Still Into You

by samwise_baggins, Steve-Bucky-Stucky (Chemical30)

Summary

Six years ago, Steve rejected Bucky in the most painful of ways . . . Now, after a series of life-altering events, Bucky is back on his feet . . . but his world threatens to shatter when Steve Rogers comes back into his life.
The Met

The warm June day made a sheer layer of sweat gather on Bucky’s back, making his thin cotton henley stick to his skin. The air conditioner broke a few days ago and the repairman couldn’t get to his townhome for two more days, so he’d have to suffer through the summer heat, with just his ceiling fans to alleviate the warm air that had settled in the home. The brunet shoved two granola bars into his black backpack when he heard tiny feet stomp down the wooden staircase.

“Uncle Bucky!” Ava’s voice rang out. Bucky straightened and turned to face his five year old niece. Her dark brown curls bounced with each step she took; her favorite pink sundress twirled around her legs as she ran over to where her uncle stood. “Uncle Bucky! I can’t find my bag! It’s not in my room!”

Laughing softly, Bucky narrowed his eyes in concentration as he tried to remember where the last place he’d seen the little girl’s purse that she insisted she take everywhere with her. Walking over to the kitchen, he saw the small purple bag lying on the countertop. “Squirt! You left it on the counter!” He called as he opened the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of water.

Ava ran into the kitchen and leaned up on the tips of her toes to grab her bag, which only contained a few stickers and a tube of shimmering lip gloss that Bucky had put in her stocking for Christmas.

“You sure you want to bring that today?” Bucky asked motioning towards the small bag with a tilt of his chin. “We’re gonna be doin’ a lot of walking. If you bring it, you have to carry it all day.”

She slung it over her shoulder and beamed up at her uncle, her bright blue eyes sparkling with joy. “I’ll carry it all day, Uncle Bucky, I promise. Can we go now?” She bounced slightly on the heels of her feet, “Please?”

Bucky walked into the living room and put the bottles of water in the backpack. “Alright, Squirt. Just because you asked nicely,” he said as he grabbed the bag and put in on over his shoulders. Ava followed closely behind as they left the home; Bucky turned to lock the front door before offering his right hand to his niece. She grabbed it happily and they walked down the front steps.

A light breeze shifted in the air and Bucky welcomed it gladly, having been stuck in their stuffy townhome all morning, some fresh air did both of them some good. By his side, Ava nearly skipped in excitement, she didn’t know where they were going but she knew it was Friday, and on Friday’s they always did something fun.

Opening the back, passenger side, door of his silver sedan Bucky motioned for Ava to get in. The little girl hopped into her car seat and her uncle helped buckle her up before shutting the door and getting into the driver’s seat. Bucky started the car and eased out of their driveway, looking at his niece from the rearview mirror, he said, “Now, Ava, where we are going today . . . there are gonna be some rules that you have to follow, alright?”

Bottom lip jutting out in a small pout, Ava kicked her feet in agitation, “Rules? Friday is supposed to be fun day. Rules aren’t fun.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Bucky shook his head, “Do you just want to stay home then?”

“No!” Ava answered quickly, eyes wide, “No! I wanna go somewhere with you, Uncle Bucky!”

Laughing softly, Bucky pulled onto the main expressway and nodded, “Alright then, so like I was
saying, the place we are going to, you have to behave, okay?"

“Where are we going?” Ava asked, tilting her head slightly.

“An art museum. It’s called The Met. Now people are going to be there that want to look at art . . .
that means you can’t run around or make a lot of noise.” Bucky winced slightly, he didn’t know how
taking an excitable five year old to a museum was going to go. The brunet had planned on
taking his niece to Coney Island, but with the air conditioning breaking, he’d been forced to
change plans. The Met had a ‘pay what you can’ policy, so Bucky could afford to take Ava to the
museum.

Ava scrunched up her nose in distaste, “Sounds boring.” She grumbled and crossed her small
arms across her chest.

Eyes flicking to meet with Ava’s through the mirror before returning to the road, Bucky laughed
softly, “I think you’re gonna like it, I used to have a friend who loved art-” The brunet stopped
mid sentence, his breath hitching in his throat. He hadn’t thought of Steve Rogers in a few
months, honestly that was a new record, Bucky cleared his throat and shook his head, “We get to
look at real pretty pictures, Ava. Just humor your Uncle and try to have fun, alright, Squirt?”

Ava seemed to think over this for a few minutes before uncrossing her arms, “Alright . . . but can
we get ice cream after?”

“If you behave,” Bucky laughed, leave it to his niece to try and bargain with him, “Then maybe,
we can get some ice cream later, deal?”

Smiling happily, seeming content with the offer, Ava nodded, “Okay. I’ll behave, Uncle Bucky.”

“I know you will.” Bucky said as he pulled into a public parking area near the museum. After he
paid for the parking, the brunet helped the little girl out of the car seat, Ava grabbed her small bag
and jumped out of the car. Bucky left his backpack in the car, knowing he’d be forced to check it
in since backpacks were not allowed inside the museum. If his niece got hungry or thirsty, they’d
just head back to the car to grab a snack. He grabbed Ava’s hand and began to walk towards the
large stone building.

Bucky had been to The Met a few times when he was in high school, once for a school project
and the other times Steve had practically dragged him; even though he’d been about half Bucky’s
size - - No, Bucky thought bitterly, stop thinking about Steve Rogers!

Shaking his head softly, Bucky led Ava across the street and they began climbing the steps that
led up to the front of the museum. The sun beamed down and Bucky suddenly wished he hadn’t
worn a long-sleeved shirt, but he hadn’t felt like dealing with all the stares and looks of pity that
were thrown his way when he showed his damaged left arm.

Tugging her uncle’s hand a few times, Ava asked, “Will there be pictures of doggies? I like dogs.
They’re cute!”

Laughing as they entered the cool, air conditioned museum, Bucky nodded, “Yeah, they are. I
don’t know if there will be anything with dogs . . . but we can look, okay?”

Seeming excited for the prospect of seeing paintings of dogs, Ava rocked on her heels as they
stopped at the front counter to pay for admission. The young woman behind the wooden counter
smiled as Bucky pulled out his wallet and gave her a twenty, a little below the suggested donation
but he figured it was better than nothing. After receiving their tickets and a map, Bucky grabbed
Ava’s hand again and led her further into the large main area.
“Uncle Bucky!” Ava exclaimed, her eyes wide in awe, “This place is so big!”

“How’s this?” Bucky grinned at the little girl fondly before unfold the map he’d gotten, “Where do you wanna start. We could go look at the Egyptian Art or The Greek . . . that’d be a lot of statues. Or maybe we can look at all the armor and stuff.”

Snapping her head to look up at Bucky, Ava smiled, “Like knights and princesses?”

“I don’t know about the princesses but there will be armor like knights would wear. Wanna start there?” Bucky asked and Ava nodded enthusiastically; the brunet smiled at the little girl and began to lead her through the Medieval art and into the room filled different types of armor from throughout history.

Ava detached herself from her uncle and wandered around, staring in open-mouthed wonder at the shining suits of armor displayed in the room. Bucky followed close behind but let the little girl look around without him leading, instead he smiled at the amusement displayed in Ava’s blue eyes as she looked at each and every glimmering suit. She turned to face Bucky and looked up, “I wanna be a knight when I grow up, Uncle Bucky. I wanna wear suits like these!”

Smiling, Bucky nodded, “You can do whatever you set your mind to. You can fight dragons and protect the princesses from the evil wizards.”

Giggling, Ava shook her head, “No! I’d protect the princes! Princes need protection, too, Uncle Bucky!”

“Ah, yes! Would you protect me from the dragons?” Bucky asked with a smirk.

“No!” Ava’s said, still laughing, “You’re a grown up! You don’t need protection!” And with that Ava turned away to look at an elaborate Chinese suit of armor. Bucky laughed softly and shook his head, following the little girl as she jumped around from each suit, offering her opinions on each and every one. Most of them, Bucky deduced, from his niece’s critique would look better if they were pink.

After several more minutes, Ava led Bucky into the next room, titled American Art. The dark blue and white walls stood out against the pieces of furniture displayed throughout the exhibit. A large portrait of George Washington hung on the opposite wall. This exhibit didn’t hold Ava’s attention for long and soon they were heading back into the Medieval art section. When they made their way into the sculptures exhibit, Bucky could see his niece start to drag her feet and look around with a slightly bored expression.

Ava looked up at Bucky and slipped the purse off her shoulders to hold it up to her uncle. Quirking a brow and tilting his head slightly, the brunet said, “You promised to hold it all day, remember?”

Bottom lip jutting out, Ava whined, “But I don’t wanna hold it anymore!”

“I’m not carrying it for you, Ava. I warned you about taking it with you today. You gotta hold it until we head back to the car, okay?” Bucky stated, his tone soft but firm.

The little girl groaned loudly and stomped her feet. “But it’s too heavy! I don’t wanna hold it anymore!”

Bucky opened his mouth to tell Ava if she continued to throw a tantrum that they’d go home, but his mouth snapped shut when he heard a familiar voice, a voice he hadn’t heard in nearly six years, call out, “Bucky? Bucky is that you?”
Whirling around to face the voice, Bucky’s eyes widened at the sight of a tall blond man. The man, who stood over six feet, and with arms the size of Bucky’s thighs had Steve’s face but the muscular man in front of him couldn’t be little Steve Rogers. The last time Bucky had seen his old best friend, the man had barely made it to his chin and the blond weighed just over a hundred pounds soaking wet. This modern version of Adonis couldn’t be the same man. Yet his voice sounded the same, maybe a little deeper, and his eyes were the same bright blue as the last time they’d seen each other.

Bucky looked over the man standing in front of him once more before saying, “Steve Rogers?” Bucky could feel Ava wrap her tiny fist in his jeans, pulling her body close to his leg, effectively hiding most her body from Steve. However, Bucky couldn’t miss how the blond’s eyes flickered to her direction before snapping back up to meet Bucky’s.

Steve smiled brightly, “You . . . uh . . . look great, Buck.”

Wincing at the old nickname, Bucky felt a blush creep up the back of his neck, thank God for long hair. The brunet licked his lips nervously before swallowing hard, “Thanks? You . . . I thought you were smaller.”

Chuckling, Steve rubbed the back of his neck, pink tinged his cheeks and he said, “Well yeah. Asthma cleared up and I hit my growth spurt real late. With my asthma taken care of, I could start working out.” The blond shrugged his large shoulders, and Bucky found himself staring at how the blond’s muscles seemed to ripple under his tight button down shirt.

Get it together, Barnes. Stop staring like some teenage girl.

“I can see that.” Real smooth. Bucky ran his right hand through his hair, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or cry at how awkward this whole conversation seemed to be. Ava clutched tighter on the pant leg of her uncle’s jeans.

Steve looked down at Ava again before asking, “You visiting with your family? Your wife here?” The blond craned his neck to look around the exhibit hall.

Fuck you, Rogers. You have no right to ask me that question. You know very well that I don’t have a wife. Bucky fought the urge to snap at his old friend. However, the brunet didn’t feel like starting a fight in the middle of a museum. “No.” Bucky grumbled, “This is Ava . . . my niece.”

Eyes widening slightly in surprise, Steve asked, “Becca had a kid? Is she here?”

“No.” This time Bucky couldn’t stop himself from snapping, “Just me and Ava here today. What are you doing here, Steve? Visiting with anybody?” The brunet needed to shift the conversation away from himself, from Steve asking why Becca wasn’t visiting with them.

Seeming slightly taken aback from the change in Bucky’s demeanor, Steve cleared his throat and shook his head. “No . . . I uh . . . I actually work here as an archivist.”

Great, I picked the one museum in New York where Steve Rogers happens to work, Bucky cursed himself, wishing suddenly he had just taken Ava to Coney Island instead, money be damned. “Wow . . . that’s great, Steve.” Bucky found himself saying, wanting nothing more than the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

“Yeah - - I’ve been workin’ here for a little under a month now.” Steve shifted nervously, scuffling his feet against the marble floor.

Good, he’s nervous. He should be nervous, the asshole.
“Graduated from that fancy school in DC, huh?” Bucky asked, his tone dripping with contempt.

“Buck . . .” Steve looked pained, his voice trailed off and Bucky didn’t miss how the blond’s blush only seemed to get worse.

Moving his right hand so that it rested gently on top of Ava’s head, his left having been shoved into his jean pocket, not wanting Steve to see the scarring, Bucky bit his lip and shook his head. “Well . . . as great as this was . . . I promised this one some ice cream . . . so I’ll see you around, Steve.” Bucky moved his hand down so it gripped Ava’s shoulder and he began to usher her past the taller man.

“Bucky! Wait!” Steve said, his voice urgent and nearly desperate.

Bucky’s whole body stiffened and he turned his head to at Steve from over his shoulder. “What?” The brunet’s breathed, he could feel his heart pounding in his chest and his blood rushed through his ears.

Sighing as he ran a hand through his blond hair, Steve said cautiously, “We should . . . I don’t know - - get coffee sometime. It’d be nice to catch up, ya know?”

No . . . No . . . No.

“Uh . . . yeah - - sure.” Shit. “Coffee . . . or something.” Bucky turned around fully to face the larger man. Stepping closer, the brunet fished out his cell phone, unlocked it, and held it out to Steve. “Here . . . put your number in.”

Steve pulled out his own phone and handed it to Bucky before taking the brunet’s and inputting his number in the contacts. The smaller man swallowed hard before typing out his contact information. Bucky gave Steve back his phone and grabbed his own from the blond’s outstretched hand. Putting the phone back in his pocket and grabbing Ava’s hand, Bucky nodded once and said, “See ya later, Steve.”

“It was nice seeing you, Bucky, really. I’ll give you a call and we can set up some time to get coffee alright?” Steve smiled.

Shit. Shit Shit. Bucky’s heart seemed to leap at the sight of Steve Rogers’ bright smile, a smile that he used to look forward to seeing every day. “Yeah . . . okay.” And before he could embarrass himself anymore, Bucky turned away and led Ava away and out of the museum, not daring to look back at the tall man.

After Bucky buckled Ava in her car seat, the brunet got back into the driver’s seat and just stared out the windshield. He felt his throat tighten as memories from his past surged forward and threatened to overwhelm him, however a small voice snapped him back to the present, “Uncle Bucky? Who was that . . . and why did he make you sad?”

Releasing a deep breath, Bucky muttered as he started the car, “Just an old friend.”

-----------------------------------------------

“You what?! Why would you do that?” Natasha snapped, jumping off the wooden counter she sat on.

Natasha Romanov owned the local bookstore, A New Chapter, with her husband Clint. Bucky had been their first and only employee when they had opened up, shortly after the brunet had received custody of his niece, but now he acted as the manager to the two other employees, Wanda and Pietro Maximoff because Nat and Clint had claimed they needed more time at home.
Bucky knew he got the promotion simply because his bosses knew he needed more money but refused to ask for help; he needed to earn what he made.

Huffing, Bucky shoved the book that he held in his hand onto the bookshelf in front of him. “I don’t know! I panicked, alright? It’s not like I planned to see him! I haven’t even talked to him in six years!”

Scowling, Nat surged forward and glanced at Ava, who sat at the front desk intently focused on her coloring book, before returning her eyes to Bucky. “Isn’t this the guy that broke your heart in high school?” Her tone was a harsh whisper.

“Well . . . uh - - yeah. But he probably isn’t gonna call, so we don’t have anything to worry about, okay? He was probably just being polite . . . trust me, if there is one thing I know . . . it’s that Steve Rogers’ doesn’t want anything to do with me.” Bucky grumbled as he grabbed another book off the cart of new arrivals and put it on the shelf.

Bucky would be lying to himself if he hadn’t been watching his phone last night after he’d put Ava to bed. A part of him had hoped the screen would light up with Steve’s name and that they’d be able to rekindle the friendship that they had in high school.

*But I thoroughly fucked up any chance of that, didn’t I?*

Nat didn’t look convinced, but she shrugged her shoulders and offered Bucky a small smile, “Just be careful, alright? You can’t shut down again.”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky let out a groan, “Of course I can’t. Jesus, Nat. I’ve got Ava now. Please, let’s just drop it okay?”

“No matter what you say, Barnes.” Natasha said, “Just let me know if I need to bury a body.”

Letting out a snort, Bucky rolled his eyes, just as he was about to reply he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Pulling it out, he saw that he had one new text message . . . from Steve. Quickly opening the text, Bucky reread the message over and over again, ’Hey, Bucky. It’s Steve. Just wanted to know if you are free Monday afternoon? I was thinking about getting some coffee.’

Well, shit.
Monday morning came faster than Bucky would have liked. Not having slept much the night before, worried about his coffee date with Steve in the afternoon, the brunet groggily got out of bed, groaning as his muscles seemed to protest the movement. Shuffling down the hall towards Ava’s room, Bucky opened the door and smiled at the sight on the little girl curled under her pink comforter, her small stuffed dog wrapped tightly in her arms.

Bucky walked over to the bed and began to run his fingers through her hair, leaning down he placed a light kiss on the little girl’s forehead. Ava squirmed under the affection and opened her eyes, still heavy with sleep. “Hey, Uncle Bucky,” she murmured, pulling the dog closer to her chest.

“Good morning, Squirt.” Bucky smiled, “Time to get up.”

Ava whined and curled up tighter, “I don’t wanna get up!”

“Ava . . . c’mon, up and at ‘em. I gotta drop you off at the shop.” Bucky said, pulling the comforter away as he spoke.

“You visitin’ Mama?” Ava asked quietly, biting her lip as she began to sit up, still clutching her favorite stuffed animal.

Swallowing the lump that formed in his throat, Bucky nodded as he stroked his fingers through Ava’s hair. “Yeah . . . I am.”

“When will I be able to see her, Uncle Bucky?” Ava asked, her voice trembling with the tears that formed in her eyes.

“Your Mama’s real sick, Ava.” Bucky stated, “But I promise that soon . . . I’ll take you to see her, okay?” Bucky didn’t know if it was a lie or not, he didn’t know when Rebecca would be ready to see her daughter or when he’d feel comfortable enough to bring the little girl to see her mother.

Shaking her head wildly, Ava looked up at her Uncle, tears still shining in her eyes. “I want to go with you . . . I want to see Mama.”

“I know . . . and you will . . . just not today, okay?” Bucky fought to keep his voice steady, “But right now I need you to get ready. Can ya do that for me, Squirt?”

Ava nodded, eyes downcast, as she hopped out of the bed and walked over to her closet. Bucky stayed closer to the bed and let the little girl pick out her own outfit for the day. After a few minutes she settled on her rainbow leggings and blue dress. Smiling softly at the choices, Bucky led her into the bathroom, across the hall, and started the shower for her.

“I’ll be in my room, okay?” Bucky called, still leaning over to check the temperature of the water. “Just holler if you need anything.”

“Okay.” Ava replied quickly.

Bucky straightened and wiped his palms on his sweatpants, he walked out of the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar so he could hear if Ava needed him. The brunet went back into his
room, smiling as he could hear his niece singing loudly in the shower, and walked to his own closet. Eying his choices, Bucky settled on a pair of black jeans and a light blue long-sleeved shirt.

Having taken a shower late last night after putting Ava to bed, Bucky quickly changed out of his sweats and tugged on the jeans. Pulling off the stained t-shirt he wore to bed, he turned. Sighing, the brunet walked over to his nightstand and opened the jar of moisturizer for his arm. He set the shirt he picked out for the day on his unmade bed, and began to apply the lotion to the raised scars that covered his left arm. The scar tissue spiderwebbed onto his left pectoral and all the way down to top of his hand, barely peaking out of the sleeve of his shirts. After thoroughly covering his arm in the lotion, Bucky pulled his shirt on over his head and subconsciously tugged the left sleeve as far down as it could go.

“Uncle Bucky?” Ava called out from the doorway.

Jumping slightly he whirled around to face his niece who wore her leggings and dress that she picked out; her brown hair dripped onto her shoulders and he could tell she had yet to brush it. Bucky motioned the little girl to come closer to the bed and he grabbed his own brush that he’d set on his nightstand after using it the night before.

He sat down on the edge of the bed as Ava happily bounded over. She turned around to face the hall and Bucky began to gently brush out the tangles. “You want me to braid it?” Bucky asked as he worked out the last of the knots. She only replied by nodding her head, making Bucky smile again as he started to french braid.

After wrapping the end of the braid in an elastic band, he patted her shoulder, “Alright, all done. Why don’t you go downstairs? I just need to finish getting ready, okay?”

“Ohay!” Ava beamed, having seemed to forgo her melancholy attitude from this morning, as she skipped out of the bedroom. Bucky heard her tiny feet stomp down the stairs.

Bucky shook his head, smiling fondly, as he started to french braid.

It took another hour to fix Ava breakfast and get her out the door, she had to run back up to her room to grab her purse, much to Bucky’s slight annoyance. He secured his niece into her car seat and quickly pulled out of the driveway, heading in the direction of the book shop.

Bucky pulled into the parking lot and groaned when he saw Wanda and Pietro already waiting by the front door. He looked down to the clock on the dash and saw that he was, in fact, fifteen minutes late. He helped Ava out of the car and they hurried up to the front door. The twins offered them kind, wide smiles.

“I am so sorry that we’re late!” Bucky said as he pulled out his keys to unlock the front door.

Wanda shook her head, her Sokovian accent quite apparent, “Don’t worry, we haven’t been waiting long.”

Opening the door, Bucky deactivated the alarm system and opened the door wider for the others to enter. “Natasha or Clint should be here in an hour or so,” Bucky said as he looked down at his watch, late, late, late. “If you need anything, you know you can always call me.”

Pietro walked into the small office in the back and brought out the cash drawer to load it into the register. He smiled at Bucky as the register opened and he set the drawer inside, “Go on, Bucky.
We’ll be fine for an hour . . . no one comes in this early anyway, you know that.”

Bucky nodded and turned to leave but he stopped and whirled around as he remembered something, “Oh! I’m going to be a little later than normal . . . I have a . . . thing?”

“A date?” Wanda asked excitedly, eyes shining. The young woman had been trying to set Bucky up with dates for ages, an offer the taller brunet always politely declined.

Huffing, Bucky chuckled, almost sourly, and shook his head. “No, just meeting an old friend. But you guys okay to watch Ava for a bit longer than usual? I shouldn’t be any later than six, I’ll definitely be back before the store closes.”

“Go on. Have a good day, Bucky. We’ll be fine,” Wanda reassured.

Bucky nodded and crouched down to Ava’s level, he kissed her forehead, “You be good today, Ava. I’ll see you later, okay?”

Ava, excited to spend the day with the twins, nodded happily, “I’ll be good! I promise! I love you, Uncle Bucky!”

Standing back up, Bucky grinned, “I love you too, Squirt.” He turned away again and called over his shoulder, “Thank you guys again! You’re the best!”

“We know!” Pietro called back; Bucky could practically hear the cocky smile that graced his features, “Have a good day!”

Bucky ran back to his car and got in. The drive didn’t take long, traffic being lighter than normal, and the brunet found a parking spot close to the entrance and jogged inside the large stone building.

Janet, the middle aged nurse, smiled up at Bucky from where she sat behind the front counter. She had her greying brown hair pulled up tightly into a ponytail, and wore lavender colored scrubs. “Hello, James. Is it Monday already?”

Smiling back at the woman, Bucky signed himself into the visitor’s log and nodded, “Yeah, time seems to fly by . . . any word on how she’s doing today?” He lifted his eyes and his voice seemed to trail off with concern.

Janet’s eyes softened and gave the other man a kind smile, “She is doing good today. Even participated in game night yesterday. Her new medications seem to be working wonders.”

Sighing in relief, Bucky nodded again and tapped the counter softly a few times. “Alright, good. I’m going to go up and see her. Have a good day, Janet.”

“You too, James,” she said back as she handed him a visitor’s badge.

Bucky clipped the tag onto his shirt and walked passed the welcoming counter. He made his way to Rebecca’s room and knocked on the door, “Becca? It’s Bucky . . . can I come in?”

“Bucky!” Rebecca called out happily, he could hear feet walking against the wooden floor and then the door opened, revealing his older sister. Bucky immediately realized how much better she looked over last week, her skin didn’t seem nearly as pale and her light blue eyes seemed focused. Her brown hair cascaded down past her shoulders, still slightly damp from her shower, and she beamed up at her brother. Grabbing his hand, she pulled him into the room and wrapped her arms around him. “Bucky! I’m so happy to see you!”
Wrapping his arms around her slender frame, Bucky nodded and kissed the top of her head, “It’s good to see you too, Becca. How has your week been?” Becca pulled away and walked over to her bed, she sat cross-legged on the mattress. Bucky followed her and sat in the chair by her desk.

“It’s been alright, I suppose. Nothing much to do here.” She shrugged and looked over to her brother, “I went to game night. Played some Monopoly.”

“That sounds like fun . . . meet anyone you liked?” Bucky knew his sister had been withdrawn since being admitted into the hospital, only leaving her room to eat and go to her mandatory therapy sessions. The change from her old, usually very-social self had taken Bucky a while to get used to.

Rebecca huffed and rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest, “No . . . none of these guys know how to play . . . how was your week, Bucky.”

Respecting that the question had made his sister uncomfortable, Bucky nodded at the change of subject, “It was good . . . shop has been real busy. Oh! You’ll never guess who I met up with the other day.”

“Who?” Rebecca asked as she uncrossed her arms.

“Steve Rogers,” Bucky answered.

“Little Stevie Rogers?” Becca’s eyes narrowed in thought, “Used to get in fights a lot . . . that Steve Rogers?”

“Yeah,” Bucky laughed slightly, remembering the first time he’d met Steve. “That’d be the one.”

Bucky kicked a rock across the street, watching as it clattered against the paved road and hit a tire, effectively stopping it in its tracks. School had just begun for the year, and the brunet could already tell his fifth grade teacher would suck, she had given out a report on the first day of school! Bucky, in his six years of schooling, had never been given a report on the first day!

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, Bucky scowled and focused on the injustice of American schooling and teachers that gave out writing assignments on the first day. Suddenly, a loud laugh cut into his attention, following by a dull thump, and the sound of something crashing against tin trash cans. Whirling around to face the alley that the noises were coming from, Bucky gasped when he saw two boys, Kyle Jones and Damian Smith, laughing as a small, blond kid shakily rose back to his feet. Bucky gasped quietly at the sight of blood running from the blond’s nose and a beginnings of a black eye.

“Ya really don’t know when to give up, do you?” Jones sneered. Bucky knew the two bigger boys were in the grade above him, the small blond didn’t look familiar but anger swelled from the brunet’s core. Kyle and Damian were picking on a kid half their size!

“I can do this all day,” the blond breathed, raising his tiny fists in front of him, Bucky would have been impressed if he hadn’t been so worried about the little guy passing out. Smith snorted and pulled back his arm, readying himself for another punch.

Bucky knew he was tall for his age, and Papa taking him to the gym with him in the mornings had helped develop some muscle on his thin frame, but both the older boys outsized him by quite a lot. However that didn’t stop Bucky from stomping into the alley, grabbing Damian’s fist, and calling out, “Hey! Why don’t you two pick on someone your own size!” Bucky pulled Smith back and before the other boy could retaliate, he punched the older boy square in the jaw.
Damian stumbled back and looked at Bucky with wide eyes, holding his jaw. Kyle grabbed Bucky’s shoulder, “You’re gonna wish ya never did that, pal!” The older boy growled, but Bucky maneuvered out of the taller kid’s hold and landed a punch to Kyle’s gut, winding him.

Bucky took that moment to grab the small blond’s hand and bolt out of the alley, “C’mon! Let’s get outta here!”

They ran a few blocks, and once Bucky was sure that the two older boys weren’t following them he finally stopped and let go of the small boy’s hand. The brunet placed his hands on his knees, leaning over, and took a few moments to catch his breath.

“I had ‘em on the ropes . . . ya didn’t need to help me!” the other boy stated, chest rising heavily and Bucky thought the blond might pass out . . . maybe sprinting hadn’t been the best idea.

“Sure ya did, kid.” Bucky huffed and straightened out.

“I ain’t a kid! I’m eleven years old!” The blond puffed out his chest and held his head high, a defiant gleam in his bright blue eyes.

Bucky laughed, “You don’t look a day over seven. You’re too little to be eleven. I’m eleven!”

“Size don’t mean everything! Why couldn’t you let me handle that? I almost had ‘em!” The smaller boy’s breathing finally seemed to settle down and Bucky didn’t think he looked to be on the verge of passing out anymore. The blond wiped the back of his hand under his nose, wiping away the blood.

Rolling his pale blue eyes, the brunet let out an annoyed huff. “Sorry, next time I see you getting beat up . . . I’ll make sure to let you handle it. I’m sure you can manage.” Bucky’s voice dripped sarcasm, “No need to thank me for savin’ your skin, by the way.”

The small boy blushed and looked down at his feet, “You’re right . . . I was bein’ a jerk.” He looked back up to meet Bucky’s eyes, “Thanks . . . for helpin’ me out.”

Grinning, Bucky shrugged, “You’re a little punk, aren’t ya?” The brunet stuck out his hand and said, “I’m Bucky Barnes.”

The smaller boy gripped Bucky’s hand with a sly smirk and shook it a few times, “Steve Rogers . . . what kind of name is Bucky, anyway?”

“Nickname my parent’s always call me . . . short for my middle name, Buchanan . . . guess it just stuck,” Bucky explained, shrugging his shoulders again as he let go of Steve’s hand. “So tell me, Steve . . . if ya really are eleven why haven’t I seen ya at school? We should be in the same grade.”

Steve blushed again and shuffled his feet, “I get sick a lot . . . so Ma decided to homeschool me. But I’m starting public school this year!” The blond seemed excited for the prospect of attending school with other kids.

“Well, maybe I’ll see you around, then.” Bucky grinned, he slung an arm around Steve’s bony shoulders, as if the pair had been friends for years. “C’mon . . . I’ll walk ya home.”

“I can get home on my own, Bucky,” Steve groaned but made no effort to move out of the brunet’s hold.

“What kind of friend would I be if I made ya walk home by yourself?” Bucky smirked as he
looked down at Steve, “Plus it’s a nice day out . . . don’t wanna go home and start on my homework. You’re actually doin’ me a favor.”

“We’re friends now?” Steve asked, the same mischievous glint in his eye as before.

“You really are a punk, aren’t you, Steve Rogers?” Bucky laughed, shaking his head as he began to walk.

“I mean I know my memory can be a bit hazy . . . but I thought you weren’t speaking to Steve?” Becca looked at her younger brother with concerned eyes, her head slightly tilted in confusion.

“What?” Bucky shook his head, trying to bring himself back into the present. “Oh . . . yeah, well . . . I haven’t spoken to Steve in, like, six years. But I bumped into him at The Met and we agreed to get coffee . . . to catch up, ya know?”

Rebecca looked skeptical; she shook her head softly, the corners of her mouth turning down in a frown, “But he hurt you, didn’t he? I - - I’m not making that up, right?”

Sighing, Bucky shook his head, “No . . . you’re not. But that was in high school, Becca. People change. I changed. Besides . . . it’s just coffee . . . after today we probably won’t see each other again.”

“Just be careful, alright? I don’t want you to get hurt again,” Rebecca said.

Bucky smiled at his sister, nodding his head. These were the days that it was hard to believe what had happened nearly three years ago; when Becca acted like her old self it was sometimes hard for him to remember that she was sick. “I’ll be careful, Becca. I always am.”

They talked for a few more hours; after taking a walk in the hospital’s large courtyard, Bucky returned his sister to her room and hugged her goodbye. He dropped off his visitor’s badge with Janet and exited the building.

Bucky pulled out of the institution’s parking lot and drove to the coffee shop that Steve and he had agreed to meet at. Luckily, the small cafe wasn’t too busy, being that it was midday and most people were already at work. The smell of roasted coffee beans and sweet pastries wafted in the air and Bucky smiled contently. A few college-aged girls giggled from their booth in the corner of the room as the brunet walked into the restaurant. Bucky gave them a quick wink, making them blush and giggle more, and pulled on his left sleeve.

Looking around, Bucky quickly found Steve sitting at a table by the window reading a newspaper and sipping a cup of coffee. Another cup sat untouched across from the blond, steaming, a plate with two muffins laid out in the middle of the table.

Bucky made his way over and slid into the seat across from Steve, trying to ignore the butterflies that fluttered in his stomach. He said, “You still read the newspaper, Rogers? You know they have this thing called Google?”

Smiling, Steve set down the paper and looked at Bucky, “What can I say? There’s something about reading the news from a paper . . . plus the comics are always funny.”

Snorting, Bucky took a sip of the coffee and was surprised that it was just how he liked it, with cream and vanilla. Setting it down, Bucky looked over to Steve and cleared his throat, “Uh . . . thanks for the coffee . . . how much do I owe you?”
Steve rolled his eyes; shaking his head, he said, “Don’t worry about it . . . I invited you, my treat. You can pay next time.”

Next time? Did he just say next time?

Bucky cleared his throat again and ran his right hand through his hair, his left staying firmly in his lap, pulling a few strands of hair from his bun. “So . . . how have things been, Steve? I take it you graduated from that school in DC?”

“Yes,” Steve blushed slightly and rubbed the back of his neck, “Yes, I graduated with my Masters in Art History last year . . . got the Archivist job only recently though.”

“What do you do as an Archivist?” Bucky asked taking another sip of his coffee; he leaned forward slightly.

“Well . . . I help set up exhibits and authenticate the art pieces. It’s fun. I get to be surrounded by art all day . . . so I can’t complain.” Steve shrugged, but Bucky could see how the blond’s bright blue eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement as he talked about his job. “How about you, Bucky? Did you graduate from NYU? You were going for an English degree, right?”

Flushing, Bucky looked down at his lap and bit his bottom lip. “I . . . uh . . . no. I didn’t graduate. I actually dropped out.” Steve’s eyebrows furrowed and he looked genuinely confused; the brunet quickly shook his head and added, “But I manage that bookstore downtown . . . ya know, A New Chapter? My friends, Clint and Natasha, own it. It’s actually pretty successful . . .” Bucky suddenly felt extremely self-conscious and tugged on his left sleeve again, blushing.

“But you always wanted to get your English degree . . . you wanted to be a publicist?” Steve looked up at Bucky and his eyes shone with concern.

Clenching his jaw, Bucky’s eyes hardened, “Well, shit happens, Steve. Not everyone can get a scholarship and just run away from their problems, alright?” The brunet shot to his feet; Steve had no right to make him feel like shit for not graduating. Steve had no idea what Bucky had been through these last couple years.

Bucky stormed towards the door of the coffee shop intent on getting to his car, but felt a hand close around his left bicep. Pulling away harshly from the grip, Bucky whirled around and saw Steve looking at him with sad, confused eyes.

“Bucky, I didn’t mean . . .” Steve cleared his throat and shook his head, “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Scoffing, Bucky rolled his eyes and crossed his arms defensively over his chest. “Well, you did. Look, Steve, what are we doing?”

“I . . . I’m not sure what we’re doing,” Steve sighed, running a hand over the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “I just know you were really . . . uh . . . I guess we’re always fighting,” he sighed.

“Whose fault is that?” Bucky snapped; taking a deep breath the brunet pinched the bridge of his nose.

Slowly, softly, Steve responded, “it takes two to fight, Buck. I’ve never been good with words, and I was concerned since you wanted that degree. I didn’t mean to push.” He dropped his hand.

“Didn’t mean to push?” Bucky repeated, nodding his head slowly, clenching his jaw again and
pulling subconsciously at the end of his left sleeve. “How did you think I was gonna react, Steve? I hear you get your Masters and then I tell you I dropped out . . . how did you think I was gonna feel when you reminded me how much I wanted that degree?” The brunet knew he was overreacting but at this point he couldn’t seem to care.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Steve hung his head. “I wasn’t thinking. I was just worried, Buck. I’m sorry, really.”

Releasing a deep breath, Bucky shook his head and looked back up at Steve, “I know . . . look, I’m sorry. I overreacted . . . maybe its best we don’t see each other . . . like you said, we just fight.” The brunet wanted to ignore the pain in his chest that the words seemed to cause.

Frowning, blue eyes troubled, the blond sighed. “We used to be good together,” he murmured softly, his eyes shifting back to the abandoned cups on the table.

“Yeah . . . well. I guess I messed that up, didn’t I?” Bucky ground out and pulled at his sleeve again.

“Buck . . . no!” Steve reached for Bucky. “You . . . you took me by surprise.” He flushed.

Stepping back, not wanting to risk the chance of Steve seeing or feeling the scars on his left arm, Bucky shook his head wildly and barked out a bitter laugh. “I took you by surprise? You know what took me by surprise? My best friend ignoring me for nearly six years. I called you . . . I - - you didn’t even look at me at graduation . . . you left without saying goodbye!” The brunet could feel tears burning his eyes but he blinked them away.

Steve dropped his hand. “Yeah, I was a major ass. Not my finest moment, Buck, and nothing I’m proud of. And after graduating, I couldn’t find the nerve to make it right.” He slid his hand back into his pocket, slightly hunching defensively, guiltily. “I just never knew how to make it up or what to say . . . so, yeah, I guess you weren’t the one who was responsible for messing us up . . . I was.”

Biting his lip, Bucky swallowed hard and looked away, hugging himself tightly, the brunet mumbled, “I - - I can’t do . . . whatever this is right now, Steve. I - - I have Ava . . . I need to focus on her.” He snapped his jaw shut, realizing he said too much.

“I’m only trying to be friends again.” Steve, too, shut his mouth. “Look,” he checked his watch then flushed slightly. “I wanted you to meet someone, Bucky . . . but if you want to leave, I understand.”

Looking up at the blond with a confused expression, Bucky tilted his head, “You wanted me to meet someone? Who?”

Steve swallowed and looked behind Bucky to the door of the coffee shop. “Actually . . . coming right now . . . insisted on meeting you . . . a bit jealous,” Steve’s words were half blurred in his muttering.

“Jealous?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, anytime I go out with someone, especially another guy, even though I said it was just coffee and catching up.” Steve dropped off as the bell rang on the door. He put a nervous smile on his face and called, “over here.”

Turning around, Bucky’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of a tall, burly brunet with a strong jaw, harsh, cold brown eyes and a military haircut. “You got to be fucking kiddin’ me.” Bucky muttered under his breath, he turned back to Steve, “You have a boyfriend?”
Drawing a deep breath, Steve nodded once. “Yeah, took me a couple years into college to admit it to myself.” He ran a hand over his neck again. “I wasn’t as honest with myself as you were apparently.” He looked at Bucky’s face, meeting his eyes.

“Y - - you’re gay?” Bucky mused to mostly himself. This is comical . . . Steve Rogers is gay. This is the universe's way of playing a practical joke on me.

The other man wrapped his right arm possessively around Steve’s waist and planted a kiss to the blond’s temple. “Hey, babe. Is this the infamous Bucky Barnes that I hear so much about?” The man eyed Bucky with a slight glare, and the other brunet squirmed under the intense gaze.

Steve flushed bright pink, down his face and into his shirt. “Brock Rumlows, Bucky Barnes . . . my best friend in high school . . . and my smarter half?” he sounded a bit worried, trying to soothe the atmosphere but knowing he’d failed miserably.

“More than friend from what I heard,” Brock said dismissively.

Bucky felt inadequate and he tugged on his sleeve again; flushing a deep red, the smaller brunet looked down at his shoes. Of course Steve told him about what happened . . . I really can’t catch a break.

“I did say best friend, didn’t I, Brock?” Steve laughed nervously. “Brock’s my significant other, Buck.” He apparently chose his words carefully around his big, buff boyfriend.

