trusts his character and his training, and his willingness to help, so he makes himself scarce for a few hours, hops on his bike and goes for a ride with no particular destination in mind.

He finds himself on Staten Island just as the sun begins to go down, lavender, purple, and orange, and watches skateboarders perform tricks in one of the skateboard parks on the South Beach Boardwalk. After a while, one of the girls tucks her board under her arm and comes over, all cocky, confident stride and too much black eyeliner.

“What’s up,” she says, craning her head back to look Steve in the face. “You here to arrest us?”

“Do I look like a police officer?” Steve asks, leaning against his bike, his hands crossed over his chest.

“No, dude, but you look like Captain America, anyone ever tell you that? Sweet bike, by the way,” the girl says as Steve schools his face into a more neutral expression, trying not to laugh.

“Thanks.” He shoves his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. “And yeah, so I’ve been told.”

“So what are you doing here?” The girl reaches into the back pocket of her jeans for a pair of battered fingerless gloves and puts them on before lighting up a cigarette. “I didn’t peg you for the skateboarding type.”

Steve smothers another smile. “Yeah? And what type did you peg me for?”
“I don’t know, man, but you look like that Abercrombie & Fitch kinda guy. You know, a model, or whatever.”

Steve *does* laugh at that. “No, I just— came here with my friend once, just after the place first opened,” he says. “I guess I’m revisiting.”

The girl looks at him with suspicion. “What, the whole thing? Wasn’t that, like, in the nineteen thirties?” she asks, extinguishing the butt of her cigarette against a low concrete wall covered in graffiti. “Shit.” And there it is, the hint of recognition in her eyes. Steve thought that maybe, just maybe, he could avoid it for the night. “Shit. You really *are* Steve Rogers. *Shit.* Dude, my sister is gonna *freak.* I need to get your autograph for her. Would that be cool?”

“Sure, let’s do this,” Steve says. After he’s done, he signs the girl’s skateboard, too. *Fly high,* he writes. The girl almost laughs herself sick.

She goes back to her tricks after that, and Steve watches for a while longer, oddly content and at peace, until the skaters pack up shop and move somewhere else, laughing and talking loudly, moving through the city in a colorful group.

Bucky would like that, Steve thinks. He knows they’re both addicted to the adrenaline rush just a little bit, and Steve loved the energy that ran among the group, the heady rush of endorphins every time they launched into the air and landed a clean trick, balancing on the edge of the concrete.

Bucky would like it a lot.

It’s completely dark by the time he heads back to Brooklyn, and he picks up some food for the three of them from an Indian restaurant just around the corner before running up the stairs to his loft, ignoring the elevator altogether. They’ve somehow lost their charm ever since he had to take a dive through the glass and onto a solid, concrete floor a long, long way down.

“Hey, I’m back,” he announces, hanging his jacket on the rack by the door and coming inside to find Sam and Bucky talking in low voices, their heads bent towards each other.

“Good looking *and* he brought food, too. I can see why you keep him around, Barnes,” Sam says then with a good-natured, teasing smile, turning to look at Steve.

“He’s all right,” Bucky admits faux-grudgingly, and it’s like a weight has been lifted off Steve’s shoulders. Bucky clearly likes Sam, despite his initial reservations, and he must feel comfortable in his company. This is good, Steve repeats to himself in his mind, over and over again. This is progress.

“I hope you don’t mind Indian?” Steve asks, hiding a smile as he turns his back to the living room to unpack the takeout containers.

“As long as you remembered that I don’t eat all that extra spicy stuff from hell that you and Natasha love,” Sam says, and Steve doesn’t need to turn around to know that he’s making a face.

“Sam, you know I would never,” Steve says, and he does turn around at that, doing his best Captain America impression, all earnest and open and honest.

Sam narrows his eyes and purses his lips slightly but accepts the cup of lentil soup all the same. “I am on to you, Rogers, so you better watch yourself.”

Sam, as it turns out, has brought not only cookies, but also a DVD with a Captain America movie
made in the 1980s, which, he swears, is even more hilarious now than it had been before he actually met Steve.

“This is nothing like the war, okay. You’re, like, defending the Earth against an invasion from the outer space, which, okay, I admit, it’s pretty spot on, considering New York, but, dude. It’s from the eighties. Spandex. Spandex everywhere. And the ridiculous hair. It’s supposed to be one of the worst movies ever made in the history of cinema, I just can’t let you miss out on that. Also, Barnes, I’m sorry to say that, but you’re wearing spandex shorts.”

They end up on the couch together, Steve with Bucky pressed into his side while Sam spends more time observing them carefully from the armchair than actually looking at the tv screen. The movie is hilarious, just like Sam promised, in that amusingly horrifying way which borders on actually enjoyable, and Steve finds himself laughing until his sides start to hurt.

Later, once Bucky goes to sleep and Sam doesn’t comment on the fact that he heads straight for Steve’s bedroom, they’re sitting in the living room with the tv on but the volume turned almost all the way down, talking over beers and leftover food.

“So how long has this thing been going on?” Sam asks in a conversational tone, unscrewing the bottle cap on a local dark lager microbrew that Steve knows he likes and buys solely for that reason.

“What?” Steve, very slowly, puts his own bottle down onto the table.

“C’mon, give me some credit here. You look at that boy like he hung the moon.”

“I’m not sleeping with him, Sam,” Steve says, his voice low and quiet. “It’s not like that, and even if it were— It wouldn’t be right, especially not right now.”

“Yeah, I know, man,” Sam says, playing with the bottle, but his eyes are fixed on Steve. “I know that, because I know you, but there’s clearly a lifetime or two of buried harbored affection that you’re obviously not talking to anyone about, unless it’s Natasha, and I doubt that, so I thought you might want to unload a bit.”

Steve runs a hand through his hair—he’s been growing it out a little, just like he used to before and during the war. He doesn’t know why, exactly. Maybe he’s just been due for a change.

“You’re doing more than enough, Sam,” he says. “You’re doing more than I can ever repay you for. You don’t have to do this, too.”

“I know you’ve been sort of short in that department for the last few years, but in case you forgot, this is what friends do for each other.” Sam says with a slightly exasperated sigh. “They listen to the weirdest shit, and then they try to make it better, so, please, take this silent martyr routine for a walk and talk to me, okay? And then you can listen to my failed attempts at dating that cute engineer working for Stark that I told you about, if it makes you feel better. Deal?”

Steve ducks his head and smiles with just the corner of his mouth. “I was fifteen. We— It never went anywhere. I kissed him, once, when we were in Europe, but he— It wasn’t like that. It’s not bothering me, if that’s what you’re thinking. I had my whole life to get used to the idea, believe me.”

“What idea?” Sam takes a swig of his beer and starts pulling the label off methodically.

“That it’s never going to happen. That it’s not meant to be.” Steve shrugs, feeling strangely small all of a sudden.
“Listen,” Sam offers, “it’s none of my business and I’m not gonna meddle or anything, because I’m not my aunt Mabel, and I know you’re a huge believer in doing rather than talking, but maybe you should talk to him about it, eventually. You know, just a thought.”

The thing is, Steve knows Sam is right, but old habits die hard, and this is one of Steve’s oldest. It’s self-preservation.

“Yeah,” Steve says at last, with a heavy sigh. “Yeah, I know.”

Steve receives the last rites twice by the time he’s twenty-one.

This time it’s a fever and a persistent murmur in his heart, and then it’s pneumonia attacking his body, already wrecked by anemia, and Steve tells Bucky he can see the angels when he closes his eyes. This time, Sarah Rogers is long gone, and Bucky runs to fetch the priest in the middle of the night.

Steve opens his eyes sometime in those small hours before dawn, when the world outside is grey and the dull light seeping through the window paints shivering shadows on the walls, and it’s the first time in his life that he sees Bucky cry.

“Hey,” he croaks, reaching out with his hand to touch Bucky’s shaking fingers, and Bucky looks up at him, wiping furiously at his wet cheeks.

“Don’t you dare, Rogers,” he says, his voice hoarse and choked up. “Don’t you dare die on me. Your ma would tan my hide.”