Brock looked down as Bucky tugged on his sleeve, the bigger man’s eyes seemed to catch on the scarred flesh on the top of Bucky’s left hand. The smaller brunet quickly stuffed the damaged hand into his pocket and regarded Brock with a wary nod, “Pleasure . . . to - - uh . . . meet you, Brock.”

Smiling, almost triumphantly, at Bucky’s cautious behavior, Brock held out his left hand, “Pleasure is all mine.”

Bucky eyed Brock’s hand with mild contempt for a few long moments before offering his left hand for the bigger man to shake, knowing full well that his sleeve pulled up and showed Steve the damaged flesh of his forearm.

A worried frown instantly came to the blond’s face but he didn’t ask about the injury. Instead he said, “any time you wanna bring Ava to the museum, I think I can help her find the discovery sections for her age group.” He offered an apologetic smile to Bucky.

Removing his hand from Brock’s grasp, Bucky shoved his hand back into his pocket and looked up at Steve with a small smile, “That’d be . . . great, Steve. Thank you - -”

“Who’s Ava?” Brock interrupted, lifting a dark brow, “you batting for the other side again?”

Bright red, Steve put a hand on Brock’s chest. “Ava’s Bucky’s little girl. Let’s go, we’ll be late for the movie, Brock,” he tried to salvage the situation.

Nodding, Brock wrapped his arm tighter around Steve and offered Bucky another glare, “See ya around, Bucky?”

Clenching his jaw, Bucky said, a strong bite in his tone, “Wouldn’t count on it, Brock.”

Hanging his head, Steve let Brock guide him from the coffee shop, not even glancing back at Bucky.
The brunet stood in the middle of the coffee shop, dazed by the encounter with Steve’s boyfriend. He still couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that Steve was gay . . . and that he was in a relationship with an abusive, controlling asshole.

Walking out of the coffee shop, Bucky considered sending Steve a text but he wasn’t sure if that would get the blond in trouble. Licking his lips nervously, the brunet fished his phone out of his pocket and opened up a message box to send to Steve.

Quickly, Bucky typed out a simple message, ‘Thanks for the coffee, Steve. Let me know if you want to hang out again.’

He didn’t think that message could get the blond in trouble, but it also let Steve know that Bucky wasn’t giving up.

After only a couple of minutes a reply came through. ‘Yeh, nds fn, mabee the zoo fr yr lttl kid. BR’

After rereading the message a few times, Bucky smiled and typed back, ‘Sounds great. I’m off Friday?’ Bucky slid into the driver’s seat and started the car.

His phone jangled again with another incoming text. ‘Frdy ok. Brng the wife or is off, tho. BR’

Finally, a feeling of dread settled in Bucky’s gut. BR . . . Brock Rumlow. Shit! He was talking to Brock right now!

‘Don’t worry, Brock. The wife will be there,’ Bucky typed out furiously, his heart pounding heavily in his chest, and his hands trembled with anger.

A third text came through. ‘We’ll be there. S’

Bucky groaned and his head fell against the seat. He needed to talk to Natasha.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! Sam and I cannot believe the attention this story has gotten! We are super happy that everyone enjoyed the first chapter.

However, we want to say that everyone needs to pay attention to the tags and warnings, this is a dark fic. We will post warnings at the beginning of each chapter for scenes we believe might be triggering.

We hope you enjoy this crazy ride and we cannot thank everyone enough for reading and supporting this story!
Chapter Notes

This chapter contains verbal and physical abuse, as well as threats against a child.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You want me to what?” Natasha snapped, her voice quiet, to avoid waking Ava who slept upstairs, but sharp. Bucky had invited both Clint and Natasha over for dinner when he picked up Ava earlier that day.

Groaning, Bucky shook his head, “I know it sounds crazy, Tasha, but I need your help . . . please.” The brunet looked over at his friend who stood, arms crossed in front of her chest, in his living room. Clint sat on the brunet’s couch, absentmindedly petting Lucky’s fur, the blond looked up at his wife and then at Bucky, his mouth pulled into a thoughtful frown.

Shaking her head, Natasha said, “Steve already hurt you once, Bucky . . . and getting involved in this . . . mess isn’t going to help anyone. I know you feel protective of him, I haven’t got the slightest clue as to why, but I think this isn’t a string we should pull on. Steve dug his grave six years ago. It’s time you let him lie in it.” Her green eyes looked over at Bucky with concern but her whole body stood rigid.

“You didn’t see how his boyfriend was treatin’ him!” Bucky threw up his hands in exasperation, “The asshole was lookin’ at him like some possession. I’m tellin’ you . . . something ain’t right.” He couldn’t believe that he was willing to get involved in Steve’s life again, everything in him told him that Steve needed his help. Bucky couldn’t help but think of the little Steve Rogers that he’d known, who always stood up for himself, who never backed down from a fight. The Steve he’d met today seemed timid . . . he’d just let Brock boss him around. The sight had made Bucky’s heart break a little.

“I don’t know, Bucky.” Clint spoke up, fiddling with his right hearing aid, “I’m not sure this is a good idea. Not just from the fact that you’re asking to use my wife as your fake wife . . . but this Brock guy could be dangerous. You sure you want to introduce Ava to that? You two have enough on your plate . . . you really shouldn’t add trying to help a dysfunctional relationship on top of that.”

Closing his eyes, Bucky took a deep breath before looking over at his friends. “I know how this must sound to you two . . . but - - Steve . . . I can’t just let it go now. I can’t. He might not need me . . . but I really don’t think that’s the case. That asshole is hurting him . . . and I can’t turn my back on him.”

“Even if he turned his back on you?” Natasha asked, quirking an eyebrow. Bucky knew this side of her . . . this was her mother bear side.

Bucky sighed, “Even if he turned his back on me . . . I - - I can’t give up on him. I thought I could just stuff all my feelings down and ignore them. But I can’t. Yes, he hurt me. But he needs our help.”

Sighing, Natasha looked over to Clint, who shrugged softly, “This is up to you, Babe,” the blond
“Alright,” the redhead nodded slowly, a deep sigh escaping her lips. “I’ll help you . . . but if I get the slightest feeling that this Brock guy could be more dangerous than just some controlling asshole than I pull the plug on this whole thing, okay? The last thing we need is some crazy, jealous boyfriend to deal with.”

Smiling slightly, Bucky said, “Thank you, Tasha.”

*************

The week came and went faster than Bucky would have ever thought possible. The brunet tugged a white henley over his head and grabbed his black baseball cap from where it sat on his dresser. He hurried down the hall and sighed heavily when he saw Ava sitting on her bed, hair still dripping from her shower and only wearing her underwear and her pajama shirt.

“Ava!” Bucky rushed into the room and threw his hands up in the air, “Why aren’t you dressed? Nat’s gonna be here in just a few minutes! I thought you were wearing your tiger shirt and those shorts you liked?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Ava pushed out her bottom lip in a pout, “I don’t wanna wear that stupid shirt! I don’t like any of my shirts!”

“Well, I can see why. They were picked by a boy.” Natasha stood in the doorway behind Bucky, having walked in with her usual cat-like silence. “What you want is a girl shirt, right, sweet?”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky huffed and turned to look at his friend. “You help her get dressed . . . I’m going to go pack snacks,” He grumbled.

“Gummy dinos?” Nat asked with a small smirk. The woman turned to the little girl and held up a plastic bag. “I got you a present, Ava. Want it? Or would you rather drip all over your pretty bedspread?”

Ava shot to her feet and jumped up and down happily, “I want it! Please!”

“Oh! I love it! Thank you, Auntie Nat!” Ava beamed and grabbed the shirt from the redhead’s hands. “Isn’t it pretty, Uncle Bucky?”

The slender redhead helped the girl slip the shirt over her head and aided in getting sleeves sorted properly. She then snaked a hand over to the small dresser and grabbed Ava’s brush. “May I do your hair?” she asked politely, with a gentle smile. Nat winked at Bucky. 

“Ah,” Nat knelt down and opened up her arms, “there’s that magic smile,” and she scooped the girl into a cuddle. Slipping the child onto one of her knees, the other balancing her on the floor, Natasha opened the plastic bag and pulled out a pink shirt embossed with a white tiger, sleek with glittery black stripes and glowing sapphire gem eyes. “So, what do you think?”

Nat’s eyes danced as if she hid a snort of amusement behind her serious nod but couldn’t help it leaking over into her pretty eyes. She carefully brushed and untangled the girl’s hair as she looked up at the man still lingering in the doorway despite having said he’d get snacks together. “So, which zoo are we going to?”
Bucky smiled softly at the sight of Natasha doing Ava’s hair. After a few moments the brunet’s eyes snapped up to meet Natasha’s and a small frown graced his lips. “I uh - - I don’t know?”

Not letting her frown translate to her hands, still gentle with the little girl, Natasha shot Bucky a quick glare. “So, we wander aimlessly and hope to stumble on your friends?�” She shook her head once, “nice of him to tell you,” she grumbled softly.

Groaning, Bucky fished his phone out of his pocket and flashed Nat an embarrassed smile before ducking out of the room. Dialing Steve’s number, the brunet made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen where he began to pull out some snacks.

“Hello?” Steve’s voice sounded happy and relaxed when it came over the line.

“Hey, Steve . . . it’s uh -- it’s Bucky?” The brunet grabbed three bottles of water from the fridge and balanced the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he stuffed the snacks and water into his backpack.

“Bucky,” Steve repeated, his voice dropping lower but the tone just as happy. “Hi.” After a moment, he asked, voice worried a bit, “um . . . you’re still coming, right?”

“Oh! Yeah . . . yeah of course. But . . . Brock . . . well he never said which zoo we were meeting at.” Bucky said carefully and zipped up the backpack.

“Oh,” Steve sounded puzzled then came back, louder once more and sounding a bit sheepish. “Central Park Zoo?�” He apparently turned away from the phone and asked, “You said Central Park Zoo, right?”

“Is there any other, babe?” Rumlow’s voice called in what sounded like a playful growl.

“Yeah, Central Park,” Steve clarified into the phone.

Bucky rolled his eyes and forced himself to keep his tone from displaying his annoyance at Steve’s boyfriend. “Alright . . . well we’ll be leaving in just a few minutes.” The brunet offered his niece and Natasha a smile as they walked down the stairs, Ava completely dressed and her brown hair pulled back in a fancy braid that Bucky could’ve never dreamed of doing.

Steve’s voice came back with a rush suddenly, “yeah, we’re on our way right . . .” the phone cut off.

Shoving the phone back into his pocket, Bucky let out an annoyed growl and slung the backpack over one shoulder, “Shall we get this show on the road?” The brunet grabbed his keys from the table by the door.

Nat lifted one well manicured finger to her lips, tapping with a dark maroon fingernail, eyebrow arching. “Sure,” she answered and dropped her hand, still studying Bucky. The redhead offered her hand to Ava and said, “are we taking the subway or my car?” She waited a beat then asked “or the bus?”

“Well parking is always crazy near Central Park.”

“Central Park,” Natasha repeated and sighed then nodded. “Bus. Let’s take the bus.”

“Alright, bus it is.” Bucky offered Natasha a tense smile and opened the front door to allow the girls to step out in front of him.

With one last long look at her friend, Natasha led the little girl from the house and took her hand
securely, leading her down towards the nearest bus stop.

Bucky locked the front door and jogged to catch up; he made it to Ava’s other side just as they reached the sidewalk. They caught the bus and the thirty minute ride was filled with Ava’s excited babbling and long, tense looks between Bucky and Natasha.

Once at the zoo, Bucky tugged on his left sleeve and pulled his cap down further over his eyes. He stood a few steps behind the girls and looked around the entrance to see if he could find Brock or Steve.

At the admissions gate Steve turned around and offered a smile. He wore slacks and a tight t-shirt with an open button-down summer flannel over it. He had a pair of nice sunglasses on. Brock was nowhere in sight, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t there. Holding up a hand, Steve waved to the trio, his phone in his other hand. At six foot two, the blond towered over many of the people there that day.

Natasha must’ve seen Steve because she lead Ava over to the blond and Bucky followed close behind. The brunette smiled up at his friend, “Hey, Steve.”

“Bucky,” Steve smiled back and then squatted down with small difficulty. “Hello again, Ava. Remember me?”

Ava looked at Steve apprehensively and hid behind Nat’s legs. “Yeah,” She mumbled and leaned her forehead against the back of the redhead’s thighs.

Steve nodded. “What a pretty shirt,” he said softly and eased to a standing position, moving slowly as if he didn’t want to frighten the child more. “White tigers are good luck and magic in India.”

“Magic?” Ava perked up slightly, “Like wizards? Uncle Bucky and I watched Harry Potter once.” The little girl detached herself from Natasha’s legs and smiled up at the tall blond.

“Wow! Harry Potter was written for eleven year olds. You’re a lot older than you look,” Steve smiled down at her.

Bucky couldn’t help but flush at the statement; he wasn’t sure if Steve had meant it as anything bad but the words left a nervous pounding in chest.

“And you understand all those magic words? I have trouble with them myself. I must be a real muggle, huh?” Steve asked Ava, not seeming to notice Bucky’s reaction.

“Well,” Ava shrugged, “I don’t understand all of them.” She turned to look up at Natasha and then back to Steve, “Do you think there will be white tigers here?” Bucky breathed a small sigh of relief at the sudden change of subject.

“Well,” Steve lifted the hand without the phone to scratch behind his neck, “there aren’t any tigers here, Ava. I’m sorry. They have snow leopards, though. But,” Steve looked over Bucky’s shoulder and frowned softly then looked quickly back down at Ava from behind his sunglasses. “Uh, all of the animals here are on the endangered species list and were rescued from the wild?”

Natasha patted the little girl on the shoulder softly and smiled, “snow leopards are really pretty, Ava. You’ll like them a lot.”

“Heya, we all ready?” Brock’s rasping voice broke over the small group.

Bucky jumped slightly at the sudden sound and turned to face the tall brunet.
The man had dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans with leather jacket despite the warm day. He pushed his mirrored sunglasses up to the top of his head and grinned at Bucky. “So, this the little family, huh?”

Swallowing hard, Bucky nodded, “Yep. This is Natasha and Ava.”

“Nice,” Brock held out a hand to Natasha and offered a smile, but he pretty much ignored the little girl. “Brock Rumlow.”

The redhead eyed the hand for a few moments before gripping it firmly. “Pleasure.” Natasha snipped and dropped the hand quickly.

Raising his eyebrows in apparent surprise, Brock chuckled slightly. “Oh, I get the feeling you don’t like me, Mrs. Barnes.”

Ava’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion and Bucky saw the little girl begin to open her mouth to correct Brock.

“I have the tickets,” Steve suddenly interrupted the conversation. “Ava, want to show them to the ticket taker?” He offered his phone to the child.

“Okay!” Ava beamed and grabbed the phone; she gripped Nat’s hand and pulled her towards the front gate. Bucky sighed, tugging on his left sleeve.

Brock seemed to see the nervous maneuver and smirked towards Bucky much as he had at the coffee shop. “You’ll let us know if you get tired or anything, Bucky,” he asked with a fake solicitous tone.

Steve flushed. “Brock, we should follow. They’ll need my ID to prove those tickets are valid.”

Clenching his jaw, Bucky took a deep breath to calm himself down, “C’mon . . . don’t wanna keep the ladies waiting, do we, Brock?”

“Never keep a lady waiting,” Brock agreed and slapped Steve’s ass as he passed, seeming unaware when Steve froze.

Taking a deep breath, the tall blond shook himself and started after his boyfriend, a slight limp on the right, the side that Rumlow smacked.

Grumbling under his breath, Bucky hitched the backpack over his shoulders again and walked closely behind Steve.

The brunet smiled at the sight of Ava excitedly showing the attendant Steve’s phone. The little girl smiled up at her approaching uncle, “Can we see the snow leopards first? Please?”

Ruffling his right hand through Ava’s hair, careful to avoid messing up the braid, Bucky smirked, “Anything you want, Squirt.”

Slipping his wallet from his pocket, Steve revealed his ID to the attendant and offered a small smile, lifting his glasses so the man could match his face to the photo. Quickly Steve lowered his glasses again but not before a glimpse of swollen purple and yellow flesh showed. He slid his wallet back into his pocket and offered a smile to Ava. “So, if you press the little paw print on the screen, you can pull up a map I downloaded. It’ll show you exactly where the snow leopards are, Ava.”

“Just don’t drop that phone, kid. It’s probably more money than your daddy can afford,” Brock
warned on a half playful growl.

Bucky flushed and hung his head as they passed through the gate.

Steve’s face and neck flushed red and he frowned, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I’m sure she’s fine, Brock. She hasn’t dropped it yet,” he replied.

A surge of anger rose in Brock’s eyes and he grabbed Steve by the arm, pulling him close, and whispering harshly, “did you just back talk me?”

“Hey, fellas.” Natasha barked out, hand gripping Ava’s hand a little tighter, “We’re here to have fun, alright? If she drops it . . . we can afford to pay you for the damage. But she won’t . . . so let’s move on, shall we?”

“Snow leopards,” Steve forced out numbly and Brock let him go, practically shoving his arm away.

“Yeah, the big cats. C’mon kid. Let’s go see if they’re feeding them.” Brock never touched Ava, he just started walking in the lead.

Bucky fell into step beside Steve, Ava and Natasha close behind Brock. The brunet gave Steve a concerned look, “You alright, Steve?”

Steve went from slumping slightly and watching the trio in front of them to ramrod stiff. “Uh, sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” He glanced at Bucky, his smile forced.

“Your boyfriend . . . he’s something else, Rogers.” Bucky whispered, eyes focusing on the burly man in front them. The busy crowds seemed to part for the large man, other parents frowned and eyed Brock suspiciously as he passed.

Steve literally winced, glancing over at Bucky then back towards Brock. “He certainly says so,” he deadpanned.

Tugging on his sleeve again, Bucky let out a harsh breath. “I - - I don’t get it, Steve. You deserve better than that.” He jutted his chin in Rumlow’s direction.

Pulling his hand from his pocket and running it over the back of his neck, Steve sighed. “Don’t know whatcha mean, Buck. He takes care of me.” Steve flushed at how that sounded but didn’t take it back. “I met him in college, you know? We’ve been together ever since.”

“He takes care of you, huh?” Bucky repeated, shaking his head, he could see the faint lines of the black eye underneath Steve’s sunglasses.

“That’s not how it sounds,” Steve flushed brightly. “I mean, I pay my own way and stuff. I’m not . . . kept.” He stammered to a halt and shoved his hand back in his pocket. “Besides, he likes that I work with art, says it’s cute.” Again, Steve fell silent, seeming to realize that his words sounded odd.

Suddenly, Bucky felt something tugging on his left hand; the brunet’s head snapped down to see Ava tugging. “Uncle Bucky! Do you see the snow leopard? Do you see it?” She asked and Bucky sucked in a quick breath and his eyes met with Natasha’s.

“Uncle?” Brock seemed to materialize at the word, stepping right next to his boyfriend and frowning softly directly at Bucky. “Your little girl called you uncle? So, Natasha’s your sister, maybe?”
Steve flushed.

“She is my niece, Brock. Nat and I take care of her,” Bucky snapped, hand tightening, protectively on Ava’s shoulder. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I never said she was his daughter, Brock,” Steve pointed out quietly. “I said she was his little girl. He watches her for his sister.” The blond immediately verbally deflected Brock’s attention away from Bucky as a target, much as he used to do with his fists back in grade school.

Stepping up beside Bucky, Natasha offered Brock a cool glare. “You got a problem, Brock? Seem a little tense?” She tilted her head.

Brock crossed his muscular arms over his broad chest. “No problem with watching nieces, if that’s what you mean, Natasha. Got a problem with lies and stuff.” He narrowed his dark brown eyes. “Oh, and just wanna make sure we’re on the same page . . . Bucky still bats for the wrong team? Or he totally legit in the wide world . . . you know, not a unicorn or anything.”

“What?” Bucky snapped, temper flaring, he pushed Ava behind him and stepped in closer to Brock, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“So you wanna do this in front of the kid, Barnes?” Brock growled, still keeping his arms crossed, narrowing his gaze at the slender man.

“Stop, please,” Steve pleaded, stepping up close and putting a hand on both man’s chest to keep them apart. “Look, Brock, maybe this was a bad idea. I know you get tense around kids. Why don’t we leave them to enjoy the zoo?”

“Can’t handle some kids, Brock?” Bucky asked, quirking an eyebrow. “Don’t like not being able to push them around?”

“Take your fuckin’ hand off me, babe, or I’ll break it again,” Brock snarled.

Steve snatched his hand away as if burned.

The dark-haired brute turned back to Bucky. “I never push little kids around. That’s cruel. What - - you hit that kid? Do I need to call Services on your ass? Is he mean to you, kid? You just say the word and I’ll get you put with a nice family instead of a mean jerk that beats you!”

Ava’s eyes filled with tears, “Uncle Bucky never hurts me! You’re mean and I don’t like you!”

Her bottom lip quivered and her tiny fists were clenched tightly by her sides.

“Brock, you’re confusing her. Let’s go!” Steve suddenly grabbed Brock’s arm and heaved the slightly smaller man away, down the path, without further word. They got around the corner quickly, never looking back.

Taking a deep, slow breath, Nat dropped to one knee and scooped the little girl into a fierce hug. “What a stupid bully, huh?” she said to Ava. “Thinking your nice uncle would even try something as dumb as hitting you?”

Ava broke down with a sob and wrapped her arms around the woman’s neck. “Uncle Bucky would never hurt me! Never ever!”

“Of course he wouldn’t” Natasha offered the girl a smile. “But you know what he would do? Cry if he thought you were afraid of him. I think he needs a hug, sweet.” She turned Ava towards Bucky.
Eyes shining with unshed tears, Bucky knelt down and embraced his niece as she ran into his arms. Bucky soothingly rubbed her back and placed a kiss on her forehead, “I’m sorry, Ava. I’m sorry I got upset.” He whispered into her ear.

Nat stood and put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “Why don’t we get some lunch, okay? I see a small shop there and I smell burgers.” She looked him in the eye. “My treat as long as I get chocolate.”

Ava pulled away from her uncle and looked up at Natasha, her lip still quivering, “I- - I don’t . . . why would that man - - say mean things?”

Nat sighed and reached down to scoop the girl into her arms, allowing Bucky to stand up. “Well, I want to talk to you about that, but I need to eat. Okay?”

Nodding, Ava allowed Natasha to carry her into the restaurant with Bucky following close behind.

She waited until they got their fast food, and a couple of chocolate brownies, and were seated at a corner table over-looking the zoo paths before Natasha began to talk softly, looking straight at Ava. “Ava, you know in preschool how the teacher tells you some people are mean to little kids? How we need to watch out and report them?”

“Yeah,” Ava nodded, her breathing still coming out in small hiccups from the crying, but no more tears fell from her eyes.

“Well, that’s what Brock was talking about, but he made a big mistake. You see, he’s mad at your uncle for being friends with Steve. You remember that girl last year in playgroup? Tina? Who didn’t want anyone to be friends with you because she was your friend?” Natasha pushed some fries towards the child.

“Yeah . . . she smacked Jim because he wanted to be my best friend,” Ava said as she picked up a fry and popped it into her mouth.

With a nod, Natasha offered a gentle smile. “Well, Brock is like Tina. He doesn’t want anyone being friends with Steve. He’s jealous and he’s wrong. And, to be mean to your uncle, he threatened to tell people that Bucky’s mean. It was his way of hitting Bucky, like Tina hit Jim. Only, Brock used words.”

Bucky flinched and felt his stomach heave. The mere thought that Brock could still contact Children’s Services made him lightheaded. It was only a few months ago that they stopped the home visits, any tips, untrue or not, could take Ava away from him.

The redhead lifted her eyes to meet Bucky’s, a soft frown on her face. She stared at her friend intently, as if to communicate something to him. Carefully, she said “he’s trouble. I think we need to stay away from Brock.”

“Yeah!” Ava agreed, “He’s a bully and I don’t like him!”

Swallowing hard, Bucky’s eyes fell and his skin crawled. They were able to never see Brock again, but Steve didn’t have that choice. The brunet couldn’t stop thinking about the bruise that the blond had been trying to hide. “Tasha? Do you think you could get Ava home? I- - I need some time to calm down.”

Pursing her lips as if she could read her friend’s mind, Natasha stiffened. Slowly, she shook her head, but out loud she said, “I sure can, but you’re gonna pay for it. I’m getting her a snow leopard to take home.” Standing, the book shop owner offered a hand to Ava. “Grab your
brownie, sweet, and let’s go find you a big cat.”

Ava slid off the chair; grabbing her brownie, she looked down at the phone still clutchted in her hand. “Uncle Bucky? I - - I didn’t mean to but I stole Steve’s phone! I promise I didn’t mean to!”

Lifting her eyebrow, Natasha slid the phone from the girl’s nerveless fingers and offered it to Bucky. “Well, I guess if your uncle returns it, it’ll be fine,” She offered a glare to Bucky along with the ready excuse for him to go after Steve and Brock.

Bucky took the phone from Nat and kissed Ava’s forehead once more; standing he said, “Be good for Natasha, Squirt.” He turned to face his friend.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly at his words. “I’ll take her to the store. If you need something . . . or someone . . . call.”

Wrapping his arms around the redhead, Bucky whispered, “Thank you, Natasha. I promise I’ll be careful.”

“Yeah, you will,” She slid her hand into her purse and pulled out a metallic box, slipping it to her friend. “You have to be . . . you got a kid to look after.” After Bucky took the taser, Natasha led the little girl from the cafeteria and towards the gift shop.

Slipping the taser into his pocket, Bucky twirled Steve’s phone in between his fingers and stepped out into the summer sun. He highly doubted Brock and Steve were still in the zoo, and he wondered if he should just call Brock using Steve’s phone. Shaking his head, Bucky headed back towards the gate they’d entered from and froze when he saw Brock and Steve standing a few meters from the gate talking in harsh whispers to one another. Bucky’s eyes focused on Brock’s hand wrapped tightly around Steve’s bicep, tight enough that he wouldn’t be surprised if the blond had bruises in the morning.

“Hey!” Bucky called out, jogging towards the pair, he tried to push down the feeling of wanting to punch Brock.

Steve turned his head to look at the voice. He sported a fresh red mark around the back of his neck, and he winced slightly at his own sudden movement. “Bucky?” his voice waivered slightly and he coughed as if to clear his throat. “Buck, whatcha need?”

Bucky hesitated for a moment, knowing that as soon as he handed over the phone Brock would take Steve away. The brunet offered a shy smile to Steve before turning his gaze over to Brock; taking a deep breath, he forced out, “I’m . . . uh- sorry? I guess I just let my temper get the best of me?”

A sudden charming smile lit Brock’s face and, just looking at him, nobody would be able to tell he bullied his boyfriend. “Hey, that’s okay, sport! I got a nasty temper sometimes, too. Know how hard it is to keep in check.” Brock let out a friendly laugh and loosened his grip slightly on Steve’s arm, ignoring the blond’s wince of relief. “The kid’s okay, right? Not worrying over what I said? I didn’t mean to scare her.” He smiled at Bucky, but his dark eyes were calculating, cold.

“Yeah, you did.”

Offering the burly man a tense smile, Bucky shook his head and tugged on his sleeve again, “Oh . . . she’s fine. Doesn’t like it when people get upset. But she’s just a kid . . . very sensitive to that kind of stuff.”

Brock nodded jovially. “Sure. Steve gets over emotional, too. Have to remind him to be a man, sometimes, but what can you do with an artist, huh?” He laughed as if Bucky would agree with
his derogatory assessment. “But, it’s cute, you know? Having an art guy on my arm. Real talking point.”

Steve flushed but just lowered his head and stayed quiet, arm still in Brock’s grip.

“Actually, Steve saved my ass from fights all the time in high school.” Bucky stated, fingers twitching. The brunet knew it was a small lie; usually it had been Bucky doing most of the saving but Brock, hopefully, didn’t know that.

“Huh,” Brock laughed. “Must’ve talked the other guy’s ears off. He’s not much of a fighter, you know? But I like ‘em quiet, anyway, so it’s great.” Brock lowered his hand to squeeze Steve’s butt, causing the blond to freeze, stiffening, and wince. “I guess you liked that about him, too, huh, sport?”

Flicking his eyes to meet with Steve’s, Bucky frowned and pulled at his sleeve again. The scars that covered his left arm itched, and he really wanted nothing more than to wipe that cocky smirk off of Brock’s face.

“So, wanna go get a beer and trade stories, Buck?” Rumlow grinned. “Or we can go back to the apartment and have some of Steve’s great cooking. It took awhile, but he learned.”

Steve kept his face down, not moving, not indicating which way Bucky should answer the question, which sounded friendly enough.

“Sure, the apartment sounds great,” Bucky offered with a slightly quivering tone. He looked at Steve again before returning his gaze towards Brock.

“Well, let’s go.” Brock grinned and began tugging Steve out the gate. “We should be there in a few minutes.” Brock raised a hand, stepping to the side of the road, and a cab shortly pulled over. “Coming, sport?” Brock looked back at Bucky.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky looked back at the zoo once more before sliding into the back of the cab with Steve.

Sliding into the front passenger seat, Brock kept a close eye on the driver, as if he didn’t trust the man he would be paying.

Steve relaxed minutely in the back, out of Brock’s vision for a few minutes.

Nudging Steve’s shoulder to get the other man’s attention, Bucky slipped the blond’s phone out of his pocket and handed it over.

Blinking in surprise, Steve took the phone and quickly looked towards Brock, who hadn’t noticed. He looked at Bucky and mouthed “thanks”. He slid the phone into his pocket and leaned closer, careful not to draw his boyfriend’s attention. “You didn’t have to come just to give the phone back. You could’ve dropped it at the museum. But thanks.”

Shrugging, Bucky gave the blond a small smile and whispered back, “No problem. Ava thought she stole it . . . so I had to give it back as soon as I could.”

Wincing, Steve sighed softly. “Poor kid. Was she really shook up by his words? Brock can be . . . forceful . . .” Steve bit his lip, falling silent as he eyed his boyfriend in the front seat. Softly, he added, “he shouldn’t have even spoken to her, though. That was out of line.”

Bucky clenched his jaw and tugged his sleeve down, as it had slid up to his mid-forearm. The brunet looked over at Steve, “Yeah, it was. But she’s fine. Nat’s getting her a stuffed leopard so
she’ll forget about it.”

But I never will.

Relief rose in Steve’s eyes. “Good. I didn’t want his nasty accusations to wreck the leopards for her.” Steve glanced back to the front then at Bucky once more. “I’m sorry this day turned out this way. Brock isn’t good around kids . . . and he gets jealous.” Steve began fiddling with the edge of his shirt sleeve. “Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to this whole outing after all.” He sighed and leaned his head against the seat then yelped softly and stiffened to an upright position, hand going to the developing bruise across the back of his neck.

Brock glanced into the back seat with a frown. “You ain’t doing anything back there, are you?”

“Just sitting, Brock,” Steve answered instantly.

“Right,” Brock eyed Bucky, but suddenly smiled again. “Next corner and we’ll be there. You’ll love my place, Sport. Got all the toys.” The man turned back to stare intently at the driver once more.

Bucky eyed the blooming bruise on Steve’s neck before nodding, “I’m sure you have great taste.”

With a bark of laughter, Brock called back, just as the cab drew to a halt, “nah. I prefer leather and beer. Steve decorated the place. He’s got a woman’s touch, you might say.” Brock paid the cabby and slid out of the cab, still snickering.

Steve flushed bright red and got out of the cab without a word. He stepped in behind Brock a couple of steps.

Bucky rolled his eyes with a huff and slid out of the cab, the brunet followed behind the couple as they entered the apartment. Bucky looked at the building with a controlled expression of awe as the doorman opened the front door. Bucky knew that this place probably cost more than his townhome and car payments for a couple months.

Letting out a low whistle, Bucky looked around, “Wow . . . this place . . . is wow.” The brunet suddenly felt like he didn’t belong, his ratty white henley and baseball cap stuck out among all the finely dressed people surrounding them.

Brock laughed. “Yeah, wait till you see the actual flat. This is just the front entrance,” he laughed again. They took an elevator up to the thirtieth floor and Brock led the way down the hall to the massive apartment. “So,” the dark-haired man gestured at the beige and ivory rooms decorated tastefully with art and arranged for comfort, “whatcha think of my place?”

“It’s great,” Bucky smiled and nudged Steve’s shoulder lightly again, “Ya did a great job decorating the place.”

Steve offered a suddenly terrified look to Bucky before the expression went back to neutral, as if it had been imagined. Without responding, the blond headed into the wide kitchen with the marble island and stainless steel appliances.

Brock turned. “Well, I like comfort. Let me show you the man cave, sport,” Rumlow grinned and gestured down the hall to an open door.

Bucky turned to look at Steve with a small frown before turning back to Brock, a forced smile on his face. “Sure, let’s have a look,” he followed the other man down the hall and into the man cave. Complete with wide, flat screen television, computer desk, and gaming station, Brock’s man cave
also came stocked with a pool table and a minibar. He grinned widely. “Want a tour or wanna have a brew?” The man seemed at ease, totally, in his apartment, no longer posturing or over-dominant.

Bucky’s hands tightened around the straps of his backpack and he shook his head lightly, “No beer for me, thanks. Don’t like to drink on an empty stomach.” The brunet flinched inwardly at his lame excuse, but he did not feel like acting as if he and Brock were best friends when less than an hour ago they’d nearly come to blows.

“Tour then,” Brock claimed and headed back out into the hall and leading the other brunet. “Well, that’s the master bath. Fuckin’ tub fits four and has a built in whirlpool. Heaven, I tell you. And that’s my room.” Brock gestured towards the master bedroom with wide king sized bed and no art whatsoever. Gesturing to another room just off the master room, he claimed “Steve’s room, when I don’t want him in mine.” Steve’s room had a lock on the door. Brock kept walking. Getting to the last part of the apartment, a place with wonderful windows and great lighting, Brock looked around proudly. “And this is my den . . . you know, so I can get away from it all while Steve cleans or whatever.”

Furrowing his brows, Bucky tried not to focus on the fact that Steve didn’t share a room with Brock or that the blond’s room had a lock on the outside of it. The brunet looked out at the wonderful view of Central Park from the windows. “That’s - - uh . . . that’s some view, huh?” Bucky couldn’t help but think of how good of an art room it’d make, the simple thought of seeing Steve painting brought a smile to Bucky’s lips. However, the brunet couldn’t see any trace of art in the room; he highly doubted Brock would let Steve use this room.

“Yeah,” Brock agreed, striding over to the panoramic view. “Feel like a king up here. I can really get away from the stress out there when I sit in here, you know?” Brock turned and grinned. “So, you like sports? Or what do you do?”

Shrugging, Bucky tugged on his sleeve, “I don’t really have time for much, with Ava and whatnot. I manage a bookstore . . .” The brunet winced, aware that Brock would probably use that against him like he used Steve being an artist.

“Huh, manager huh? Someday owner, then?” Brock grinned, nodding. “Ambition. That’s good. I like ambition.” He gestured back down the hall. “So, Steve’ll have some chow for us in a minute or two. Wanna go back to the man cave?”

“Shouldn’t we keep Steve some company?” Bucky offered, “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“You wanna hang out in the kitchen?” Brock frowned. “Weird.” He shrugged and headed towards the large room. “Yo, Steve, we’re coming in,” he called and walked over to the central island, plunking himself down on a tall stool, pretty much in Steve’s way as the blond moved around, cooking.

Bucky hung out on the edge of the kitchen, setting his backpack down near the front door. The brunet watched as Steve hurried around the kitchen; shuffling awkwardly, the brunet asked, “Do ya need any help, Steve?”

Steve seemed to freeze for a moment then shook his head, not turning around. “No, thanks, Bucky. I’ve got this. Why don’t you go watch TV or something? Brock, have you shown him your man cave?”

“Yeah,” Brock snorted. “He won’t drink until you feed us.”

Flushing, Bucky scratched the back of his neck, “No rush or nothin’, Steve.” The brunet offered
meekly, feeling completely out of his element.

“I’ve got it. Won’t be more than five minutes,” Steve called out, still not turning, his attention seemingly totally on his work.

Brock looked bored. He stood up and walked out of the kitchen, leaving his stool pulled out so Steve tripped over it. The blond fell heavily against the marble island, wincing, and pushed back to shaking legs. He paused, taking a deep breath.

Bucky lurched forward and placed a hand on Steve’s arm, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ve had lots worse. You know that,” Steve tried a strained chuckle. “Brock doesn’t often bring people here. Not used to guests is all.” The blond lifted his head and his blue eyes reflected worry, fear, and misery.

“I can leave if I’m makin’ ya uncomfortable . . . truth be told I kinda feel like a fish outta water,” Bucky said quietly, hand lingering on Steve’s arm; the brunet hadn’t even noticed he’d offered his left hand and that the sleeve of his shirt had pulled up.

“He brought you here for one of two reasons, Buck,” Steve whispered, eyes falling on Bucky’s scarred hand and wrist. “He’s either trying to seduce you or he’s planning on roughing you up.” Steve lifted his eyes. “He only brings people over for those reasons. Brock’s main friends are me and Jack from down on twenty-eight.”

“Well neither one of those are happening.” Bucky stated, voice dripping with venom, “How come you’re here, Steve? This . . .” The brunet shook his head, the blond man that stood in front of him was not the Steve Rogers he used to know. Bucky’s eyes fell and finally noticed his hand on Steve’s bicep and how much of the scar tissue was visible.

“Who did that to you, Buck?” Steve asked softly, nodding his chin towards the damaged flesh, ignoring Bucky’s question.

Wrenching his hand away, Bucky pulled his sleeve down so harshly that the collar pulled down and Steve could see the scars on the brunet’s collarbone.

With a wince at the sight, Steve sighed. “Your whole arm? Ah, Bucky . . .” he sounded regretful.

Bucky stepped back, stumbling over the stool that Steve had just tripped over. The brunet lost his footing and he could feel himself falling.

Steve’s hands flew out, as quick as he’d ever been, catching Bucky up and pulling him against a hard, muscular body to steady the lean man. “Whoa, careful!”

Breathing heavily, Bucky closed his eyes and his fist grasped Steve’s shirt as if the other man was his anchor. “I - - I’m sorry?” Bucky breathed, he could feel himself trembling against the larger man.

Steve drew a slow, deep breath, eyes locking on Bucky’s face. He continued to hold the other man against him. Slowly, softly, he asked “Buck,” his tone breathless.

“I’m . . . sorry. Please ya gotta believe me. I’m sorry I ruined our friendship . . . maybe if I hadn’t, you would have never gotten with that asshole.” Bucky muttered, his words almost illegible.

“Buck . . . Bucky . . . I thought we’d established that I was the one who acted out of reason and ended our friendship? You were being honest, and I couldn’t even be that.” Steve frowned sadly, watching his former best friend. Once again he seemed to ignore Bucky’s reference to the hell
Steve’s life had become.

Bucky’s arm ached and his fingers seemed to twitch as they often did when he got upset. Shaking his head, Bucky finally opened his eyes and looked at Steve. “Why? Why are you allowing that asshole to abuse you?” The brunet’s tone was shaky but firm.

“Abuse?” Steve frowned and carefully set Bucky back away from him. “You don’t really know Brock. He can be . . . great. He’s got a temper. Doesn’t like people taking up my time.” Steve backed against the sink and sighed, running his hand over his neck and wincing.

“He hits you!” Bucky snarled but he kept his tone down. “That’s abuse, Steve. And let’s not forget the way he talks to you . . . you don’t deserve that!”

“Yes, I do,” Steve harshly bit out and whirled to take the pan from the oven. He was so distracted, he forget to grab gloves or potholders and yelped as the hot metal burned his hands. Steve dropped the pan, the metal clanging loudly against the tiled floor. Brock came running at the sound and stood, frowning.

“What the hell? Did you fucking dump lunch on the floor?” The man stormed in and grabbed Steve’s wrists, shoving his hands in the sink and turning on the cold water full blast, drawing another yelp from Steve. “God, you are such a clutz!”

Bucky’s fists clenched and he watched the couple with fury in his pale-blue eyes. He wanted to scream at Steve for allowing himself to be talked to in such a way, and he wanted to punch Brock until his knuckles bled for thinking he had the right to do so.

“I’m sorry, Brock,” Steve whimpered in pain as the other man held his wrists and hands under the thundering water.

Brock rolled his eyes. “God, now I gotta take you to the hospital again? You are such a fuckin’ clutz, Steve. I don’t know why I put up with your shit.”

“Don’t talk to him like that!” Bucky snapped before he could stop himself.

Brock turned to Bucky, surprise on his face. “What?”

“Don’t. Talk. To. Him. Like. That.” Bucky growled, too far gone to even consider the consequences of his words.

With a low growl, Brock let go of his boyfriend’s wrists and turned fully towards Bucky. “Did you just fuckin’ challenge me in my own goddamn home? You little fucking unicorn!” Brock reached into his pocket to pull out his phone. He began dialing.

“Damn fucking right I did.” Bucky snapped.

Steve kept his hands under the painfully hard stream of water, tears in his eyes and hands already blistering despite the cold rush of water.

“I have an emergency up here, Stan. I need an ambulance,” Brock growled into the phone with deadly clarity. “No, Steve burnt himself cooking again.” He flicked his phone off and shoved it on the counter then took a step closer to Bucky. “You’ve got some balls coming into my home and abusing me like this!”

“Abusing you?!” Bucky shouted, “That’s fucking great! You sick fuck!” The brunet stood straight, his hands shook. “Can’t handle a little challenge, Brock? Not used to people actually standing up to you?”
Brock stepped right up in front of Bucky and glared at him. “What the hell are you talking about? Challenging and standing up? You’re a fucking nutcase. No wonder Steve didn’t wanna hang out with you after high school. I thought it was cause you maybe hurt him when you tried to get in his pants or something, but he wouldn’t say nothin’ more’n that you and he were real close.” Brock crossed his arms, thrusting out his chest. “But it was more than just Steve wanting a different path from you. You did something and now you want him back cause you realized just how fuckin’ amazing he is in the sack!”

Seeing white, Bucky shoved his hands against Brock’s chest forcefully, “You have no fuckin’ clue what you’re talking about!”

Brock snapped his hand out and grabbed Bucky around the throat, lifting him slightly. “You fucked up, sport,” he growled, but yelped when Steve whirled and splashed a bowl of icy cold water over the pair. Brock dropped Bucky and turned towards Steve, who took off running at top speed. Brock followed him with a roar and they ran into the hall.

Steve managed to get his door open and slip inside, slamming the door behind him. Brock started hammering on the thick wood and roaring incomprehensibly at his lover, total rage on his face and in his tone. Apparently, despite his injuries, Steve was able to hold the door shut at the moment.

Bucky scrambled back to his feet and bolted down the hallway, feet slipping slightly on the cold water. The brunet grabbed Brock’s shoulder, whirled the other man around and punched him hard across the jaw.

Roaring even louder, Brock grabbed for Bucky, a red welt rising on his jaw. “I’ll fuckin’ kill you, you bastard!”

Dodging the first blow, Bucky launched himself at Brock. The lean brunet felt the other man collide with the wall behind them with a loud thud.

Steve’s door opened and the blond reached out, grabbing Bucky by the henley, ripping the fabric, and dragging him into the room. “He’ll kill you!” he gasped as he leaned his entire weight against the door once more, blue eyes wide and hands blistered and red raw.

Breathing heavily, Bucky rushed over to help Steve hold the door shut. “You sure know how to pick ‘em, Rogers.” The brunet growled as the door lurched with a forceful shove.

A sob escaped Steve’s throat and he clamped his jaw shut. “Can . . . can you reach . . . my phone? Call the cops?” Steve groaned as the door slammed again. “He’ll be ripping mad when he gets out, but it might get him calmed down again.”

“Fuck!” Bucky groaned and lurched forward so he could reach Steve’s phone, which had fallen a few feet from the door.

The door slammed open as Bucky moved, throwing Steve against the wall behind it. Rumlow stood there in the doorway, eyes ablaze and hands clenched into fists, ignoring the splintered door and broken hinges. “You will get your fuckin’ hands off my man!” Rumlow screamed, apparently not seeing that the pair weren’t doing anything but trying to get away from his rage.

Bucky slid the phone across the floor towards Steve. “Why don’t ya come make me, ya sick fuck!” The brunet shouted, wanting to get the attention off Steve so that the blond could call the police.

Roaring, the burly brunet threw himself at the leaner, lighter haired man. He grabbed for Bucky’s throat, slamming him onto the floor, making something dig into Bucky’s side. Steve scooped the
phone up with a yelp, trying to get his stiffening, swollen, blistered fingers to move so he could dial.

Gasper for breath as Rumlow’s hands wrapped around his throat, Bucky scrambled for his pockets. Black dots spotted his vision just as the smaller man’s hand wrapped around the taser Natasha had given him.

*Thank God for Natasha Romanov-Barton.*

Pulling out the weapon, Bucky jabbed the end of the taser to Brock’s side and switched it on.

A severe convulsion rocked through the thick body of Brock Rumlow and he let go of Bucky, twitching and shaking as he stumbled to the floor with a blood curdling scream.

Air rushed into Bucky’s lungs and the brunet gasped heavily. Turning to his side, Bucky let out a loud series of choked coughs. His vision blurred for a moment before focusing again.

Sirens echoed up from the street below and several people seemed to be calling out from the front door of the apartment. “EMT’s! Open the door!”

Steve remained curled up on the floor behind the door, phone in both hands, which were bleeding, the skin slipping off where the blisters had ruptured. He still seemed to be trying to hit the numbers on the screen, the fight had happened so quickly.

Pushing himself to his knees, Bucky took a few deep breaths before crawling over to Steve. “Hey . . . hey - - you’re okay. It’ll be okay.”

Steve lifted his face, eyes blinded by tears. “Buck?” His voice trembled. “I . . .” the men at the door interrupted again.

“EMT! Let us in! You got a burn victim?”

Groaning, Bucky rose to his feet shakily and carefully stepped around Steve. He hurried over to the front door and wrenched it open.

Several men in paramedic uniforms stood there with a rolling stretcher and a medical kit. “Where’s the victim, sir?” One asked while the other frowned. “Do you need more than one stretcher?” the first asked, noticing Bucky’s injuries. “What happened here?” The pair hurried in.

“Domestic dispute. The burn victim is down the hall,” Bucky stated as he led the paramedics down to where Steve and Brock were. Pointing towards Rumlow, Bucky admitted, “I tazed that man . . . he’ll probably need medical attention.”

The pair of rescue workers glanced at each other then split up, one to check on Rumlow, the other to check on Steve, who seemed impassive and calm, no sign of tears or pain suddenly.

Bucky leaned against the splintered doorjam, suddenly exhausted; his throat ached. And he suddenly became very aware of his ripped shirt that showed most of his scarred shoulder and chest.

The EMT checking Rumlow nodded and stood, walking over to Bucky. “Your turn. Let me look at your neck.” The man gently began to probe Bucky’s injuries. “No stranger to burns, huh?” the man asked and Steve looked over, eyes worried suddenly.

“He - - uh, grabbed a pan right out of the stove, no mitts or anything,” Bucky said, his voice coming out slightly hoarse. A twinge of pain shot down his neck as the EMT prodded the tender
tissue. The brunet offered the man a quick glare.

Stepping back, the man grabbed for a small radio on his shoulder and depressed a button. “Send two more ambulances to this location. The burn victim is joined by a domestic dispute. One tazer, one choking.”

“No,” Bucky said quickly, “I don’t need to go to the hospital.” The brunet knew he couldn’t afford a trip to the ER, not with the air conditioning needing to be fixed and Becca’s new medication bill.

Skeptically, the EMT shook his head. “Might have a minor crushed larynx, sir. We should get some x-rays.”

“I’m fine,” Bucky insisted, “I’ll ice it or whatever when I get home. I don’t need a hospital. I’ll sign whatever papers . . . I’m fine.”

“Buck,” Steve’s voice sounded from where he sat by the door, his hands being tended by the second EMT. “I can pay for it. It was my fault you got attacked.”

“No,” Bucky snapped, “I don’t need charity, and what happened wasn’t your fault. Stop blaming yourself.”

Steve snapped his mouth shut and turned his head painfully away, letting his eyes close but showing no other sign of pain or distress.

The EMT frowned and glanced over to Bucky then back to the still unconscious Rumlow. Finally, carefully, the man picked up Steve’s dropped phone and looked over the screen. He frowned and put the phone back on the floor. “Even if you sign papers not to be treated, sir, you aren’t going anywhere until the police sort this out,” he advised in a suddenly cold voice.

“Fine . . . that’s fine.” Bucky slumped against the wall, wincing at the pain the movement seemed to cause. He looked over at Steve and then at his feet; hanging his head, Bucky could see his own hands shook violently and the knuckles of one hand were already bruising from punching Rumlow.

A different set of sirens arrived and shortly several police officers and more EMT’s made their way into the room. Confusion reigned for five minutes as the EMTs tried to separate all three men and treat them, while the cops also tried to get at each man, Rumlow beginning to stir at last. Finally, the original EMT Bucky had refused treatment from led a cop over to Bucky, who had been moved to the man cave. “This is the one who doesn’t want treatment. He admitted tazing the other one. Said something about the blond burning himself on a hot pan.”

“Rumlow attacked me and then Steve.” Bucky murmured softly, still staring at his bruised knuckles. “It was self-defense.”

The officer, whose name badge read ‘Wilson, S,’ pulled out a notebook and pen, jotting down notes as Bucky talked. “Can I get your name, sir?” the cop asked in a gentle, serious voice, not sounding as accusatory as the EMT’s had.

“James Barnes.” Bucky stated, his tone detached. He worried that this altercation would make it back to Children’s Services and they might take Ava away from him.

God, what have I done?

”And this was reported as a domestic dispute? This Rumlow, he’s the man you tazed . . . he attacked you then your boyfriend, you said?” The cop continued writing.
“Steve isn’t my boyfriend. Rumlow and Steve are together, and Rumlow beats Steve. I saw it. Told Rumlow to stop. Rumlow got angry and attacked me. Steve splashed water on him to get him to stop . . . then Rumlow went after Steve. I - - I hit Brock to get him to stop but Steve - -”

“Brock?” the cop asked, glancing up.

“Brock is Rumlow’s first name.” Bucky added, “Steve pulled me into the room and we tried holding the door shut. Steve asked me to get the phone, and as soon as I got off the door . . . Rumlow bust it open. Kept sayin’ he was gonna kill me. I slid the phone to Steve and then Rumlow tackled me and started choking me. So I tazed him.”

Nodding, the cop lifted his head as he finished writing. “Okay, think I got all that. The blond, Steve, burned his hands. But when Rumlow started beating Steve, you intervened and Rumlow turned on you. Steve tried to distract him, and he went after Steve again, and the fight moved to the bedroom, where you finally tazed Rumlow? I’ll have the actual words written up for you, but that the gist?”

“Yeah . . . that’s how it went.” Bucky muttered; he wrapped his arms around himself and he could still feel his whole body shaking.

“Okay, so, we’ll let the EMTs check you over and tend that neck. Any other injuries, Mr. Barnes?” The cop lifted his pen.

“No . . . I’m fine,” Bucky answered numbly, “H - - how is Steve?” Bucky finally lifted his head and looked up at the cop.

Studying the trembling brunet for a long moment, the officer finally, carefully asked, “Do you want to press charges against Rumlow for attacking you?”

Bucky froze; he hadn’t thought of that. If he pressed charges . . . Rumlow might stay in prison longer . . . but it could draw more attention to himself. Attention that could notify Children’s Services. “I - - I . . . no? No . . . I don’t think so.”

Surprise lifted the cop’s brows. “No? He choked you and beat your friend, and you felt threatened enough to use a taser on him, but you don’t want to press charges against him? Might I ask why?” the officer lifted his pen from the paper, indicating a measure of privacy.

Sighing, Bucky searched the cop’s face, “I - - I have a little girl. I don’t want her to be taken away,” the brunet mumbled softly.

The cop nodded and gestured towards one of the leather chairs. “Sit, Mr. Barnes. Let’s talk.”

Sitting down, Bucky looked over at the police officer. His face looked tired and scared, he was terrified of losing Ava.

Officer Wilson sank onto a chair close to Bucky and studied the brunet for a long moment. Finally, he said, “did you start this fight?”

“I - - I . . .” Bucky hesitated, because technically he’d shoved Rumlow first. “I don’t know? He was yelling at me and Steve . . . things happened so fast.”

With a nod, the cop gestured towards some mirrored balls tucked in each corner of the ceiling and wall jointure. “And those cameras are recording?”

“I have no idea . . . probably.” Bucky swallowed.
Ava is going to get taken away. I’m an unfit guardian. Oh my God. Ava is going to get taken away.


Bucky’s eyes clouded with tears as he took the deep breaths. His fingers twitched and he tugged on the ripped sleeve covering his left arm.

Softly, gently, the cop touched Bucky’s hand. “Mister Barnes. Unless you are lying to me, this is what I see. Your friend was attacked, you tried to defend him, and the attacker went off on both of you. You tased him in self-defense. Unless those cameras or the other two guys give me different stories, it sounds like you did everything right.” He studied Bucky.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Bucky nodded once. “I’m not lying . . .” the brunet whispered and tugged on his sleeve again.

“I see no reason your little girl needs to come into this, unless she’s hiding in one of the back rooms? Is she in danger, Mister Barnes?” The cop’s voice remained calm and careful.

“No!” Bucky said quickly, eyes widening, “No! Natasha has her . . . I make sure she’s safe. I - - I’d never do anything to hurt her.”

The cop touched Bucky’s hand again. “Look at me, Mr. Barnes.” He waited for Bucky to look up then continued, “I didn’t say you would endanger her on purpose. I wasn’t sure if you brought your kid over here to visit your friend then the boyfriend started this attack. You see my concern? Why I have to ask these questions?” The cop nodded. “So, this Natasha is not in the apartment? She’s babysitting your kid somewhere else, right?”

“Yeah . . . at the bookstore she owns . . . I manage it. A New Chapter?” Bucky said, his eyes flickered nervously around the room as if to make sure Rumlow couldn’t hear where his niece was at the moment.

“Yeah,” the cop smiled briefly. “I go there sometimes, early mornings, when it first opens.” He stood slowly. “So, which of you men live here?”

“Steve and Rumlow,” Bucky answered.

The man nodded and jotted that down. “So, here’s the way I see it. If you’re telling the truth, you can only help keep this guy off the street and away from you and your friend if you press charges. It’s the responsible thing to do. The thing that helps out when you show you are trying to protect the public and cooperate with the police, you see?” The cop smiled softly, encouragingly.


Relief crossed the cop’s face. “Good, so we’ll need to get full pictures of your injuries and doctor’s reports from your exams to log those in with your report.”

“I can’t go to the hospital,” Bucky said, “I’ll take whatever pictures but I can’t go to the hospital.”

With a frown, the police officer studied Bucky again. “Why?” he asked simply.

Flushing, Bucky pulled at his sleeve again, “I - - I can’t afford it,” he mumbled, eyes downcast.

Looking thoughtful Officer Wilson finally, slowly, asked “do you believe you can get this guy locked away by giving testimony?”
“Like in court?” Bucky asked, eyes snapping back up to meet the police officer’s.

“Well, by pressing charges, you are asking the state or town to arrest the man and take him to court for his crimes. So, yes, in court.”

“I - - I think I can do that?” Bucky said.

“Do you think your friend will press charges, too? Testify about this Rumlow beating on him? Because if you and he both testify, I can have the prosecution help you open a civil case for restitution of medical bills.” The officer looked down at the seated brunet.

“I don’t know. I was trying to get him to leave the asshole before all this broke out. Steve thinks he deserves all this for whatever reason.” Bucky looked pained as he spoke the words.

“Sounds like your friend needs some heavy trauma counseling,” the cop said. “Most domestic abuse victims stay in the abuse because of feelings of need or inadequacy or that they deserve what they get... or because they think they can change the abuser.” He shook his head. “Your friend sounds like a victim of continued abuse. And, unfortunately, even if he escapes this guy, without help, your friend will most likely run right into another abusive relationship.”

“I won’t let that happen, sir,” Bucky stated, eyes flaring in determination, “He’ll get the help he needs.”

“And will you?” Officer Wilson asked gently. “Will you get the medical help you need so you can take care of your little girl? If you have hidden injuries, or are more hurt than you know, you won’t be able to care for her. Did you think of that?”

Bucky was really starting to dislike this detective. The guy could find a way to circle back to everything and use Bucky’s own words against him.

“Fine,” Bucky grumbled, tugging on the sleeve again; even though the policeman could see the scars all down the brunet’s arm, Bucky couldn’t help but try to cover as much of the scarred tissue as possible.

With a soft smile, no triumph in his manner, the cop nodded once. “I’ll have a medic come in, photograph you, and do a preliminary check. They we can determine if you need a hospital or not, alright?” He gestured towards the door. “Or you could move to a bedroom or come down to the precinct for this?”

“Can I see Steve?” Bucky asked, “I just gotta make sure he’s alright?”

“I can see if he wants that, sure,” the cop said and strode immediately to the door. He signaled to someone then spoke quietly. After a moment, the cop looked back in, frowning. “I think maybe you can help us with him. He won’t talk to anyone.” The cop studied Bucky. “You wanna come with or should I bring him in here?”

Rising to his feet, Bucky frowned and said, “I’ll go to him. Where is he?”

“The windowed room in the back,” the man stated and led Bucky to Rumlow’s den.

Steve sat on the edge of Rumlow’s lone chair, his hands bandaged, his neck bruising but bare. He looked towards the skyline from his perch, not speaking to the frustrated looking cop standing nearby.

“Heya, Punk.” Bucky spoke softly as he walked into the room and over to the blond.
Steve looked up, studying Bucky intently and frowning. “Did you get treated yet?” he asked softly.

Shrugging, only to wince slightly at the movement, Bucky shook his head. “I will, I promise. That damn cop is way too convincing.”

The cop beside Steve glared at the blond. “Now you talk?” But Officer Wilson frowned and signaled the younger cop out of the room. They left the pair alone.

Bucky looked over at Steve and sighed, “Are you okay, Stevie?”

“They want to lock Brock up,” Steve answered softly.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky pulled at his tattered sleeve, “He should be locked up, Steve. He tried to kill us. He’s not a good guy.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped. He nodded softly. “Yeah, I . . . I guess he did . . .” the tall blond sounded unsure, lost.

Bucky pointed at his neck and added quietly, “If I hadn’t had that taser . . . we’d both be dead. Steve . . . the guy is dangerous.”

Covering his face with his bandaged hands, Steve let out a soft groan. “Yeah, you’re right. You’re right. He . . . he lost it completely this time.” He wiped his sleeve over his eyes and sobbed once. “I’m sorry . . . so sorry . . .”

“Hey,” Bucky cooed, “Hey, look at me.”

Steve lifted his tear-washed blue eyes, looking miserable.

“You don’t got nothing to apologize for. None of this was your fault. It was Rumlow’s and Rumlow’s alone.”

Shaking his head, Steve moaned softly, barely audible, “no, it’s my fault, Buck. Everything. I shouldn’t have turned you away, ignored you. I should have . . . I shouldn’t have invited him to meet you,” he changed the other thing he had been about to say. “I definitely shouldn’t have agreed to let him go to the zoo with a kid, even one as precious as Ava. And I should have warned you that he’d try to kill you or screw you if you came home with us.”

Bucky lifted his left hand and gently wiped away the tears that fell from Steve’s eyes. “It’s in the past now, Steve. All we can do is work on the future.”


“You stop that right now,” Bucky snapped. “You deserve so much, Steve Rogers.”

Steve’s eyes widened and he snapped his mouth shut.

Groaning, Bucky retracted his hand and tugged on his sleeve again, the fabric ripping more. “Look, Steve. I was thinkin’ - - and I know it sounds fucking crazy but - - and you don’t have to say yes, but I was thinkin’ maybe you could stay with me and Ava until you get back on your feet? You don’t have to say yes . . . it was just an idea - - stupid idea really.”

Slowly breathing in and out, Steve looked around. He looked at Bucky. “You mean while this place is a crime scene?” He bit his lip. “Until Brock gets out of prison time again?”
“No, I mean until you’re comfortable enough to move out on your own. I mean . . . if you have someone else to stay with . . . of course I’d understand. You probably don’t wanna stay with me anyways.” Bucky sighed and grasped his ripped shirt, fingers playing with the tattered strings.

Shaking his head, Steve sighed. “No. Brock doesn’t let me have friends, actually. Says I need to concentrate on my work and keeping this place nice.” Steve stood slowly and limped over to the window. “I don’t have anywhere to go. This is my home.”

“Well . . . I mean, I guess you can stay here? But it’ll take a few days to process all the evidence . . . sorry . . . I know it was a stupid idea. I’ll just shut my trap.”

With a sigh, Steve shook his head. “It took months before they released it last time. I’m going to need to find something else.” Steve looked at Bucky, worry in his eyes. “But I don’t want to interfere with you and Ava and Becca.”

_Last time? Jesus Christ._

“You won’t . . . it’s just Ava and me, actually.” Bucky mumbled, eyes falling to the floor.

Steve drew his breath in sharply, shock in his eyes, finally seeming to snap out of his lethargy. “Oh, God, Buck. I’m sorry! I should’ve realized. God, how insensitive of me!” He placed one bandaged hand on his forehead and winced at the apparent pain.

“Becca ain’t dead . . . there - - there was an accident?” Bucky murmured, “Lot’s happened while you were away, Stevie.”

Lifting his head, Steve’s eyes fell on Bucky’s left arm, studying the scars through the tattered material. Softly, he said “the guy who did that hurt her too?”

Tears sprung to Bucky’s eyes and his jaw clenched tightly; he pulled furiously at the sleeve, ripping it more. The brunet shot to his feet and turned away from Steve; he swallowed and clutched his left arm tightly.

“Sorry,” Steve murmured. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

Taking a deep breath, Bucky rolled his shoulders and turned back to Steve. He forced himself to smile and said, “Don’t worry about it . . . it’s - - it’s a long story. One that I am far too tired to tell.”

Easily accepting Bucky’s deflection, Steve nodded. “Do you think the police will let me get some clothes this time, or will I have to buy more again?” he asked softly, looking towards the doorway.

“If they don’t . . . I have clothes you can borrow. My shirt’s might be a little snug . . . but they should fit,” Bucky said.

Steve shrugged and tried a smile. “The only shirts I have are snug. It’s the way Brock prefers them.” He drew in a breath and walked towards the door. “I guess I should give my statement . . . but Brock’s gonna be so angry when he gets home tomorrow.”

“You won’t be home. And he don’t know where I live . . . I’ll protect you, Steve. That bastard ain’t laying another finger on you,” Bucky ground out, fingers twitching again.

Steve turned to look at Bucky and frowned, a flush creeping up his face. “When did I become such . . .” he shook his head and walked from the room.

A few hours later, both men were cleared and their official statements given. The detective Bucky
had spoken to gave the brunet his card, Detective Sam Wilson, and had told both Steve and Bucky to call him if they ever needed him. Bucky opened the door of the taxi and gestured for Steve to get in first. The blond had been allowed to take a small bag of clothes and personal items.

Carefully balancing so he didn’t have to use his injured hands, Steve slid into the cab and moved to the far side of the back seat. He looked to Bucky, who was carrying his bag. “You sure you don’t want to go to the hospital for that neck, Buck?” His sunglasses had gotten destroyed in the fight somehow, so Steve’s black eye was evident . . . one that had purpled and yellowed enough to prove he’d received it about the time of the coffee shop meeting, Monday.

Bucky slid in next to Steve and rolled his eyes, “I’m fine, Punk. Just a little bruising. You sure you don’t need to get checked out?”

“I was cleared by the EMTs,” Steve said, frowning. Now that they were alone and away from the confusion, Steve sounded more in control, more normal.

Nodding, Bucky gave the driver the address of A New Chapter. “Nat is gonna kill me,” Bucky groaned, “It’s past eleven o’clock. And she called me like a million times. Just put me out of my misery, Steve.” The brunet flopped his head back to the headrest dramatically, wincing as the sudden movement caused a flare of pain to run down his spine.

“We could get Ava and go to a hotel and hide out, if you’d rather she couldn’t find you for a bit.” Steve frowned, his voice firm and take charge. “I’m sure she’ll settle after a while.”

“Ava can’t live without her bed. Or her stuffed animals. Or her dress-up clothes. She is a little prima donna, I swear. Prepare to have your fingernails painted and bows clipped into your hair. One time she tried to braid my hair . . . I had that tangle for like three days.” Bucky sighed but a smile graced his lips.

“My hair’s too short for braids,” Steve said absently but didn’t offer to take them to a hotel again. Rather he stared at Bucky a long silent moment. Finally, he glanced out the window, frowning.

Picking up on the tension, Bucky sat up and looked over at Steve with concerned eyes, “Hey, if this makes you uncomfortable . . . I’ll have the driver drop you off at a hotel. I swear, I won’t mind. Ava and I can be a handful . . .” Bucky picked at the remains of the sleeve.

Turning to look back at Bucky, Steve shook his head. “I was thinking this might be uncomfortable for you. I was the one who walked out on us before.” Flushing at how that sounded, Steve corrected, “I mean, our friendship . . .”

Humming a low noise of agreement, Bucky nodded, “Little do you know . . . this is all my ploy to get back at you. You will have to spend the rest of your days dressed up like a princess and drinking imaginary tea. Ava doesn’t like normal tea . . . so she makes you drink air. Girls are weird, Steve.”

“Okay,” Steve commented, but didn’t clarify what part he was agreeing to.

Bucky cleared his throat, and looked down at his sleeve. This henley had been one of his favorites . . . the material had been thin enough so he didn’t get too hot wearing it. Frowning, the brunet ran his fingers over the ruined fabric and the ugly, shiny scars that covered his left arm. Bucky tucked his arm against his chest and tried to hide as much of the arm as he could.

As the cab pulled up before the bookstore, Steve drew a slow, steadying breath. “We’re here, Buck,” he said, straightening his shoulders as if about to go into battle.

Snapping out of his haze, Bucky nodded and grabbed Steve’s bag before stepping out of the taxi.
The brunet hurried over to the blond’s side and opened the door for him. While Steve got out, Bucky fished out the money for the cab ride.

With a thankful smile, eyes sparkling momentarily, Steve slid from the cab. “Thanks,” he said then lost his smile as he looked at the shop. “Hope Natasha will forgive me for keeping you so long.” He limped towards the store.

Paying the driver, Bucky hurried over to catch up with Steve. The brunet could see Clint, Natasha and Ava all sitting at the counter, Ava was slumped against Clint, her eyes closed. Taking a deep breath, Bucky unlocked the front door and allowed Steve to step in first. Lucky bounded over happily to meet the newcomers.

With a small frown, eyes worried, Steve walked directly over to Natasha and Clint, not afraid to face whatever would be thrown at him. Apparently, as far as Bucky could tell, the only thing he feared was his own boyfriend. Steve glanced at the dog and offered a small smile for the enthusiastic animal. “Heya, boy,” he said warmly.

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at the pair, but it was Clint who spoke first, tone quiet to avoid waking Ava. “That dog . . . I swear the only thing he’ll do is lick ya to death.” The smaller blonde offered a small smile to Steve, “Steve, I take it?”

The taller man lifted his vivid blue eyes to meet Clint’s warm look. He smiled and lifted both hands above the dog’s reach, trying to keep his bandages fur-free. “Noted. Hello, yes, I’m Steve Rogers. You must be Clint?”

“The one and only,” Clint smiled back and ran a hand softly down Ava’s back, “Hey, Ava. Uncle Bucky’s back.”

Natasha stared at Steve for a long while, her eyes dragging down the blond’s body. She looked calculating, as if she was trying to get a handle on the situation. Finally, after a few moments she turned her gaze to Bucky. Her green eyes lingered on the deep purple bruising circling the brunet’s neck and the tattered remains of Bucky’s shirt. “What happened?”

Bucky groaned and shook his head; he was way too tired for this shit.

Steve flushed and nodded slowly. “Brock got mad at Bucky for . . . well, Brock’s in jail right now and we’re pressing charges for assault?” He moved to run his hand over the back of his neck and winced, halting and dropping his bandaged hand from his own bruised neck.

Ava squirmed in Clint’s arms and looked over at Bucky with a tired smile. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. “Uncle Bucky!”

Lucky answered the child with a happy bark.

“Heya, Squirt.” Bucky smiled back, “Ready to go home?”

Ava nodded and Clint transferred the little girl over to her uncle. She clutched at Bucky’s neck and the brunet hissed but allowed her to continue holding on. “Mind giving us a ride back to my place? Spent the last of my cash on the taxi over here,” Bucky asked looking over at Natasha and Clint.

Steve looked at Bucky and tried to reach for his pocket. “I could have paid. I didn’t think of it.” He winced as he managed to get two of his bandaged fingers into his pocket, but the bandages shifted from his raw, burnt fingers.

Bucky gave Steve a quick glare. “I wasn’t about to ask you to pay,” the brunet grumbled.
Natasha shook her head, “Alright, let’s get going. Where are we dropping you, Steve?” The redhead plucked the keys off the counter and Clint attached Lucky’s leash to his collar.

With a flush, Steve glanced at Bucky then at the floor. “I can go to . . .”

“He’s staying at mine, Tasha.” Bucky offered with a groan, he shifted Ava so that he held her with one arm and then he knelt down to pick up Steve’s bag again. “I’ll face your fury tomorrow. But tonight . . . please I just want to go home and get to bed.”

Natasha didn’t say anything, instead she walked past Steve and Bucky and out the door.

Steve fiddled with the bandages, trying to re-cover his fingers.

“Don’t worry about Tasha. She’s in her mother bear mode,” Clint offered Steve a small smile and ducked out of the door, Lucky in tow, and held the door open for the other two men.

Steve reached over and took his bag from Bucky with a tug. “I can carry it,” he ground out and walked out of the shop without looking back.

“I swear . . . I’m going to go become a monk,” Bucky mumbled, and Clint snorted as he locked up the shop.

The drive over to Bucky’s townhome was tense and Clint had given up trying to start a conversation. Natasha simply stared out the windshield, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Steve kept his bag on his lap, hands wrapped around the handles, tight with pain. But he showed no sign of the pain in his face, merely frowning softly, his eyes troubled. He kept his eyes downcast for the entire ride.

When the redhead stopped the car in front of Bucky’s home, she stated without turning around, “Take the day off tomorrow, James. We’ll talk on Sunday.”

“Thank you for the ride, Natasha, Clint,” Steve said as he fumbled to let himself from the car.

Bucky flinched, not used to being on the receiving end of Nat’s cold shoulder, and hefted Ava up as he slid out of the vehicle.

Lucky gave a farewell bark and wagged his tail, tugging at his leash experimentally.

Shifting Ava to his left arm, Bucky stepped up to the front steps and froze. “Shit. Shit. Shit.” The brunet mumbled as he felt around in his pockets.

Steve glanced at Bucky. “What’s wrong?”

“The keys!” Bucky groaned, “My keys were in my backpack . . . which is still at your apartment.”

“Oh,” Steve looked at the door. “Well, I see a couple choices. We get a cab back and see if the police will release it, but that probably won’t happen. We take a cab to a hotel after all. Or I can break a window and get us in and replace the window later?”

Wincing at the thought of one of his windows being broken, Bucky shook his head. “No . . . uh - - let me think. . . .” Bucky bit his lip in thought.

“You don’t keep a spare under a loose stone anymore, do you?” Steve asked softly.

“My spare!” Bucky exclaimed happily, Ava stirring at the loud noise; the brunet set the little girl
down. Ava pouted and rubbed her eyes sleepily as Bucky bent over and tugged at a loose stone by the door. He offered Steve a sheepish smile, “Old habits die hard?”

Steve offered a smile, a real one, not a small or apologetic one. “Yeah, they do,” he laughed slightly.

Unlocking the front door, Bucky flipped on the lights and grimaced at the sight of his messy living room. Blankets were scattered messily on the old couches and Ava’s toys were thrown everywhere. The brunet could see the dishes in the sink and groaned. “I - - we weren’t expecting company? Sorry . . . I’ll clean it tomorrow.”

“It’s fine,” Steve said not even bothering to glance around too much. Instead he shifted the bag in his hands, wincing slightly. “I remember being ‘carefree’ once in awhile, and it looked far worse than ‘always busy’.”

Bucky smiled and said, “Let me just get this one to bed . . . feel free to explore or whatever. Food’s in the fridge and cups are above the coffeemaker.” The brunet shut the front door and whisked Ava away, his footsteps fading as he walked up the stairs.

Steve looked after Bucky then around at the living room. With a soft sigh somewhere between relief and pain, Steve set his bag on the floor under the coffee table, out of the way from causing tripping accidents. He ignored the blood on the handles and his bandages as he began to carefully straighten up the blankets on the couch. He sank onto the piece of furniture, too short for him, but he refused to complain. Sinking down, kicking his shoes off, Steve pulled a blanket over himself and let his eyes close.

After several minutes, Bucky hurried down the stairs, “Sorry, she wanted to hear a story before - - ” The brunet stopped when he saw Steve sleeping on the couch. Frowning at the sight of blood on the other man’s bandages, Bucky called out softly as he stepped closer to the couch, “Steve?”

Steve jolted awake and into a sitting position immediately at the sound of his name. “Yes, sir!” he called out, blinking in confusion, trying to fight a wince of pain.

Frowning deeper, Bucky said as he rubbed the back of his neck nervously, “I - - I have a guest room? Ya don’t hafta sleep on the couch.”

“Oh!” Steve struggled up from the couch, careful not to touch anything with his bloody bandages, which made him all the more awkward. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” He reached for his bag under the coffee table.

“No, I’m sorry. I just had to get Ava to bed. It’s way past her bedtime.” Bucky grabbed Steve’s bag before the blond could get to it.

Wincing, Steve pulled his hands back so Bucky wouldn’t accidentally hit into him, letting his old friend take the bag.

“First we are cleaning your hands though,” Bucky mumbled and motioned for Steve to follow him up the stairs.

Steve walked slowly, one foot in front of the other, fighting his exhaustion. “I tried not to touch anything,” he confirmed.

Waving his hand dismissively, Bucky shook his head, “I don’t care about that . . . shit’s so old . . . stains almost make it look better.”

“Cold water and protein soap,” Steve murmured as he followed Bucky.
Bucky opened the door to the guestroom and turned on the light; the room was mostly bare aside from a full-sized bed, a nightstand, and a small dresser. “Sorry . . . it’s kinda small. If you want you can have mine . . . it has more room.”

With a confused frown, looking around, Steve shrugged and pointed out something Bucky had never noticed during the trying time at Steve’s. “It’s bigger than my room.” In fact, Steve wasn’t wrong; thinking back, Steve’s locking bedroom had been maybe the size of a large walk-in closet.

Frowning, Bucky set Steve’s bag on the bed and walked into the small en suite bathroom which contained a small shower, sink and toilet. The brunet turned on the light and sifted through the cupboard under the sink until he found the first aid kit.

Watching Bucky, Steve moved to the toilet and gingerly sank onto the seat cover, holding out his hands patiently.

Sighing tiredly, Bucky shook his head, “How did you manage to bleed through the bandages so fast?”

“Thanks, Buck. I really appreciate this,” Steve murmured, looking up to meet Bucky’s pale eyes. Then he flushed as the man’s question sank in. “Blood thinners,” he answered simply.

Grunting softly, Bucky carefully began to unwrap the bandages and frowned at the amount of blood. “You sure I don’t need to take you to the hospital?” The brunet looked down at Steve, his grey eyes shining with worry.

Meeting his old friend’s eyes, Steve countered, “only if you go, too, Buck.”

“Such a fucking punk.” Bucky smiled fondly and carefully began to clean the wounds.

Steve let out a little laugh. “Yeah, I guess I am,” he responded. He never once let out a wince or whimper at Bucky’s ministrations.

After thoroughly cleaning the wounds, Bucky carefully began to wrap Steve’s hands again.

That was when Steve let out a hiss of pain, as the open burns were covered once more.

“Sorry,” Bucky flinched as he finished up.

“I think tomorrow sometime I should leave them open to breath a bit,” he murmured, as if he very well knew how to take care of burns. “Maybe take some pain meds or something.”

Making a small, tired sound of agreement, Bucky nodded. “I can run to the store and get some burn ointment. I think Ava used the last of it when she burned herself trying to help me with baking cookies.”

“There’s some in my bag. The EMT gave me some . . .” Steve flushed. “I forgot until you mentioned it.” He frowned softly, eyes sympathetic. “Poor kid. Burns hurt like hell.”

“Oh, don’t I know it.” Bucky snorted and motioned towards his left arm.

Steve’s eyes flicked to Bucky’s tattered sleeve and sudden understanding dawned in his eyes. “Those were burns . . .” he snapped his mouth shut, flushing, knowing Bucky didn’t like talking about his arm.

Bucky threw the old bandages in the trash bin and nodded, jaw tight. “Yeah . . . was in the hospital for a few months. I’m lucky to have full movement of my arm.”
“Did Becca and Ava get hurt, too?” he asked softly, still looking down at his fresh bandages.

“No,” Bucky answered sharply, “I made sure they didn’t.”

Steve turned a sunny, angelic smile up at Bucky. “You were always a hero, Buck. They’re lucky to have you.” He seemed to genuinely feel glad about the idea the Bucky had saved his family.

Bucky snorted and shook his head, “I ain’t no hero, Rogers.” The brunet closed the first aid kit and tucked it back under the sink.

The smile dropped and Steve looked tired, troubled. “Because you did what came as instinct? Because you didn’t actively choose to run into a fire to save them? It’s instinct that makes a hero, Buck. Doing the right thing no matter what.”

Shaking his head, Bucky pulled at his sleeve again, “Do you need anything else, Steve? Glass of water? Food? Are you hungry? I think I have some leftover pizza in the fridge.”

With a sigh, Steve shook his head. “Just my pain meds the EMT gave me and my other night meds.” He moved towards his bag.

Nodding, Bucky held his left arm close to his chest and asked, “Do you need help?”

Steve hesitated. Finally, he sighed and dropped his hands before touching the bag. “Yeah, please? I might start bleeding again if I don’t let these rest a bit.” He held up his hands as if they were useless tools. “There’s a pill organizer with Friday Night pills in it. I need those and a dose from the new bottle the EMT gave me.”

Bucky strode over to the bag and unzipped it, pulled out the needed medication and handed them over. “Do you need water?” The brunet asked.

“It’s preferable, but I can take them dry if I have to,” Steve offered a small smile, as if teasing Bucky.

Bucky turned on his heel, muttering, “Fucking punk . . . I swear to God.”

Steve’s smile dropped away and his eyes filled with sadness but he forced the expression, the emotion, away as he noticed Bucky come back.

Cocking his head, Buck offered Steve the glass of cold water, “What did I do?”