Steve smiles weakly. “Please, she adored you. And you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Bucky says with a smile, but his hands are still shaking. “Gave me one hell of a scare, though. Do you want me to go now, or—”

Steve shifts closer to the wall, making room for Bucky in the narrow bed. The sheets are soaked through with sweat and the entire room smells like sickness, but Steve really, really doesn’t want to be alone right now.

“Don’t you have work in the morning?” he asks, just before he slips back into unconsciousness.

“The pub’s closed, McDougal gave me the day off,” Bucky whispers, his warm breath ghosting against Steve’s cheek. “Some family affair—a wake, I think. They won’t be needing me today.”

Steve gets a few hours of restless sleep interrupted by coughing fits, and when he finally opens his eyes around nine, Bucky is still sleeping on the pillow next to Steve, his lashes unbelievably long, fanning against his cheek. On an impulse, Steve reaches out and smooths out the worried line of his mouth, knowing full well it was him who put it there.

He licks his parched, cracked lips and tastes the coppery tang of blood. The glass standing by his bed is empty, and he remembers vaguely how Bucky kept forcing him to drink even while Steve was half out of his mind hallucinating.

He’s still too weak to sit, though, not to mention stand up, so he just lies there on his back for a while with his eyes closed, listening to Bucky’s breathing. Bucky starts to stir some time later, and when he opens his eyes and sees Steve wide awake, he just stares at him for a moment, like he can’t quite believe he’s not looking at a ghost.
“Morning,” Steve says, his voice still small and quiet, barely there.

“Do you need something? Food? Water?” Bucky asks, sitting up and taking in Steve’s pallor, the dark rings around his eyes that Steve knows must be there, because his eyelids feel like they’re made of lead.

“Just water, thanks,” Steve says.

Bucky knows that Steve hates to be fussed over, so he avoids hovering for the rest of the morning and the afternoon, and goes about his business like it’s a day like any other, like Steve can’t still feel the aftertaste of the viaticum on his tongue.

He hadn’t been there the first time—Steve was twelve, and Bucky’s mother forbade him from going, scared that it might frighten him too much, so it was just Steve, his mother, and the priest. It took Steve longer to get better, too, two long weeks of high fever and vivid dreams which weren’t dreams at all, and when the fever finally broke, Bucky was there, with his jaw jutting out stubbornly, informing Steve that he just wasn’t allowed to die, not while Bucky was there.

Okay, Steve said, and that was that. A promise he intended to keep.

Steve knows what they’re saying—that he probably won’t live to see thirty. They’ve been saying this for a long time behind his back, but they’ve been saying he’s stubborn as a mule, too, so maybe he will get to live after all, out of the sheer power of will. Maybe if he just tries hard enough.

Bucky leaves after a meager lunch to get groceries, because they’re running low on food, and promises to be back as soon as possible.

Steve sits up gingerly, propped up by his pillows, and tries to force his eyes to stay open. He reaches for Bucky’s book, lying on the nightstand—something about space and time-travel—and flips through the pages until the book starts to weigh heavy in his hands. The fatigue is a clear sign for Steve to lie down, but he doesn’t give up without a fight, reaches for a comic book he started reading a while back and picks up where he left off.

It’s how Bucky finds him twenty minutes later.

“Hey, I bought you some liver at the butcher’s on my way back,” he announces, standing in the door.

Steve looks up at him from his comic book and clutches his hands to his heart theatrically. “And they say romance is dead,” he says.

In the light of day, Bucky looks ashen, worn out, and Steve knows it’s his fault.

“Yeah, pal, keep dreamin’,” Bucky says with a smile, and Steve’s heart skips a beat, because Bucky has no idea how close to home that hits, like a punch straight through the chest.

Father Doyle comes by to check up on Steve a few days later and just shakes his head when he sees Steve already dressed, curled up under a thick blanket in the living room and drawing. Steve is working from home right now, grateful that his position at the WPA will be waiting for him when he returns but still unwilling to take any chances. Bucky is out working down at old McDougal’s pub, but the door is left unlatched and when Steve hears the knocking, he just asks the guest to let himself in, still too weak to stand and walk, even if it’s just to answer the door.

“Well, Steven,” Father Doyle says eventually, after making the usual inquiries, and there’s a small smile playing on his lips, “maybe it is God’s will that you outlive us all.”
Steve wakes up to the suffocating feeling that something isn’t right. It’s still almost dark outside, just the faintest hints of the approaching dawn painting the city outside the window black and grey, and he feels faintly like he’s lost something he cannot even name.

The feeling subsides slowly when he looks down at Bucky, sleeping beside him peacefully, and Steve lies back down, staring at the ceiling. He can feel the warmth of Bucky’s body next to him, and if he shifts just a little bit closer, well, that’s between him and his conscience. They’re not even touching, it’s just that the closeness softens the sharp, jagged edges in Steve’s mind, makes breathing easier.

Bucky makes a soft sound in his sleep and closes his fingers around Steve’s wrist, pulls him even closer and nestles himself into the crook of Steve’s arm. He looks pristine like this, untouched by anything the world has burdened him with, and Steve presses his lips to the top of Bucky’s head, the touch chaste and swift, barely-there. It’s more about comfort than anything else.

They wake up slowly, within a few minutes of each other, and when Steve turns his head, Bucky offers him the smallest smile he has ever seen. It’s the first time Bucky has smiled at all since he came back.

“I’m going jogging with Sam in a little while,” Steve says, his voice raw and rough around the edges. “Wanna come with?”

Bucky thinks about this for a moment before shaking his head. “Not yet,” he says, and that’s better than no.

Back from the run, Steve announces that he’s going to just hop in the shower for a moment and then they can eat breakfast—it’s routine by now, and they always eat together, as if to make up for all those times they couldn’t, back in the past, when Bucky had to leave early to unload the crates at the pub and Steve was running late for work. He doesn’t hear Bucky’s answer as he turns the shower on and stands under the spray, scrubbing himself vigorously, relishing the scorching burn of the hot water. He forgoes clothing for now in lieu of a towel wrapped around his waist and wanders into the living room area to find Bucky frozen on the couch with a book in his lap.

“Something the matter?” Steve asks, his tone neutral and even, but inside, his heart is trying to beat its way out of his chest.

Bucky raises the book to let Steve see, and Steve’s blood runs cold, because he knows exactly what that is. He got it as a gift from—someone, he can’t even remember, and he flipped through it, interested enough to see how much the author got right (surprisingly a lot), and he knows, he knows what Bucky is going to ask before he even opens his mouth.

“Were we? Like this?”

Steve swallows painfully around the lump in his throat, and he would give a lot to have this conversation while fully clothed, but now he knows—this is how it’s going to play out, him in a towel around his waist, dripping water onto the floor, Bucky’s dog tags clinging to the damp skin on his chest where he didn’t towel off properly.

“No,” he says, and it’s the truth, and it’s the greatest lie he’s ever told. “No. It wasn’t like this. Not like this.”

“So what was it like, then?” Bucky can’t seem to let it go, and Steve wants to rewind that entire morning, wants it to never have happened at all, wants for Bucky to pick a different book.
“We were friends, not a couple, Bucky,” he says, words clipped and quiet, and maybe just a little too terse, but it’s the truth, it is God’s honest truth, no matter what Steve wants, and truth is what Bucky deserves. “You were my best friend, Buck,” he adds, offering Bucky a small, sad smile. “Always have been, always will be.”

There’s something in Bucky’s expression that Steve just can’t decipher, and after a moment of silence, Bucky just nods in acknowledgment before putting the book away to move into the kitchen, leaving Steve in the living room with a hollow feeling in his chest.

The afternoon finds him beating the shit out of a punching bag in the basement gym that his building maintains but Steve rarely uses. He’s sweating and his knuckles start to actually hurt, but he doesn’t stop until he hears the door open and close with a grating, metallic sound, and then Bucky is there, dressed in Steve’s hoodie with the hood up, hands hidden in the front pocket.

“Did I do something wrong?” Bucky asks, looking up at Steve, and this time, he doesn’t take his eyes off Steve’s face even for a second.