Taking the glass, Steve carefully popped the pills into his mouth and drank the water, his hand shaking slightly as he gripped the glass in his injured hands, both wrapped around it to counter his shaking. “Thanks, Buck.” He looked up. “Do?”

“You were smiling and then I left and now you’re upset,” Bucky muttered and rubbed his right hand over the other arm, trying to soothe the burning, itchy feeling that crawled under his skin.

The blond shrugged. “You didn’t do anything. I just can’t figure out how to stop being such a problem to you.” Steve shook his head and carefully placed the empty glass down on the nightstand. “You’ve been better to me than I deserve after what happened. And I really am grateful.”

Bucky scoffed and said, “I think I can judge how I should treat you. Steve, I didn’t know it until I saw you at the zoo today . . . but I - - I realized that I’d forgiven you a long time ago.”
Steve’s eyes widened then filled with shimmering liquid. He bowed his head and wrapped his arms around himself, careful not to grab with his hands. He seemed unable to talk, merely sitting there fighting his tears.

“So you need to stop beating yourself up over it. It happened, Steve. It’s time we move past it. I - - I’m not saying it’ll be easy because I am pretty fucked up, but I’m willing to give this a go if you are.” Bucky shrugged and continued to rub his arm, he wasn’t getting a wink of sleep tonight if this continued.

Steve lifted his head, a couple of tears escaping down his cheeks. He nodded. “I’m willing, Buck. I’ll try my best not to make you regret this,” He drew in a breath, fighting the sob that wanted to well up. After a moment, he softly asked, “have you tried Aloe and Vitamin E?”

Stopping his hand from rubbing, Bucky flushed and nodded, “Yeah. I’ve got some special stuff from the doctor. But some nights it just acts up . . . feels like there are bugs crawling under my skin.” Flushing deeper, Bucky ducked his head and licked his lips nervously.

Nodding, Steve asked “nights when you feel stressed or overtired, huh?”

“I guess?” Bucky shrugged, “But I shouldn’t keep you any longer . . . you’re probably exhausted. Do you need anything else?”

Steve nodded in agreement but verbally he said, “I can stay up if you need to talk or just want some silent company or something, Buck. I don’t mind.”

Smirking softly, Bucky shook his head, “Nah . . . I’ll be fine. You need your sleep, Steve. Goodnight.”

“G’night, Bucky,” Steve answered softly, watching his former best friend intently.

Smiling slightly, Bucky nodded once and then turned to walk out of the room. “I’m glad you’re here, Steve.” The brunet called quietly over his shoulder.

“Oh, too, jerk,” Steve said so softly he might not really have spoken at all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the wonderful comments and kudos! Sam and I can’t thank you enough!
Early Morning Visits

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky gave up on the notion of sleep somewhere around four in the morning. Growling softly, he ripped the sheets off his body and made his way into the bathroom. He frowned at his reflection in the mirror; the dark purple circles under his eyes matched the bruising across his neck and his scars on his left arm were raw red from constantly scratching and rubbing them all night.

Shaking his head, Bucky slipped out of his sweats and briefs, tossing them into the hamper in the corner of the room, and hopped into the shower. The cool water soothed his inflamed skin a little and he sighed in relief. After washing his hair, Bucky stepped out, wrapping a towel around his waist; he padded back into his room and went over to his closet. He grabbed clean underwear and pulled them up, letting the towel fall to the ground. Next, he mindlessly grabbed a pair of old blue jeans and a thin black sweater.

He rubbed on some of his moisturizer on his arm before pulling on his jeans and the sweater. Bucky could feel his hair dripping on his shoulders but he couldn’t find the motivation to dry it off or tie it up. He quietly walked down the stairs, not wanting to wake Ava or Steve.

Bucky couldn’t believe that Steve was currently staying in his home, after not seeing each other for six years. Everything had happened so fast in the last week, from meeting Steve at The Met to the attack at Rumlow’s apartment. Releasing a shaky breath, Bucky ran his fingers through his wet hair as he walked into the kitchen.

The brunet started a pot of coffee and sifted through the mail that he’d thrown, carelessly, onto the counter the previous morning. He sighed at all the multiple past due stamps on the outside of the envelopes; he could barely manage to pay the mortgage on the house and the expensive monthly cost of Becca’s treatment. The insurance only covered twenty percent of her annual expenses at the institution, and Bucky had been left to scramble for the remaining amount.

Bucky still had his own medical expenses to pay off, and he felt anxiety swell in his chest as he thought about the fact that next month he’d have to take Ava shopping for the new school year, as well as start looking for the little girl’s birthday present. Natasha and Clint paid him as much as they could afford, and Bucky was extremely grateful for that, but he couldn’t help but think he might need to start looking for a second job.

Bucky was drowning, and he just needed someone to throw him a life vest.

Growling, Bucky shoved the bills away from him, sending them fluttering to the floor on the other side of the breakfast bar. The brunet turned to grab a mug from the cupboard and filled it up with the hot liquid. Setting the pot back into the brewer, Bucky braced himself against the counter, palms flat against the smooth granite. He could feel himself shaking, and he tried to take a few deep breaths to calm himself down, but they just came out as shaky, quiet gasps of air.

Distracted, Bucky didn’t hear Steve walk down the stairs and approach the kitchen.

At the smell of coffee and the soft sounds of what could be sobbing, Steve hesitantly stepped into the room, looking around at the scattered bills and piled dishes. Softly, the muscular blond knelt with a wince and started picking up the envelopes, trying not to pry but noticing the numerous ‘past due’ stamps. Bucky appeared to be struggling quite a bit . . . it was no wonder the brunet seemed to always be on edge, ready to snap and snarl at the slightest comment or look. Carefully
piling the stack of mail Steve slowly rose from his side of the island, trying not to startle Bucky with his sudden appearance. Without a word, he placed the bills on the granite surface, not stupid enough to mention where he found them; Bucky would have already known they were down there in all probability.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve said softly. “Want me to cook something for you and Ava? I’m pretty good.” He ran his bandaged hand over the back of his neck and winced, but didn’t retract his offer.

Whirling around at the sudden noise, Bucky quickly wiped at his face, trying to get rid of the evidence that he’d been crying. “Steve! Sorry . . . I - - I didn’t wake ya did I? I - - I was tryin’ to be quiet.”

“Coffee,” Steve said by way of explanation. “The smell of it brewing always wakes me up, even if I’ve only slept a couple hours.” He shrugged.

Nodding, Bucky swallowed and with a shaky hand reached up into the cupboard and pulled out another mug. The brunet filled it with the hot coffee and asked, “Do you still like cream and sugar in yours?”

Just as softly as before, Steve said, “I didn’t mean you had to share, but . . . thanks, Bucky.” He offered a smile. “I take it black nowadays. Not allowed a lot of sweets.” Suddenly Steve flushed; he’d had a notorious sweet tooth growing up.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky forced a small smile and turned back around. Handing the mug over to his friend he said, “Well you don’t hafta worry about that anymore . . . if ya want cream and sugar you can have it.”

“Technically, I’m not really allowed caffeine, either,” Steve murmured while he took the mug with care. A puzzled frown crossed Steve’s face and he looked over at Bucky. “What do you mean worry about it?”

Bucky’s mouth dropped and then snapped shut again, unsure of what to say. The brunet licked his lips and tugged on his sleeve as he turned back around to grab his own mug.

“Arm still itching?” Steve asked, sipping his coffee and making pleased noises in his throat. “This blend’s good, Buck.”

“It’s literally the cheapest shit on the shelf, Steve.” Bucky smiled and took a sip from his mug, frowning as the liquid had gone cold. The brunet set the mug down.

Steve laughed and flushed. “Well, I guess I lost my palette then,” he chuckled and sipped again. Seeing Bucky put down the mug, Steve frowned, eyes worried.

Bucky rubbed his arm, the raw skin burning slightly as he did so, and looked over at Steve, “I - - Well . . . since I have the day off . . . Ava will probably want to do something. I was thinking we could go to the park . . . you’re welcome to come if you want.”

“Oh . . .” Steve hesitated then nodded, swallowing another mouthful of coffee to gain time. Finally, he murmured, “sure, if you want.”

The brunet’s eyes fell at the hesitance in Steve’s tone, and he frowned again when he saw the envelopes sitting on the counter. His pale-blue eyes shot up to meet Steve’s and he felt himself flush, knowing that the blond had probably seen all the past due notices. “Well,” Bucky swallowed, “I invited you so . . . yeah, I want you to come.”

With a nod, the tall blond finished off his coffee then limped carefully to the sink and rinsed the
mug. “Okay. Sounds like it could be fun,” he murmured towards the sink.

Sighing, Bucky scratched his arm over the fabric and said, “But I totally understand if you want to stay inside today . . . maybe get some more rest? A five year old can really wear ya down, especially my five year old.”

Straightening, but not in a negative appearing way, Steve turned and offered Bucky a small smile, eyes tired. “I’m . . . uh . . . my leg’s hurting, actually.” He shrugged. “I was . . . hoping to rest it up, you know? I’ve got work tomorrow and it means a lot of walking.”

Bucky waved dismissively and offered Steve a small smile, “Yeah, of course.” The brunet paused, “Wait . . . how are ya gonna get to work? I noticed you lived close enough to walk to the museum . . . I can drive you if you want?”

“Ah,” Steve flushed and grinned sheepishly. “I actually hadn’t thought of that. Sure, I’d like a ride, Buck . . . if you let me pay for gas and parking. Otherwise, I’m taking a cab.”

Quirking a brow, Bucky smiled at the blond, happy to see the other man was comfortable enough to challenge him. “Fine . . . I leave here around eight . . . actually, probably we’ll leave around seven forty-five so that way I have time to drop you off and make it in time to open the shop. Is that okay? Or is it too early?”

Brushing his bandaged hand over his bruised neck again, Steve sighed. “I’m due in by seven.” He frowned. “Maybe I should take a cab, instead. Don’t wanna interrupt Ava’s sleep schedule.”

“No, seven is fine.” Bucky said quickly, “I can take her to breakfast or something . . . she’s had a rough week.” The brunet began to rub his arm again, “Nothing a stack of pancakes or something won’t fix.”

Finally smiling in agreement, Steve nodded. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Yep, positive.” Bucky nodded.

Bucky’s phone buzzed, and Steve turned back to the sink to give his friend some privacy, beginning to look in drawers and under the sink. He found some washing gloves and carefully pulled them on then began to wash the dishes.

Bucky picked up his phone and frowned when he saw Steve’s name on the screen. Answering the call without alerting the blond, the brunet answered tensely, “Hello?”

“Ass,” was the only thing said in a raspy growl before the phone hung up. Somehow, Rumlow must’ve gotten Steve’s phone from the cops, who had taken it for evidence the night before.

Letting the phone fall from his fingers, the device landing with a loud clatter on the counter, Bucky backpedaled and he could feel his blood rushing through his ears.

The noise drew Steve’s attention and he turned with a frown. “Everything . . . Buck? What happened . . . is Becca sick?” He peeled off the gloves, wincing as the bandages tugged on his healing hands. Steve reached for the phone.

“I - - It’s not - - nothing, I’m fine, it’s fine,” Bucky lied, even he knew he didn’t sound very convincing as his voice trembled. The brunet looked up at Steve with wide eyes.

Scooping up Bucky’s phone but not looking at it, Steve stepped over to his old friend, a worried frown on his face. “What happened, Buck? You look like you want to pass out and throw up at the same time.”
Shaking his head, Bucky pushed on the counter behind him then began to pace. “I - - I need to install an alarm on the house . . . maybe change the locks? Yeah . . . all the locks need to be changed.” He ran his fingers through his hair and tugged harshly on the fistful of hair. His left arm seemed to flare and it felt like the burns were on fire again.

Steve hung his head and sighed. “It was Brock, wasn’t it? I told you he’d get out today.” The taller man shook his head and put Bucky’s phone right next to the bills. “He has friends on the force . . . Jack Rollins, for one.” Steve began to walk from the kitchen. “You’ll both be safer if I go to a hotel. I don’t think he knows where you live.”

“Fuck that.” Bucky growled and tugged at his hair again, “No . . . I - - I mean if you wanna leave, you’re more than welcome to. But don’t go because of him. Don’t give him that power.”

Steve had frozen at Bucky’s forceful swear and stayed to listen to his words. Finally, slowly, he turned, crossing his arms over his chest. “If I stay, you’re both in danger, Buck.”

“I think that ship already sailed, Steve. He doesn’t know you’re even here and he still called me!” Bucky snapped but immediately closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Steve winced and lowered his eyes. He looked thoughtful, frowning. Finally, slowly, he looked up and said, “fine. It’s my fault you’re in this fix, so let me have the alarm installed and the locks changed.”

“I can’t . . . I can’t ask you to do that - -” Bucky muttered.

“You didn’t ask,” Steve cut him off, sounding more like his old feisty, almost always angry, self from high school. “I agree that leaving would be pointless now, so I’ll accept your hospitality, but I wanna protect you guys. If I hadn’t introduced Brock into your lives, you wouldn’t need security locks. So, I’ll pay for them. You worry about regular things.”

Bucky looked over at Steve, eyes wide and his whole body trembled. His knees gave out and he crumpled on the floor, hugging his legs tightly to his chest.


“I don’t know what I’m doing, Steve.” Bucky whispered, his eyes filling with tears. “I have no fucking clue! I - - I don’t . . . I can’t take care of her.”

With a small sound of distress, Steve reached out and pulled Bucky into a warm hug, holding him close and burying his face in the other man’s hair. “I’m sorry. Let me help you, please? I . . . I don’t wanna see you guys hurt because of my stupid fuck ups, Bucky.” He petted Bucky’s back carefully with one large, strong hand. “You want . . . you want a loan? Just until you’re on your feet again? I can afford it, Bucky.”

Bucky snapped away, pushing himself up, only to crash harshly with the edge of the counter. “I don’t need your money, Steve!” The brunet snapped, he rubbed his arm furiously until the skin under the fabric burned.

Frowning fiercely, Steve said, “No, Bucky, listen to me. It’s not charity or a gift or anything. It’s a loan. We can even have it legally drawn up if you want. But you’re sinking here and you need help. You’ve put yourself out for me, and I can help. Let me lend you the money to pay those bills and get whatever it is you need that you’re behind on. Then, you can pay me back a bit at a time or whatever.”
Clutching the now raw arm tightly until his knuckles were white, Bucky shook his head. “I — I’ll just . . . Steve, I can’t.”


“I don’t deserve help!” Bucky snapped, fingers digging into his skin.

“Fine,” Steve snapped right back. “Then I won’t lend you the money. I’ll lend it to Ava with you as the trustee.” He crossed his arms, still kneeling on the floor. “She needs the bills paid and food on the table and whatever else kids need as much as you do. So, if you don’t want my money for whatever dumb reason you think you need to punish yourself, let me lend it to Ava. You’ll just have to be the one who pays it back for her, since she can’t legally work yet.”

Bucky’s vision seemed to unfocus and he leaned against the counter heavily, a ragged breath escaping his lips. “I’m sorry . . .” Bucky murmured, the tears he’d been holding back ran down his cheeks.

Pushing his apparent advantage, Steve added softly, “Bucky, I don’t wanna see you hurting yourself, and every time you stress, you’ve been digging that arm up. You’re going to make it so you can’t work. And that’s gonna give you an ulcer if you don’t already have one. Just take enough to get on your feet, so you can stop worrying, and won’t be getting sick or whatever. Then, you can breathe again.” He reached for Bucky, fingers closing over his right shoulder gently. “Please? I want to help and I can’t think of any way to do it. I have more than enough. And it’s just sitting there collecting interest. I think helping you guys would be a much better use of Momma’s money. She would’ve offered it to you if she was still here, you know.”

Bucky sucked in a quick breath, “Sarah?”

“Yeah, they don’t pay archivists much money, actually. Momma left me a lot of savings she never even told me about. I’m not rich, but I can get by for awhile if I stopped working.” He flushed then shrugged. “She hated that we stopped talking, never let up on me to patch up our ‘argument’.” He sighed, looking sad.

The last time Bucky had talked to Sarah Rogers, she had told him that Steve had taken an early summer course and wouldn’t be back until the holidays. Bucky seemed to curl into himself; he’d never even bothered to check in on her. She had been like a second mother to him. “I’m sorry . . . I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t . . .” Steve trailed off, eyes wide and filling with moisture suddenly. “I . . . she passed from cancer about four years ago . . . just before I . . .” Steve looked away and muttered, “just before I met Brock.”

Bucky shook his head, “I had no idea . . . my parents were killed in a car crash about two years ago.”

Steve nodded. “I know. I was in the back at their funeral,” he said softly.

That hit Bucky like a physical blow; he stumbled away from Steve looking up at him with shocked, hurt eyes. “You were there . . . you were there and you didn’t even — —”

Misery flared up in those vivid blue eyes. “I’m . . . I’m sorry I didn’t say anything to you, Buck. I wasn’t even supposed to be there. Brock thought I was at a job interview.” He flushed.

Bucky’s eyes hardened, “Do you know what happened to Becca?”
Frowning, worried, Steve shook his head. “You said she and Ava were in a fire and you pulled them out?”

“You’re not lying?” Bucky growled low, throwing up his defenses again.

Eyes widening, Steve shook his head. “I have never, not once, lied to you Bucky.” He wrapped his arms around himself. “I might lie to other people, but I’ve never . . .” he shook his head. “Of course, you don’t believe me. You’ve seen me lie to my boyfriend.” He rose painfully, injured leg stiff and swollen from the long kneeling position. “I thought maybe she was in college or on a trip with Ava’s dad . . . but there’s more to it that I’m missing somehow.” He sighed. “She died, didn’t she? I’m sorry, Buck. Really.” Without another word, Steve left the kitchen, heading into the living room. The sounds of movement came from the other room.

Releasing a deep breath, Bucky dug his fingers into his flesh until he felt small trickles of blood run down his forearm. The brunet whirled around and stormed over to the sink where his coffee cup still sat mostly untouched. Grabbing the ceramic mug in his right hand, Bucky hurled it at the opposite wall and collapsed again, back sliding against the counter.

“Uh,” the sound of a hesitant woman’s voice came from the kitchen door. “Hello? No one answered at the front when I knocked?” She was dressed in a prim business suit, glasses perched on the end of her nose. Her hair had been pulled into a severe bun and she carried a clipboard and brief case. “This is the Barnes home?”

Bucky shoved himself back to his feet and walked over; opening the door, he answered, “Ma’am . . . it’s not even six in the morning.”

“Yes, well, I was called that there might be a situation here? And when we get calls like that, even two in the morning isn’t too early.” She looked up at him.

“Called?” Bucky asked.

Clearing her throat, the woman nodded. “Yes. I am Ms. Maria Hill, from Child Protective Services? I received a call that there might be a child who is,” her eyes flicked to the destroyed mug, “in danger?”

No. No. No. Fuck . . . this is not happening!

Bucky stumbled back but held the door open for the woman; he fought to keep his breathing in check. “I promise . . . no child is in danger here.”

Stepping into the room, eyes skimming over the mess she’d apparently witnessed Bucky making in frustration, as well as the half finished dishes and the stack of bills next to the abandoned phone, the woman made a few marks on her clipboard then raised her eyes to Bucky’s once more. “As you may know, it is my job to make sure the child or children is not in danger. Do you have any problem with me seeing the child or children in question, Mister Barnes? You are Mister Barnes, correct?”

Bucky knew how to handle Children Services . . . after the accident, they had made frequent visits to his home to check on Ava. He shook his head, “No . . . she’s sleeping right now.”

“Is she?” Ms. Hill’s eyes flicked back to the shattered mug and spreading coffee then back to Bucky. “Let me be frank, Mister Barnes. I was told you might have a house guest who . . . is endangering your daughter?” She checked her clipboard. “A Mister Rogers?”

“Steve?” Bucky stuttered, “No . . . Steve isn’t putting Ava in danger. Who told you that?”
She sighed and frowned softly. “Our contact is anonymous for their own safety, Mr. Barnes. We aren’t required to divulge their identity. But they did say that your house guest may be taking an unhealthy interest in the little girl?” She frowned. “I’ll be blunt. It was reported that Mr. Rogers might be touching her and . . .”

“What?!” Bucky snapped, “Look . . . Steve has only been here for one night! He hasn’t been with my niece alone . . . not once!”

“And where is he right now, Mister Barnes?” She tilted the clipboard.

Shaking his head, Bucky let out an annoyed growl and said, “In the living room.”

“Right. Then you won’t mind showing me around the house and introducing me to your guest until your niece wakes up so I can talk to her?” Maria Hill looked at Bucky with a frown.

“Not at all,” Bucky muttered and lead her to the living room; he tugged on his sleeve, wincing slightly as the fabric of his sweater caught on his self-inflicted wounds.

As she followed the tall, lean man, Maria asked, “and where did your guest sleep last night? Could he have managed time alone with your niece without your knowledge?”

“He slept in the guestroom. And no. I was up all night . . . I didn’t hear any doors open,” Bucky reported quickly.

Suddenly, Maria seemed to relax her stiff shoulders and she nodded, writing something on the clipboard. “And was there a reason you felt the need to stay up all night? Perhaps to keep an eye on this guest so he didn’t approach your niece?”

“No! Jesus,” Bucky breathed, “No . . . I - - an injury kept me up. Pretty sure that injury is listed in your file.” The brunet jutted his chin sharply towards the clipboard.

Maria cocked an eyebrow, looking over her glasses at Bucky before asking, “and you are aware that this is not the first complaint against your guest for inappropriate behavior with a child? That he was investigated for this last year as well?”

Freezing, Bucky looked over at Maria with confused eyes. “What?” Finally they reached the living room.

Steve had made himself busy cleaning the room, stacking the blankets neatly, picking up and arranging the toys, and generally making the room as presentable as it might have been in his own apartment. He frowned as he worked quietly, apparently lost in thought.

“Steve,” Bucky snapped, “We have a guest.”

Steve’s head came up and he turned, frowning still. “Yeah, Bucky?” He looked at Ms. Hill without recognition.

“Children’s Protective Services,” Bucky stated, fingers twitching.

Steve went pale. “Shit,” he said softly, blue eyes widening in something akin to horror. “He didn’t . . .”

“Who didn’t what, Mister Rogers, isn’t it?” Ms. Hill wrote something on her clipboard.

With a frustrated sound of distress, Steve ran his dirtied bandage over the back of his neck, ignoring the painful bruises and the throbbing burns. “Brock. My boyfriend. He called you, didn’t
he? He’s angry at Bucky and me and . . . he threatened something like this.”

“Uncle Bucky?” Ava called out, still dressed in her nightgown and clutching her stuffed dog. She rubbed her eyes and blinked up at the group of adults.

Maria Hill’s expression went from frowning sternness to a gentle, welcoming smile that reached her eyes, making them warmer. “Hello. My name’s Maria. Are you Ava?” She squatted down, knees together so her skirt didn’t spread.

“Yes? Are you a friend of Uncle Bucky’s?” Ava muttered sleepily.

With unsettling honesty, the woman shook her head, still smiling. “No. I just met him. I’ve come from the state to make sure you’re happy and healthy.”

“You aren’t Mr. Coulson,” Ava muttered again, “He always made jokes. He stopped coming because he said Uncle Bucky was doing a good job.”

With a soft laugh that would be pleasant in other circumstances, she shook her head. “I’m afraid Phil’s on vacation this week. He speaks very highly of his friend Ava. Is that you?” She smiled wider. “I’m not here about your Uncle Bucky. I’m here because someone was worried you might be . . . afraid of Mister Rogers.”

Bucky watched the woman with a frown, arms crossed over his chest.

Steve went paler and he seemed to staggered slightly. He mouthed the words, “not again,” but no sound came out.

“Steve?” Ava repeated, “Steve made Uncle Bucky sad at the museum . . . but then he took us to the zoo . . . he showed me the snow leopards. They were real pretty. Have you seen the snow leopards?”

With a soft shake of her head, the brunette woman said, “I don’t think so. I haven’t been to the zoo since I was a little girl. Did you have fun at the zoo?”

“No,” Ava grumbled, “Steve’s boyfriend hit Uncle Bucky with words. Auntie Nat said Steve’s boyfriend was a mean man and that we should stay away from him.”

Bucky groaned softly and threw his head in his hands, shaking his head.

“And what did Steve do when his boyfriend hit your uncle?” Maria asked, eyes widening in interest.

“Steve took him away. The mean man said he was gonna take me away! Uncle Bucky never hurts me! Never!” Ava pouted, pulling her stuffed animal tight to her chest and hugging it tightly.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Maria smiled and nodded, her tone soothing. “So, you’re happy here Ava?”

“Auntie Bucky takes care of me. He says I might be able to see Momma soon!” Ava smiled slightly.

“That would be nice when she’s feeling better, wouldn’t it?” Maria answered. “Ava, are you happy here?” she prodded gently.

Ava furrowed her brows, confused, “Yes. Uncle Bucky makes me chicken nuggets, and he even let me braid his hair once! Don’t take me away! That mean man said he was gonna take me away!” The little girl’s eyes shone with tears and her lip quivered.
Maria put her clipboard down, written side on the floor, and put her hands up, palms out. “I have no intention of taking you from you uncle, Ava. That’s not why I’m here.” She offered another smile.

Bucky looked at the pair of girls, misery displayed in his pale eyes; he shot a quick look over to Steve.

The tall blond remained frozen in his spot, a look akin to fear and horror still on his face. His skin remained unnaturally pale and he seemed unable to take his eyes off of Ms. Hill.

Ava looked to her uncle and tears fell from her bright blue eyes. She looked back over to Maria, “You’re confusing me. I like Mr. Coulson better.”

Maria nodded. “I’m sorry, I didn’t come to take you from your uncle. I came to ask you about Steve, Ava. Do you like playing with Steve?”

Ava shrugged, “He makes Uncle Bucky sad . . . I only met him when Uncle Bucky took me to the museum. And then I saw him at the zoo with the bad man.”

Steve winced at those innocent, honest words.

Nodding, still smiling, Maria asked, “did the bad man touch you, Ava?”

“No!” Ava shook her head wildly, “He kept touching Steve. He didn’t like me.”

“And did Steve touch you,” Maria continued.

Bucky made a small, pained noise but didn’t interrupt the conversation.

Steve looked like he wanted to throw up, his eyes desperate, but he stayed rooted to the spot.

Furrowing her brows again, Ava shrugged, “No . . . I accidently stole his phone. But Uncle Bucky gave it back . . . I had to stay with Auntie Nat and Uncle Clint.”

“And did Steve get upset when you took the phone?” Maria asked gently, eyes on the child.

Shaking her head, Ava answered, “No . . . Uncle Bucky gave it back. He said I wasn’t in trouble.”

“And Steve stayed over last night?” Maria continued to smile, her manner open and friendly.

“I guess,” Ava shrugged, “It was real late when Uncle Bucky and Steve got me. I was asleep. Uncle Clint let me play with Lucky.”

“Did someone carry you into the house, Ava?”

“Uncle Bucky always carries me when I’m asleep,” Ava said.

Maria nodded. “Not Steve?”

The little girl scrunched her nose up and shook her head, “No! I don’t know Steve! He makes Uncle Bucky sad . . . I don’t want him carrying me.”

“I have a couple more questions, Ava, then we’re done, okay?” She picked up her clipboard but continued watching Ava. “Did you and Steve play together?”

“I already told you. No.” Ava said, her eyes flicking over to Bucky and then back to Maria.
The woman nodded and asked “and do you want me to make Steve stay away, Ava?”

Ava seemed to think for a few moments, her favorite stuffed dog clutched tightly to her chest, after a while, she said, “Only if he keeps makin’ Uncle Bucky sad.”

“Well, what a very grown-up answer, Ava. Thank you for talking with me.” Maria nodded and stood, still smiling. She began writing on her clipboard. After a long moment, she looked up at Bucky. “And what do you want me to do, Mr. Barnes?” Her voice was still friendly, apparently because Ava still stood there. “Do you feel we should continue this investigation in light of the previous investigation?”

Bucky froze, it was a loaded question. If he said yes, he’d lose Steve. If he said no, it would look incredibly suspicious to Children Services.

Steve finally spoke, his voice strained, almost inaudible. “They said that was closed . . . sealed.” He sounded as pale as he looked.

Bucky tugged on his sleeve, he swallowed and opened his mouth, only to snap it shut again.

Ms. Hill glanced over at Steve finally. “It was sealed, Mr. Rogers. However, a second report allowed us to reopen the original case.”

“I was acquitted,” Steve responded slowly, misery in his tones.

Gripping his arm tightly, Bucky closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Acquitted is not the same as not guilty, Mr. Rogers. It could mean lack of evidence or any number of other reasons,” Ms. Hill pointed out reasonably, still watching Steve, her eyes hard.

“I wouldn’t . . .” Steve gasped, strain around his mouth and eyes, misery in his very bearing. “I’ve never hurt a kid! I wouldn’t ever!”

Maria looked at Bucky. “Mr. Barnes?” She cocked an eyebrow. “You met him a week ago at the museum?”

Snapping open his eyes, Bucky shook his head, “Steve and I were friends in high school. We had a falling out and we just reconnected last Friday.”

Nodding, Maria wrote on the clipboard. “And do you mind sharing why he was spending the night?”

Flicking his eyes to Ava, Bucky frowned and pointed at his bruises than at Steve’s, “Brock attacked us. Steve needed a place to stay.”

“Brock . . .” Maria lifted her face expectantly. “The boyfriend?”

“Yes.” Bucky answered.

“Brock Rumlow,” Steve offered, his voice sounded defeated.

“Ms. Hill,” Bucky started, “I really think this is all . . . some sick game to Rumlow. He called you with a false tip.”

“And it happens that he called a false tip on a man who’s been investigated for,” her eyes flicked to Ava then back to Bucky, “this thing before?”
“Look, all I know is that Rumlow is manipulative and very upset because of what happened last night. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had something to do with the first case.” Bucky dug his nails into his arm in an attempt to keep himself grounded.

“Well,” Maria crossed her arms and frowned softly. “While this is being checked into, it might be wisest to cut ties with Mr. Rogers . . . after all, we never can tell what’s on the inside, can we? Ted Bundy was a suicide hotline worker, you know.”

Steve went pale once more and his hand fluttered to cover his abdomen as he turned a bit greenish. Whispering, voice miserable, Steve said, “Brock called in last year after I had him locked up for breaking my hands.”

Bucky looked over at Steve in horror, his mouth hanging open.

Maria looked surprised and turned to the table, flipping her briefcase onto the coffee table’s smooth surface then opening the leather case. She pulled out a file and started flipping through it with a frown.

Steve caught Bucky’s shocked look and flushed. He shrugged and looked down at his feet. “He said it was an accident. He shut the window and I couldn’t move my hands in time. I . . .” he gulped, “I . . . guess I over-reacted because I was in pain and the police pushed me into pressing charges? But he got out the next day and called Services. He said it was to teach me not to be . . .” Steve fell silent, eyes flickering over Ava.

Snapping his mouth shut, Bucky clutched his arm tighter, not trusting himself to speak.

“Hmmm,” Maria frowned and looked up. “I’ll be back, Mr. Barnes. I’ll be making a full report and looking further into this.” She put the file and the clipboard into the briefcase and snapped it shut. Picking it up, Ms. Hill offered Bucky another frown. “I would suggest security at the least, Mr. Barnes. If Mr. Rogers is telling the truth, his boyfriend might come looking for him. And that would endanger Ava.”

“Looking at systems today, actually.” Bucky muttered, eyes falling to the floor. “I’m changing the locks, too.”

“Good,” Maria nodded firmly. “I’ll add that to my report then.” She headed towards the front door. “Oh, and you might want some stress counseling, Mr. Barnes. It’s not healthy to vent by throwing things. Someone could get hurt.” She let herself out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your continued support! It means the world to us!
Bucky flinched as the door shut and he hugged himself tightly. His arm burned and he could feel his sleeve sticking to the wounds.

Looking hesitantly at Bucky, eyeing the way the sleeve clung, the blond said, “I’m sorry, Bucky. I didn’t think he’d pull that again. Really, I’d never hurt a kid!”

Nodding once, Bucky offered the blond a forced smile. He turned his attention to Ava, “Heya, Squirt. Why don’t you turn on some TV? I’ll make some breakfast, okay?”

Ava nodded and bounded over to the couch; Bucky grabbed the remote and turned it on some cartoon. The brunet offered his niece one last concerned look before walking back into the kitchen. His eyes focused on the shattered remains of the mug. Sighing, he knelt down and began to pick up the pieces, cold coffee seeping into the fabric of his jeans.

Steve’s soft footfalls sounded on the stairs.

Bucky let out a quiet sob and quickly clasped his hand over his mouth so that Ava wouldn’t hear him.

After ten minutes, Steve came back down the steps. His footfalls paused at the living room for a long moment then sounded as he walked into the kitchen. He had dressed in nice slacks and a button down shirt and dress shoes. He watched Bucky but didn’t approach the man.

Not hearing, or maybe not caring about, Steve’s approach, Bucky still knelt in the cold liquid and his hands shook as he still tried to pick up the pieces.

“A piece of ceramic cut into his palm and Bucky hissed, dropping the pieces he’d managed to pick up. The brunet eyed the shattered remains with a look of mild contempt.

Steve winced. “Need some bandages or a mop or something?” He tried again from his place in the doorway.

Not answering Steve, Bucky began to pick up the pieces again, ignoring his cut. He mumbled to himself, something that Steve couldn’t quite make out. After a few moments, Bucky stopped, hung his head and let out another sob that was quickly muffled by his hand.

“I don’t know how to convince you that Brock lied . . . I don’t know what to do.” Steve sighed and walked over and knelt, starting to pick up the pieces but not touching Bucky at all. “I . . . I want to help, Bucky, but I’m not sure what to say or do. And I can't blame you if you don’t believe me. About any of this.”
Lowering his hand so that it tightly gripped his arm again, Bucky shook his head, “You could never hurt a kid, Steve.” His voice came out raspy and wrecked.

A sob broke from Steve then, and he sat back on the floor. “You believe me.” Relief radiated from his entire body. “God, I thought even with our fighting that maybe Brock had convinced you . . . with those cases . . .” He shook his head. “Bucky, let me take care of your arm?” The subject change was abrupt, but the blond felt the need to offer something in return for the loyal trust Bucky showed.

“I got to make Ava breakfast.” Bucky mumbled, his tone distant. Shakily the brunet rose to his feet, “I can’t even clean up a mess right,” he murmured as he looked down at the mess on his floor.

With a sigh, Steve looked up. “Why don’t you let me make breakfast and clean this up? Ava might be pretty confused by what she had to witness just now.” He looked back at the floor. “I don’t want her afraid of me, but I won’t stay if she’s unhappy, Bucky. It’s her house, too, and you both deserve some peace.”

Biting his bottom lip, Bucky looked to Steve and then to his arm. “I - I can’t talk to her while I’m bleeding. It’ll just freak her out.”

Steve rose to his feet and threw away the pieces of ceramic. “Let me take care of your arm then you can go sit with her. Waffles sound okay? Or, pancakes if you don’t have a waffle iron.”

“I . . . mom’s waffle iron broke last year,” Bucky mumbled as he walked over to the sink. He bent down and started looking in the cupboard beneath the sink. After a few moments he pulled out a first aid kit and set it on the counter. The brunet gave Steve an embarrassed glance before rolling up his left sleeve. He winced at the sight of multiple open and bleeding scratches, as well as the inflamed skin from his constant rubbing.

Nodding, Steve took off his own dirty bandages and tossed them aside, his hands beginning to heal but looking raw and angry. He pulled out one of Bucky’s dish clothes. He dampened it in cold water and began carefully washing up the blood from the wounds. He then patted it dry, leaving the bloody towel on the counter top for now. Carefully, Steve smoothed antiseptic cream over Bucky’s scratches and lotion over the other dry, near-raw scars. Finally, despite his own injured hands, Steve wound clean bandages over his friend’s arm and fastened the wrappings securely. He rolled Bucky’s sleeve down over the clean white linen. “Go spend time with your girl, Buck. I’ve got this.”

Looking up at Steve, the brunet nodded and his jaw clenched before relaxing. “Thank you, Steve. I - I’m sorry I made a mess.”

“I’ve done worse,” Steve offered a small half-smile. “I seem to recall a burnt chicken dinner not twenty-four hours ago.” He began cleaning up the dirty bandages and the used towel.

“That was my fault. I got you upset,” Bucky said quietly, his eyes falling.

“Okay,” Steve didn’t argue. “And I’m sure the mug was my fault for upsetting you.” He sighed. “We’ve gotta stop this one-up-manship thing, don’t we?” He tossed the bandaging away and grabbed another cloth to clean up the spilt coffee.

“You - - you sure I can’t help?” Bucky offered, feeling useless.

Steve looked up from his position on his knees. He blinked his blue eyes slowly and offered a small smile. “Well, if you want to pull out the pancake supplies so I don’t spend ten minutes trying
Jumping at the chance to help, Bucky made quick work of gathering all the supplies and setting them on the counter.

Looking thoughtful, Steve suddenly raised his voice and called, “Ava, do you wanna learn to make pancakes?” He kept his eyes on Bucky, the spill and ceramic cleaned up by then.

The sound of little feet echoed throughout the house as the little girl ran into the kitchen. She stopped and looked over at Steve; apprehensive, she said, “You won’t make my Uncle Bucky sad anymore, will you?”

“Ava!” Bucky snapped quickly.

Steve raised his hand. “No, Buck, it’s a perfectly reasonable question.” He looked at Ava. “I can’t promise that, Ava, but I can promise to try not to. Is that good enough?”

Ava looked at Steve, her arms crossed, and she didn’t say anything for a few seconds. After a moment, she nodded once, “If you make him sad I’ll let Auntie Nat have you.”

Bucky groaned and shook his head, “Ava . . . that’s not nice.”

“Fair enough. Deal, Ava.” Steve offered a small smile. “I want to talk to you both about what happened since we met. Do you want to ask anything? I promise to treat you like a big girl and answer you.”

Looking at her uncle, Ava bit her lip and looked back up at Steve. “Why do you make Uncle Bucky sad?”

“Ah, that’s probably the biggest question, isn’t it?” Steve sighed. “Okay, climb up on this stool and I’ll answer you as we measure out the pancake stuff.” Steve used the time it took to organize the kid to equally organize his answer. Finally, looking over at Bucky, Steve answered, “we were best friends since we were little. Did you know that, Ava? He saved me from a couple of bullies who were beating me up on the street.”

Ava leaned over the counter and poured the pre measured cup of flour into the bowl that Bucky pushed over. “Like he saved Momma and Me?”

“Right,” Steve said. “Only I got lucky. Your uncle didn’t get hurt so bad saving me, and that makes me happy. But, anyway, we did everything together growing up. And then, when we were maybe seventeen or so, your uncle told me a secret. But I was shocked and confused and scared by his secret. So,” he sighed and met Bucky’s eyes, “I acted like a coward and ran away.” Steve passed other ingredients to Ava, letting Bucky instruct her on how to use them so he could talk.

“I thought the secret was so big and scary that I didn’t think we could be friends anymore. And I left. But I was wrong.” Steve sighed mightily and passed over a mixing spoon. “Because a couple years later, I understood his secret . . . because I had the same secret. But by then, it had been so long since we’d talked, I was afraid to talk to him.” Steve looked at Ava. “That probably makes no sense, huh?”

Bucky didn’t look at Steve or Ava, his eyes were focused on the mixing bowl.

Ava shook her head, “What was the secret?”