Steve reaches out to steady the bag, trying to find his breath. “No, Buck,” he says, shaking his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’ve been in a weird space since I woke up, needed to let off some steam.”

“It’s just that I— I know you’re not queer, Steve, okay? It was a dumb thing to ask. Don’t know what came over me.”

Steve takes a deep breath and starts to unwrap the tape around his knuckles. “Who says I’m not?”

When Steve glances up, Bucky looks like he’s been punched.

“What?” he asks.

“Who says I’m not queer?” Steve repeats, a strange sense of calm washing over him. It’s done. The secret is out. It’s not the one he’s been guarding since he was fifteen, not exactly. This—this he can live with. “I like men just as well as women. In theory anyway, not that there was ever a chance to—”

“Okay,” Bucky says, and Steve can see the way his Adam’s apple rises and falls as he swallows slowly. “Did I know? Back then?”

“No.” Steve shakes his head. “It just wasn’t— Back then, it wasn’t something that you talked about, with anyone, and there was never any fella— If there was someone, if I’d found someone else, I would’ve told you, you know. But it wasn’t— It wasn’t something you were, it was something you did. It’s different now, though.”

Steve knows he has slipped up before he even finishes talking—knows he said someone else instead of just someone—but Bucky doesn’t seem to notice, just looks at him for a long while in complete silence, assessing.

“Makes sense, I guess,” he says eventually and shrugs with one shoulder. “You done here? We should probably do something about dinner, I’m starving.”

In the end, they get Chinese takeout. In the end, Bucky still sits right next to Steve, buried in his side, warm and solid, and there, and when they go to sleep, he nestles himself into the crook of Steve’s arm with his head pressing against Steve’s collarbone and sleeps peacefully through the
night.

In the end, that’s the most important thing.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

guys, i’m so, so sorry for the delay. basically, life happened, and when it happened, it happened all at once, the way it usually does. but it has finally gone back to normal, more or less, so you can expect more regular updates from now on.

as usual, i’d like to thank all the lovely people who left feedback in any form, and in particular those of you who have been listening to my writing woes on twitter. my super special thanks go to beardsley, who is basically the fairy godmother to this chapter. (she’s also the one to blame for the shower scene. that’s all on her. i wash my hands of that.)

It’s just a fraction of a second, and then it’s over.

The only thing he can hear is the sound of his ragged breath and Bucky’s scream.

Below him, the world is white white white.

His body moves, finds the rest of the Commandos. Goes through the motions. He knows they speak to him, but he can’t understand the words. He doesn’t speak at all. They have to drag him out of the train.

He almost kills Zola on sight. They don’t mention that in the report.

By the time they arrive in London, he still hasn’t spoken a word, but he has seen Dum Dum Dugan cry. He feels like he should cry, too, but he just feels numb, like there’s nothing left inside of him, just the echo of that scream and nothing else. Like the rest of the world has moved on on the other side of the glass, muted and blurred.

He writes the report almost automatically, barely registering the words as he types them up. Then he writes a letter to Bucky’s family, choking on his guilt and shaking all over. He hasn’t eaten in over twenty-four hours.

Nobody at the headquarters approaches him, people turn their eyes away from him when he passes by, suddenly extremely preoccupied with the files they’re carrying, but he can hear the whispers behind his back.

He knows the Commandos have already left for the only wake Sergeant James Barnes will ever have—quiet drinks at some pub that still hasn’t been destroyed by the German bombs. Dum Dum found Steve earlier and asked him to come with them, but Steve just shook his head without a word. He almost regrets it now, but he knows the way soldiers grieve—they drink, they laugh, they tell stories. He can’t laugh, and his voice is still lodged in his throat, threatening to choke him every time he opens his mouth.

Every time he closes his eyes, he can see Bucky falling. Every time he opens his eyes, he could swear he can hear the dull thud of a body hitting the ground.

He keeps it all in until he finally slips away in the evening, finds a shell of a bombed-out pub somewhere in the middle of London and cries until his throat feels raw, until all that’s left in him
are dry, heaving sobs that feel like the beginning of an asthma attack, and he can’t, he can’t catch his breath, can’t get enough air is his lungs, and it burns, it burns when he closes his eyes and waits for the violent shaking to subside.

By the time Peggy comes to find him, he’s downed almost two entire bottles of whisky that had miraculously survived the bombing, hidden behind what’s left of the counter.

Add that to the list: he can’t laugh, can’t speak, and he can’t even get drunk.

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. Steve Rogers wasn’t supposed to mourn Bucky Barnes.

He can add that to the list, too.

The subpoena arrives on a Wednesday morning. Steve opens the door with a cream cheese bagel in his hand and blocks the view of the living room while the messenger looks for the receipt, shooting Steve apologetic glances all the while.

“Sorry, I just deliver the mail,” he says.

Steve knows he should comply. Everything else aside, if he acts like he has something to hide, they will start looking. He can’t predict how little or how much they will find.

Steve has little patience for the people on Capitol Hill; he remembers the way they treated Natasha, remembers the thinly veiled threats of putting people like her and Steve under lock and key for doing what’s right, and he has very few illusions still left intact. But he’s evaded the loaded questions for as long as possible, and it seems that the time is finally up. He knew that moment would come, eventually, it’s just that they’ve finally reached a certain state of relatively peaceful equilibrium that Steve would hate to disturb, and the questions they will no doubt ask will put an end to that.

When he walks back to the kitchen, Bucky is still sitting at the kitchen aisle, eating his cereal, but Steve can see the line of tension in his shoulders and he knows Bucky must have overheard his conversation with the messenger.

“What are you going to tell them?” Bucky asks, and the tone of his voice is cautious, guarded. It stings a little, but Steve reminds himself that this is not about him.

Steve stalls, even though they both know precisely what he’s doing—he peels an orange and eats it slowly, licking at the juice dripping down his fingers, and Bucky follows the movement with his eyes, his expression a jumble of emotions, impossible to decipher.

“They don’t have much,” Steve says finally, but it sounds weak, almost desperate, like he’s trying to convince not only Bucky, but also himself. “One blurry photo, some footage from the traffic cameras. If I don’t name you—”

“If you don’t name me, then I will never leave this apartment. Not in broad daylight.”

The thing is: Steve would lie on the stand for Bucky. God knows he’s done worse things for him. But this was never about exchanging one prison for another, even if there are no bars in the windows at Steve’s apartment. The other thing is: in a better world, Bucky would be recognized as a war hero, and he could walk openly with his head held high. Steve is not so sure about this world.

“Okay,” he says, passing the other half of the orange to Bucky almost without a thought. “If that’s
what you want.”

Bucky looks at him with disbelief.

“If that’s what I want?” he repeats, incredulous. “And if it weren’t, what then? Would you lie under oath?”

*I would do anything to protect you*, Steve almost says.

“What do you want me to say?” he asks instead.

Bucky shrugs with one arm. “The truth,” he says.

“How much of the truth?” Because he might be forced to testify, but it’s not his nightmare to tell. He didn’t live it, and he has no right to pretend he can even begin to understand.

“All of it.” Bucky looks down at his metal hand and curls the fingers until they form a tight fist, but he looks half-absent, like his mind is in a different place, and Steve isn’t sure if the gesture is entirely conscious. “Not much point in trying to hide it now, is there.”

“If that’s what you want,” Steve says again and closes his hand around Bucky’s metal wrist. The curled fingers loosen a little bit.


It’s comforting, in a way, to hear Bucky say he wants things. It’s important, Sam says, it’s important for Bucky to want things and to express that wanting, to have that feeling acknowledged and respected, even if the things he wants are not something Steve would want, too. So Steve just swallows thickly around the tightness in his throat and nods.

“Okay,” he says.

.  

He’s just heading down to the gym when Bucky leans against the doorway, dressed in a hoodie and a pair of loose pants. He looks at Steve for a moment without a word, then steels himself visibly before asking, “Mind if I go with you?”