Steve nodded. “You know how I said it was such a big secret that it scared me and I let it break our friendship?” Steve let out a small, bitter laugh. “Well, I was stupid, because it was the smallest
secret ever. You see, your Uncle Bucky told me he liked boys. And you already know I like boys . . . or I wouldn’t have a boyfriend . . . or,” he sighed, “used to have a boyfriend. Brock’s not my boyfriend anymore. Not after he hurt you two.”

Not realizing his hands had begun to shake again, Bucky picked up the milk jug but it slipped and fell on the counter. The brunet managed to pick it up before it could spill much; he quickly grabbed a towel and began to clean up the mess.

Blue eyes immediately snapping to Bucky, Steve flushed. “I’m sorry. I should have asked if you’d told her . . .” he sighed and hung his head. “See, Ava? I’m pretty stupid and always say and do the wrong things. And that’s why I’m always making your uncle sad. It’s not on purpose. It just happens because of how stupid I am.”

“Uncle Clint and Auntie Nat told me that we should love everyone, despite who they like or where they come from. Uncle Bucky loves you, Steve, so I guess I can try, too,” Ava stated honestly and began to stir the ingredients.

With a small intake of breath, Steve looked at Ava. “I’d be happy with friends if you rather? That might be easier?”

“But I love my Uncle Clint and Auntie Nat. And they’re my friends, too. I love all my friends,” Ava said, looking up at Steve.

“Oh,” Steve said, nonplussed by the child’s simple logic. Finally he said, “I guess you can teach me a lot, huh, Ava? You’re a pretty smart girl.”

Ava beamed at the compliment, “Uncle Bucky says I’m the smartest girl he knows.”

“Well . . .” Steve drawled slowly, smiling softly. “Maybe the second smartest I know. I’m thinking your Auntie Natasha is pretty smart.”

“Yeah, she is!” Ava smiled and began to stir again.

Bucky grabbed the empty bowls and carried them over to the sink; he put the dishes into the soapy water and began to wash them out. He needed something to distract himself with; his hands were shaking violently.

Finally, Steve got back to the question at hand. “So, um, when I saw you and Bucky in the museum, I finally got brave enough to try to fix our friendship I broke. It’s why I asked him to coffee and then you and him to the zoo.” He shrugged, frowning, looking sad. “But that went all wrong.”

“But you’re here?” Ava said, her tone unsure, “We can all spend time together, and you and Uncle Bucky can be friends again.”

“I’d like that very much.” Steve smiled at the girl then turned his smile hopefully on Bucky.

The brunet turned his head and offered Steve a small, unsure, smile. His pale eyes shone with fear and uncertainty. “Yeah, we’ll all be friends.”

Steve’s smile dropped and he turned back to Ava. “So, we have to cook them now. What I’ll do is tell you how, and you watch me and make sure I do it right, okay? Then, when you can see over the stove without a stool, your uncle might let you start making them for him.”

Ava nodded happily and began to watch Steve intently, “I’ll make the best pancakes ever!” She said, head held high.
“I think you will,” Steve agreed, careful to explain about the proper size to use so it didn’t stay sticky in the middle, and watching for the bubbles at the sides, and how to carefully flip them, and everything. He was as patient as his own mother when she had taught Bucky and him how to do this same thing.

Bucky watched the pair from where he stood by the stove. Watching Steve be so patient and kind with his niece made his heart swell and his stomach flip. The brunet shook his head, trying to push away the familiar feelings from so many years ago. Bucky turned back towards the sink and continued to wash the dishes.

Finally, Steve turned off the burner, plating the last of the pancakes and carrying them to the breakfast area. “Syrup? Powdered sugar? Butter? Plain?” he asked the little girl.

“Lots of syrup! Uncle Bucky says you can’t have pancakes without lots of syrup!” Ava jumped up and down, clapping her hands together.

“Yeah, I think your uncle owned stock in a maple farm,” Steve teased and opened the syrup bottle. “So, you like to cover the entire thing, or is that too much?”

“The whole thing!” Ava smiled as she sat down in her chair at the table.

“Well,” Steve eyed the plate then the syrup doubtfully. Finally, he said, “why don’t I let your uncle do this part. I think he’s been feeling left out.” He turned and called, “Bucky? Joining us?”

Putting the last dish on the drying rack, Bucky called back, “Yeah!” The brunet wiped his hands on his dirty pants as he walked out of the kitchen. The tall brunet slid into the seat across from Ava and next to Steve. He shot Steve a hesitant smile.

Offering the bottle with a small smile, Steve surprisingly was almost spotless in his trousers and shirt . . . despite having cleaned and cooked with a child. “Syrup master?”

Smirking softly, Bucky grabbed the syrup bottle and said, “I will train you to be the master of syrup pouring, yet.”

“Well, you haven’t managed in fifteen years, but there might still be hope for me yet,” Steve agreed with a laugh.

As Bucky began to pour the thick sugary syrup, his phone rang.

Jumping at the sound, Bucky shot to his feet and hurried over to the counter where his phone buzzed loudly. Seeing Steve’s name again, the brunet answered the phone with a snap, “What the hell do you want?”

“Send him home,” the rasp growled back.

“Not a chance, pal,” Bucky barked back.

“You like that meeting today? I can arrange more. Send him home!” Rumlow’s voice threatened.

Bucky ended the call and let the phone fall again; the brunet bolted from the room and ran up the stairs, taking two at a time.

The blond watched, smile gone completely, fear and worry once more in his eyes. “Might wanna eat, Ava,” he said softly. “Looks like we’re gonna be busy today.”

Wrenching open his bedroom door, Bucky knelt down in front of the chest at the end of his bed.
Frantically, he began to toss out some of the old blankets and sweatshirts that he hadn’t gotten rid of yet. “Where is it?!” Bucky seethed as he sifted through the contents.

After only a couple of minutes, Steve reached over and picked up Ava’s plate as she took another bite. “I think you need to sit in your room to eat while I check on your uncle. I can promise he doesn’t want you down here alone right now. Brock’s pestering him, and that means he’ll be worried about you.” Steve offered Ava a gentle smile and led her upstairs, carrying her plate and the syrup. As he settled the little girl at her tea table in her room, he said, “scream if you get scared okay?”

“Ohkay.” Ava nodded, “You make sure Uncle Bucky is okay.”

“I mean it. Scream loud, Ava. I’ll be in your uncle’s room.” Steve put the syrup next to the girl and walked out and down the hall. He stopped in the doorway to Bucky’s room, and the blond frowned softly, watching. Finally, he asked, “Bucky?”

Bucky snapped his head up to look at Steve, his eyes wide with panic, “I can’t find it!”

“Can I help you look?” Steve asked, walking in and dropping to his knees painfully, his aching leg reminding him of his injuries. “What are we looking for?”

Flushing, Bucky gripped the edge of the trunk tightly and muttered, “My . . . my gun?”

Drawing a deep breath, Steve merely nodded. “You keep it in this trunk? You sure Ava hasn’t found it?” The blond began rooting carefully through the clothing and other items in the trunk.

“She knows not to go into my room without me with her,” Bucky said sharply.

With a snort, Steve responded, “as if the ‘off limits’ rule ever kept us out of your dad’s porn collection or my mom’s hidden candy stash.” But he continued to search.

With a low whine, Bucky hung his head.

Going pale, realizing what he’d just hinted at, Steve looked up, eyes wide. “I’m sure she’s not old enough to begin rebelling yet, Buck. We waited until puberty.” He began methodically removing every piece from the trunk.

As Steve unloaded the trunk, a gleam of metal caught Bucky’s eye and he lurched forward. Grabbing the small gun, the brunet let out a sigh of relief. “I keep ammo on the top shelf of my closet. It’s unloaded.”

“Do you think you’re going to need to shoot someone, Bucky?” Steve asked carefully, eyeing the weapon.

“Rumlow just threatened me with worse than the visit this morning if I didn’t send you back,” Bucky growled, grasping the gun tighter.

Eyes widening, Steve stiffened and drew his breath in sharply. “God, I’m sorry, Bucky!” He stood and paced across the room to the window, glancing out nervously. “I never thought he’d begin . . . I don’t know . . . stalking you?”

“I don’t care about me. He ain’t laying a finger on my little girl,” Bucky ground out as he rose to his feet.

“What does he want?” Steve moaned and turned. “How can I stop him? What do I do?” He seemed lost and overwhelmed but struggled to keep control.
“We need to contact Sam Wilson and tell him what’s going on. We need to get a restraining order, so that way if he gets close to any of us . . . he’ll go straight to jail,” Bucky stated, he ran his fingers through his hair and let out a shaky breath.

“How did he get your number? I never gave it out,” Steve frowned but sounded more certain with a set instruction. He headed for the door.

“He’s using your phone,” Bucky answered, following Steve out of the room.

Steve looked in on Ava in her room. “Ava? How’s it going?” His voice came out distracted but concerned.

“I’m good.” Ava answered; she motioned towards her new snow leopard toy, “Chester is keeping me company.”

With a nod, Steve commented, “just don’t feed him chocolate ‘cause it’s bad for his heart, being a cat and all. And no syrup, because it gets stuck in his fur.” He turned to Bucky. “She’s okay. Let’s go talk.” And Steve led Bucky back to his bedroom.

Collapsing onto the edge of the bed, Bucky felt the exhaustion of the last few days hit him. The brunet tugged at his sleeve, looking up at the blond with fear in his eyes.

“So, today we’ve got a busy schedule, right?” Steve sank onto the bed next to Bucky, not really thinking about it as his shoulder touched Bucky’s. “We get new locks, an alarm system, and a restraining order. We add to the statements we gave Sam Wilson, and we let him know that Brock seems to have my phone, which was supposed to be in evidence. And that he called in false reports this morning so far.”

Bucky nodded and ran his fingers through his hair, tugging slightly. “Jesus . . . this is real, isn’t it?”

Steve sighed and nodded. “If I could give him what he wanted to make him stop, I would, Buck. Last time he wanted me to come back home.” He sighed and shook his head. “But there’s no way I’m giving him Ava, if that’s what he’s asking for this time.” Steve stood, raw fists clenched, ignoring his own pain. “We should find someone to watch Ava, but they’ll need to know what kind of danger she’s in.”

“Clint and Natasha live in a gated neighborhood,” Bucky offered numbly, his eyes staring, unfocused, past Steve.

“Okay, we need to get Ava and you to their place. C’mon. You’ll wanna grab your . . .”

“No,” Bucky snapped.

Frowning, Steve fell silent.

“I’m staying here. I ain’t letting Rumlow kick me out of my own fucking home,” Bucky growled, his eyes snapping to meet Steve’s.

“I didn’t mean for long. Just for today while people are running in and out fixing the alarms and locks and stuff, Buck.” He looked at his old friend.

Hugging himself, Bucky shook his head, “I don’t feel comfortable leaving you by yourself.”

“But what about Ava?” Steve frowned. “She’s going to want you with her.” Steve ran his hand over the back of his neck and winced, hissing as he pulled the injured hand away.
A small growling whine broke past Bucky’s lips and his threw his head into his hands. “I can’t do this! Fuck . . . I can’t do this! Ava was just starting to get better . . . she hasn’t had a nightmare in a few months.”

Biting his lip, Steve sighed. “Okay, so want to bring her with us? She can see that we’re doing things about this? I’m not sure how much she’ll understand, but it might make her feel like there’s some control?”

“I don’t know!” Bucky snapped and his shoulders shook.

Steve winced and strode to the door, leaning his forehead on the doorjamb.

“Most guys my age are just worried about what job they are going to get into after college and when’s the next time they’ll get laid.” Bucky muttered softly, “I didn’t ask for this . . . I still have no idea what I’m doing, Steve. I’m not her dad . . .” The brunet shook his head.

“You are in every sense of the word except direct biology, Buck. You’re raising her and protecting her and worrying about her.” Steve looked over at his friend. “I never got to raise a kid, so I have no idea how to help. But I can try. It’s my mess and you’ve been sucked into it. So, let me try to fix it. Just one simple question. Leave Ava with Natasha today or bring her along to the police station and the security store?”

Lifting his head, Bucky said, “We should drop her at Nat’s. I - - I don’t think the police station is any place for a five year old.”

Nodding once, firmly, Steve offered a small wane smile. “Okay, so get your wallet and keys and we bring her to Nat’s. You wanna call ahead or do you think he’s found a way to break into your phone or something? Brock’s never been tech savvy, but . . .” the blond shrugged.

Bucky’s eyes widened; he hadn’t even thought that Rumlow could’ve broken into his phone. “Fuck . . . now I’m gonna need to buy a new phone.”

“Not so fast, Bucky.” Steve held up his hand. “We get the security people to scan your phone and see if they can tell if it’s compromised. Why buy new things before checking the old first?” He sounded as practical, and almost as frugal, as his mother used to.

A sudden thought crossed Bucky’s mind, leaving the brunet gasping from fear. “Y - - you don’t think he’d go after Becca, do you? I need to call the institution.”

Frowning, Steve shook his head. “I don’t think he’d be able to find her grave, Buck. I don’t even know where it is. He only has my phone contacts unless he found a cloning device or something.” Pausing, Steve tilted his head. “Institution? What are you talking about?”

Bucky opened his mouth but no words came out. After a few moments, the brunet said, “Becca isn’t dead, Steve.”

Relief and confusion warred in the blue eyes. “I . . . the way you talked about her this morning, I thought maybe . . .” he swallowed.

“It wasn’t an accident, Steve.” Bucky murmured softly; he couldn’t look at the blond, instead he focused on his hands.

“Accident? Yeah, uh . . . Bucky? If you don’t want to talk about this, it’s fine. We can go wherever you need to . . .” Steve wasn’t sure what Bucky was talking about anymore, and he fell quiet in in confusion.
“She set the fire.” Bucky blurted out before he could stop himself. “Becca tried to kill herself and Ava.”

A long moment passed as Steve’s world tilted and he had to force his mind to re-sort all his knowledge and emotions. Finally, he softly asked “did she tell anyone why?”

“Her husband, Hank, he was a firefighter. Died on the job.” Bucky felt his eyes well with tears, “I - - I thought I’d stop by . . . it was a week after the funeral. She wasn’t returning my calls so I thought I’d check up on her, ya know?” The brunet lifted his head and looked up at his old friend, his face contorted in misery.

Steve watched Bucky, his face frozen in surprise, his eyes sad and confused and a bit horrified. Slipping down to the bed, the tall blond pulled Bucky into a hug against his broad chest. “I’m glad you stopped by . . . you got them out of there, Bucky.” Steve’s voice sounded non-judgemental, just sad and worried.

“When I got there . . . the whole fucking house was on fire! People were just standing outside on their phones or taking fucking pictures. The - - the firemen hadn’t arrived yet . . . I didn’t even think. I just needed to get them out.” Bucky sobbed once and covered his mouth to muffle the sound.

“You did right, Bucky.” Steve reached one raw hand over and carefully petted the brunet’s tangled hair. He kept his arm securely around the lean man’s shoulders.

“I got Ava first . . . there was so much smoke. She was just lying in her crib . . . I - - I thought she was dead.” Bucky took a deep breath, “I could barely see . . . barely fucking breathe. I just kept thinking about losing them . . . I couldn’t lose them, too.”

Nodding, Steve spoke softly. “No, you shouldn’t lose them, too, Bucky. You did right. You saved the baby.” He continued to stroke Bucky’s hair.

Sobbing, Bucky nodded, “I - - I got Ava out. I handed her to a neighbor and just went back in. Becca . . . Becca was in the back room. Christ, Steve . . . the amount of smoke was unbelievable.”

“Of course. You had to get your sister, too, Buck. It makes perfect sense.” He stroked and began to rock Bucky in his strong arms, gently, slowly.

“The fire was so hot. And Becca just sat on the bed . . . she was barely conscious and mumbling how she was gonna be with Hank again.” Bucky wiped at his eyes.

“She really missed him and loved him. She must have hurt inside so much. It’s good you saved her and got her help, Buck. And you saved the baby,” he reminded his old friend, stroking and gently rocking.

“She tried to kill her own fucking daughter, Steve!” Bucky hiccuped from the force of his sobs.

“No,” Steve cut Bucky off finally. “She didn’t try to kill Ava, Bucky. She tried to bring Ava back to her father. You and me, we see it as murder, but Becca was in too much grief and pain to see it that way.” He lifted Bucky’s chin and studied his eyes. “It’s not a pretty thought and it’s hard to understand, but until you realize she did what she thought was best, you can’t forgive her and mend your relationship . . . and help her realize what she did was wrong.”

“The fire got so out of control . . . my - - my arm.” Bucky cried out.

Steve carefully moved his hand from Bucky’s chin to the damaged, bandaged left arm. He stroked
the shoulder carefully. “A badge of courage, Buck. It must have hurt worse than anything else.”

“No!” Bucky snapped, shooting to his feet. “It’s a constant reminder of how I failed her! I should have seen the signs . . . I should have known something was wrong.”

Steve watched him with a small frown. “What signs, Buck? It had been a week. What signs did she display that you should have seen?” Steve spread his hands. “A week’s not long to identify that not only is someone grieving but has gone into severe dissociation and intends to kill people.”

Bucky shook his head and pulled his shirt over his head, showing Steve the entire arm and parts of his chest that were scarred heavily. “This isn’t some badge of fucking courage, Steve! I passed out before I could get her out! The doctors said I was lucky not to lose my whole fucking arm! I couldn’t even save her!” The brunet sobbed fully now, his whole body shaking.

“Becca’s alive or dead, Bucky?” Steve asked in some confusion, trying to follow the broken thoughts. He pulled Bucky against him into a secure hug.

Bucky clawed at Steve’s shirt, clutching the fabric tightly in both of his hands as he buried his face into his friend’s chest. “I waited for you.” Bucky mumbled miserably, “I kept telling myself that you’d walk into my room. I - - I was so alone.”

Steve nodded settling his chin over Bucky’s head and cuddled him, frowning. “I’m so sorry I left you, Bucky.”

“I loved you so fucking much . . .” Bucky cried, “I loved you so much that it hurt.” The brunet was so hysterical he didn’t really comprehend what he was saying.

Steve held Bucky close, letting him babble, unsure how to make things better for Bucky. He wanted so much to make up the years, the loss and strain and misery that had happened over those years. “I’m sorry I failed you, Buck. I . . . I was afraid of being in love with you . . . so I left, and I’m so sorry.”

Bucky froze, his body still convulsing with his sobbing. Between hiccups, Bucky asked softly, “Y - - you loved me?”

With a soft groan, Steve nodded slightly. “Since I was fourteen . . . and I didn’t know what to do about it. The Father said I was dragging you to hell . . . and I . . . I’m sorry.”

Pulling away so that he could study his friend closely, Bucky didn’t say anything.

Steve met his gaze, still frowning. “I didn’t know I liked men . . . I just knew I loved you. And I didn’t want to be the one who made you . . .” he sighed, losing his words.

Stumbling back, Bucky shook his head, “You - - you loved me and you still made me go. Y - - you said those things. I called you . . . I called you for three years.”

Steve let Bucky go, miserable, knowing he deserved the recriminations, the anger. He knew he could defend parts of what Bucky said, but did he really deserve to lessen his punishment for hurting his friend so badly?

Furrowing his brow, Bucky paused. “You . . . you said you deserved what Rumlow did to you. You fucking stayed in that relationship because you were punishing yourself.” The brunet gasped as he said the words and he searched for any sign that Steve wouldn’t agree with him . . . that Steve would get angry and do something.

“Not exactly,” Steve said at last, sighing. He looked at his hands, the few remaining blisters, the
peeled skin, the raw wounds. “I stayed with Brock because I don’t deserve any better.” He shrugged, not expecting Bucky to understand the difference. “And there were good days . . . sometimes he was really good to me.” But Steve didn’t have his heart in defending Rumlow or the relationship. He merely shrugged again.

“You could’ve called and I would’ve answered.” Bucky murmured, eyes red from crying. “Even after everything I would’ve dropped everything to help you . . . before things got so bad.”

Shaking his head, Steve finally told Bucky the final truth. “No, I couldn’t call you, Buck. After what I’d said and done . . . I didn’t deserve to have you with me any more. I . . . I’m sorry.” He shrugged again, not meeting Bucky’s eyes. “And I was right. No sooner do I show back up and you’re in this mess. I knew I should have stayed away.”

“I’d rather be in this mess with you than not have you at all,” Bucky whispered, he wrapped his arms around himself.

Confusion welled up strong and Steve raised his tear-washed blue eyes, straightening from his shamed posture. “You’d rather? That makes no sense, Bucky. You can’t possibly want this hell over . . . well, before . . . when you were safe and secure with Ava.” He shook his head. “I’m certainly not worth it. After all these years, I’m surprised you even want to claim friendship.”

“You’re worth everything. I fucking missed you! I waited everyday for you and you can’t stand here and tell me it’s not worth it.” Bucky felt a new wave of tears threaten to spill.

“God, Buck . . . I’ve missed you every day and you are worth . . . “ He shook his head again. “I’ll make this right.” He didn’t know what to say. Years of being beaten down, verbally and physically, had whittled away Steve’s indomitable self-worth and confidence. He knew he was nothing like the boy Bucky must have fallen in love with. But he was selfish enough to wish Bucky could let him start over. Slowly, he said “what are . . . is . . . what now?” He couldn’t sort his mind as easily as he’d done in the past.

Licking his lips, Bucky shook his head, “Now that I made a complete ass of myself . . . again.”

“Complete ass? I don’t know what you mean . . .” Steve ran his hand through his hair and winced, tucking the limb against his waist with a hiss, but the blond never broke eye contact.

The brunet shook his head and turned away, it took everything in Bucky not to admit he still had feelings for Steve. But he couldn’t do that to himself again; Bucky couldn’t handle his heart being broken all over again. He walked over to his closet and pulled out another pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. “I’m sorry, Steve. I just dumped a lot of shit on you. Forget about it, yeah?” Bucky’s voice quivered and he flashed the blond a watery smile.

“If you want,” Steve responded, pushing his feelings deep once more, where he’d practiced hiding them for years. Steve made his way from the room, once again checking on Ava from her doorway, not going further into the room. “You okay, Ava?” he asked in an overly soft voice, deliberately gentle to hide the waver in it.

Ava crossed her arms, “You made Uncle Bucky sad again! You promised!” The little girl pulled Chester close to her chest.

“No on purpose. He told me about the fire and then we talked about why I left him in high school.” Steve hugged himself and watched the five year old. “But don’t worry. I’ll leave if you guys want me to. I don’t wanna hurt anyone anymore.”

Ava climbed off her bed and walked over to Steve, she stared at him with wide blue eyes.
Steve tried his best to keep her gaze, willing himself not to show the tears and heartbreak he felt.

“Uncle Bucky loves you.” Ava said simply.

“He said that, yeah,” Steve answered softly.

The little girl stomped her feet in frustration, “Adults are dumb.” Ava rolled her eyes and walked over to her dresser.

Steve hung his head. “I did tell you I’m stupid, Ava.” He looked around the room. “You take care of your uncle, okay? You’re the smart one.”

Ava opened the bottom drawer and fished out a paper that looked like it had been folded and opened many times. The five year old stomped over and thrust the paper out to Steve.

He took it and frowned. He unfolded it and looked it over. Then he looked back at Ava. With a sigh, Steve dropped his eyes to the picture he’d drawn on Bucky’s sixteenth birthday . . . a picture of the two of them. It hadn’t been easy; he’d had to use a mirror to get himself just right, but Bucky’s lines had been seared into his hand and soul by then. Bucky had always been a subject of his art while they were growing up.

“You know what Uncle Bucky told me when he gave me that picture?” Ava asked, arms still crossed.

“What?” Steve asked, still looking over the drawing.

“He said that you were his knight in shining armor . . . you would never give up on him.” Ava shook her head.

Still looking at the fading drawing, Steve’s voice went as misty as his eyes. “But I’m not good like I used to be, Ava. I hurt him . . . he deserves someone nicer, stronger than me.”

“Uncle Bucky needs someone to save him. That’s what knights do.” Ava nodded once and looked up at Steve.

Drawing a deep breath, Steve folded the drawing and offered it back to the little girl. “I’m not going anywhere until he’s safe, Ava. I can promise that. But, if he doesn’t want me around after that, I’m not going to force myself on him.”

Ava shook her head and eyed the picture, her lip jutting out in a pout. “Keep it.”

Steve frowned and carefully slid the paper into his pocket and looked towards the hall. “You’ve gotta get ready to go to Auntie Natasha’s for the day, so we can have alarms set up in the house and other things. Stuff that will keep everyone safe.”

The little girl shook her head, her brown curls bouncing slightly. Ava turned and went back to her bed; grabbing Chester, she hugged the stuffed leopard tightly. “You can be a knight, Steve. I know you can,” she said firmly as she started towards her closet.

Sighing, unsure just how to be a knight for anyone, let alone the man he’d hurt so much, Steve walked into the hall and peeked in Bucky’s room. “Ava’s getting ready.”

In the middle of putting more lotion on his scars, Bucky froze and flushed deeply. “Yeah . . . good. Thanks, Steve.”

“Of course, Buck. Anything you need,” the blond answered, eyes trailing over Bucky’s frame
before the man shook himself and forcefully strode from the room and down the stairs.

Sighing, Bucky rubbed in the remaining lotion and tugged on his shirt. Steve could barely look at him; the brunet knew he’d never have any chance at getting with the beautiful blond. Not when he was so ugly. Shoving his feet into a pair of socks and his shoes, Bucky walked out into the hall where he saw Ava leaving her room, dressed in a dress Nat had gotten her and clutching the leopard tightly.

The front door opening echoed softly up the stairs followed a few seconds later by a soft closing.

“Steve?” Bucky called out, frozen at the sound of the door opening. The brunet motioned towards Ava to stay where she was, as he crept down the stairs. “Steve? Is that you?”

No one answered Bucky, and Steve didn’t appear to be in the house any more.

Rushing down the remaining steps, Bucky looked around for any signs of a struggle. He couldn’t see anything immediately wrong. “Ava! Honey! Go into your room! Lock the door!” Bucky shouted and was only answered by the immediate sound of a door shutting quickly.

The brunet’s fingers twitched as he made his way to the front door; Bucky slowly opened it and looked around.

Standing serenely on the stoop, Steve watched the traffic pass by as he waited for Bucky and Ava to finish getting ready. He had a piece of paper in his hand but wasn’t looking at it.

“Jesus,” Bucky breathed as he slumped against the doorframe. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

Steve jumped at Bucky’s voice. He whirled around. “Buck? Everything okay?”

“I - - I called for you . . . I - - I thought . . .” Bucky flushed, he sounded like an anxious teenaged girl. “Whatcha lookin’ at?” Bucky quickly changed the subject.

Flushed softly, Steve held the paper up to the brunet. “Ava gave it to me,” he explained.

Taking the paper carefully from Steve, Bucky gasped at the picture. “Uh . . . I - - I’m sorry. She . . . “ Bucky stuttered but couldn’t form a single sentence.

“She’s upset because I made you cry, but when I offered to leave after you two were safe, she got insistent that I was being an idiot, pretty much.” Steve sighed. “I really don’t understand kids.”

The blond shook his head, looking back at the traffic. “I tried to explain that no matter what we might have felt for each other once upon a time, you’ve changed your heart, so she should let me go. But I don’t think a five year old gets it.”

“I changed my heart?” Bucky asked, confused.

Steve looked over. “Yeah, you told me to forget it, so . . .” Steve frowned, eyes confused again. “I’m being as stupid as Ava said. I misunderstood something again. And now I’m not even sure what I’ve heard or just thought I heard or hoped I heard.” He sighed and ran his hand through his hair, ignoring the pain.

“I loved you then and I love you now, Steve Rogers,” Bucky stated quickly before turning on his heel and walked back into the house.

“But . . . you told me to forget it,” Steve felt torn and twisted and lost. He wasn’t sure what he should think or feel any more.
Stopping mid-step, Bucky turned his head to look at Steve from over his shoulder.

Steve’s eyes held misery as he stared at the stoop, trying to sort things out. Somehow, he felt he’d made things far worse.

“I’m not going to rush you into anything . . . but I might as well be honest with you . . . considering I have a crazy psychotic boyfriend after me,” Bucky said as he turned back around.

At that, Steve winced. He didn’t say anything, shoving his hands roughly into his dress trouser pockets and starting to walk down the street. “Yeah,” he finally murmured. “I’ll go take care of that.”

“Steve Rogers! Will you fucking listen to me for one god damned second?!” Bucky shouted, but he didn’t make a move to chase Steve down.

The blond stopped and hunched his shoulders defensively. He nodded as if confirming something private. Slowly, Steve turned and walked back over, keeping his head bowed. He stopped right in front of Bucky. Softly, he said, “I’m listening.”

“I’m probably just screwing myself over again . . . but - - fuck!” Bucky shook his head, “I . . . still have feelings for you.”

Steve nodded without lifting his head. “Yeah, Buck. You said that a lot so far.” His voice was strained, on the edge of tears.

Letting out a bitter laugh, Bucky shook his head, “I don’t know why I’m doing this to myself, again!” The brunet turned back around and walked further into the house.

“I don’t know what you want me to say or do, Bucky. So far you’ve told me about five times you still love me, then you keep pushing me away again. I’m getting mixed signals, and I’m sorry I’m being stupid about this. I never stopped loving you, but I wanna make you happy and safe. So . . . maybe if you tell me what you want me to do, I can go do it.” He still looked at the ground, shoulders hunched defensively, hands deep in his pockets.

Whirling around, Bucky shook his head, “This isn’t something I can tell you to do, Steve. I’m not Rumlow. I’m not going to force you into anything.”

Lifting his blue eyes, Steve looked miserable and lost, adrift and uncertain. “I . . . I don’t know what to do, Bucky.”

“How about starting with what you want?” Bucky offered, crossing his arms as if trying to shield himself from getting hurt.

Steve nodded. “I want to stay with you. I want to keep you safe. I want to see you smile and laugh again.” He shut his mouth, a small amount of fear rising in his eyes.

Sighing, Bucky dropped his arms, “I’m terrified, Steve.”

“Me, too,” he whispered. “I’ve only really been with Brock. I don’t know . . . what to do.”

“That’s one more than I’ve been with,” Bucky admitted, a blush reddening his face all the way down his neck.

Steve flushed, too. “He always told me what to do and say and how to act and dress. I . . . I don’t wanna let you down like I did before.” Steve bit his lip but kept his face up, watching Bucky.
“Don’t leave,” Bucky muttered, “You won’t as long as you don’t leave me again.”

“I can do that. As long as you want me around, I can stay around. I want to stay.” Steve seemed to tremble.

“You can be our knight, Steve!” Ava shouted happily from where she’d been hiding on the stairs.

“But I don’t know how any more,” Steve practically whispered, confused and looking a bit overwhelmed.

“Ava, I told you to stay in your room!” Bucky groaned, looking over at the little girl.

“I heard you and Steve talking . . . I thought we were okay?” Ava smiled back at Steve, “You’ll figure it out, Steve.” The little girl grabbed Bucky’s hand and grinned over at Steve.

Steve moaned softly, letting his head hang again. “I can be whoever he needs me to be, whoever he wants, just tell me how,” he moaned to the little girl, sounding miserable and lost once more.

Bucky looked just as lost and confused as Steve felt, “A knight? What is she talking about?” The brunet whispered to the tall blond.

Steve looked at Bucky helplessly. “I don’t think I know how anymore. I’m no good at helping people. I just clean and cook and decorate museums.”

“That’s not true,” Bucky mumbled, “You do so much more, Stevie. You’re really talented.”

“Used to be, Bucky,” he said sadly, “Now I’m just a glorified housewife with a great job to escape . . . go to.” He flushed. “And any time I offer to help, I do it wrong.” He shook his head, looking sadly over Ava. “I’m not sure how to be the knight she wants me to be for you.”

Realization dawned in Bucky’s eyes; swallowing, he nodded and he said softly, “We’ll figure it out, together?”

“Together,” Steve murmured, sounding like that word was a lifeline. “I . . . I can do that, if you want, Bucky.” He shoved his hands absently into the pockets of his trousers, looking neat and clean and ready to go to work rather than go shopping for security stuff to prevent a crazed stalker from nabbing a kid.

Following Steve’s hands with his eyes, Bucky frowned, “You’re bleeding again.”

Steve flushed and whipped his hands out of his pants like he’d been burned. “Sorry . . .” he muttered, holding them carefully away from his clothing. “I bleed easy.”

Bucky made a low hum of acknowledgment and dropped Ava’s hand, he folded up the drawing still clutched in his hand and slipped it into his back pocket. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“Okay,” Steve answered and followed Bucky up and into the townhouse once more. “I think the first aid kit in the kitchen is almost out of antibiotics, though.”

“Well I have a kit in every bathroom so I’m bound to have some in one of them,” Bucky stated.

The blond nodded. “I’ll go get the kit,” he said and headed for the closest bathroom. After a moment, he came back out, carefully trying to carry the kit, trying not to bleed on it.

“Stop worrying about getting your blood on stuff. I promise you . . . on most of my stuff the stains really are an improvement,” Bucky teased with a smirk.
Steve flushed brightly and dropped his head, freezing where he was. He held out the kit towards Bucky. “Sorry, Buck.”

Smirk fading, Bucky stepped up closer and lowered his tone so Ava wouldn’t overhear, “You . . . you need help, Steve. Rumlow’s really done a number on you.”

Drawing a deep breath, Steve nodded. “I . . . I can go to the hospital while you talk to Natasha about taking Ava today.”

“Not the hospital, Steve. I mean counseling,” Bucky whispered; he took the kit away from Steve and opened it.

“Counseling? Um . . . what . . . about?” He paled suddenly. “I told you, he made those charges up, Bucky.”

Bucky’s pale eyes flicked up to meet Steve’s before returning back to the kit, “You were in an abusive relationship for years, Stevie. You apologize for bleeding.”

Steve’s eyes inadvertently softened at the old nickname. He nodded, not interrupting Bucky.

“I went to a counselor after the fire,” Bucky shrugged.

“Uh . . . I can try to remember that blood’s not a big problem for you guys. It’s just, well, living in a house that’s all cream and ivory, blood sticks out. Brock didn’t want the furniture or rugs messed up.”

“It’s not just the blood thing . . . at any order you just blindly follow. There’s nothing wrong with getting mental help, Steve. It helped me . . . it’s helping Becca.”

Steve shrugged and answered, “Okay. I guess it won’t hurt to try.”

Smiling softly, Bucky nodded and began to clean the wounds.

Steve’s eyes watched every move, and for once Bucky could see that Steve seemed to be carefully processing some bit of information or other. He appeared to be struggling with something and trying to puzzle it out, and finally his worry cleared, as if he’d solved whatever troubled him.

“I can hear your gears grinding from over here,” Bucky murmured with a smirk.

“Sorry,” Steve said immediately. He flushed.

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Bucky shook his head, “Mind sharing though?”

“Um . . . I was trying to figure out about the counseling thing you want me to try,” Steve ventured, sounding a bit nervous. “I guess I understand now.” The blond looked at his hands.

“Understand what?” Bucky pushed gently.

“You want me to say out loud?” He glanced nervously down at Ava and back to Bucky.

Shrugging, Bucky shook his head; the brunet finished with the other man’s hands and shut the kit. He set the kit down on the coffee table and turned back to the two other people in the room.

Softly, Steve said “I’m not sure how much Ava understands or knows?” He looked at the girl with her stuffed leopard.

“Are we leaving yet? Chester wants to meet Lucky!” Ava said, oblivious to the older men’s
Bucky smiled and said, “Sure thing, Squirt. Let’s get going.” The brunet offered Steve a smile and asked, “We can talk about it later, yeah?”

“Okay,” Steve answered and walked back outside to the car. He waited for the others to catch up, watching as a couple walked slowly down the opposite sidewalk, hand in hand.

Bucky locked up the house and jogged down the steps with Ava in tow, “Thank God I had a spare key for my car!”

Steve’s fingers twitched as they used to when he wanted to sketch. His eyes followed the couple, though his face remained neutral, eyes curious.

Seeming to catch Steve’s gaze, Bucky unlocked the car and whispered as he opened the back door for Ava, “Did he let you draw at all?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered absently. “All the time. He said they were good enough to sell.” The blond finally drew his eyes from the couple and turned back to the car, carefully opening the door, wincing slightly. “He thought it was cute that I was an artist and able to make him look good to his coworkers.” Steve slid into the front passenger seat and struggled painfully until he finally got the seatbelt secured.

Buckling Ava into her carseat, Bucky looked over at Steve, “What does he do? I mean . . . for a living?”

“Military police,” Steve answered immediately. “Army. The 107th Infantry.” He lifted his eyes to look at Bucky. “You know, my dad’s old unit.”

Sucking in a fast breath, Bucky swallowed and nodded, answering Steve’s question. The brunet realized fully how dangerous Brock could be; the man had been trained in the Army! Bucky knew if it ever came down to a fight, one without a taser, he’d definitely lose.

Kissing Ava’s forehead gently, Bucky straightened up and moved to get into the driver’s seat.

Steve’s eyes found the couple again as they paused under a tree to cuddle and kiss. He watched for a long moment then turned his head, studying the interior of the car.

Bucky pulled out of the driveway and kept glancing over at Steve as he drove towards Natasha and Clint’s.

As they drove, Steve’s fingers twitched lightly and he seemed to be processing once again. He frowned softly as he lost himself in his thoughts. Finally, just as they pulled up to the gate that would allow them access to Bucky’s friends, Steve seemed to relax and shake his head, his eyes looking as if he’d decided he wouldn’t solve his problem and he was willing to just accept it. The gate swung open, allowing them inside the small community.

Pulling in front of a single story home, Bucky offered Steve a smile, “Do you wanna come in or wait in the car?”

“Come in if that’s okay?” Steve reached to try and unfasten his seatbelt.

Bucky reached over and unbuckled the blond’s seatbelt without a word.

Offering a thankful smile to Bucky, Steve let his friend help him. He reached for his door handle, still smiling.
Getting out, Bucky helped Ava out of her carseat and the little girl bolted out of the car and ran up to the front door.

Climbing from the car, Steve stopped next to Bucky. “This looks nice,” he smiled at his friend.

“Yeah, they just moved in about a year ago. Business is doing really well.” The brunet watched as Ava didn’t even bother to knock, instead she just let herself in. “Ava!” He called, “We talked about this!”

A dog barked, but not from inside the house. Rather the friendly sounds came from just down the sidewalk a house or two. Clint appeared, Lucky on the required leash, strolling towards them. “Hey, Bucky,” Clint grinned. “When Nat gave you the day off, I don’t think she meant for you to come hang out with me.” He didn’t seem to mind, however. The stocky blond reached to push his unlocked door open wide. “C’mon in.”

Bucky offered Clint a shy smile, “There’s . . . uh- been some complications?”

“Complications?” Clint nodded and unleashed his dog to allow the mutt to run down the hall towards his water bowl. “Sounds ominous.”

“Is Nat home?” Bucky asked as he stepped in after Clint.

“Sure. She’s in the back, painting.” The man looked over at Ava and Steve and offered his smile, though his eyes were wary when he looked over Steve. “Welcome to my home. Ava, wanna see my new dart board? I can teach you to throw.”

“Yeah!” Ava exclaimed happily.

Clint offered the girl his hand, grinning wider, then he led her down the hall to his ‘family room.’

Releasing a deep breath, Bucky motioned for Steve to follow him.

Steve followed Bucky, looking all around the beautifully, yet simply, appointed home. “This is nice,” he commented with a smile.

“Yeah,” Bucky smiled softly, stopping when he passed by an open room, Natasha on a ladder, painting the wall in front of her a deep maroon. “Hey, Nat? Ya got a minute?” Bucky called out.