Steve throws a second towel into the gym bag and zips it up in one smooth gesture, trying to contain the almost giddy smile that’s threatening to break through. “You have no idea how long it’s been since I had a decent sparring partner. For some reason none of the guys at SHIELD ever wanted to get up close and personal with me, and Natasha was rarely available,” he says, his tone light and joking, but for some reason, Bucky isn’t laughing.

“No,” he says. “No way, Steve. I’m not going to fight you. The last time I fought you, I almost killed you. You almost died.”

“No, that’s not— You saved me. I would’ve drowned in the Potomac if you hadn’t pulled me out.”

Bucky takes a step back, caught totally off-guard for some reason. “I didn’t— That’s not—”

Steve grits his teeth. “Please, don’t lie to me, Bucky. I know that was you. There was no one else. And you were pretty hurt, too, so I can’t imagine lugging my unconscious body back to the shore was the easiest thing you could’ve done. You didn’t do that just because. You did that because, deep down, you never wanted to hurt me in the first place. And I know that, Buck, because I
In the end, they go together, and Steve stretches on the mat next to Bucky, thinking this could be 1944, and they could be back in London, at the SSR headquarters, if it weren’t for the fact that they’re a bit older, a bit more damaged and disillusioned, still trying to find their footing in a world that has long since moved on.

Steve can see that Bucky treads with caution, his movements restrained as he circles around Steve, keeping his distance for now, taking his time. Steve doesn’t rush things, lets him find his rhythm, feel the space around him. It must feel strange for Bucky, he thinks, fighting on his own terms, without the programmed intent to kill, without the expectation of return to the cryo-sleep at the end of the mission.

Steve strikes first, and Bucky is fast, so, so fast now—Steve can barely keep up as they fight, their movements almost a blur. He takes two steps back and dodges the blow to his ribs followed by a swift kick to the knees that almost brings him down to the floor. He has only a short moment to catch his breath before Bucky lands a powerful hit straight to Steve’s jaw, but Steve is done fighting clean, and he yanks at Bucky’s hair, buying himself half a second to trip him up and send him down onto the mat. He pins Bucky down, keeping him in a strong hold as he breathes heavily into the crook of his neck.

It would be so easy for Steve to lean down and press his lips against Bucky’s racing pulse, so easy to follow the drop of sweat travelling down the slope of his Adam’s apple and catch it on his tongue, taste salt and skin.

When he looks up, Bucky licks his lips, still panting, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he squirms under Steve, struggling to break free.

Steve lets him go almost immediately, painfully aware of his physical reaction to that much contact, but Bucky doesn’t get up right away; instead, he takes several deep breaths and props himself up on his elbows, looking at Steve, who goes to retrieve two long sticks he keeps in the corner for the rare occasion when Natasha comes over.

“Catch,” Steve says, throwing one of the sticks to Bucky and assuming the fighting stance. He had Natasha training him with those, and he’s pretty decent by now, but he still gets his ass handed to him every time she agrees to spar with him.

Bucky is on him before Steve can even register the movement, and Steve takes a step back, two, three, blocks, takes a step forward and tries to find an opening, but Bucky doesn’t let his guard down. He’s incredibly fast, landing blow after blow; he throws Steve over his shoulder, and Steve hits the ground with a dull thud, scrambles to his feet and jumps away before Bucky can pin him down. Two clean hits later, Steve throws Bucky to the floor. Before he goes down, Bucky hooks his foot behind Steve’s knee, pulling him in; they’re both up within a fraction of a second, exchanging blow for blow until they’re sweating and breathing heavily, neither willing to concede, technique forgotten, pure instinct and muscle memory taking over. By the time Steve sees Bucky fall into a crouch, it’s already too late, and he finds himself on his back just a moment later, his breath knocked out of his lungs and Bucky’s thighs around his neck.

“Do you yield?” Bucky asks, leaning over Steve with a smile. He gently presses the stick against Steve’s throat.

Steve can only swallow and nod.

Bucky helps him to his feet and doesn’t let go for a moment, closing the distance between them enough that Steve can hear Bucky’s frantic heartbeat, and he feels dizzy for a few seconds before
the world rights itself in front of his eyes. He’s pretty sure it’s not just the vertigo.

Somehow, Steve doesn’t feel loose and relaxed; instead, he’s wound tight like a coil and there’s the insistent buzzing just under his skin that he can’t seem to shake off. He rolls his shoulders, trying to chase the feeling away, and Bucky must notice, because he comes over and looks at Steve with concern, the way he always used to back in the day.

“You okay?” he asks.

Steve shrugs. “Yeah, it’s just that annoying feeling I get sometimes after a workout. Like I’m too big for my own skin.”

The double meaning doesn’t hit him until after the words have left his mouth. For a moment, Bucky regards Steve with an almost unsettling level of scrutiny.

“Yeah, I get that sometimes, too,” he says finally with a nod. “Hot water usually helps, so we should probably hit the showers.”

They meet Mrs. Johnson from the third floor on their way up—she’s an elderly lady who lives with her granddaughter, a local artist whom Steve has met briefly on several occasions. He knows Mrs. Johnson is claustrophobic and never uses the elevator, even though the long climb to the third floor always leaves her exhausted and short of breath, so he helps her up whenever they run into each other.

Bucky remains silent while Steve makes small talk, following three steps behind with the hood up, obscuring his face. The tension in his shoulders doesn’t leave him until they’re back at the apartment.

“People are gonna talk,” he says with a frown.

Steve drops the gym bag to the floor and goes to the fridge to retrieve two bottles of water. He tosses one of them to Bucky.

“The hearing is in two days, Buck,” he says. “People are gonna talk anyway.”

Steve gets the second shower and he lets himself linger, feels the tension slowly leave his body inch by inch until all that’s left is the pleasant, boneless sensation that makes him want to melt into the tiled wall. His mind drifts aimlessly for a while before it goes back to the sparring session. The thing is, he thought he was getting better about respecting the boundaries he’s laid out in his own head, but Steve can’t not remember the way Bucky’s body felt under him, over him, pinning him down with his thighs, can’t not remember Bucky’s smell and the heat of his skin, the sharp cold of metal against flesh. He can’t help the things he’s wanted since he was a sickly, fifteen-year-old boy living in Brooklyn with his best friend, but he can control what he does about it, so it almost feels like a betrayal of some unspoken trust when he wraps his hand around himself and strokes slowly, taking his time, twisting his wrist on every other upstroke to let the tension build at a languid, unhurried pace. It would almost be better if it were frantic, fast and hard, with no room for thought or consideration, just pure instinct and lust. Maybe then it wouldn’t look so much like daydreaming.

These days, Steve wakes up most mornings hard and frustrated, chasing some remnants of a dream he doesn’t even remember dreaming, with Bucky wrapped around him, just a little bit softer around the hard, unforgiving edges, just a little bit more peaceful, and Steve can’t bring himself to stop this, them sharing his bed, because Bucky needs the physical closeness and comfort more than Steve needs his sanity intact.
He’s getting close now—he’s getting so, so close, when there’s a knock on the door and Steve can hear the quiet rustling of Bucky’s clothes on the other side even with the drumming sound of his heart in his ears.

“Steve?” Bucky asks, his voice low and husky, and Steve almost, almost comes right then, clamps his hand over his mouth and stays very, very still. “You okay in there? Want some coffee or something to eat?”

Steve needs to fight to keep his eyes open and his hands still; he could easily drown in the sound of Bucky’s voice alone, the way he’s been slowly drowning since he was fifteen, a lifetime or two ago. It would be so simple—to give in. Steve keeps motionless, his hands curled into fists at his sides.

“Yeah, sure, I could eat. And everything’s fine,” he says, his voice weak, stiff and unnatural, the way it always gets when he has something to hide, and Bucky knows this, he can’t not recognize that tone, but for whatever reason, he doesn’t press the issue. Steve can hear his footsteps fading as Bucky heads in the direction of the kitchen.

Steve comes approximately ten seconds later with his eyes screwed shut and his lips hurting from the way he presses them together to keep the sound in.

There’s no satisfaction in it, only guilt and longing.

It’s a chilly, windy morning when Steve boards the six a.m. train to D.C. He’s supposed to meet with Natasha before the hearing, but that’s still more than three hours away, and he passes the time alternating between reading the paper, browsing the internet on his phone and discreet people-watching. He notices that some of those people watch him back when they think he’s not looking.