Freezing, Natasha turned to look over her shoulder and frowned at the sight of the two men. She stepped off the ladder and crossed the room. A smudge of paint dashed across her cheek and she wore a pair of old, baggy jeans and a paint-spotted white t-shirt.

Steve watched her carefully. “You have a lovely home, Natasha,” he said quietly at last.

Natasha offered Steve a reluctant glance before turning back to Bucky, “You didn’t call ahead. What’s wrong?”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Bucky cleared his throat, “We . . . uh- had to drop off Ava for the day?”

Narrowing her piercing green eyes, Natasha turned her head to look directly at Steve, “What happened?”

“We’re going to get security installed at Bucky’s,” he said softly.

“Why?” Nat’s eyes narrowed further, demanding the full explanation.
Steve looked over to Bucky but then back at Nat. “Because Brock has my phone and he’s been calling Bucky . . . and he called Child Services this morning and threatened to do worse.”

Eyes widening slightly, she turned to look back at Bucky. “I told you, Bucky. I told you not to get involved . . .” She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes.

Steve straightened and frowned softly. His eyes darted from Nat to Bucky and back to Natasha. Softly, he said, “we’re going to the station, too, to make sure Detective Wilson knows what’s going on.”

“We’re gonna get restraining orders, too,” Bucky added, his tone barely above a whisper.

Blinking once, Steve echoed a bit more slowly, “Yes, we are. And change the locks.”

“That isn’t going to stop a psycho like Rumlow,” Natasha said slowly, raising her head to look back up at both Steve and Bucky. “I only met him once and I know he is not going to stop until he gets what he wants.”

“Bucky said he threatened to take Ava,” Steve said, hesitantly.

“What?!” Natasha snapped, eyes flashing dangerously.

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Bucky said quickly; he pulled at his sleeve. “I’d die before I ever let the bastard touch Ava.”

Steve frowned. “It’s a bit off. Brock doesn’t go for kids. But I guess he’s willing to use her as a threat.” He shook his head.

“She should stay here, with Clint and me, until Rumlow is taken care of,” the redhead said suddenly, her tone firm.

“That’s why we’re here,” Steve pointed out. “To ask if you can watch her for the day.”

“No, I mean until this whole mess is cleared. She’s safer here, we have 24/7 security, and he’d have to get past the front gate.” Natasha turned to look at Bucky fully, who seemed to pale at the demand.

“No!” Bucky stammered, “No . . . she - - I . . . she’s safe at home. We’ll get the system installed and the locks changed.”

Steve stayed out of this argument. It wasn’t his place to tell Bucky how best to care for his niece. Instead, he let his eyes wander over the room and the changes Natasha made.

“She’s not safe until this Rumlow freak is taken care of! And neither are you! Damnit, Bucky!” The shop owner shook her head and took a deep breath. “This is exactly what I warned you about!”

“I am perfectly capable of keeping her safe, Nat!” Bucky’s tone rose and his tugged at his sleeve.

Steve’s attention swung back to the pair, and he frowned. He slid his bandaged hands into his blood-flecked trousers, still unaware that he’d bled on himself, even if he’d managed not to bleed on the first aid kit. “What about the taser, Bucky? I’m sure you could get it back from the police.”

Pale blue eyes flicking over to meet with Steve’s, Bucky opened his mouth but Natasha spoke first. “I have another if you can’t, but I still think Ava, at the very least should stay here. Just for a few nights while things, hopefully, settle down.”
Steve glanced at Bucky for his response, trying his hardest not to interfere, despite his own private thoughts concerning the subject.

Growling softly, Bucky looked physically pained as he nodded in agreement. “Fine. Just for a few nights.”

Hanging his head, Steve drew a shaky breath, knowing it was yet again his fault, this time for separating the uncle and niece.

“Why don’t you go tell her, Bucky. Steve and I need to talk.” Natasha smiled softly but didn’t leave much room for the brunet to argue.

Looking up suddenly, Steve caught and held Natasha’s gaze, not looking away. He did nod slightly in encouragement for his friend.

Nodding once, looking upset, Bucky turned and walked back down the hall in search of his niece.

Once alone, Natasha turned to look at Steve, “I’m sorry for what you’re going through right now. It must be really hard on you.”

He flushed. “Thanks?” he whispered, knowing that wasn’t the real reason the woman had kept him there for a private discussion.

“That being said,” Nat moved on, “I won’t have you hurting him, again. That family has been through too much.”

“I agree,” Steve said softly, not making any promises. God knew he didn’t want to hurt Bucky or Ava, but he was honest enough not to promise something he might not be able to do.

“He didn’t even hesitate, you know?” Natasha quirked an eyebrow.

Thinking he understood the topic, Steve softly said, “he blames himself for passing out and not pulling his sister out.”

“I know.” She said, “I know because I held him while he cried in the hospital.”

“Thank you for being a better friend to him than I was,” Steve said softly, finally looking down, blue eyes filled with pain.

“I’m not trying to one-up you, Rogers. I’m being honest.”

“No need to try, Ma’am,” he replied, looking up again. “So am I. I left him because I was too afraid to take what he offered, and it hurt him a great deal. And then, I came back and brought nothing but terror on his family. I would leave, but he says he still wants me, God knows why. As long as he wants me, I’m sticking around. I owe him that much . . . a chance maybe to make this work this time?” He asked softly, confusion on his handsome, almost angelic face.

“Because he is probably one of the most loyal people I know.” Natasha’s eyes softened slightly, “What I meant earlier, is that he didn’t even hesitate to come to your rescue.”

“My rescue?” Steve blinked, looking absolutely stunned.

“Bucky saw how that asshole was treating you at the coffee shop. Clint and I practically begged him not to meet with you two again, to not get involved with whatever was going on. But he insisted he couldn’t let you go . . . couldn’t turn his back on you.”
“Oh,” Steve flushed bright red, from his ears and down into his button up shirt. “Brock heard from a friend that I’d been talking with a ‘hot young guy’ at work, the museum, so he asked me about it. I explained I’d met up with my old high school friend, Bucky, and we would meet for coffee. Brock insisted on coming, too, to make sure I didn’t do anything . . . he considered disloyal.” With a sigh, Steve added, “Brock is jealous when I talk to people, especially other guys, unless he arranges it.”

Natasha nodded in understanding; she said softly, “Bucky tries to act tough. I mean . . . he is tough . . . but he also has a lot of problems, mainly with himself.”

With a shrug, holding his bandaged hands spread out, palms up, Steve softly reassured her, “he’s in charge. He takes charge and keeps it. And . . . it works for him. But I think he feels too much of it and it’s killing him, too.”

“He got custody of Ava when he was only twenty-one. He had to grown up too fast,” Nat said softly.

“Yeah,” Steve whispered. “I did the math.” He sighed.”He also mentioned something about that.” Steve looked around the room, the walls, the ceilings, anything before finally meeting Nat’s gaze head on. “He loves me, and he said the only way I could hurt him is to leave him again. But, Natasha, I’m not sure what he’s playing at.” Holding up his hand, Steve said, “please let me explain before you go Mama Bear on me?”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed again but she let Steve continue without interrupting him.

“I don’t mean that he’s playing a game or an angle. He told me he loves me, then he cried and after a while told me to forget what he’d said. So, I tried to obey, but he got angry and so did Ava.” Steve blew out a breath in frustration. “I finally got him to tell me he doesn’t want me to leave, and I think he’s accepted that I never stopped being in love with him, but I’m still not sure what else he wants. I mean,” Steve spread his hands once more, “me staying can’t be the only thing he wants.”

“Did Bucky say he dropped out of college?” Natasha asked, seeming off-topic.

“Yeah, at the coffee shop. When I asked what happened, he got angry and yelled at me.” Steve began fiddling with the bandages over his fingertips.

“He never went,” Natasha said, her eyes swarming with pain.

“Wait, what?” Steve looked confused and stopped messing with his bandages. “Never went at all? But, there was time before he got Ava . . . a couple years at least.”

“I’m not saying this to hurt you . . . but after you left . . . Bucky spiraled and he didn’t even go to college. His parents were furious . . . but I guess,” she shrugged slightly, “he was too hurt . . . I met him at a hospital.”

“Hospital? Not for the burns, I take it?” Steve frowned, eyes filling with misery and something akin to anger.

Shaking her head, “I was there because Clint had gotten into an accident, lost his hearing.” Natasha took a deep breath, steadying herself, “He tried to kill himself, Steve.”

Pain lanced over Steve’s face and he stumbled slightly back, suddenly pale. He shook his head, but didn’t deny the words. Instead, softly, almost too softly to hear, he said “never again! He wants me, he’s stuck with me. I’m gonna take care of my Bucky . . .” his eyes had focused on a far wall, seeing something inside his own head, and for the first time since Natasha had met Steve,
he sounded like the tough bastard that always picked fights Bucky had described.

Smiling, although the gesture didn’t quite meet her eyes, Natasha nodded, “I hope so. God knows that boy needs someone to take care of him for a change.”

Eyes snapping to focus on Natasha suddenly, still frowning, Steve claimed softly, “I can take care of him. It’s the one thing I’m really good at . . . taking care of my man.” He crossed his arms. “Do you give advice as much as warnings?”

“Depends,” the redhead shrugged, “What advice are you looking for?”

“Advice on how Bucky likes things in his household, maybe?” Steve frowned. “I’m having trouble piecing through things a bit. They don’t always make sense.” He shrugged.

Laughing, a sweet sound Steve hadn’t actually ever heard from the redhead, Natasha smirked, “No, they don’t. Bucky tries but he has a lot on his mind and the house usually is the last on the list.”

“Oh,” Steve flushed slightly, “No, I meant household, like in . . . relationships? He said he hasn’t had any, but he had friends, right? So, I wondered if he prefers to be in charge or not.” Running a bandaged hand through his hair with a wince, Steve went on in a lower tone, “I can do sub or dom or whatever he wants. But I don’t wanna get in any more fights with him because I’m not picking up his cues, like this morning. Any help would be good.”

“I mean,” he rushed on to further explain, “I already figured out that if I agree, he relieves my pain, so that’s something. But, he doesn’t seem to always want agreement, either.” Steve’s blue eyes looked troubled.

“Ever since the fire, Bucky has been forced to take charge.” Natasha tapped her chin in thought for a moment, “In high school, did he ever really take the lead in a situation or did he follow you?”

Steve snorted. “No. I would fling myself headlong into something and he’d wade in after me, helping me out of my scrape and dusting me off again. He had my back, but I had his, too.”

“I think you got your answer, Steve. Bucky, whether he wants to admit it or not, likes to be led sometimes. I think it’s because he has so much going on in his head that it’s almost . . . a relief to let someone take control.”

“Okay,” Steve said slowly, thinking through that. “This isn’t going to be easy then. I don’t wanna push the boundaries too far.” He looked like he once again puzzled through a difficult problem, almost like planning a war strategy or something. Finally, he said “well, I’m not stupid enough to think he wants me to fling myself into fist fights so he can clean up the mess,” he joked half-heartedly.

“No, probably not. Maybe a nice quiet dinner would suffice?” Natasha offered with a small smirk.

“I can cook,” Steve smiled in relief. “I can make sure the house is comfortable and orderly. I’m good at keeping that up, even around my job.”

“I hope things work out between you two, I really do.” Natasha admitted honestly.

Steve looked at her surprised. “I got the feeling you didn’t like me at all,” the blond said softly.

“I didn’t. At first I just saw you as the guy that caused Bucky to almost end his own life.” The redhead said; she looked up at Steve, “But I can see you care for him. Just . . . please. Don’t break his heart . . . I don’t think anyone would be able to pick up the pieces this time.”
Steve sighed. “Look, Natasha, I’ve only ever had one romantic relationship, and I was pretty lousy at that. I don’t deserve Bucky, not by a long shot, but if he wants me, I sure as hell plan to make him keep smiling. I don’t want him regretting this choice.” He sighed and scratched at the back of his neck. “I wanna try to get somewhere close to where we were before I screwed up and ran from my own heart and his.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Bucky asked suddenly, appearing beside Steve.

Steve looked over and shrugged. True to his claim earlier that he never once lied to Bucky, the big blond answered simply, “you and how I can make you happy.”

The brunet flushed and looked down, “well . . . uh - - that’s good? Ava won’t talk to me . . . Clint is with her in the den.”

“Want me to try to talk to her again?” Steve offered.

“She’s pretty upset, Steve.” Bucky looked weary.

“Let me guess,” Steve sighed. “She thinks you’re deserting her . . . much like a little skinny blond deserted his beautiful best friend over a stupid thing six years ago?”

Blushing at the compliment, Bucky ducked his head, “Yeah . . . that’s about it.”

“Then I might be the perfect one to talk to her . . . and explain that you certainly are nothing like me.” He nodded to Natasha. “Nat,” he softly said and walked towards the room where Clint and Ava sat, his take charge or bull-headed attitude showing again as he found a problem he could try to solve and went for it wholeheartedly.

Knocking on the door jamb, Steve called out, “Ava, I wanted to talk to you, if you let me?”

Ava sat on the couch, clutching Chester tightly against her chest as she wailed. Clint flinched at the loud noise and fiddled with his hearing aid, turning the device down a few notches. The blond man looked up at Steve with a grimace, but he didn’t stop rubbing soothing circles on the little girl’s back.

Steve took the fact that she didn’t instantly refuse him as a good sign. He moved into the room, limping noticeably now, and eased to the floor in front of her. “Ava? Will you listen to me? I promise you wanna hear what I wanna tell you.”

“Un - - Uncle Bu - - Bucky is leaving me!” Ava sobbed.

“Uncle Bucky is crying in the other room because Auntie Natasha bullied him into agreeing to let you stay for a few days,” he pointed out bluntly.

The little girl looked at Steve, strands of her curly brown hair sticking to her face. “Really?” She sniffled.

Reaching over a very large, yet infinitely gentle hand, Steve started carefully pulling the sticky strands of hair from her flushed skin and tucking them behind her ears or against her scalp. “Okay, listen to everything I say, okay? And you can ask questions. First. My old boyfriend isn’t my boyfriend any more because he’s tried to hurt you and Bucky, right?”

Bottom lip quivering, Ava nodded, “He’s a bad, bad man.”

“And now Bucky’s my boyfriend, right? Because we love each other and I’m staying, right?”
“What?” Clint asked, messing with his hearing aid again to make sure he’d heard that right.

Steve shot Clint an annoyed look for the interruption. He looked back at Ava with a gentle expression. “Right, Ava?”

“Right.” She nodded, a few stray tears running down her face.

“And Brock, the bad man, keeps calling Bucky to make mean threats, right? Scaring him?” He stroked careful thumbs over her face to remove the tears.

“Yeah,” The five year old hiccuped and held the stuffed animal tighter.

“Okay, well, I don’t think he wants you to know, but I treat you like the big girl you are, right? So I’m gonna tell you. One of the threats Brock made is that he wants to steal you.” Steve left his hand on her shoulder, looking her in the eyes. “And that scared your uncle more than any other thing Brock ever could have said, because he never wants to lose you.”

“I’m missing something,” Clint muttered, watching the pair beside him with a confused expression

“Then go in the other room and ask Bucky,” Steve growled at Clint, never breaking eye contact with Ava. “I’m trying to explain to a scared little girl why her uncle agreed to leave her with friends.”

Clint held up his hands innocently and slowly rose to his feet, “Sorry, man. Continue explaining.” The smaller blond man walked out of the room.

“No, wait!” Panic filled Steve’s voice as he called to Clint, blue eyes wide. “Don’t leave us alone! Brock keeps trying to tell the services that I abuse kids. I don’t want anyone to be able to claim I’ve been alone with her and hurt her.”

Turning back into the room with wide eyes, Clint nodded slowly. “Geez, Rogers. Couldn’t have picked a crazier boyfriend?”

Steve flushed and dipped his head, momentarily losing his confidence and his momentum with Ava. “Sorry . . .”

“No . . . I’m sorry.” Clint rushed to apologize, “I’m just really confused right now.”

“Okay, let me try from the beginning again, and maybe that can help Ava, too?” He looked at the little girl. “Okay, Ava?”

Sniffling, Ava nodded and shifted closer to Clint as the other man sat down next to her on the couch again.

“I hurt Bucky years ago and left. But now I’m back. Ava knows all about that part. I don’t know how much you know?” Steve looked at Clint. “Anyway, in the meantime I got together with Brock . . . very long story. Not for Ava’s ears.” He looked back at the little kid. “Well, Brock is over jealous of me, and he went ballistic on Bucky. Now, to hurt Bucky, he has threatened to steal Ava . . . at least, I think he has. I never heard him say it, only Bucky’s answered the phone.” Steve looked at Ava. “Make sense so far?”

Both Ava and Clint nodded, the little girl started fiddling with Chester’s ears.

“Okay, well, Bucky and I had a lot of mini-talks and long cries today,” Steve huffed and ran his hand through his hair, ignoring his pain. “And we came to the realization that we’re still in love. So, I asked Bucky how I could not hurt him. He told me not to leave. Thus, I’m here for as long
as he wants me.” With a self-conscious shrug, Steve added, “so, I guess I’m his boyfriend now.” The tall blond looked at Ava. “Right, Ava?”

“His knight in shining armor?” She asked, peeking up at Steve under her damp lashes.

“Well, I’m trying to be. But my armor got rusty and I lost my horse some ways back.” Steve looked at Clint then back at Ava. “So, now we’re back to where I was before. Bucky’s terrified Brock will find a way to steal Ava. So, he wants Ava to stay today with you guys so we can get alarms put on the house and new locks, so Brock can’t get in. We’re going to talk to the police, too. And other security stuff.” Steve glanced at Ava. “Still making sense?”

“Yeah . . .” Ava mumbled, her voice still quivering from the crying.

“Okay, now the part that hurts the most, right?” Steve asked but plowed on. “Well, hearing that you are in danger, Natasha got scared, too. Since they live in this little town in a wall, like a guarded castle, and have cops all the time roaming like knights, she thought you’d be safer here while we get the house safe and we help the police lock up Brock.” He spread his hands. “And seeing how a princess like you would definitely be safer in a castle, your uncle agreed to let you stay for a bit.”

“Why don’t you and Uncle Bucky stay here, too?” Ava asked, “I don’t want the mean man to hurt him.”

“That makes perfect sense, but there are a few reasons. Number one, I wasn’t invited.” He ticked off his fingers. “Number two, as the knight, it’s my job to go out and hunt the bad guy for the princess, right?” He ticked off another finger. And then a third as he said, “and this little hut in the castle probably isn’t big enough for all of us and Lucky, too. He seems to take up a lot of room. Look at him stretched over that entire couch!”

Ava giggled slightly when she glanced over to the dog that sprawled upside down on the couch, taking up as much room as possible. “You promise to keep Uncle Bucky safe? You have to promise!”

“I promise on my own life, as his knight, to keep Bucky safe. I will do whatever it takes to stop Brock from hurting him.” Steve had his right hand up as he made his vow to the child, eyes serious.

Ava, seeming content with the vow, nodded once. She held Chester tightly and asked, almost sheepishly, “Did Uncle Bucky really cry?”

Steve looked surprise. “Let me call him in and you can see how red and swollen his eyes are, Ava,” he responded, brutally honest. “Wanna give him a hug before we go get fortifications?”

Nodding frantically, with new tears springing to her eyes, Ava said,”Yeah.”

Standing, moving away so he didn’t blast Clint with his bellow, Steve turned to the door and called “Bucky! Princess Ava needs you!” He hoped the playful title for the girl would alert Bucky that his niece was not in danger.

Within a few moments, Bucky walked into the den, and true to Steve’s word, his eyes were red and swollen. The little girl jumped off the couch, throwing Chester to the floor, and ran over to her uncle. Bucky knelt down and scooped his niece into his arms, pressing kisses into her hair and murmuring softly in her ear.

Steve smiled tenderly at the pair. “Ava, did you wanna tell your uncle something?” His voice smiled, not sharp or harsh at all.
Pulling away slightly, Ava sniffled and nodded. “I love you, Uncle Bucky. I love you so much! You’re the best Uncle in the whole wide world!”

Steve nodded, smiling. “And you understand why he’s leaving you here for a while, but coming to visit when he can?”

“Yes,” Ava blinked, more tears running down her face, “Steve told me why. Steve needs to catch the bad man and you’re gonna help him . . . also,” the little girl turned to look at the still sleeping dog, “Lucky takes up too much space.”

A bright flush crept over Steve’s face and neck and he ducked his head.

Chuckling, despite the tears that welled in his eyes, Bucky nodded. “Steve’s right . . . I couldn’t possibly dream to share the couch with that dog.”

“See,” Steve whispered then cleared his throat, trying again. “See? I told you there’s not enough room here for us and Lucky. And since it’s Lucky’s home, we’ll visit.”

“That dog is so spoiled,” Clint grumbled fondly, but reached over to scratch the dog’s belly.

“And whose fault is that?” Natasha asked her husband, cocking one eyebrow.

“Yours, obviously. I just do as I’m told,” Clint deadpanned.

“Naturally,” Natasha rolled her eyes at Clint in a similar fond exasperation that her husband had shown for the dog. “Ava, did you want to walk your uncle to the car? He’s got a lot to do so he can come back for dinner.”

Gripping Bucky’s hand tightly, Ava tugged her uncle up, almost causing the brunet to lose his balance.

Steve shot to his feet and winced, a small groan escaping as his leg protested. But ignoring it seemed common; Steve’s hands flew out protectively, just in case Bucky stumbled.

Flushing, Bucky let his niece lead him out of the room.

“Take care of him, Steve,” Natasha said again, “And call us if you need anything.”

Steve nodded willingly and strode from the room to catch up with the other pair.

At the car, Bucky hugged Ava tightly. “I love ya, Squirt. I promise it’ll only be for a little while. I love you so much.”

Sniffling again, Ava nodded and held onto her uncle’s neck tightly, causing the older man to wince again. “I love you, too.”

Steve watched as they said their goodbyes, waiting by the car and frowning softly, eyes troubled. When the girl finally headed back inside at Nat’s call, Steve fumbled his door open and sank onto the seat. He took a couple of deep breaths and fumbled his seatbelt closed.

Chapter End Notes
Originally this chapter and the next chapter were together, but it was so incredibly long. So, Sam and I decided it would be better to split it, that's why the chapter may seem to end kinda suddenly.

Thank you all for reading, commenting and leaving kudos! Please feel free to leave any comments or questions, Sam and I love hearing what everyone is thinking!
Bucky got into the car and released a deep breath, his eyes staring longingly at the house in front of them.

“It’d be frivolous to buy a car just because it has automatic seatbelts, wouldn’t it?” Steve offered in a breathless joke, trying to break the tension a bit.

Smirking, although it didn’t meet his eyes, Bucky said, “Yeah . . . just a bit. Too bad Tony Stark hasn’t invented something that useful yet.”

“Didn’t have to, actually,” Steve answered. “I think General Motors beat him to the punch. They stay clipped in and when the door opens, the seat belt moves along the door to let the passenger out. I saw it at a trade show or something.”

“Huh, well ain’t that something,” Bucky mused half-heartedly.

“The police will take some time, so do we want to get the locksmith and alarm people over to the house to work while we talk to the police?” Steve turned his head to look at Bucky.

Jumping at the source of direction, Bucky nodded, “Yeah . . . yeah. Locksmith and alarm first.”

“Right.” Steve cleared his throat. “So, unless you know any of the top of your head, I’ll need your phone to search for one?” Steve flushed a bit, ducking his head briefly.

“Oh! Yeah, sorry.” Bucky fished out his phone and handed it over to the blond.

Taking it, bandaged fingers brushing over Bucky’s warm flesh, Steve looked at the phone. “Do I need a password?” He wondered when Bucky would want to finish their conversations they had been unable to go into because of Ava.

“It’s . . . uh - - you - -” Bucky stuttered.

“Well, if you pull over, you can type it in so I don’t know it?” Steve offered.

“It’s your birthday.” Bucky mumbled, cheeks flaming in embarrassment.

“July 4th?” Steve looked over. “Easy to hack into, Bucky, using a holiday.” But Steve typed the password in and frowned when nothing happened. Then, flushing more as he understood completely, Steve typed the year, too. “Oh,” he murmured.

“Sorry. I know that’s kinda weird . . .” The brunet mumbled not daring to look over at Steve.

“Not weird at all, Buck,” Steve said softly. “Mine used to be Momma’s death date til I upgraded phones and Brock . . . uh . . .” he fell silent.
Nodding, not expecting the blond to continue, Bucky pulled onto the expressway that led into the city.

Steve played with the phone a few minutes then started reading precise instructions on how to get to a local security store that included an on in store locksmith.

Once they arrived, Bucky heaved a sigh and unbuckled Steve’s belt before his own.

“Thanks,” the blond said softly offering a grateful smile to the other man.

“Anytime.” Bucky smiled and opened his door to step out of the vehicle.

Steve fumbled his door open with a sigh and a wince then slid from the car. He waited for Bucky before stepping out without a word, heading straight into the security store. Seeing an assistant, he walked over and cleared his throat. “This man here is interested in a security system. But he has specific needs,” Steve tacked on, eyes scanning the store as if for threats.

Bucky stood close to Steve; he wanted to hold the blond’s hand because his skin crawled and he needed a distraction, but he wasn’t sure if Steve was ready for that yet. Instead, Bucky settled on flashing the employee a nervous smile.

The clerk looked at the pair with a grin and nodded, pushing his glasses higher up his nose. “Sure! What are you boys lookin’ for? What specific needs are we talkin’ about?”

“Buck?” Steve turned to his friend and apparently brand new boyfriend. “Should you tell him about the stalker and Ava?”

Looking up at Steve with miserable eyes, Bucky swallowed and nodded, “Uh - - yeah.” The brunet turned his gaze over to the clerk, tugging on his sleeve, Bucky said, “I have a five year old at home. This . . . stalker is threatening to hurt her. I - - I need something to help make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“And make sure the police get the message just as quick as an alarm scaring the crap outta him,” Steve added, a glint in his eyes reminding one of danger.

“Sure, we got plenty of systems that alert the police,” the man said, “Do you want all entries monitored or just the front and back doors?”

Steve cut his hand through the air decisively, without even thinking, “all doors and windows, even the upstairs. This guy’s military and knows how to climb.”

Bucky paled, the thought of Rumlow climbing in through the windows would be something that kept him up at night.

Watching the sales clerk writing down their specifications, Steve continued to frown softly. “We also need all the locks changed. And we need to know if this phone’s been hacked, too.” He put the phone on the counter.

Peering up under his glasses, the clerk let out a low whistle, “This guy ain’t messing around is he?”

“He’s Army Infantry and well trained,” Steve confirmed, “and he’s threatening to steal the kid.” Steve’s voice came out as a harsh, low in the throat growl.

The salesman flinched and flashed Steve an apologetic smile, “If you get the Deluxe Package . . . I’ll throw in the new locks at half-price.”
“No,” Steve declined harshly, arms crossing and eyes narrowing. “If you need to make a deal like that, the Deluxe Package isn’t worth our time. I want security, and ADIT is just down the street. Now, you going to get serious?” He stepped once closer.

Bucky felt like he was going to hurl . . . or maybe pass out . . . probably both. He gripped his left arm tightly, the pain of touching the fresh wounds seemed to distract him from the nausea.

Steve’s eyes instantly shot to Bucky at the brunet’s movement, and the frown softened to concern, eyes worried. Voice gentle, Steve said “Buck? You need to sit down? Need water?”

The clerk eyed Bucky with a frown, “Does he need an ambulance? He don’t look so good.”

“Bucky, want a doctor?” Steve offered but didn’t make that particular call for the other man. He already recalled how adamant Bucky was against using funds on his own health.

“No.” Bucky muttered, hand wrapping tighter around his arm.

“Want to go to ADIT, instead?” Steve asked.

“I just wanna get this over with,” Bucky admitted with a whine.

Steve stepped over, worry thrumming through him, and pulled Bucky into a tight hug, hand going to cup the back of his head, guiding Bucky’s face to his shoulder. “We’ll make Ava safe, Bucky, I swear it.”

“Rumlow’s not going to stop,” Bucky muttered against Steve’s skin, fingers still digging into his flesh, “He’s not going to stop until he gets what he wants.”

Sighing, Steve turned a small worried frown on the sales clerk. Talking to Bucky, not the other man, the tall blond said “I won’t let him get her, Buck.”

“She’ll be fine. She’s safe, right? Rumlow don’t know where she is . . . we’ll . . . we’ll keep her safe,” Bucky mumbled, finally releasing his left arm when he felt the familiar sting of open cuts.

“She’s safe in her castle, Bucky. Trust her guards.” Steve stroked the tangled brown tresses and held the man close. “We’re going to keep her safe.” Steve turned to the sales clerk. “Got something for me or do I go to ADIT?”

The salesman gaped at Steve for a moment, his eyes flickering between the two men. “I - - I think I might have something.”

“Think?” Steve growled low, chest rumbling under Bucky’s cheek.

“Geez! Gimme a moment.” The clerk scurried away to the back of the store.

Steve frowned, eyes suddenly worried, an uncomfortable flush creeping onto his face. “I think I’m bullying him, Buck . . . am I being too mean? I just want the best for you and Ava . . .”

“You’re being a little punk,” Bucky murmured softly, not making any movement to pull away from the tall blond.

With a sigh, Steve let his worried blue eyes flash over the store. “I just don’t like how he sounds like he’s not so sure about the products he’s selling, you know? This is something far more important than a box of cereal or a half-priced watch.”

Finally, Bucky pulled away, his skin still pale and eyes shining with fear. The brunet looked up at
Steve, he opened his mouth to say something but the voice of the clerk cut him off.

“This is the best system we got!” The clerk said as he put a large box on the counter, he held out a brochure to Steve. “Comes with state of the art laser technology and all the cameras can be accessed using an app on your phone.”

“Laser?” Steve paled considerably suddenly. “Uh, I don’t wanna barbeque him, I want to stop him and let the police take him.”

“Not like that,” The clerk said, “The lasers only trigger the alarm and are placed on each windowsill and on the doors.”

“Oh,” Steve nodded, relief flooding him. “So, it picks up on movement. What about light or sound? Does it trigger for squirrels or does it have to be a certain size?”

Frowning, seeming thrown off by the question, the clerk shook his head, “It won’t trigger for a squirrel . . . or any household pets . . . It’s programmed to detect certain bulk and weight and size. If you get robbed by a midget, this won’t sound but your new locks will stop him . . . but a normal guy? Yeah, it’ll trigger a loud obnoxious alarm at the house as well as another at the security building and at the local police station.”

“And the new locks,” Steve asked softly. “What are they made of? Titanium?”

“Yup, uh huh, titanium steel. Guy won’t be able to break the locks . . . the locks will break any tools he uses.” The clerk flashed Steve a small smile.


“As long as it keeps the bastard out of my house,” Bucky grumbled, his sleeve sticking again to the new wounds.

“Okay, how soon can this be installed?” Steve asked the clerk.

“Usually it can take up to a week to put in the work order . . . but I’ll put a rush on your order. I will personally guarantee that your new system will be installed by the end of business tomorrow.” The salesman offered Steve and Bucky a genuinely kind smile.

Steve nodded slowly. “Tomorrow is good, right, Buck?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said quietly, “Tomorrow is better than a week from now.”

Steve turned and smiled at the salesclerk, genuinely seeming pleased. “Thanks a lot. We’ll take it.” He carefully maneuvered his hand into his pocket to pull out his wallet. One handed, he slipped it open, pulled out what seemed to be a credit card and a photo ID card, but not a driver’s license.

“Here you are,” Steve said, still one arm wrapped protectively around Bucky.

The clerk took the items and nodded, “Is the address the same on the ID as the house in which the system is being installed?”

“No,” he flushed. “That’s my apartment there.” Steve’s apartment was a high end well-to-do residence.

Bucky fished out his own wallet and handed the clerk his driver’s license, “That’s the address for the home,” the brunet offered.

The salesman took Bucky’s ID and nodded again, “Okay, give me a moment to write up the bill
and submit the work order. I’ll be right back.” The clerk ducked into the back room once more.

With a silent nod, Steve wrapped his free arm around Bucky again. “Almost done this part, Buck,” he whispered.

A small sigh broke through Bucky’s lips as the brunet nodded, “Yeah, then we just hafta go to the station.”

“Well, we gotta get your phone checked to see if Brock hacked it or not, too,” Steve reminded his boyfriend . . . how odd that felt; Bucky Barnes was his boyfriend. Was it real? Steve felt like he was in a daze suddenly.

The phone on the counter rang.

The brunet pulled over his phone and whimpered at the sight of Steve’s name flashing on the screen. He looked up at Steve with fearful eyes.

Meeting Bucky’s eyes, Steve frowned. “Him again?” he asked softly.

With a shaky hand, Bucky answered the call, “Brock.”

“Give him back and this is all over,” Brock’s tone came out reasonable and friendly.

“He ain’t some possession,” Bucky snapped.

“He’s my boyfriend, and you can’t just walk in and seduce him from me. Just cause you got those pretty lips and eyes doesn’t mean he’ll enjoy sex with you any more than with me. He’s mine!”

“He’s not yours anymore, Brock. J - - just leave us alone!”

“Slut,” Brock’s voice rasped out. “The little fuckin’ slut! I knew he’d been whoring behind my back!” The phone hung up.

Bucky slammed the phone on the counter and stumbled back, his eyes shining again.

Reaching out to try to support Bucky, Steve frowned, worried. “It was him . . .” he said with certainty. “What’d he want this time? Ava’s safe. He can’t get to her, Bucky!”

Looking up at the blond, Bucky said with a trembling tone, “H - - he wants you back. He said I seduced you away from him.”

Flushing, Steve shook his head. “I . . . I can’t go back to him. I’m with you.” He bit his lip, eyes worried.

“He said . . . I had pretty lips . . . and eyes - - I - -” Bucky rambled nearly incoherently, head shaking.

Confused a bit by that, Steve nodded and hazarded, “you have gorgeous eyes, Buck . . . and your lips look like they’re made to kiss.” He seemed unsure what to say or do.

“He called you - - I . . . I’m sorry I didn’t mean to say it but I told him you weren’t his boyfriend anymore . . . and then he called you,” Bucky winced as his fingers wrapped tightly around his arm again.

Steve lowered his eyes, looking like he puzzled through the words. Slowly, he said “you didn’t mean to say I’m not his boyfriend?” The blond’s deep voice came out soft and worried.
Bucky’s eyes widened and he shook his head, “That . . . that came out wrong! I - - I . . . I just didn’t want to make you a target . . . now he’s mad at you, too.”

Lifting troubled blue eyes to Bucky’s pale ones, Steve frowned softly, silently. He lowered his eyes again on a sigh. “Okay . . . what else? Was there anything else, Bucky?”

Furrowing his brows in thought, Bucky said quietly, “He kept calling you his.”

“He,” Steve repeated dully, eyes flickering over the floor as he stood there, arms uselessly down by his sides now that Bucky had pulled away. “No, I can’t be his anymore. I’m your’s as long as you want me,” Steve reiterated.

Bucky’s eyes welled with tears and he tore into the flesh of his left arm.

Steve’s hand snapped out, grasping Bucky’s right hand firmly, but not bruising. “Please stop hurting yourself?” He whimpered just a bit then cleared his throat, trying to regain control.

Looking up at Steve with wide, tear-washed eyes, Bucky didn’t make any movements to pull away his hand. “It’s crawling . . . Stevie. I - - I can feel it.”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded and tugged Bucky back into his arms. He lifted his boyfriend’s left arm and began inspecting it. “Yeah, it’s crawling in stress and fear. Let’s get my cards and get you something to rub on it, okay?” Steve’s voice was all concern, as if any worry over their stalker had fled his mind.

Just then, the salesman walked out of the backroom with a paper and the other men’s cards. “Alright, all you have to do, Mr. Rogers, is sign.”

Nodding, reaching over his right hand, still holding Bucky in his left arm, Steve took the pen. “Just point the proper spaces out, please. I need to get him out of here,” Steve began to make the new alarm system official. Only minutes passed before he slid the three cards loose into this pocket, including Bucky’s driver’s license, not bothering with his wallet. He also shoved the folded up contract and receipts in his pockets as well. Finally, with a loud sigh, Steve said “Bucky, ready to go?”

Looking up at Steve, Bucky simply nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“Good, me too.” The blond looked at the clerk then reached for Bucky’s phone. “It’s all clear? Nothing wrong on it?” he asked.

“I couldn’t find anything.” The clerk nodded, “Go on, get your boy home.”

“My boy?” Steve murmured, looking slightly confused but then glanced down at Bucky and nodded. “You wanna go home, Buck?”

“We - - we gotta go to the police station,” Bucky said numbly.

Straightening, firmly guiding Bucky from the store, Steve nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.” He guided Bucky down the street to where the car was parked but stopped and laughed bitterly. “I don’t drive.”

Mind too far gone to realize that it was probably Brock’s fault Steve didn’t drive, Bucky muttered, “I can drive, Steve. It’s fine.”

“You sure?” Steve bit his lip. “I don’t want you getting hurt driving,” he added but moved to the passenger side of the car.
Bucky shuffled over to the driver’s side and unlocked the car.

“We could always call the detective to come to us?” Steve offered suddenly, looking over the hood at the brunet.

Seeming to grasp at the notion of going home, Bucky nodded, “You can call him on the way back.”

“Okay,” Steve agreed thankfully, seeming not to realize that letting Bucky drive home was probably just as reckless as his driving to the police station. Steve fumbled his buckle closed, hissing, eyes watering. He reached over and asked “your phone?”

Wordlessly, Bucky handed over his phone and carefully pulled onto the main road.

As Bucky drove, Steve concentrated on the phone, dialing the detective’s number and extension carefully. He left his message, being assured that the detective would answer as soon as he was done with whatever person he was helping currently. Finally, Steve looked up. “Bucky? You missed the turn, or are we going a different way?”

“Oh . . . sorry,” Bucky mumbled but he turned down the next street.

The blond glanced over at the brunet with worried eyes. He let his fingers play over the phone in his hands, but the tall man didn’t seem aware of what he touched or even pressed.

After the small detour, Bucky pulled into the driveway and unbuckled Steve’s seatbelt, not even realizing that he hadn’t secured his own belt before pulling away from the shop.

Taking a deep breath, scanning the area but not seeing anyone, Steve fumbled his door open. “Thanks, Bucky,” he murmured. He slipped from the car and leaned against it, feeling the metal under his hands and near his cheek. “Thanks,” he repeated and shook his head. “We should get inside maybe?”

“Yeah . . . inside.” Bucky muttered and stumbled out of the car. The brunet fumbled in his back pocket and pulled out the keys.

Steve waited long enough for the door to open then wrapped his fingers securely, but not painfully, around Bucky’s wrist and guided him inside, kicking the door shut. In the hall, he tugged Bucky into his arms and enclosed him in a strong embrace, burying his face in Bucky’s hair. “I promise I’m not sleeping with anyone behind your back, Bucky. Brock lies about me.”

Bucky blinked slowly and it took a few extra moments for Steve’s words to process. “I - - I don’t believe him.”

Relief welled up and Steve sobbed once, nodding. “Good . . . that’s good. He’s always accusing me of sleeping with people behind his back, but he’s wrong. He knows every person he ever had me sleep with.”

Bucky in a slightly detached tone, reached over and patted Steve’s back, and said “He’s wrong.”

Steve pulled back slightly and cupped Bucky’s face in both hands, meeting his eyes with worried blue ones. “I love you. I won’t leave you, Buck,” Steve whispered fiercely and then, for the first time in their lives, he brought his mouth down over Bucky’s in a warm, somewhat clumsy but heartfelt kiss.