The train isn’t too crowded, but the majority of the seats are taken, and when the train stops in Philadelphia, a young girl sits down next to Steve with a heavy sigh, headphones on, ready to disappear into her Kindle and shut out the world around her. Steve envies her a little—with his heightened senses, the world is a constant blur of noise and color, and movement, and it’s hard for him to ignore that even when he closes his eyes.

When he checks his phone, just as they arrive in Baltimore, there are two texts from Natasha, saying that there are already paparazzi waiting for him on Capitol Hill, and then some more ready to ambush him at Union.

_i thought this might happen_, he texts back.

_want me to distract them? :D_, reads the next message.

Steve just smiles.

_NATASHA_, he sends.

The train arrives five minutes late, and the people getting off at Union look around with confusion, squinting when the camera flashes hit their eyes. Steve knows there’s no way he’s getting out of this unrecognized, but he tries to weave through the crowd away from the reporters, his shoulders hunched and his head down.

Natasha catches up to him just as he walks out of the station and into the blinding, autumn D.C. sun.
“What are you going to tell them?” she asks, and it’s a strange sort of déjà vu, like looking into a distorted mirror.

Steve shrugs, kicks a pebble that skips down the sidewalk and he watches it until it stops a few yards away.

“The truth.”

Natasha is quiet for a moment, like she’s turning the next question over in her head. They walk in silence for a while, until she turns to look at Steve and asks, “And what are you going to tell him?”

Steve almost stumbles, losing the rhythm. “What?”

“Steve, come on, you’re a terrible liar,” Natasha says, but her tone is amused more than anything else. “And I realize I’m the last person who should be saying that honesty is the best policy, but maybe you should try that anyway, you know.”

Steve gives her a sad, tired smile.

They get coffee at Starbucks and pretzels from one of the local vendors, and they eat them slowly as they walk in the direction of Capitol Hill at an unhurried pace.

“How is he doing, though?” Natasha asks, flicking the crumbs off her jacket. Steve knows why she’s asking—it’s more than just simple courtesy, it’s the knowledge that she wasn’t the only one who was used and brainwashed, and lied to, and the knowledge that you can come out on the other side and live, not just exist.

Steve takes a deep breath but finds that he doesn’t even have to lie when he says, “Better. He’s doing much better.”

It shouldn’t come as such a surprise, but he guesses he’s been so wrapped up in their little life inside of Steve’s apartment that it took the physical distance away from that self-contained world and from Bucky for Steve to gain this sort of perspective.

“And how about you?” Her voice is more quiet this time, more intimate, and there’s fondness in it that can’t be mistaken for anything else.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he says, and it’s equal parts evasion and complete, honest truth. “You and Sam, and Bucky. It doesn’t feel like I’m in this alone. That helps.”

It’s an amazing thing—to see Natasha smile while she’s trying to pretend she’s not.

“C’mon, Rogers, don’t go all sappy on me, you’re making me blush,” she says, bumping into him with her shoulder. “And speaking of, is Sharon coming? I haven’t heard from her lately.”

Steve shakes his head. “No, they’re keeping her busy at Langley, she couldn’t make it.”

“I bet she’d love that, though.”

Steve huffs out an amused laugh. “Yeah, you don’t say.”

Natasha smiles with the corner of her mouth. “Ah, the fresh smell of incompetence in the morning.”

“I think she’s already filling her quota at work,” Steve says. “Judging from her messages.”
Natasha pretends to consider something for a moment.

“I’ll keep her updated, just in case,” she says.

Steve pushes through the crowd of reporters and paparazzi gathered on the stairs, Natasha a calm, confident presence just a few steps behind him. He looks straight ahead with his head held high, but his throat is dry, parched, and he can feel his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest. The reporters are shouting questions at him, but he doesn’t engage as he climbs up the Capitol stairs, his steps sure and measured.

The room is full when he enters, cameras everywhere, and he can feel the eyes of everyone on him. Natasha touches his forearm briefly in a comforting gesture before she takes a seat in the last row, right next to the exit.

He could swear he heard her say, *give them hell*.

When he finally takes his own seat at the center of the room, he feels strangely calm, all of the earlier apprehension gone now, replaced with a sense of determined certainty. He sits straight, refusing to appear intimidated, his face a stone mask. (Natasha should be proud.)

Steve can hear the quiet hum of people behind him, can see the camera flashes in his peripheral vision. *It’s just noise,* he repeats in his head over and over again. *It’s just noise.*

He briefly wonders if Bucky is watching C-SPAN.

“Please, state your full name and date of birth for the record,” says the committee chairman, after they have already sworn Steve in.

Steve leans in closer to the microphone. “Steven Grant Rogers, born on fourth of July, nineteen eighteen,” he says. He can hear a few hushed noises from the back—despite the overwhelming media exposure, it still throws people for a loop to hear him say it out loud.

“Why the prolonged silence, Captain Rogers?” asks one of the generals, and Steve has been on this side of that unmistakable displeased expression from his superior officers often enough to recognize it immediately. “You had been asked to appear in front of this committee to answer our questions once before, but you did not think it important enough to comply with our request.”

“I have been attending to important personal matters,” Steve says, his voice calm and even. “And, to be completely frank, I didn’t think I had anything to contribute to this committee’s investigation at the time, given that Agent Romanoff—”

“Yes, yes,” one of the senators interjects, and Steve grits his teeth, “Miss Romanoff mentioned that you—”

“Agent.”

The senator starts, visibly baffled. “Excuse me?”

“Agent Romanoff.”

There’s a murmur rising behind Steve, but he keeps looking straight ahead.

“Captain Rogers,” the senator says, “I don’t appreciate your tone, and besides, the agency for which Miss Romanoff used to work doesn’t even exist at the moment, no thanks to your efforts,
so I don’t see how that’s even relevant at this point.”

“And I’m not part of the military anymore, but I can hardly see that stopping you,” Steve barrels on, stubbornly refusing to take his eyes off the man. He could swear he hears Natasha laugh quietly at the back of the room.

“Captain Rogers, according to Agent Romanoff’s testimony,” the senator says pointedly, “there was indeed not much for you to say, but this committee begs to differ. For example, how would you account for the fact that you did not use the appropriate SHIELD protocols and containment procedures?”

Steve takes a deep breath, then a second one, and another.

“With all due respect, sir,” he says, “but I think that all the members of the military and other special forces on this committee will agree with me when I say that using what amounts to enemy protocols during a covert op is not something any commanding officer would advise. And at the time, SHIELD was overrun by HYDRA. They knew those protocols because they designed them. I didn’t think that part even needed explanation.”

The next few questions are similarly fruitless, and he’s not entirely sure what point they’re trying to prove, if any, but he feels strangely like he’s unwillingly taking part in a witch-hunt. He missed the first one, frozen under the ice, but apparently history does have a way of repeating itself, it seems. It’s far from a comforting thought.

“Captain Rogers,” a red-haired woman whom Steve vaguely recognizes as a Democratic senator from Rhode Island looks at him with scrutiny, “do you recognize the person in this photograph?”

To the left, on a big flat screen tv, they show the grainy photo of Bucky with his mask and goggles on, the one which circulated in the media a few weeks back.

“Is that the person responsible for the D.C. attacks as well as the death of Nicholas Fury, former Director of SHIELD?” she continues while Steve’s eyes don’t leave the photo even for a second.

He’s strangely calm when he answers, “This is the man I fought on the Insight helicarrier during the HYDRA attack, yes. But I think we shouldn’t forget that the man who personally orchestrated and ordered to carry out those attacks was Alexander Pierce, who acted on behalf of HYDRA. If you’re looking for someone to blame, you don’t need to look any further than that.”

Steve can see the surprise in their faces.

“So what you’re saying,” one of the generals asks, “is that the man who leveled a significant part of Washington to the ground and personally assassinated Director Fury was, what, a puppet? Is that what you’re saying, Captain Rogers? Please, help me understand here, because, frankly, I’m lost. Do you or do you not know the real identity of the D.C. shooter?”

Steve breathes steadily in and out. “I do,” he says. It’s just noise, he repeats in his head. Behind him, people are starting to get loud.

“Well?” the general continues. “Would you care to enlighten us?”

“The man in that photo is an operative the special forces community refers to as the Winter Soldier.” In and out, it’s that easy. “But to the rest of the American public, he’s known only as Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes.”

There’s an almost deafening noise as the words leave Steve’s mouth, then nothing. He can hear
the frantic beating of his heart, his own, slightly ragged breath. Everyone else is holding theirs.

“Is that a joke, Captain Rogers?” the senator from Rhode Island asks after a long while, disturbing the heavy silence. “Are you seriously trying to tell us that Sergeant James Barnes, who died in the service of this country during the Second World War, is suddenly alive and working for a Nazi terrorist organization?”

“No, ma’am senator,” Steve says. By his sides, his hands aren’t shaking. “I’m saying that Sergeant James Barnes has been a prisoner of war for the last seventy years.”

It’s still so, so quiet, everybody watching him in stunned silence.

“Please, explain yourself, Captain Rogers,” the chairman says eventually, but Steve can see he has a hard time forming coherent sentences. “How is that even possible?”

“He never died. Sergeant Barnes survived the fall in the Alps,” Steve says, and when he closes his eyes for a second, he can still hear the echo of that scream. “He had already been tortured and experimented on during his time as a prisoner of war at the HYDRA facility in Austria, and he had received some sort of serum treatment before he was rescued along with the rest of his unit. That probably helped him survive the fall from the train. He was then found and captured by HYDRA operatives. They knew he was a valuable asset, so they continued the treatment with what we can assume was the perfected version of the supersoldier serum. His left arm had been shattered in the fall, so it was amputated while Sergeant Barnes was conscious and replaced with a metal prosthesis. After that, Sergeant Barnes was continuously tortured and brainwashed for the next seventy years.”

Steve swallows thickly and blinks furiously a few times. His entire jaw hurts, the muscles screaming in pain.

“Brainwashed? Tortured?” the chairman asks. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“Conditioning. Shock therapy. Regular memory wipes. Indoctrination. Sleep deprivation.” Steve can barely see the table in front of him as he recites the list from the file Natasha gave him. “Sensory deprivation. Hypnosis. Isolation. Chemical castration. Waterboarding. Drug injection.” He stops for a moment. “Sergeant Barnes had no memory of his life before his capture, or even of his prior missions. He didn’t recognize me. He didn't know who he really was. He had no idea they had made him into a weapon, into a thing. He had no idea he was even human.”

The committee members are quiet for a moment, then one of them asks, “If this were true, Sergeant Barnes would be an old man by now. The man in the photograph clearly isn’t. How do you explain that, Captain Rogers?”

“Sergeant Barnes was kept in cryogenic suspension in between the missions. Which, I would argue, is a form of torture in itself,” Steve says. “He was also conscious during the process, which initially took up to three hours to complete, according to the data in the HYDRA file obtained by my sources.”

“You mean Agent Romanoff.”

Steve lets it go unanswered, but he clenches his fists so hard under the table that the nails almost break the skin.

“Captain Rogers, you mentioned memory wipes,” the Rhode Island senator speaks again. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“They developed a process—they would wipe Sergeant Barnes after each mission, because his
mind was constantly fighting the HYDRA programming,” Steve explains. “That’s also why they used sleep deprivation, especially during those missions when he had to stay out of the cryogenic suspension for a longer period of time, because sleep allowed the serum to rapidly start healing the damage to his brain and he would start to fight his handlers. So they never let him sleep, sometimes for days. A week, in one case. Then he went back for a memory wipe and back to cryostasis.”

“So he did carry out numerous assassinations on behalf of HYDRA, after all?” The senator asking the question looks straight at Steve with a challenge in his eyes.

“HYDRA used him to carry out numerous assassinations over the decades,” Steve says, almost shaking from the barely contained rage. “There’s a difference. That wasn’t him. He had no say in this, no free will, no identity. He was their weapon, nothing else. You don’t ask the weapon its opinion. You clean it, load it and fire it. That’s all. And that’s exactly what they did.”

The senator doesn’t look convinced. “Captain Rogers,” he continues, “don’t you think that your close relationship with Sergeant Barnes, or the Winter Soldier, or whatever you want to call the man who killed the Director of SHIELD and left D.C. in ruins, might be clouding your judgment?”

Steve wants to go. He wants to stand up, walk out and run until he’s back in New York, back at his apartment, with Bucky safe and alive, and close enough to touch. He grits his teeth and doesn’t even bother to hide his anger.

“With all due respect, sir, I don’t agree. The truth is, if it weren’t for Sergeant Barnes, I wouldn’t be here today, testifying in front of this committee, pointless as this entire hearing has been so far,” he says. “Because I would’ve drowned in the Potomac on the day of the HYDRA attack. It was Sergeant Barnes who saved my life. He dragged me back to the shore while heavily injured and made sure I was safe before leaving.”

This visibly makes them pause for a second, and suddenly Steve is so, so tired—he’s exhausted, aching down to the bone, and he doesn’t think he has any words left in him. But he sits there—he sits there and answers the questions, even when, deep down, he just wants to go home.

“Captain Rogers,” the Rhode Island senator asks finally, “are you aware of the current whereabouts of Sergeant Barnes?”

He pauses for a moment to take a deep breath, then says, “Yes.” This time, there is an uproar on all sides. Steve waits for it to die down before continuing. “Sergeant Barnes has been living with me for the last three months, recovering under my protection.”

He looks at the members of the committee, daring them to say something, anything.

There’s a cacophony of sounds after that, questions and thinly veiled threats shouted at him from all directions, and Steve is so, so ready to be done with all of it.

“I don’t think there is anything else left for me to say,” he informs them tersely, “and, frankly, I don’t appreciate the implications behind the committee’s questions as well as the indirect accusations with regard to my loyalties, so if you’ll excuse me, I’m needed back in New York.”

He’s outside, walking hurriedly in the direction of the Union Station, followed by the paparazzi, by the time he realizes he’s shaking.

Natasha catches up to him just as he enters the station. She doesn’t say anything, but she stands on her tiptoes and hugs him until Steve can breathe again.
“Let’s get you home,” she whispers into Steve’s ear.

They go together.
so, first of all, i’m so, so sorry for the long wait. you have no idea how sorry i am for leaving you hanging for such a long time. i’m also incredibly grateful to everyone who left feedback or messaged me in the meantime, so i really hope this chapter doesn’t disappoint. as always, thank you once again for all the lovely comments, kudos and messages, and also thank you to beardsley for all the cheerleading and hand-holding, you’re the absolute best 🖤
also, this is more of a slightly shorter breather chapter before the plot picks up again, but still, things happen, okay. trust me.

Natasha comes with Steve all the way up to the loft and leans against the wall as he fishes the keys out of his pocket.

“You think I should come in?” she asks in a hushed tone. She looks tired but calm, betraying no apprehension.

There are quiet footsteps on the other side and before Steve can answer, the door opens to Bucky, his eyes still puffy from sleep and his feet bare; suddenly, he’s close enough to touch. Steve makes an aborted gesture, as if uncertain in the light of today’s events, aware of Natasha’s curious eyes observing them, but it’s Bucky who closes the distance without hesitation, and Steve melts into it, closes his eyes and breathes.

“Did you watch it?” he asks after a moment, and Bucky nods.

“I heard you talking, just now,” he says then and steps aside, allowing them to enter. Natasha hovers in the doorway for a few seconds, as if still deliberating, but Steve ushers her in.

“Come on in, a cup of coffee is the least I can do,” he says. The light at the apartment is low, muted, and there’s a record playing on the turntable, something old, quiet and soothing.

“Widow,” Steve hears Bucky say behind his back, and it’s cautious, guarded, like he’s not entirely sure how to address her, in this strange space in which they’re not fighting or trying to kill each other, slowly covering the new ground with tentative steps.

“Natasha. I think we’re past codenames now, don’t you think, Barnes?” she says, her tone light and neutral.