Stiffening slightly, it took Bucky a few seconds to respond; he whispered in Steve’s mouth, “This must be a dream . . .”
Confused, Steve stopped kissing him and frowned slightly, eyes puzzled. “A dream?”

Unfocused pale-blue eyes snapped to meet Steve’s, “Well . . . yeah? No one as pretty as you would want someone like me. I’m damaged.”

Steve’s confusion didn’t lessen. Instead he shook his head. “I don’t get it. You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met . . . always have been.” He stroked one of his hands down Bucky’s cheek, studying the brunet’s pale eyes.

At that moment, the phone rang again and Bucky slowly moved his head to frown at the interruption.

Steve pulled the phone out of his pocket with a frown. He flicked his thumb over the screen to check on the call. “It’s the detective, Bucky. Wanna answer the phone?” he asked, offering it, looking up at Bucky’s eyes.

Biting his lip, Bucky looked over at Steve, “Can you answer it?”


“Hello, it’s Detective Sam Wilson calling,” Sam’s voice rang out.

“Yes, sir,” Steve answered. “This is Steve Rogers answering, sir.”

“Is James okay?” The detective sounded worried.

“No, he’s not,” Steve answered truthfully. “He’s getting stalked by my ex-boyfriend and he keeps getting disturbing phone calls. He’s been having panic attacks, causing him to self-harm. We need your help.”

“Shit,” Sam breathed out harshly, “Alright. Where are you guys right now?”

“At his house. You should have the address. Just like you should have my phone, in fact,” Steve mentioned, voice hardening slightly. “Locked in evidence somewhere?”

“I’ll explain that when I get to the house. Too many people here. I should be there in less than thirty minutes.” The detective hung up quickly.

Drawing a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Steve once again pocketed the phone on instinct. “He’ll be here in less than half an hour,” he informed the brunet.

“That’s good,” Bucky muttered, “I need to put lotion on my arm . . . it’s crawling, Stevie.”

“Okay, yeah, let’s treat your arm, Buck.” Steve pulled Bucky by his wrist into the nearest bathroom. “Sit down?” he asked as he pulled out the necessary supplies “So, just like last time?”

Numb, Bucky sat down on the edge of the tub and held out his wrist. The brunet didn’t say anything, just continued to stare blankly ahead.

Steve nodded and began to wash his friend’s arm, careful yet firm enough to be felt. Finally, patting it dry, Steve pulled out lotion and antibiotic cream. He smoothed the medicine on first then blended the lotion over the remaining spaces. Finally, he put the meds away and hesitated. Slowly, enough to let him react if he chose, Steve kissed Bucky again. It was obvious he wasn’t very practiced in kissing.

Bucky kissed back, not with as much passion as he would have had he been in his right mind, but
he did respond to Steve’s lips.

Slowly, Steve stopped so that he could breathe against Bucky’s warm mouth. “Buck? Are you . . . can I help?” He hated to see Bucky looking so lifeless, so out of it. “Bucky, you want something? What can I do, baby?” The endearment was absentminded.

“Tired, Stevie.” Bucky mumbled, “So tired.”

Nodding in response, Steve drew a slow breath then carefully slipped Bucky up into his arms. He carried the slender man into his bedroom and eased him onto the bed, ignoring his own limp and his own burned hands. “You sleep, Bucky. I’ll talk to the detective.

“Oh okay.” Bucky nodded, his eyes drooping shut as he turned on his side, “I love you, Stevie.”

Steve brushed his hand lightly over Bucky’s hair, watching protectively as the man slept, waiting and listening for the arrival of the detective for their case.

A few minutes shy of thirty, a soft knock echoed throughout the house, startling Bucky.

Steve jumped up, eyes wide at the sudden noise. “I’ll get it. You stay here and rest, Buck.” And the tall blond made his way downstairs to open the door.

The dark-skinned detective stood outside, a small frown on his face.

“Come on in?” Steve asked him softly, stepping out of the way, revealing his battered, burnt hands unbandaged and reopening. “Bucky’s asleep.”

Stepping into the townhome, Sam nodded and asked in a quiet voice, “How’s he doing?”

“Dull and lifeless and drained. He had to leave Ava with friends to keep her safe and this entire thing is wearing him down. He keeps digging open his old burns.” Steve ran his tender hand through his hair and winced.

“His sister has a history of mental issues, yeah?” Sam asked softly, not judgemental.

“Yes, she was grieving so hard, she tried to kill herself and Ava, too.” Steve looked frustrated. “Bucky blames himself for that.”

“If it gets too bad, you might need to get him checked into a hospital, Steve,” the detective stated. “But they’ll lock him away and drug him, and he’ll lose Ava,” Steve practically whined in distress at that. “It’ll kill them both to lose each other, Detective Wilson.”

“He can’t keep hurting himself. If his sister has a mental issue . . . he might, too.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, bitterness creeping into his voice. “It’s called stalking, Detective. He was just fine before Brock began terrorizing him, telling him he would kidnap Ava, sending services over on trumped up charges, and generally making his life hell just to get me back. But Bucky refuses to let him have me, and I agree with Bucky. I don’t want to be with Brock.” Steve ran out of steam and hung his head.

“And you shouldn’t. I’m just saying you need to look at every option, Steve.” Sam paused and pulled out a small notepad from the pocket of his slacks.

“And that means options in which we get counseling and catch this guy and protect Ava, too. Not just hospitals. That’s a last resort, and I won’t do it to him.” Steve crossed his arms defensively
over his broad chest, so at odds with his narrow waist. “Look, he’s been digging at his arm in stress. It gets worse the worse he feels. That’s the extent of his self-harm.” He frowned. “I just need you to help find and put away Brock. That should relieve a ton of stress right then.”

Sam seemed to study Steve for a long moment, eyes running down the length of the tall blond’s body. The detective’s gaze seemed to catch on Steve’s hands and how the taller man seemed to be favoring a leg. “How are you doing, Steve? You’ve had a rough few days . . . you sure you’re okay to be taking care of him right now? Maybe you need to focus on taking care of yourself.”

The blond rolled his eyes and huffed. “I’m not important. I’ve had worse. I need to take care of Bucky. He needs someone to help him while he’s down,” Steve insisted, his hand absently going to his right leg but not touching it.

Eyeing the leg apprehensively again, Sam asked softly, “How about we sit down, yeah?”

Turning his head to eye the chair, Steve drew in a slow breath, as if Sam suggested a round of lying on a bed of nails or something equally torturous. “Okay,” he said softly and eased carefully onto a chair, holding himself stiff.

Sitting down across from Steve, Sam set his notepad down on the dining table, Bucky and Steve’s untouched plates of pancakes next to him, and started, “You said something about Rumlow calling Mr. Barnes? How many times?”

“Um,” Steve thought. “He called before sending Services over. Then he called a couple more times . . . three or four, I think.” The blond flushed and looked guilty. “I’ve had trouble focusing the past couple of days.

Nodding, Sam scribbled something down, “You can tell Mr. Barnes that I will be contacting Children’s Services and try to clear up the situation.”

Going pale, Steve rushed to say, “they sent a Ms. Hill to talk to Bucky and Ava. Brock reported that I wanted to hurt Ava . . . sexually. He’s done that before, last year when I had him locked up.” Hanging his head in shamed memory of how he’d treated Brock then, Steve drew a deep breath. He met the officer’s dark brown eyes. “I never hurt a kid, Detective. I was acquitted last year, and Ms. Hill left, allowing me to stay, this time.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Sam dropped the pen and looked at Steve closely. “You don’t seem like a guy to hurt children.” He said simply and then moved on, “Has Rumlow made any violent threats? Threats of physical harm?”

“I’m not the one who’s been hearing the phone calls,” Steve said, sounding a bit frustrated. “I only know what Bucky said. He said Brock wanted to take Ava from him, which is pretty much what Brock threatened at the zoo on Friday.”

“Do you think Rumlow is capable of taking a child?” Sam asked seriously after jotting down another note on the paper.

Shrugging, Steve answered honestly. “He’s never been one to like kids or even pay them much attention, but yeah, he’s capable. Brock’s an Army Ranger and in the military police. He’s trained to abduct people loaded with weapons. A five year old wouldn’t be too difficult for him.”

Nodding, as if the information wasn’t new to him, Sam wrote something else down. “And Ava is at a secure location, now?”

“I won’t tell you where,” Steve suddenly, inexplicably grew stubborn, crossing his arms and frowning at Sam.
Dropping the pen again, Sam looked back up at Steve, “I know you don’t trust the police, and we haven’t really given you much reason to . . . but I want to help, Mr. Rogers, I really do. James seemed like a good guy when I talked to him earlier, and he is a very good father. I won’t force you to tell me where Ava is.”

Slowly, Steve nodded. “She’s with friends of Bucky’s in a gated community with full time security. But I’m not telling who or where,” he conceded. “I think she’s safe. You said you’d talk to me about how Brock got my phone out of evidence. I expected he’d be able to walk out of jail. He always gets out in a day or two. But I never thought he could get secured evidence.”

Sighing heavily, Sam rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head, “Mr. Rogers . . . I’m going to be honest with you.”

“Jack Rollins,” Steve said, without waiting for Sam’s words. “He got assigned the evidence locker, didn’t he?”

Almost looking pained, Sam nodded, “Yeah, and he convinced the Captain to look over the security tapes. He’s trying to get charges pressed against James.”

“Yeah, they’re best friends, actually. Means Brock’s also probably got weapons and other stuff you guys don’t know are gone yet.” Steve rose, painfully and seemed to sigh before he limped towards the door. “I need to do something . . . what can I do?” He turned carefully to look at Sam with misery in his blue eyes. “I was the one who brought Brock into their lives.”

“I don’t think leaving James freaked out by himself is the answer, Mr. Rogers. And neither is going after Rollins or Rumlow.” Sam took a deep breath and rose to his feet.

“I can’t touch either of them, so it’d be pointless to go after them myself. But can’t you guys prove Rollins stole evidence? And that Brock’s stalking Bucky and Ava?” Steve moved back to Sam’s side and held his hands spread in a pleading gesture. “Anything?”

“I’m working as hard as I can. I promise. But I’m fighting an uphill battle. I’m thinking the Captain might be working with Rollins or something,” Sam sighed in exasperation.

“Wait a minute,” Steve said slowly, “are you the only detective assigned the case?” He looked stunned. “That’s ludicrous!”

“The Captain thinks you and James are lying. Doesn’t think this case is worth a lot of manpower.”

“The Manhattan police. What about the Brooklyn police? Brock’s . . .” Steve’s blue eyes widened and he sank to the chair, letting out a yelp of pain as soon as his buttock and thigh touched the hard surface. Easing back from the chair again, Steve asked, “What about the FBI?”

“I’m trying, Mr. Rogers,” Sam said firmly, unable to give the other man specific details of the case.

“No, the FBI have a legit case, Detective. Interstate crime. Brock’s been using the phone to stalk Bucky . . . that’s an FBI jurisdiction!”

“You think I haven’t tried contacting them?” Sam snapped, but took a deep breath in order to calm himself down.

Steve shut up, eyes wide, face pale, breath hitching. He folded his hands carefully together over his abdomen and merely watched Sam. Finally, slowly, he said, “that’s a lot of people to be in on.
this . . . conspiracy . . . Detective. Your Chief’s that well connected?”

“I don’t know!” Sam slumped into the chair again, “I don’t know why . . . but this case - - it’s different. Every time I think I get a lead . . . it disappears before I can properly look into it.”

“Okay, tell me how I can help. You need someone with . . . power?” Steve winced. “Money, influence? Will that make people start letting you do your job? What’s the chief’s weakness?” He watched Sam but there was a calculating, if miserable, look in his eyes.

Brown eyes flicking up to meet Steve’s, Sam shook his head, “The first thing is that you two are going to request a restraining order . . . no judge is going to deny the request when they see your guy’s files. That’ll give me something to work on.”

“Unless our files have already been sealed or disappeared?” Steve asked softly. “You said that Rollins has the video footage from my apartment?”

“Yeah . . . and it’s not good. James did shove Rumlow first,” Sam stated honestly.

“Because he was being rough on me after I’d burned my hands,” Steve said softly, by way of explanation but without much conviction. “So, how far back in the footage did your guys take? To when Bucky came into the place? Any further?”

Sam shook his head, “They only allowed us to take right as James shoved Rumlow and then the resulting altercation.”

“They?” Steve frowned. “They who?”

“The apartment management? Kept claiming security rights.”

A bitter laugh escaped Steve. “The manager is one of Brock’s friends, too. And he has no say over my security footage. I can release as much as I want of it.” Steve crossed his arms, looking defiant, as if he were utterly convinced he had the say over the footage, not the guy who owned his apartment.

Suddenly a loud thump came from upstairs.

“Bucky?” Steve immediately sprinted for the stairs, ignoring his pain as he raced up to check on Bucky. “Buck?”

Sam followed close behind, hand on his service weapon.

Running into the room, Steve skidded to a kneeling position next to Bucky’s bruised body on the floor. “Bucky?” He looked at the bed then down at Bucky, confused as to what had made the brunet fall asleep down there. But, he shook his head. Bucky must’ve slammed into something, maybe the dresser or bed frame, to have made . . . eyes widening, Steve realized how stupid he’d just been. Bucky must’ve fallen out of bed.

Writhing on the floor, eyes clamped shut, Bucky muttered, “Please . . . no. No.”

Steve reached out and placed a gentle hand on Bucky’s hair and the other carefully on Bucky’s scarred arm. Softly, he crooned in his deep voice, “Bucky, baby? I’m here. Steve’s here. Wake up for me, Buck.”

Eyes snapping open, Bucky let out a loud gasp of air and he looked up at Steve with wide eyes. “Steve?”
“Right here, Buck. Right with you,” Steve reassured him in a calm voice, hand stroking the tangled nutbrown tresses while he kept his other steadily, carefully, on the scarred limb. “I’m here, Bucky.”

“Fire . . . he was - - there was fire.” Bucky murmured, his pale-blue eyes frantically searched the room.

“He? Bucky,” Steve murmured gently, “who was in the fire?”

“Rumlow. He - - he - - I couldn’t get to you or Ava. There was so much smoke! I couldn’t breathe!”

Nodding, Steve understood how Bucky’s memories of Becca’s fire had mixed with his fears of Brock to create the blended nightmare. “Brock’s not here. There’s no fire. We’re safe. Ava and I are safe. You’re safe.” He stroked again and leaned close, hesitated briefly, then brushed his lips softly over Bucky’s before sitting back. “We’re fine, baby.”

Looking around, Bucky’s eyes finally focused again and his body stiffened when he saw Sam lingering in the doorway.

Following Bucky’s gaze, frowning, Steve looked at Sam. He looked back at Bucky. “Detective Wilson is the cop assigned our case, Buck. He wants to help us get restraining orders. We were talking about the security footage from my apartment when you must’ve fallen from bed in your nightmare.”

Sitting up, Bucky ran a shaky hand through his hair, “I’m sorry - - I didn’t mean . . . I haven’t had a nightmare in a while.”

“We can’t control when we’ll get nightmares, Buck. You told me that when I was twelve. Did you forget?” He offered a small, hopeful smile.

Tugging on his sleeve, Bucky ducked his head and flushed. “No. I didn’t forget.”

Reaching up, Steve stroked Bucky’s hair again. “We were talking about the case, Buck. You want us to let you get more sleep?”

Sighing, Bucky felt even more exhausted than he had when he’d gone to sleep, but his mind kept replaying the nightmare over and over again. “I don’t think I could sleep right now.”

“I,” Steve glanced at Sam, nervous about what he was going to offer, but Bucky’s need kind of outweighed the law, didn’t it? “I have some meds that prevent dreams?” Steve offered.

Sam turned and walked away, not allowing himself to witness a law being broken, but also not stopping it from happening.

“I - - I . . .” Bucky stammered, “I won’t have nightmares?”

“I can only give you one,” Steve informed him, “but it will stop the dreams and let you sleep for about eight, maybe twelve hours. If you need more after that, I can bring you to Brock’s doctor to see if he thinks you need them.”

“Okay,” Bucky said simply, his exhaustion making him slump against the bed.

Nodding, Steve eased to his feet and limped heavily to his room. He’d really done his injury a number when he slid to the floor by Bucky. Quickly, the big blond grabbed his duffle bag and brought it back to the other bedroom, opening it and pulling out four medicine bottles. He began
looking over the labels and chose one to open, shaking out a small tablet. “Let me get you some water, Buck,” he said, offering the pill.

Taking the medication with a shaky hand, Bucky offered the blond a small, grateful smile.

The man quickly got a tumbler of water and brought it back to the brunet’s side. He eased back to the floor with a hiss and held out the glass.

“Your leg,” Bucky muttered as he took the glass.

“Uh,” Steve looked down at his right leg and winced. He glanced back at Bucky. “Yeah?”

“When did you hurt your leg?” The brunet asked, brows furrowing in thought.

Flushing, Steve sighed. “Same time I hurt my eye. Just after I left the coffee shop.” He looked down at his hands.

Bucky’s eyes filled with frustrated tears, “I’m sorry - - I didn’t even notice.”

Steve looked up and shook his head. “You were watching over Ava whenever we were walking, pretty much. I can’t fault you for being a good parent. I’m a grown up. I’ve had worse,” he told the brunet.

“You shouldn’t have had worse,” Bucky mumbled before popping the pill into his mouth and taking a small sip of water.

With a small nod, though he didn’t seem totally convinced, Steve picked up his four medicine bottles and began sliding them into his duffle.

Eyes already falling shut again, Bucky shook his head and turned to get back onto the bed. “Thank you, Steve,” the brunet mumbled.

Steve reached over and helped Bucky into his bed, ignoring his own pains in favor of taking care of Bucky. “I mean it, Buck. I can’t give you a second dose later. If you want more, you need to see a doctor.” He glanced towards the door. “Besides having a limited amount myself, it’s illegal.”

“Don’t like taking medication anyway,” Bucky muttered. Still in his shoes and street clothes, the brunet curled up and let his eyes close again.

“Yeah,” Steve commiserated. “Neither do I. I hate my meds.” He stood achily and winced, hand hovering protectively around his buttock. “Get some rest, Buck. I’ll talk to Wilson some more.” The blond moved slowly around the bed and fumbled Bucky’s shoes off, but left him alone other than that. He left the room and looked at Sam.

Sam’s expression was neutral; he motioned for Steve to follow him down the stairs.

Hanging his head, still sporting his duffle bag, Steve went where the cop indicated. “He needed sleep, sir,” he said softly. “I promise I won’t give him any more.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Rogers. I ain’t going to arrest you. That kid looks like he could use a few years of sleep. I probably would’ve done the same,” the policeman offered.

Relief filled normally vibrant blue eyes and Steve slipped his bag onto the kitchen table, near the uneaten breakfasts from long ago that morning.

“Try lavender,” Sam said as he took his seat across from Steve.
“Lavender?” Steve frowned. “Why lavender? Brock always uses that for sex. You want me to have sex with Bucky until he collapses from exhaustion? I’m not that good,” Steve flushed.

Sam snorted and rolled his eyes, “The smell of lavender helps some people relax . . . also chamomile. I light a candle a few hours before I go to bed and it helps me wind down.”

“Oh,” Steve flushed. “Not sure he’ll let me burn things in the house. He’s had bad experiences with fire, sir,” Steve’s tone still remained soft and respectful, slightly embarrassed.

“Oil, maybe?” Sam shrugged, “It’s just food for thought, Mr. Rogers.”

Nodding, Steve folded his hands carefully and placed them on the table. “I’ll check into it,” he sounded like he was making a promise.

Sam nodded and looked down at his notepad that still sat on the table. “You’re going to install a security system, yes?”

“Yes, the man is coming tomorrow. He’s also changing the locks.” Steve raised his eyes, seeming on firmer footing now. “And with the restraining orders, that should help a bit. But I plan to get a few other things I think Bucky needs around here.”

“Like what?” Sam asked, leaning forward slightly.

“Security video for every room, tastefully placed for Ava and Bucky’s privacy but security back up. New phones for them and me, so Brock doesn’t have any access to them. And I was thinking maybe looking into getting Bucky his own taser so he doesn’t have to borrow Nat’s again.”

“You tell Bucky about all this?” Sam questioned, he wrote something else down quickly before returning his eyes to Steve.

“Not yet. We haven’t had time to talk about it. I have to wait until he’s thinking calmly before I offer to make even more changes to his life.” Steve sighed in frustration, but obviously he respected Bucky enough to want the man’s permission to make those changes.

“He seemed pretty out of it.” Sam commented, his brown eyes flicking to the untouched meals still on the table.

Biting his lip softly, Steve said, “I don’t think he sleeps well. And I know he worries all the time. But,” bringing their former discussion back up, Steve insisted, “I don’t think he needs a hospital. He needs rest and help . . . I can help. After a couple weeks, and less stress, he’ll bounce back.”

“I did manage to alert the institution his sister is at of the situation,” Sam said, his attention back onto Steve.

“And she’s safe there?” Steve asked carefully.

Shrugging softly, Sam shook his head, “It’s hard to say, honestly. They have a pretty lax security system . . . it’s a nice place, more like a spa than any hospital I’ve seen.”

“So, let me get this straight?” Steve asked softly, eyes serious and hard. “The police are compromised, and we may need an ally with wealth and influence to trump Brock’s power. The institution might not be able to protect Becca, so we need someone with money and influence to deal with either getting them up to snuff or moving her somewhere secure. And the man who owns the building my apartment is in has decided he can do what he wants with my stuff.”

“You see my problems, now?” Sam asked softly, “This is what I’ve been dealing with for two
days now.”

Groaning, Steve pinched the bridge of his nose between a sore thumb and aching forefinger. “Yeah. And I might have a solution. But I really didn’t want to do it. Brock will go ballistic!” Steve looked at Sam miserably. “Last time I did it, he broke my hands.”

Interest peaked, Sam’s brows rose and he looked over at Steve with wide eyes, “What did you do?”


“Intervened?” Sam’s eyebrows pulled together, “What do you mean?”

“Roger Grant,” Steve whispered, wincing.

“I’m not sure I’m following you here, Steve.” Sam stated honestly.

“Money, power, influence . . . the chief will have to start taking this case seriously. And the institution will have to give Becca respect and better care,” Steve pointed out, eyes miserable.

“How do you know Roger Grant?”

“I thought it’d be in my file,” Steve said softly. “My name is Steven Grant Rogers . . . and I majored in art in university.” He lifted his darkening blue eyes to Sam. “Brock wanted to brag, but he hates it when I take matters into my own hands. He told me it’d be safer to have a pen name, if you will . . .” he looked away. “And then, well, after I broke my hands, I couldn’t paint any more, so I finished my degree in Art History instead.”

“Roger Grant . . .” Sam repeated, trying to piece it together, “You’re Roger Grant.”

“Was,” Steve sighed and shrugged. “Haven’t been for a year now. But I think the name still has pull, right? And I have Momma’s money. So, I can grease wheels?” He shook his head. “Brock’s better at this than I am, but I can do it. Bucky needs my help.”

“Aren’t you one of the most prominent artists from New York? You sold to some pretty big collectors?” Sam said.

“Yeah, was,” Steve said again. He sighed. “But most people don’t know because Brock never wanted me to suffer from stalking or anything, so I never had my face out there in the papers or anything.”

“You don’t have access to your own account, do you?” Sam asked softly.

Shaking his head, he said, “Brock handles everything for that, actually. But I can get to Momma’s money that she left me. That can help?”

Sam shook his head, running his hand through his short hair. “Does Bucky know?”

“No?” Steve more asked than stated, tone frightened suddenly.

“That’s something he should know, Steve,” Sam said quietly.

“Why? I only ever used my fame once before, and that didn’t go so well. I mean, it’s not like it’s going to get me anything for much longer. My star is fading fast, and if it’s still got some pull, I should use it now. Brock’ll flip, but . . . I can get the case looked at properly and get Becca help . . . unless you think my star faded too much? I’m out of the public eye, have been for a year now.”
“Man, people still talk about it. You’re like a ghost or something . . . most people think you went to Europe. I think your name will have pull for a while longer,” the detective reported.

Steve frowned, apparently really kept out of the loop about his own ‘story.’ He shrugged finally. “That’s okay. I don’t mind if they think I went to another continent. As long as I can help. Do you think the chief will listen to . . . uh . . . me enough to go look over the parts of the tape from before Bucky hit Brock? Take in the other evidence seriously?”

“I think you’ll have enough pull to make him do a double check, yeah,” Sam answered; the detective rose to his feet, “This may work, Steve.”

“Then I want him to pull the footage back to the beginning of the week . . . from when we got home after Brock first met Bucky.” Steve flushed. “I don’t show so well in it, but it might help to prove Brock’s insanely jealous of Bucky?”

“Alright,” Sam nodded, “Okay. I’ll get those restraining orders put through and we’ll get the entire footage.” The smaller man plucked his notepad from off the table.

Nodding, Steve looked relieved suddenly. “And we can get Becca somewhere safe or a guard or something? If you need money for that right off, I can get some.”

“If you want to move her, you’ll have to talk to Bucky. He’s the only one who can sign off on that sort of thing,” Sam answered as he put the notepad back into his pocket.

“Okay, I’ll talk to him when he wakes up.” Steve said firmly, his eyes showing absolute fear as he fought to tamp down on his emotions. He nodded and looked at Sam. “Once Brock realizes what I’m doing . . .” he swallowed. “I should get a taser for myself, shouldn’t I?”

“Wouldn’t hurt.” Sam stated honestly, “I wouldn’t leave Bucky by himself either . . . if he has a panic attack - - well, he’d be too vulnerable.”

“So, I should contact someone to get stuff for us? We’re pretty short on groceries at the moment.” Steve glanced over at the fridge, his emotions coming back in check with something so mundane and certain to worry about.

Pulling out his notepad again, Sam scribbled down a phone number. He ripped the page out and handed it over to Steve, “That’s a number for a market that does deliveries. I use it all the time.”

Eyes lighting at the help, Steve offered his near-angelic smile to Sam. “Thanks. When Bucky wakes, we’ve got a lot to talk about . . . Becca and counseling and more safety procedures,” he sighed and his eyes took on that tone of fear again, “and Roger Grant,” he said almost whispering.

Sam nodded, “You take care of yourself, Steve. You have my number. Do not hesitate to call if you feel unsafe. I’ll be in touch.”

“I always feel unsafe,” Steve bowed his head, his words so low they could have been an illusion.

Frowning, Sam nodded again, “I bet. Look, I may not completely understand everything you’ve been through . . . but I do know some things about trauma. If you need an ear to listen . . . give me a call. You need to take care of yourself to take care of your boy.”

Finally, Steve looked back at Sam and nodded, firmly. “Thank you. I know I haven’t been the easiest . . . uh . . . I guess victim’s the right word,” he winced. “But you’ve been hanging on any way. Thanks.”

Sam flashed Steve a kind smile and then walked to the door, “I’ll give you a call when the
restraining orders are in place.” The detective opened the door and let himself out, ducking into
the midday sun.

Taking a deep breath, Steve trudged painfully up the steps to go check on Bucky. Watching the
man he’d loved for almost twelve years, Steve reassured himself that Bucky really was here . . .
was willing to forgive him for screwing things up so badly. Now, Steve had to find a way to fix
this, so they could get past everything else that came before. He turned and put his bag in his room
and went downstairs to begin cleaning, get groceries delivered, and make sure he knew what each
room contained and how soon the first aid kits would need to be resupplied due to expiration dates
- - anything to keep busy for the next eight hours while Bucky got rest.

Finally, secure in his lists and orders, waiting for the first of the deliveries of supplies and food,
Steve walked over to Bucky’s phone. He winced, hating to use the other man’s private device, but
he had to do it anyway. Nat needed to know they couldn’t come tonight . . . and Ava had to know
why.

Dialling, Steve waited as he heard the ringtone Bucky had set for outgoing calls.

After the second ring, Natasha’s voice came over the line, sounding worried, “Bucky? Is
everything okay?”

“It’s Steve. Bucky’s asleep.” The blond took a deep, steadying breath. “He had a panic attack
while we were at the security store. And then the detective assigned to our case came over, so
Bucky went upstairs.” He paused, gathering his thoughts to best explain all that had happened.

“Is he okay now?” Natasha asked quickly, the faint sounds of Lucky barking could be heard.

“Not really,” Steve answered. “He fell out of bed from a bad nightmare and was still upset and
dazed. I . . . I gave him one of my pills to knock out the dreams for eight hours, but I warned him I
wouldn’t give him any more without a doctor’s permission. So, right now he’s sleeping.”

Natasha released a deep breath, “Did he cut up his arm?”

“Hasn’t stopped, Natasha. I’ve had to change his bandages and we’re nearly out of antibiotics.
The detective wants me to put Bucky in a hospital, but I won’t do it. He doesn’t need that. He just
needs stress relief and rest . . . and his family intact. I’m sorry he won’t make dinner because of the
pill, but I really think he’ll need to talk to Ava on the phone when he wakes up?”

“Don’t worry about dinner,” Natasha dismissed, “She’s been asking for him for a while. But I can
distract her.”

Sounding worried again, Steve glanced towards the stairs. “I’d bring him to your place, but I don’t
drive. I could get a cab and carry him? But he’d still be knocked out for hours.”

“No, let him sleep in his own bed.” Nat took another deep breath.

Ava’s small voice called out, a little muffled, “Is that Uncle Bucky? Is he almost here?”

“I can talk to her if you want? Try to explain?” Steve offered.

“You want to talk to Steve, Ava?” Natasha asked, and the little girl must’ve agreed because the
sound of the phone transferring hands could be heard.

“Hey, Ava? How’s the smart one?” He asked softly, heading up the stairs towards Bucky’s room.

“I’m okay.” Ava sniffled, “Are you almost here with Uncle Bucky?”
“No,” he said, honestly, but then continued, “wanna know why?”

“Yes!” Ava whined, “He’s not leaving me here is he?”

“Nope, he’s not. It’s my fault he’s not coming, but I can’t explain if you get upset before I’m done. Promise to listen?” Steve asked carefully, slipping to Bucky’s bed to check on his breathing.

“Okay,” Ava muttered, her voice quivering.

“Thanks,” he said, as if she were another adult, or at least more reasonable than five. “We went to the store to get the alarms, and your uncle got scared when I told the clerk why we needed the best alarms in the store. So he started scratching his arm. I took him to your house and we called the cop so we could get papers telling Brock to stay away or he’ll get arrested and put in jail.” Steve took a breath. “But Bucky was really tired, so I told him to get a nap. When the cop and I were talking, your uncle had a very scary dream about Brock and fell out of bed.” He stopped talking for a moment then asked, “you ever get scary dreams, Ava?”

“Yes,” Ava sniffled, “I got lots after the accident.”

“Yes, me too. I get a lot, all the time.” Steve sighed. “Well, my doctor gave me a pill to help the nightmares stay away, but it’s a very . . . tricky medicine. I gave the pill to your uncle, but it won’t work right if he takes another without the doctor giving him his own. Does that make sense? It’s gotta be special for each person?”

“I guess?” Ava sounded a little confused.

Thinking, Steve went on. “Anyway, the pill will make him sleep for eight hours. Do you know how much that is?”

“That’s a long time!” Ava exclaimed.

“Well, it is. And he needed the sleep. Between you and me, I think your uncle doesn’t sleep a lot because he’s scared of the nightmares.” He sighed and checked on Bucky again. “So we can’t come tonight, but when he wakes up, I’m gonna tell him to call you, even if he has to wake up Auntie Nat to get you up. Is that okay with you?”

“You promise?” Ava asked, her tiny voice raising slightly.

“Yes, Ava,” Steve sounded very serious. “I promise to call Nat and have her wake you up so you can talk to your uncle when he wakes up.” Steve breathed deep. “But I wanna tell you something else, too.”

“What?”

Steve smiled slightly. “When we were kids, your Uncle used to purr in his sleep. Wanna see if I can get him to do it again?”

Ava giggled, “Uncle Bucky’s not a kitty, Steve!”

“Wanna bet? He’s a big kitty. Listen.” And Steve put the phone close to Bucky’s mouth and reached over to stroke Bucky’s abdomen, like he used to do when they played as boys, a cross between a tickle and a caress.

A soft purr broke past Bucky’s lips; the brunet squirmed slightly but didn’t wake up. Smiling, Steve let the sound die off before picking the phone back up. “What do you think?
“Kitty?” He deliberately didn’t explain how he got the man to make that contented noise, though. Some secrets didn’t need to be shared with children.

“Uncle Bucky sounded like Hannah’s kitty!” Ava giggled even more, seeming to forget her sad attitude from before.

“Told you he purrs. But I better let him sleep or it’ll be even longer before he wakes up.” Steve stood painfully, giving Bucky another long look before limping softly from the room. He heard a knock on the door and looked out the hall window to see if it was the delivery man or someone undesirable. Absently, Steve asked, “have you ever heard a cat bark? Maybe you can get Lucky to purr?” Satisfied that the woman at the door wasn’t a threat, Steve went down the steps to let her in.

“I can try!” Ava said quickly.

“Well, just remember that purrs take gentle hands. So be real gentle while you try. I’ll let you go do that. I’ve gotta talk to the lady from the store. I asked her to bring some more food so Bucky and me didn’t have to leave while he was sleeping.” Steve shook his head, realizing that might need further explanation. “It would have been annoying trying to carry your uncle around the store while I shopped.”

“You can’t carry Uncle Bucky! He’s too big!” Ava laughed again.

“I carried him before. I can do it again,” Steve promised then said, “talk to you in a few hours?”

“Okay!” Ava said, “Maybe you can kiss Uncle Bucky awake like Snow White!”

“Yeah, that sounds like a great idea. I’ll try it later,” Steve smiled. “Can you put Auntie Natasha back on?”

“Bye, Steve!” Ava said before handing the phone back to the redhead.

“You have a magic way with her, Steve. I swear I was gonna have to deal with another outburst,” Natasha said with a kind tone.

Sighing, Steve said, “I just remember Bucky always talking to other kids like they could understand if you spoke in small ideas.” He shrugged. “Yeah, as a kid he did that. That’s probably why he was a tutor and a hall monitor in grade school.” Steve watched the delivery woman placing bag after bag on the table and floor before she took down his credit card information.

“Thank you, Steve,” Natasha said suddenly.

“You’re welcome?” he responded. “Bucky’ll be out for about eight hours. I told you that, right? There’s bad news, too, Natasha. I think you should know since it impacts Ava.”

“Yeah, you did,” she paused before saying, “Bad news? I thought Bucky having a panic attack was the bad news.”

“Yeah, we have only one cop assigned our case right now. Brock’s best friend was working the evidence room and stole a lot of the evidence, including my phone, which was how Brock kept calling Bucky. The Chief is a friend of Rollins, Brock’s buddy? And the security on Becca isn’t very good right now.” Steve took a breath after those bombs.

Natasha didn’t say anything for a long moment; Steve could hear the sound of a chair scraping against the floor, before she answered, “He stole evidence?”
“Yeah, he did,” Steve sighed. “And Sam Wilson, our detective? He keeps getting the run around, including being blocked from contacting the FBI. In fact, Brock and Jack Rollins have convinced the Chief to press charges against Bucky for assault.”

“What?!” Natasha snapped harshly.

“The man who owns the building my apartment is in? He thinks he can control my security videos so didn’t release anything before Bucky pushed Brock. Even though the ten minutes right before would have shown Brock verbally and physically roughing me over.”

“Is he going to be arrested?” Natasha sounded extremely worried.

“No.” Steve took a deep breath and began the campaign he’d discussed with Sam. “I’ve got contacts. And . . . Roger Grant is going to intervene. Get the whole week of footage pulled to show Brock’s attacks on me. Get the FBI involved for phone crimes. And try to get Becca better security, if Bucky approves when he wakes up.” Steve trailed off as if he expected Nat to reach through the phone and attack him for what he’d said.

“Roger Grant? The artist? No one’s ever even seen the guy,” Natasha’s voice trailed off, as if she was thinking over something.

“Yes?” Steve sounded uncertain. “That’s the one.”

“You’re him, aren’t you? Makes sense. Rumlow would’ve never wanted you in the limelight.”

Flushing even though Steve stood alone in the kitchen since the delivery girl had left, the blond groaned very softly. “Yes?” He whispered, sounding miserable. “I figured before my influence wears out completely I can use it to help Detective Wilson with the case and protect Becca?” Steve hoped she’d at least consider the audacious idea, dreading her disapproval and laughter.

“I hope Becca hasn’t even crossed Rumlow’s mind . . . but if Rollins is in on it - - he’d have access to the police file. Most like Rumlow knows everything about the fire.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve sighed and began emptying the bags into neat rows on the floor, cold things close to the fridge. He worked one handed so he could hold the phone. “Bucky was asleep when Sam and I talked about the case, so I have to ask him what he wants to do about Becca when he wakes up. Think he’d consider letting me move her somewhere else? Or do you think he’d want a bodyguard for her? Or . . . or would he just want me to leave her alone completely?”

“Approach that subject with extreme caution, Steve. I agree that Becca should be moved . . . but Bucky picked that institution himself.”

“Is it a good place? Detective Wilson said their security is lax, but are they good to their patients at least?” Steve suddenly worried for Becca’s health on top of her safety.

“Extremely. They don’t push their patients and they let them come to terms with things on their own. Becca chooses to isolate herself . . . but they have group activities all the time. It took Bucky over three months to chose which place he thought was right for her.”

“Um, Nat? Do you know why Becca’s there?” Steve asked, but his tone suggested that he knew why.

“Of course,” Natasha answered.

“So, without saying it near Ava, is that place a minimal security prison place for people who need help?”
“Well . . . it’s uh - -”

“I mean, could Rollins get a legitimate transfer there as a cop or am I being paranoid?” Steve whispered.

“Shit,” Natasha muttered, “I mean, yeah, technically he could.”

“Okay, so that’s something I need to bring up to Bucky, too. Basically, we need to get him locked up quick for stealing my phone out of evidence.” Steve started worrying at his sleeve with his free hand. “So, uh, Roger Grant should make calls tonight? About Rollins?” He sounded uncertain again.

“We need to take care of Rollins first. As a cop he has a lot of power . . . we can’t let Bucky get arrested, either. Children’s Services would intervene.”

“Okay. I’ll call the Chief and talk to him about the case,” he sighed. Then he whimpered very softly, “God, this time Brock’ll kill me, not just break me.”

“We aren’t going to let that happen, Steve,” Natasha said firmly, “We’ll get this taken care of. Did Bucky show you his gun and where the ammo is?”

“Yeah. I was going to ask him if he wanted me to get a taser or something. I don’t much like guns.”

“If Rumlow gets in the house you may not have a choice, Steve. You know how to shoot one?”

“Never touched one. My . . . my dad took a bullet to the head when I was small,” Steve whispered, eyes round, hand frozen on the orange juice. “I . . . I don’t like guns much, but I know Bucky has one. I saw it today.”

“You might want to learn how to use it, Steve. Rumlow isn’t going to give you a choice.”

“I’m a dead shot with wasp spray?” he seemed to question, as if he weren’t sure if he made a joke or a legitimate claim.

“A good place to start, I suppose.” Natasha laughed, although it sounded a little forced. “Just have Bucky at least show you how to load it and pull the trigger . . . just in case?”

“Okay,” Steve whispered, images of his father’s body flashing through his mind. He pushed away the memory and put the orange juice on the door of the fridge. “Okay, when he’s up to it.”

“It’ll be okay, Steve,” Natasha said, “Just watch out for each other, okay?”