There’s a moment of silence, then, “Bucky.”

Steve doesn’t have to turn around to know that there’s a small smile playing on Natasha’s lips.

“Then Bucky it is.”

She doesn’t stay long—they’re both dead on their feet and dream of nothing more than a shower and a warm bed—but before she goes, she pulls Steve into the hall with her and says in a low voice, “Remember that thing I told you about earlier? Yeah, now might be a good time.”

She kisses him on the cheek and shuts the door behind her, leaving Steve alone, leaning against
the wall with his eyes closed. It’s only then that he realizes how raw he feels, how utterly exposed and laid open, and so, so tired. He sits on the floor, with his back to the brick, until Bucky wanders into the hall.

“Steve?” he asks. “You okay?”

_No, Steve wants to say, no, I’m not okay, I haven’t been okay for a long, long time, since before the war, before this, and I love you, and I can’t do this anymore._

“Yeah, Buck,” he says instead, but it rings false, and he’s always been a bad liar. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just— tired. Did you want something?”

“I remembered something, earlier, and it’s—” Bucky pauses for a moment, and Steve looks up at him, then climbs to his feet. “I think it might’ve just been a dream, but it’s— blurry, and it doesn’t feel like a dream, and I— I need you to tell me.”

“Tell you what, Buck?” Steve asks, and takes a step closer—it’s a mistake, he knows, because he’s suddenly too close, and when Bucky looks at him, he can’t _not_ look back.

“Just— just tell me if I got it all wrong. If that’s not what you want,” Bucky says, and kisses him. It’s tentative, chaste, just a light press of lips against lips, but it leaves Steve frozen in place, unable to move, or speak, or think. After a few seconds, Bucky stops.

“Okay, I— Okay,” he says, and his voice is quiet; it is so, so quiet.

Steve’s ears are ringing and he feels unbalanced, like a half-empty glass that’s been tipped over. Bucky takes half a step back.

“Christ, I’m sorry, Steve, I—” he starts, the words fading quickly.

Steve catches Bucky by the wrist, stops him from moving away.

“It was,” he says, his voice hoarse, rough around the edges, like he hasn’t spoken in years. Like he hasn’t spoken since that night he kissed Bucky in the abandoned factory, in the middle of the war. “It was real, Buck.”

He touches Bucky’s face, runs his thumb along the line of his cheekbone, then brings Bucky’s hand to his lips and gently kisses the knuckles. When he looks up, Bucky is still staring at their joined fingers. Under Steve’s shirt, the dog tags are burning into his skin, and he can feel the drag of the chain around his neck with every intake of breath.

This time, when Bucky kisses him, Steve kisses back and doesn’t close his eyes.

It’s slow, unhurried, and goes on until they’re completely still, pressed against each other, breathing each other in, and for the first time since he woke up, Steve feels anchored, grounded. At home. It’s almost a foreign feeling by now, one he associates with his mother’s gentle hands and lazy, sunny afternoons spent with a book in his lap, leaning against Bucky until they both fell asleep, warm and content.

When he finally looks up, Bucky’s lips are so, so red, and Steve thinks briefly, _I did this_, before he
chases after him with his mouth.

There’s a strange tightness in his chest, his throat, and he feels a bit like he wants to laugh—a bit like he wants to cry.

“Why now?” he asks when they break for air, their foreheads touching.

Bucky licks his lips, looking at Steve, so close that it almost hurts, and he’s there, he’s right there, solid and warm, and real, and alive, and Steve can’t stop touching him. Can’t believe he’s allowed to touch.

“I just had to know,” Bucky whispers. “Thought I was going crazy, and when you said we weren’t— That we never— I just had to know.”

Steve laughs then, quiet and broken, because after two lifetimes of wanting and not having, he’s still, deep down, that fifteen-year-old boy from Brooklyn who had no idea how to tell his best friend he was in love with him so much that it hurt to breathe. Now he knows the way Bucky tastes in the dim light seeping into the hall from the living room. He wants to know if he tastes different in daylight. If he tastes different in the dark.

“Come on,” he says and takes Bucky’s hand in his. He doesn’t let go even for a moment, desperate in his need to stay close to Bucky, to ground himself in his warmth.

“You didn’t have to lie to me, Steve,” Bucky says when they sit down on the bed, side by side, their thighs touching. Bucky isn’t looking at Steve, but their fingers are still laced together. “What did you even do that for?”

It’s hard to explain—the years he spent convinced that Bucky would never look at Steve the same way if he knew (because Bucky is the best man Steve has ever known, but it would be different between them, the unspoken tension always at the back of their minds), the years he spent convinced that Bucky would never look at a man the way he looked at the women he took out dancing and kissed under the streetlamps and fucked in their beds until they made soft, breathy noises or muffled their screams when they came. The weeks—months—after Bucky’s return, when Steve knew Bucky had to become a person again before he could be anything else. The way Steve never thought Bucky could be something else for him, apart from what they used to be to each other.

“It wouldn’t be fair,” Steve says then, his heart in his throat all of a sudden. “It wouldn’t be fair to you, and it was never about what I wanted, not when you came back and you—I’ve been dealing with this for a long time, never thought I’d—”

“How long?” Bucky asks, his voice soft and quiet, and Steve can feel his eyes on him, but he doesn’t stop staring at their joined hands, unable to speak. “Steve, how long?”

It takes everything in Steve to tell the truth.

“I was fifteen,” he says. “I was fifteen, and less than nothing to look at, and never even been kissed, and you were a man, all broad and handsome, and the girls who would never give me the time of day were all sweet on you, and I couldn’t even blame them, because you were you, and I wanted—” He takes a deep breath. “I just knew what I could and couldn’t have, that’s all.”

“Jesus, Steve—”

Bucky touches his face, metal fingers cool against his skin, trying to get Steve to look at him, but it’s like the flood gates have been opened, and the words just tumble out, impossible to stop.
“Remember when we got drunk at your parents’ and you showed me those dirty pictures?” Steve asks and swallows thickly around the tightness in his throat. Bucky thinks for a moment, then shakes his head. “It was the middle of summer, the weather was really hot, so we stayed inside. We were alone, and you stole some of your father’s liquor and showed me some dirty pictures you got off of Johnny Carter. You got tipsy, and then you got real excited by the pictures, asked if I liked what I was seeing, and the only thing I could think of was how much I wanted to kiss you.”

He can see the tendons in Bucky’s jaw working as he digests Steve’s words for a moment.

“So if I didn’t kiss you today—” he starts, then stops, bites gently into his lower lip.

“You’ve been doing so good, Buck.” Steve draws small circles at the base of Bucky’s thumb with his finger. “You’ve been getting better, you are getting better, every day, and I wouldn’t be able to look at myself in the mirror if I did anything to fuck that up.”

“You didn’t.” Bucky untangles their fingers and takes Steve’s face in his hands, forcing him to look straight at Bucky. “You’re the best man I’ve ever known, Steve, I know you’d never do anything like that, but I’m not the only one who got all fucked up by this, by everything, and you deserve to have something, too. You don’t gotta keep that all in.”

Steve knows Bucky is right about him. He’s the kind that bleeds on the inside until he chokes on his own blood.

“And I was always looking at you,” Bucky adds quietly after a moment.

Steve doesn’t exactly know what to do with that revelation. He feels a bit like somebody just punched him in the stomach, and he can taste the lost time like bitterness in his mouth. But maybe, he thinks, these things happen for a reason. Maybe it’s more than just another cruel joke at his expense. Maybe they were supposed to be here, in the end. Maybe this is what the back of their book looks like.

The worst thing is—he’s selfish enough that he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Steve moves, slowly, deliberately—he buries his face in the crook of Bucky’s neck, breathes in his scent. “I missed you so much,” he says, his voice thick and rough. “It was like breathing, you know. Loving you. I didn’t know how to stop. That was the worst thing.”

It’s easier that he thought it would be, to say it out loud.

Steve presses his lips against the warm skin of Bucky’s throat and kisses him gently, runs his fingers along the curve of his jawline. It’s an exhilarating feeling, like an endorphin high but better, and Steve hadn’t felt like this since the last time he got drunk—they went out for drinks the night before Bucky left for basic, and they walked back home at two in the morning, tipsy and laughing, and Steve thought, I’m going to lose him, and then he thought of nothing at all.

“Now you don’t have to,” Bucky says, kisses him one more time.

He could get used to this, he thinks. He wants to get used to this, until this, too, feels as natural as breathing.

Steve wakes up to Bucky sleeping peacefully next to him and a text from Natasha.

don’t turn on the news
He blinks a few times, chasing the bleariness away and looks down at Bucky, who makes a soft sound and shifts closer in his sleep, closing his hand around the dog tags on Steve’s chest.

A quick search on his phone reveals the reason behind Natasha’s message, and she was right, he didn’t want to see this. It’s not unexpected, and Steve’s never had any illusions about it, but it still hurts to see treason and terrorist plastered right there on the front pages.

There’s some good, too, as well as the bad, people and news outlets coming out in support, but the vitriol is vicious, ugly, and Steve feels faintly sick when he reads some of the comments. Doesn’t mean they have to take it lying down. They never did, before, and there’s no reason to start now.

(He’s done. He’s done hiding, done pretending like he doesn’t want to scream at the world Bucky sacrificed himself to protect and all he got in return was pain and suffering, and the word traitor smeared all over his name. He’s done.)

06:38, says the digital clock. There are no paparazzi outside when Steve looks out of the window, the weather is nice, for late November, and Sam is coming to pick him up in twenty minutes.

Steve wanders back in the direction of the bed, looks at Bucky, still sleeping soundly, curled in on himself, and shakes him gently by the shoulder. Bucky starts awake, eyes wide open and fingers grasping around the non-existent knife under his pillow.

“It’s just me,” Steve says, kneeling on the bed to finally sit down on the edge of the mattress, half-twisted to face Bucky. “Sam’s coming in a few minutes to pick me up for a run. Wanna come with? This way, we can both kick his ass.”

Bucky shrugs, but there’s a small smile tugging up the corner of his mouth. “Can’t let him get too out of shape,” he says, then grows more somber. “Steve— What are they saying?”

Steve doesn’t even try to pretend he doesn’t know what Bucky is talking about, but he still rises to his feet and pads, barefoot, to the kitchen to get some coffee going before he answers.

“Some people are just glad you’re finally home. Some people— aren’t. There are a lot of people who mostly want to see someone punished, publicly, someone other than Pierce. But we already knew that.” He grips the edge of the counter until his knuckles turn white. “It’s not about justice, it’s about the spectacle.”

When he turns around, Bucky is standing by the window, looking out. This, too, is progress. He used to flinch every time Steve got close to any of the windows, like he was looking for a flash of a sniper rifle, for light reflected in the sights.

The coffee is still almost scalding-hot when he approaches Bucky from behind and hands him the mug, dropping a brief, affectionate kiss on his shoulder. Bucky stills for a second, then shakes his head, huffs out an unamused laugh.

“Look, we don’t have to—” Steve starts, but Bucky cuts him off.

“No, Steve. It was just a stupid reaction, that’s all. I may be fucked up, but it’s fine.”

“Okay. Okay.” This time, when Steve’s fingers close around the jut of Bucky’s hip, he just leans into the touch.

“I have no idea why I keep doing these things to myself,” Sam says, still out of breath, with his head down and his hands on his knees, bent in half. “And now there’s two of you.”
Steve laughs and tosses Bucky a bottle of water. “We’re just doing you a favor, really. Making sure civilian life doesn’t make you too soft, that sort of thing.”

Without looking up, Sam gives him the finger.

“I’m moving out of the Tower,” he says later, when they’re walking to a breakfast place in Hell’s Kitchen, just off of 34th Street. There are dark, leaden clouds gathering above their heads and the air smells like first snow. “It’s been fun, y’know, but I think it’s time I got a place of my own, if I’m going to stay here permanently.”

Steve nods. “You got something in mind?”

“No, I’m still looking, but I’m not in any hurry, either.” Sam pushes his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket. “Still, would be nice to get settled again.”

“You could always ask Clint,” Steve suggests. “Maybe he has some free leases in his building.”

“Maybe I should,” Sam says, considering.

It would be nice to have Sam this close to them, Steve thinks. Not like the old times, in the old neighborhood where everyone knew everyone else—it’s impossible to go back, he knows, and he wouldn’t even want to, now—but still comforting. Familiar.

They arrive at the breakfast place just as a guy with a white cane walks out in a hurry, another guy at his heels, both followed by a tall, blonde girl who gives the three of them a brief, curious look before she catches up to her companions just as they cross the street.

The place is busy this time of day and they look for a free table for a while before deciding on ordering out. Bucky hovers at a safe distance while Steve and Sam wait for their order, but people are starting to notice. They’re starting to stare. They should’ve expected this—Steve knows their faces have been plastered all over the news since yesterday, and there are probably paparazzi trying to hunt them down. Still, it’s a disconcerting thought, and Steve has been dealing with this—with the not entirely subtle glances and the covert photo-taking—ever since the news of his return broke out, but this is new for Bucky, who just stares ahead with unseeing eyes, his mouth a thin, straight line, his jaw set painfully.

“Come on, Buck, we got our food. Let’s go,” Steve says, guiding him gently towards the exit with a hand at the small of his back. Once they’re outside, it seems like Bucky can breathe again.

It starts to snow just as they reach the subway. Big, half-frozen snowflakes get tangled in their hair only to melt away after a moment, and Steve remembers Europe, remembers that cold, harsh winter that left them gaunt and hungry for warmth, and he remembers the old Brooklyn, their old apartment, and those long, cold nights he spent curled up next to Bucky, desperately wishing not to die.

The evening creeps in unexpectedly, like a thief, accompanied by more snow and that particular stillness that comes after the first snowfall, when the entire world seems to be suspended in time for a short while.

There are a few paparazzi camped out on the sidewalk across from his building, though Steve is secretly surprised there isn’t more of them, and he’s also starting to suspect that it might be Pepper’s doing, but either way, he’s grateful. He still pointedly doesn’t turn on the news.
Behind the closed curtains, they can pretend for a little while that the world doesn’t extend beyond the walls of Steve’s apartment.

It’s still fresh and fragile, this thing between them, and at the same time it’s as familiar and natural as breathing. They sit together on the sofa, curled into each other, absentmindedly half-watching the tv show Steve has put on, and when Steve turns his head, he can smell the strong, clean scent of Bucky’s soap on his skin.

“I did, too, you know,” Bucky says at one point, but he looks away and his voice is soft, quiet, like it’s a secret he’s kept for too long. “Loved you. Still do.”

It does something to Steve in that hollow place behind his sternum, and it almost hurts to hear it, but it’s good, too. It’s the best thing Steve has ever felt.

“I think I remember your mother,” Bucky continues after a while, and it’s another sharp stab, a wound that has long since scarred over but still hurts sometimes. “You look like her. She had kind eyes and kind hands, but God help you if you made her really cross with you. Like that time you almost broke your hand trying to punch Tommy McCormick’s lights out and I had to drag your sorry ass back home.”

Steve laughs softly. “Yeah, ma did the whole I’m so disappointed with you thing so well. Didn’t even have to yell.”

“Now imagine if she saw you run off to join Uncle Sam.” Bucky shakes his head. “Christ, Steve, I still sometimes can’t believe you really did it. I just wanted you to be safe, not to try and get yourself killed the minute I wasn’t there to whack you across your stupid head.”

He sometimes thinks about it—how different their lives would’ve been if he’d never left Brooklyn. Or if he did but they both came back after the war, safe and sound, and just a little less broken, just a little less disillusioned. Just a little more alive.

“We’re here now, aren’t we?” he asks, and that’s the most important thing. They’re still here, against all odds, and below them, the world is white white white.

(It’s just this, a moment in time, suspended in between two heartbeats, and when Steve leans in, Bucky is there, warm and soft, and alive. It’s enough. It’s everything.)

End Notes

as usual, please, come say hi on tumblr if you want. :)

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