“Yes,” Steve’s voice firmed. “I will.” He took a breath, sounding more confident. “Look, Natasha? The ice cream cake I bought for Ava’s birthday is starting the melt. I should finish with these groceries.”

“Alright. Stay safe. I’ll hear from you in a few hours,” Nat said and ended the call.

Steve hung up and checked to see if Bucky had messages during that long phone call. Finally he finished putting away the groceries and then began cleaning up the kitchen once more, ignoring his hands and leg in favor of doing something, anything to help Bucky . . . he was intent on relieving stress so Bucky didn’t have to go to a hospital even for a day.

Finally, he had the dishes cleaned and dripping dry, the floor and table and counters clean, and everything in the room organized the way it seemed Bucky had originally intended. Taking a deep
breath, Steve trudged upstairs and pulled off his shirt and trousers, wincing at the congealed blood causing his trousers to stick to his open wound on the back of his thigh and buttock. He hissed as the wound reopened. Reaching for a wash cloth, Steve twisted awkwardly to try to clean the knife wound again, frowning as he tried to use the bathroom mirror to see what he was doing.

Just as he got the bandages in place and sticking with a load of now blood-stained tape, Bucky’s phone rang. Steve looked over, frowning. He limped to the phone and picked it up in a bloody hand, flicking it on. Seeing his own name, Steve hesitated, but several years of living under Rumlow’s complete authority caused the blond to turn on the link.

“Hello?” He seemed to ask his greeting.

“Steve!” Brock sounded genuinely worried, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you . . . you scared me. You know I don’t like not knowing where you are, Baby.”

Flushing, feeling guilt well at Brock’s worried tones, Steve hesitated and said “I’m at Bucky’s place?”

“Bucky’s place? Baby, why are you there? You should come home, Baby,” Brock cooed; one could never guess this was the same man who’d tried to kill both Steve and Bucky a little over twenty-four hours ago.

“I . . .” Steve took a steadying breath, not knowing what might set his boyfriend off, “I couldn’t go back. The police blocked the apartment?” He walked to the window and glanced out, pulling the curtain shut after a moment, seemingly unaware of his own nudity.

“Well, it’s okay now. I’m sorry, Steve. You know I have a nasty temper . . . I promise I’ll try to get better. I love you, Baby. You need to come home.”

“I . . . I’m taking care of Buck. He’s asleep,” Steve hedged. He hadn’t seen any sign of someone watching the townhouse.

“He’s a big boy, Steve. He can take care of himself. I need you, Baby. I promise I’ll get better . . . I just need you to come home,” Brock’s tone shook as if the man on the other line was trying to hold back tears.

“Please don’t cry, Brock?” Steve said softly, heart aching. They weren’t often, but the times Brock had let his vulnerable side show had been some of their tenderest moments of the past few years.

“Brock?” Bucky’s voice called out sleepily from the doorway. “Steve? Are you talking to Brock?”

Steve turned, unaware of the blood running down the back of his right leg. He nodded at Bucky, eyes miserable. “He called again,” Steve said, voice shaking. “He’s . . . he’s . . .” Steve fell silent, unable to explain, and equally unaware of his bloody hand getting the phone messed up.

“Stevie . . . hang up,” Bucky said, his voice quivering and eyes shining with unshed tears. “Please . . . please hang up?”

Watching Bucky, feeling as if something adrift was grounding in those blue-grey depths, Steve hung up the connection without another word. He let out a sob and offered Bucky the phone. “He . . . he said he would get help?” But Steve seemed to be aware once more of the many times Brock had used that same promise and failed to do so.

Bucky seemed to be rooted to his spot at the door, staring at the blond with misery and horror in
his eyes. His mouth dropped open a few times only to snap shut. The brunet wavered and leaned against the doorway; his eyes looked over at Steve’s nude body, seeing years of abuse, and they focused on the red gleam of blood running down the blond’s right leg. Bucky’s eyes met with Steve’s again and the brunet shook his head, “You told him you were here, Stevie.”

Flushing, suddenly thinking he may’ve done something terribly wrong, Steve nodded and whispered, “I didn’t give the address, but I told him I was with you . . . and that you were asleep. I’m sorry, Bucky.”

Leaning heavier against the door, the effects of the drug still making him drowsy, Bucky simply nodded. “It’s - - It’ okay. You - - you didn’t do anything wrong.” The brunet took a long, shaky breath and said softly, “Let’s get you cleaned up?”

Nodding, Steve limped over towards Bucky and offered the phone again. “I shouldn’t have answered your phone . . . I’m sorry, I thought it could be Natasha but then I saw my own name . . . .”

Eyeing the phone with contempt, Bucky didn’t make any move to take it from Steve, honestly wishing the thing would just go away. The brunet walked past the blond without a word and strode into the bathroom, pulling out the first aid kit. Half-heartedly, he joked, “I swear these kits have gotten more use in one day than they have in the three years since I bought them.”

Knowing he’d really messed up, Steve hung his head and slipped the phone onto the nightstand, guilt rising. He’d broken Bucky’s trust by talking to his ex-boyfriend. “I’m sorry. I haven’t brought the replacement stuff up yet.” Steve limped towards Bucky. “I left them in a bag downstairs.”

“Yet?” Bucky questioned, “You went to the store while I was asleep?”

“No! I promise I didn’t leave, Bucky. I wouldn’t do that. You might have needed me,” Steve rushed to explain. “After Detective Wilson left, I called his store for delivery. He gave me the number?” Steve stopped talking, standing still.

Bucky grabbed the supplies he needed from the kit, nodding slowly, he said, “That was nice of you . . . I - - I would’ve bought what we needed. I - - I can pay you back?”

Steve reached out hesitantly, trying to judge Bucky’s reaction. “I know you would have, Buck, but I wanted to replace the stuff I’d used . . . and I just thought I’d stock up since I’m . . . living here?” the end showed his uncertainty, unsure if Bucky would keep him around now he’d talked to Brock again.

“After work tomorrow we need to stop at the market . . . we’re getting low on food.” Bucky mumbled and headed back into the bedroom, the supplies in his arms.

Taking a deep, slow breath, Steve nodded. “That’s what I was talking about, Bucky. I had it delivered.” He turned and followed his oldest friend.

“Everything?” Bucky swallowed, feeling guilty and useless.

Sounding hopeful, Steve said, “unless you’d rather I . . . didn’t buy things? But I . . . I thought I’d be staying, so we could use it anyway?” He stood in the bedroom and tangled his fingers together. “I’m sorry, Buck. I should’ve asked.”

“It’s - - I . . . I’m not used to this. I pay my own way - - Ava doesn’t want for anything.”

Flushing hard, the red creeping down his chest as well as over his face, Steve said, “I pay my
way, too, Buck . . .” his voice dropped. “I told you, I’m not kept by Brock.”

Whirling around to look at Steve, Bucky stammered, “I - - I didn’t mean . . . It wasn’t an attack on you, Steve, I promise! I know you pay your own way - - I just don’t like people thinking Ava and I are some charity project.”

Steve nodded and sighed, his frown soft and eyes confused. “I . . . I’m not sure what I’m allowed to do or not do yet, Bucky. I . . . I took care of the leftover food.” He hesitated then winced as he admitted, “I put it in the trash.” He held his breath at the waste, knowing how Brock would’ve reacted to trashing their breakfasts. Hell, if it wasn’t moldy, Brock would’ve had Steve put it away to eat later . . . for Steve to eat later, that is, telling him that it was a lesson in wasting food.

“I’m sorry.” Bucky sighed, he set the supplies on the bed and motioned for Steve to lay down, “You are just trying to help. I’m being an ass again.”

Obediently, Steve eased onto the bed. He shook his head, burying his face in his folded arms and saying quietly, “No, you have house rules and I’ll learn them. I promise.” He eased his injured leg and breathed out a bit in relief that the pressure was off the sliced area. Spreading his legs a bit so Bucky could reach, he asked softly, “I don’t know where the lube is . . . or did you want dry? I won’t scream.” He seemed to be unaware that that one statement alone spoke of Brock’s entire attitude towards Steve.

“Jesus, Steve,” Bucky seethed, “We - - we’re not - - I’m just cleaning your wound. You’re bleeding.”

“Oh,” the blond flush deepened, his fair skin always giving away his embarrassment. “Sorry . . . I . . . sorry.” He fell silent, a mix of relief at not having to deal with sex and worry he’d upset Bucky yet again. He was supposed to be taking charge, being Bucky’s knight, but Steve had a feeling he was failing miserably.

“I’m going to fucking kill that bastard,” Bucky growled softly as he pulled away the bloodied bandage. The brunet gasped at the sight of a slice following the curve of Steve’s ass, in the crease between buttock and back of the thigh . . . an obvious knife wound with bruising and swelling marking it as having been done on Monday or Tuesday at the latest . . . after Brock had met Bucky at the coffee shop. “He stabbed you?” Bucky asked incredulously. “You should’ve told me . . . I - - you should have stayed in bed today . . . fuck!”

“He lost his temper,” Steve reported in as neutral a voice as he could manage while fighting worry and pain. “I’m not actually sure why he had the knife to begin with. I . . . I blacked out, so it’s fuzzy, but I think he was upset about dinner having been held up. He said there was no time to make roast since I’d . . .” Steve sighed, “been out partying for lunch.”

Bucky’s stomach lurched and he felt like he might throw up again. “He did this because of - -” The brunet cut himself off, his throat tightening with emotion.

“Because of dinner. Yeah, I know. He hasn’t found an anger counselor that will take his case. They’re all booked up,” Steve murmured.

Taking a deep breath, the smaller man began to clean the wound again. “I think you should take tomorrow off, Steve. You need to give this time to heal.”

Steve sighed as he felt the remnants of the blood and dirt he hadn’t been able to reach being pulled away. At Bucky’s mention of work, Steve buried his face in his arms. “Yeah,” he agreed with an inadvertent sound of disappointment. His one true joy was being allowed to go work at the museum . . . get away from house rules and stuff for several hours and handle art once more.
As Bucky finished wrapping the wound as best he could, the brunet said softly, “I’m sorry about today - - I haven’t lost it like that in a while. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Turing his face a bit, Steve studied Bucky for a moment. He offered a gentle smile, feeling a bit more secure somehow in face of Bucky’s admitted weakness. “No, it’s okay. You were stressed and hurt and . . . you needed to let it out? You didn’t hurt anyone.” Steve added the last as a reassurance.

Bucky looked down at his left arm, which was wrapped tightly in more bandages, “I don’t remember a whole lot . . . we were at the store and my skin was itching.”

With a gentle smile of reassurance, Steve pushed himself carefully onto his arms. “You were pretty quiet the whole time, actually. I think the clerk thought you were sick. Really. It was hard to tell. You wanted to go home so we left and called the detective to come here instead.” Suddenly remembering his conversation with Sam, Steve groaned and buried his face into his forearms. “We have to talk, Bucky . . . about what Sam said abo . . .” eyes widening, Steve rushed to cover his mistake, “I mean Detective Wilson!”

“You can call him, Sam. It’s okay, I don’t care.” Bucky said, picking up the dirty bandages and pushing off the bed. The brunet walked back into the bathroom and threw them away.

Feeling nervous and a sense of fear well up at Bucky’s words, Steve called out, “I’m not . . .. doing anything with him. We just talked about the case and he . . . he gave me the number for the market.” He fell silent. His heart ached with his love for Bucky, something he’d been burying painfully hard all this time, and he really didn’t want to give his friend a reason to kick him out . . . send him back to Brock after all.

Furrowing his brows, Bucky shook his head and turned back to walk into the bedroom. “I wasn’t thinking you were, Steve. Sam is nice.” The brunet walked over to the closet and pulled out an old robe, one that had belonged to his father, and handed it over to Steve. “This way you don’t have to worry about underwear or pants pulling at the cut or anything.”

Relief rang through Steve’s voice at Bucky’s words, taking them for the truth Bucky meant. “Good. I just . . . I slipped up on his name because he was so nice. But, if you don’t mind, that’s good.” Snapping his mouth shut to cut off his own relieved babble, Steve drew a deep breath, still lying on the bed on his arms, still watching Bucky. “But, we really need to talk about what he told me?” He shifted his weight onto one arm so he could reach out for the robe. “Thanks, Buck,” he smiled at the care. “I appreciate it. My leg . . . does hurt . . . a lot,” he admitted.

Bucky nodded, “it was dad’s . . . use to wear it every Saturday. Ma always wanted to get him a new one but he loved that thing.”

“Yeah,” Steve smiled and caressed the material between his rough, raw fingers. “I remember. He used to stand there in his boxers and this robe at the top of the steps on a Saturday and call out ‘now who wants pancakes or are you sleeping your day off away?’ I always waited especially to hear that when I spent nights over. Made me feel like part of the family.” Steve turned his sunny smile up to Bucky, blue eyes shining.

“You were part of the family, Steve.” Bucky smiled sadly, “I never told them what happened between us. I - - I lied and said that we still kept in touch.”

Sadly, Steve looked down again. “I . . . I was so wrapped up in my own head, I never thought about what to tell them or even talking to them.” He stroked again. “Then it was too late, and I read about the accident. I told Brock I had an interview so I could sneak to their funeral . . . but . . . I’m sorry, Bucky,” He lifted his eyes. “I’m truly sorry about . . . everything I put us both through
for the last six years.”

Bucky nodded and tugged on his sleeve again, making a small hum of agreement. “It’s okay . . .”

“No, it’s not okay if it makes you nervous or scared or upset,” Steve corrected firmly, watching Bucky’s movements, hand still on the robe, almost as if he gathered George Barnes’ former strength with the touch.

“They were so mad at me when I didn’t - -” Bucky’s mouth snapped shut, realizing he said too much.

“When you didn’t?” Steve prompted, carefully rolling up to sit awkwardly on his left buttock, letting his right take as little pressure as he could. As always, Steve seemed unaware of just how lovely his nude form was . . . still used to his skinny, asthmatic self from school.

Bucky flushed and looked down at his hands, “When I didn’t go to school,” the brunet murmured, almost illegibly.

“You had to work through your own things?” Steve offered. “And then Ava came along. Really, they understood . . . I’m sure. Your parents always understood.” He watched Bucky carefully, wondering how to share with him all the bad news . . . especially when they seemed to have made a break through Bucky’s constant anger.

Bucky shrugged, eyes still downcast, he pulled at his sleeve again and released a deep breath. “I’m sorry . . . I - - I, uh . . . got off topic, didn’t I?”

“It’s okay, Buck. I don’t mind talking about your parents. They were one of my happiest memories?” He offered a soft smile. “I don’t know how to talk about what . . . Sam said,” he tried out the name.

“They almost didn’t let me take Ava,” Bucky said, his hand wrapped around his left wrist. Shutting up, realizing Bucky needed more, Steve studied the other man, the once familiar brunet. “I’m glad they did, though. They must’ve thought you were too young?” He bit his bottom lip.

Bucky shook his head, “No.”

“No?” Steve echoed, not understanding. Then again, he’d not lived in Bucky’s circumstances, with two loving parents, instead of one, and a sister who’d had a break down, and a need to take a custody case on at such an early age.

Finally lifting his eyes to meet Steve’s, Bucky said softly, “They thought I was too unstable.”

“Oh,” was the only thing Steve could think to say. Bucky, unstable? That was a near laughable idea for the blond; Bucky had always been the sensible, level-headed part of their duo. He was the brains behind Steve’s imaginary brawn, the wiser head that prevailed when Steve went off on one of his many indignant crusades.

Eyes falling again, Bucky shook his head, “About a year and a half after you . . . uh, left? I barely left my room . . . I lost touch with everyone. One day - -”

“You tried to kill yourself,” Steve supplied dully, eyes filled with worry for the youth Bucky had been not too long ago.

“You knew?” Bucky gasped, head snapping up to look at Steve.
“No,” Steve corrected. “I guessed just now,” he admitted. He hung his head and shifted a hand to trace at a long, jagged set of lines down his left forearm. “I . . . I remember how it felt to push you out of my own life . . . how lost and scared I felt.” He shook his head and pulled his hand away from his arm. “I guess by the way you talked that you felt it that bad, too.”

“I didn’t know what to do without you,” Bucky admitted, “It happened so fast . . .”

Steve nodded. “I was so scared and . . . well terrified, really, and confused when you told me. And I let that overwhelm me.” He shook his head, lifting miserable eyes to Bucky’s face. “I never was very good at thinking things through, and I reacted on stupid instinct . . . sort of. I wanted to run to you and scream and cry and hide, but it was you who had made me feel that scared . . . that torn up. So, I ran in the totally opposite direction.” Drawing a deep breath, Steve sighed again. “I guess that makes no sense.”

He softly added, “I was afraid of what it meant to be . . . gay and, well, to be gay with you, even if I never said anything. I had to be strong and . . . and be a man. Nothing ever said I was allowed to love . . . a man.” Steve’s face was so red by then, he’d moved beyond individual blushes. “I was afraid of how it would work out, too. I mean, do I take it or . . . well, the mechanics terrified me as much as anything.” He finally dropped his eyes.

“That was the only time I’d ever been on the receiving end of little Stevie Rogers’ anger. I never really thought such a little guy could shove so hard.” Bucky smiled slightly.

Steve winced and let out a nervous chuckle. “I kept telling you I could handle myself,” he offered weakly.

“I had a bruise for a week.” Bucky added, smile not fading.

Lifting his eyes, Steve studied Bucky as if he might see where the old injury had been. “I never meant to . . . I was selfish and self-centered. It was all about me back then. I was too wrapped up in my own feelings to worry about how you felt . . . or anyone else.”

“You always were a punk.” Bucky shook his head.

“Yeah,” Steve echoed, eyes sad. “I was a punk and a jerk and an ass rolled into one.”

“You said it, not me,” Bucky joked lightly, shrugging.

Nodding, Steve said, “you don’t need to say it. I’ve been told enough since then to figure out how much of a major bastard I’d been.”

Wincing, Bucky let his smile fade and he cleared his throat. “I - - I . . . you were going to tell me what Sam said?”

“Yeah, and it’s not good news,” Steve sighed, shifting uncomfortably in his awkward lean. “It’s pretty serious.”

Bucky nodded and leaned up against the dresser, arms crossing in front of his chest, “Figured. Nothing about Rumlow ever seems like good news.”

Steve winced at that, but merely nodded. “Jack Rollins, Brock’s best friend, was assigned the evidence locker. It’s how he got my phone and the security footage from my apartment,” he started.

“Of course Rumlow’s best friend would be a fucking cop,” Bucky groaned, hugging himself tighter.
Nodding, Steve pointed out, “they met at some kind of convention they both went to for work. Brock for the Army and Rollins for the force.” He slowly eased over until he sat up, ignoring the deep ache and slicing pain in his butt wound. “And Jack’s convinced the Chief to press charges on you for assault on Brock.” He waited, knowing that news would be almost the worst Bucky’d hear that night.

Bucky froze, “No . . . No! It was self-defense! Oh my God! If I get arrested they’ll take Ava! Steve, I can’t go to jail!?” The brunet exclaimed, his arm flared again and he wrapped his fingers tightly around his left elbow.

“I’ve thought of a way to stop them, though.” Steve swallowed, fighting his fear over the consequences he could suffer for what he planned. He had to do this for Bucky and Ava, even though the last time practically made his life worthless. “I can stop them.”

“How?” Bucky whined, his eyes wide and desperate.

Drawing a slow breath, breaking practically the biggest taboo Brock had even put on him, other than the forbidden leaving Brock or having sex with someone else without Brock’s say so, Steve twisted his hands together. “I’ll have Roger Grant tell the chief he’s taken an interest in the case and he wants to pull all the footage and,” Steve shrugged, “and charge Rollins with evidence tampering and theft and . . .” he fell silent, hanging his head, feeling useless and stupid and knowing he’d just broken the rules Brock had firmly set down.

“Roger Grant? Isn’t he some artist or something? A recluse?” Bucky looked thoroughly confused.

“Yeah, and the chief respects him . . . Sam said he thinks it’ll really work, since he’s got influence right now with some of the . . . richest people in the city?” Steve flushed deep red. He’d never gotten comfortable, never been allowed to get comfortable, with his alter ego . . . never been allowed to think of his other half as, well, himself, so talking about his artist side in the third person actually came quite easy. But it didn’t stop the misery from welling.

“You know him from the museum or something?” Bucky ventured, he looked over at Steve.

“Something . . . no.” He shook his head. “A lot longer than that. It’s why Brock started dating me.” He ran a hand painfully over his neck. “But Brock hates when I use the connection, the influence. Last time . . .” Steve shook his head, back stiffening. “Well, I don’t care what he’ll do,” Steve lied to himself, but it was an obvious fearful defiance. “I want to help, and this can. I can get Becca a guard, too, if you want?” He offered.

“Becca?” Bucky breathed, “He’ll go after Becca? She hasn’t done anything!”

“I don’t know if he will, but Sam thought it was possible. He checked the security and warned them, but they . . . but they don’t seem able to handle what Brock can dish out.”

“She can’t leave! It’s not like I can check her out, Steve.” Bucky’s voice rose, and he’d begun to pace; still clutching his arm.

“I know she can’t,” Steve tried to soothe. “That’s why I thought maybe getting her a guard or something. I don’t know,” Steve trailed off. “I don’t know what to do to help any more. Aside from going back to Brock, I can’t think how to protect your or her . . . I can get the chief to look at the case and Jack Rollins . . . but I can’t solve the rest of this.” He dropped his face into his hands. “I’m so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing for Rumlow!” Bucky snapped, his tone harsh.
Steve winced, his body jerking away from Bucky’s direction on instinct, but he shut up.

Realizing what he’d done, Bucky stopped and looked over at Steve. “Oh . . . Steve, I’m sorry! I - - I didn’t mean to - -” The brunet fell heavily against the wall behind him and sank to the floor, it took everything in him not to start clawing at his arm again.

“No, you’re right?” Steve lifted his face, eyes troubled. “I can’t control him . . . I didn’t ask him to do these things to you or your family. I only wanted to see if we could be friends again.” He drew a breath slowly. “Bucky, I never wanted to bring trouble, but I’m willing to do what I can to help stop it, if you say it’s okay? Sam said I should ask you first before I made the calls.”

Bucky looked over at Steve; he tapped his fingers against his skin in an effort to calm the crawling sensation. “If Sam thinks it’ll help . . . I - - I can’t go to jail, Stevie.”

“You won’t,” Steve’s voice firmed and his eyes flashed, determined over this fact. “Sam said I could fix that with the Chief by getting him to look at the evidence that you were defending me. See, Jack only gave him from your shove onwards. He never let the chief see what was right before that. I’m gonna have them pull my footage from the entire week as supporting evidence.” He flushed, knowing it would show him letting Brock hurt him, how weak Steve had become, but the blond was determined to do this for Bucky and Ava. “Sam said the Chief respects Roger Grant, so he’ll listen.”

Bucky whined again, a low, pitiful sound.

Looking down, Steve slipped from the bed to settle painfully on the floor beside Bucky, slid his arm around the other man and pulled him in tight. “Are you listening to me or losing yourself in your head, Buck?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky muttered; the brunet leaned into Steve.

“I can promise it worked last time . . . last year . . . and Sam says it will work again.” He carefully tilted Bucky’s head with one finger, looking worriedly into those pale eyes. “I’ll do whatever I have to in order to protect you and Ava. I promise.”

“What happens after that?” Bucky whispered, voice filled with fear, “Rumlow will just find another way to hurt us.”

“Rollins will lose his job and do jail time, so Brock won’t have an in on the force any more,” Steve offered softly, giving Bucky a small hug. “And I’ll have charges of . . . of assault and defamation and false reporting and stalking and stuff brought up on Brock.” Steve swallowed hard, pushing his rising fear down, away. “I’ll get him sent back to federal prison. Sam says Roger Grant can break through the block the Chief put on Sam from contacting the FBI about this. Brock’s using the phone to threaten you. The moment he sends a letter, he’s locked away for a long time. And Brock does like to write his threats down sometimes.” Steve drew a breath and offered Bucky a hug. “By the time he gets out, Ava should be in high school or even college.”

Bucky nodded, he tried to push away his anxiety and fear, but the dread in his gut seemed only to get heavier. Finally after a few silent moments, the brunet looked over at Steve, “You’re supposed to be on the bed . . .”

“But you were on the floor and needed a hug,” he protested meekly, easing off the hard wood with a whimper. He crawled back onto the bed, lying on his front, shivering briefly in his nudity.

Getting off the floor, Bucky walked back over to the closet and pulled out a quilt his mother had made. The brunet walked back over and draped it over Steve’s body gently, trying to avoid
hurting the large blond. “You should try and get some sleep,” Bucky said.

“I need to make the calls in the morning, though,” Steve offered as if he were finishing some conversation.

“Yeah, I don’t think the Chief or your friend will appreciate being called at three in the morning.” Bucky said with a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

Suddenly, eyes wide, Steve groaned and touched Bucky’s arm, practically desperate seeming. “I promised Ava I’d have you call when you woke up so you could talk to her. Nat’s supposed to wake her for your call! I forgot!” He moaned softly, letting his eyes shut. “I broke my promise . . .” he felt like a miserable, horrible person for that.

Nodding, although he didn’t feel like he was in the best mindset to speak to his niece, Bucky cooed, “Don’t look like that - - you remembered. I’ll give her a call, okay?”

Steve nodded, relief crossing his features. “Okay. Thanks, Bucky? She was disappointed about dinner, but understood I think, at least a little.”

“She understood that her uncle is a fucking nutcase that can’t handle a visit to a security store?” Bucky asked bitterly, a deep blush running down his bruised neck.

Frowning, Steve began to push up off the bed. “No! I told her you got scared when I told the clerk what I wanted the security for, so I took you home and gave you medicine to keep the nightmares away. But that it meant you’d sleep through dinner.” Steve reached for Bucky, awkwardly balanced, “you’re not a nutcase, Bucky. And she doesn’t think you are! I’d never tell her that!”

Bucky closed his eyes and nodded once, fingers twitching madly, “I know you’d never say anything like that . . . get some sleep, Steve.”

“Yes, Bucky,” Steve responded and lay down, eyes still worriedly watching the brunet. It was at least a far softer response than the ‘yes, sir’ Bucky had spooked out of him earlier.

Leaning down to press his lips to Steve’s temple, Bucky ran his shaking fingers through Steve’s short blond hair.

Softly, almost whispering, as if worried he was saying something wrong, Steve said, “I love you, Bucky.”

“I love you, too, Stevie.” Bucky murmured back.

A bright smile crossed Steve’s face then he yawned, wrecking the near-angelic look. Closing his blue eyes at last, having been up since early the day before, Steve allowed himself to sleep.

Smiling softly, Bucky straightened, grabbed his bloodied phone off the nightstand, and turned away; on his way out of the bedroom he flicked off the light switch.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the love guys! Keep reviewing and leaving kudos, they are our lifeline :)
Bucky quietly made his way down the stairs, and even in the dim lighting the brunet could see the spotless conditions of his living room and kitchen, aside from the few bags that were still on the dining table. He went into the kitchen and turned on the light; Bucky went to start a pot of coffee but stopped as he reached the counter. Steve had said that the smell of the warm drink brewing always woke him up, so the brunet knew he’d have to do without his normal pick-me-up.

Setting the phone down on the counter, Bucky moved over to the fridge to get a glass of orange juice and frowned at the sight of the fully-stocked appliance. Steve had literally gotten *everything*, from eggs to soy milk.

Shutting the door, Bucky opened the freezer and his eyes landed on the beautiful ice cream cake on one of the shelves. The brunet thought back to all of Steve’s birthdays; Sarah always insisted on an ice cream cake. Slamming the door shut, Bucky leaned his forehead against the cool, metal surface. A picture of him and Ava at the shop hung from a magnet next to him. Pushing off the surface, Bucky leaned the picture free and looked at it for a long moment.

They both looked so happy: Ava sat on the counter at *A New Chapter* and Bucky hugged her from behind. Natasha had taken it shortly after Bucky had been made manager.

A burning itch crawled under the skin of his left arm; Bucky growled quietly and put the picture back before turning back towards the counter where he’d left the phone. He should call Ava, should make sure that Steve’s promise was kept, but the brunet simply stared at the phone with wide eyes. He couldn’t call Ava . . . she’d hear how upset he was . . . he couldn’t worry her more than he already did.

Bucky picked up the still bloody phone and unlocked it. The brunet frowned when he saw that he had a new recording. Quickly he tapped the screen to open the new recording and gasped when he heard Steve’s voice answering a call. Brock’s worried voice rang out a few seconds later. Steve had recorded the call with Brock!

He listened to the call three times. At first Bucky had been mad to hear Steve’s own concerned tone when regarding the man that abused him, but after the third time, the brunet realized that no matter what Brock said, Steve denied his ex in favor of Bucky, and the fact that once Bucky had asked Steve to hang up, the blond had done so without question, not even bothering to say goodbye to Brock.

Setting the phone back on the counter, it dawned on Bucky just how much Steve cared for him, how much the blond loved him. He wasn’t some charity case or a pet project taken on by guilt. Stumbling back, slightly blind due to the tears that had welled in his eyes, Bucky shuffled into the living room. Collapsing onto the couch, the brunet noticed immediately how clean the cushions were, there was no sign blood or any other of the stains, really. The couch was spotless.

Standing up, Bucky walked over to where he knew there was a vomit stain by the TV from when Ava had gotten sick due to the flu. The carpet below him showed no stains. He fell to his knees and began to run his fingers over the plush surface. A sob broke past his lips but he quickly muffled the sounds with his hand, fingers twitching wildly.

Even with his painful injuries, Steve had spent hours scrubbing the home, making it as
comfortable as he could. The blond had sacrificed his own health and comfort for Bucky and Ava’s.

A soft knock sounded at the front door.

Bucky whipped his head towards the sounds and he bolted upright. The brunet grabbed the baseball bat he kept by the front door and looked out the front window.

His next door neighbor, elderly and somewhat spry, Mrs. Garfunkel stood on the porch with a covered something in her gnarled old hands. She wore a bemused smile and kept glancing up towards Steve’s window.

“What the hell?” Bucky muttered; he looked at the clock hanging above the TV and saw that it was only three-thirty. Dropping the bat, Bucky opened the door, “Mrs. Garfunkel? Is everything okay?”

“Hello, James,” She smiled and offered a plate that smelled very much like fresh cinnamon rolls. She had a thermos tucked under one skinny arm. “Saw your new boyfriend. My is he . . . delicious?”

“I . . . uh - - thank you?” Bucky stammered, blushing heavily.

She nodded and walked in past the tall brunet, looking mildly interested arround the house she’d only ever entered when Ava had been small and Bucky in need of quick advice. “So, might want him to keep his curtains closed if he plans to strut his stuff after a shower.” She laughed and put the plate on the coffee table. “I brought hazelnut and vanilla if that’s okay with you, James?” She set down the thermos.

Shutting the door, still confused as to why the elderly woman was bringing him pastries and coffee, Bucky nodded his head. “Yeah . . . thank you?” The brunet stepped away from the door and towards the woman.

The woman turned her wicked grin on Bucky. “Oh is he back in the shower? Or did you wear the poor stud out and send him to bed?” She waggled her eyebrows.

Bucky choked on his own saliva, his face burning with embarrassment for both himself and Steve. “He’s sleeping . . . but I - - we didn’t - - we don’t . . .”

She waved her hand dismissively in the air. “I’m only teasing, James. You young people. You claim to be so free about your sex life then you get all prunes and prisms when someone suggests a little adventure from normal missionary style.” She chuckled. “I don’t think he’d make a bad looking gay man, though, but if you say you’re not . . .” she looked around again. “How’s Ava?”

Stunned momentarily by the change of topic, Bucky cleared his throat, “She’s fine . . . spending a few nights at a friend’s house.”

“Oh,” the woman apparently took that as another cue to tease her neighbor. “So you could have a little . . . date night with your boyfriend?” She grinned widely.

“Uh - - yeah?” Bucky shrugged, rubbing his neck awkwardly.

“More like a cry night.

“I knew it!” she crowed in delight. “I told my girls that you were into men, but they said that was an impossibility with gorgeous eyes like yours.” She began to open the thermos of coffee. “Ah, if I were a man, I’d be in bed with him still . . . or does he like the fairer sex, too?” She teased,
pulling the cloth off the frosted cinnamon rolls. “I’m happy to share.”

Bucky opened and shut his mouth a few times, still taken completely by surprise by the elderly woman’s visit. “I . . . we only started dating not too long ago?”

“And you have him spending the weekend? Naughty Jimmy!” She teased then sank uninvited onto the couch, watching Bucky in amusement. She patted the cushion near her. “Sit, let’s gossip.”

Stumbling forward, Bucky collapsed on the couch next to the woman.

“We don’t see much of each other any more now that Ava’s out of diapers and teething rings, do we?” she said.

“No, ma’am,” Bucky answered honestly.

“Young people. Always on the go.” She laughed and poured some coffee into the lid of the thermos and handed it over.

Taking the steaming liquid gratefully, Bucky looked over at Mrs. Garfunkel. “Is there any particular reason you’re up so early, ma’am?”

She nodded and pushed the rolls towards her neighbor. “I don’t sleep more’n six hours a day and six hours a night now,” she joked. “So, I get up around two to let my body have time to realize it’s awake by six.” She patted Bucky’s leg. “And this time I saw that beautiful man stand by the window in all God’s glory.” Her smile slipped suddenly and her eyes narrowed dangerously, “and I saw blood on his leg when he turned?”

Bucky nearly dropped the thermos lid, but quickly recovered, only spilling a splash on his leg. The brunet seethed at the small burning sensation.

The woman immediately got up and fussed around for some paper towels to clean the spill. ”Here you are, James,” she offered solicitously when she came back from the kitchen.

Sheepish, Bucky took the towels and began patting his leg dry. “I - - I didn’t do that, I swear! Steve’s come from a . . . unique situation.”

“Well, that’s alright then, isn’t it?” She asked almost absently as she sank back onto the couch and patted Bucky’s other leg. “As long as you didn’t hurt that good looking adonis, everything’s just fine.” She pushed the cinnamon rolls towards him again.

Bucky’s stomach growled, he hadn’t eaten at all the previous day, and he reached a still slightly trembling hand over to grab one of the pastries. Taking a small bite, Bucky let out a small groan, “These are really good.”

The old woman laughed. “Well, that’s good. I was a baker for sixty years. I’d hoped I hadn’t lost my touch.” She beamed happily at his enthusiasm. “So, you setting up a party or something? Maybe doing a bit of mini-landscaping?” She settled her attention seemingly on positioning the plate just so on the table.

“Why do you ask that?” Bucky questioned after taking another bite.

“Well, I saw the surveyor man looking over your backyard earlier and then the man on the phone in the car out front not even a half hour ago. I thought maybe you were redecorating with so much attention out here.”
Bucky dropped the cinnamon roll and it fell onto the coffee table; the brunet felt his whole world tilt and his vision tunneled dangerously.

The woman watched him and hummed, a small frown on her face. “So I was right. Those men are maybe looking to rob you or something, aren’t they? I was right to be a nosy neighbor.”

His fingers twitched as his left arm burned again, “The - - The man earlier . . . the one in the backyard . . . what did he look like?”

“That man? Dark, not as tall as you, stockier, looked a bit like an Italian. He was dressed for work in an office, but he carried something tucked under his suit jacket. It bulged as he moved with that surveyor tool.” She watched Bucky intently, her old grey eyes snapping with intelligence.

“And the other man?” Bucky asked, voice shaking heavily.

“Him? Good looking, built to push down walls and catch fainting woman. He was a bit darker skinned. I could see him by the light in his car. He had those smoldering dark looks you read about in those novels that publishers call romance and are really just a polite way of saying steamy sex scenes between boring dialogue.”

Bucky’s stomach heaved violently and the brunet bolted into the kitchen; leaning over the sink he lost what little he had in his stomach.

“Oh, now I know something’s wrong.” She followed him. “These men have been hurting you? Blackmail? Threats? What? Are they after Ava? You tell me and I’ll get Harry from down the social center after them.” She turned on the water and soaked a cloth, pressing it carefully to the back of his neck.

Whole body trembling, Bucky groaned and spit into the sink, “They’re very dangerous. I - - I didn’t think they knew where I lived.”

“Huh, anyone with a GPS and an internet connection can find people nowadays,” she growled. “It’s child’s play anymore. No privacy in the world. Not like when I was a girl your age. People respected each other then.”

Heaving painfully again, Bucky coughed loudly as bile stung the back of his throat and nasal passage. The brunet’s skin felt clammy and his fingers clenched tightly around the edge of the sink.

Reaching up and grabbing a glass from his cabinet, the woman filled it halfway with lukewarm water. She twisted her hand in Bucky’s hair to get it out of the way and offered the glass. “Sip it, spit, sip and rinse. Don’t drink it, honey.”

Doing as he was told, Bucky spat out a mouthful of water into the sink, groaning again as he vision spotted.

“Okay, you need help, don’t you?” She nodded. “I can solve this. You sit, I’ll get you some crackers and weak tea. You need me to go wake your boyfriend? Tell him the blackmailers are out there?” Mrs. Garfunkel pushed Bucky into a chair.

“No.” Bucky muttered helplessly as he fell into the chair, “No . . . Steve needs to rest.”

“So,” she nodded again. “Those men are the ones that hurt him. Are they here because they followed him?”

“I pissed them off . . .” Bucky whimpered as his stomach tightened and heaved again.
“Ah, makes perfect sense. A book store manager pissed off a couple of gang thugs . . .” She stroked Bucky’s hand then set about making toast and tea for him to swallow down. “Not sure what book they needed that badly,” she hinted.

“One of them was Steve’s ex . . . he abused him.” Bucky muttered, eyes becoming unfocused and he began to clutch tightly at his left arm.

“The ex abused your Steve or Steve abused his ex?” she asked for clarification. Turning, the woman slapped Bucky across the face with a stinging blow. “None of that! James, you can’t faint now. You haven’t told me how to help.”

Head snapping painfully, Bucky groaned but his eyes refocused and his hand immediately released his scarred arm. “Jesus!” The brunet rubbed his reddening cheek. “You got a serious arm there.”

“Call me Hannah,” she instructed. “We’ve been friends for years.” Sighing, the woman placed the dry toast in front of Bucky. “Eat that, and let me tell you, if you think my slap is something, you don’t wanna see me with my purse. I carry a brick in there!” Hannah turned back to finish with the tea before putting it, plain and hot, in front of Bucky.

Bucky’s stomach heaved again at the sight of the food but he slowly nibbled off the end.

“The dry bread will soak up the acid, James. Trust me.” She nodded and watched him eating.

Taking a slightly bigger bite, Bucky shook his head, “Steve was abused . . . I - - I got in a fight with his ex. Got the bastard arrested . . . but he got out.”

“Ah,” Hannah sighed as if she understood everything. “And now he’s after Steve and you both. Men abuse people so they feel powerful. He lost that power when you saved Steve from him. Now he’ll do whatever he can to win that power back . . . including hurt you and Steve. Good thing you sent Ava to her friend’s house.”

Numbly, Bucky nodded and he looked down at the remaining toast with sad eyes. “She wasn’t safe here . . . she wasn’t safe with me.”

“Bullshit,” Hannah said. “Ava’s safest with you, James. I’ve seen you take care of her. Remember? I was there to show you diapers and burping and fever meds and everything. Sending her away while you get this under control is not a sign of failure. It’s smart and looking out for the kid.” She patted his hand. “No kid needs to see her daddy, or uncle if you prefer, become a bear and wreak havoc on a bastard.”

Bucky raised his eyes to meet Hannah’s, “I don’t know if I’m strong enough . . . these - - these guys are military.”

“So, they have training and aren’t afraid to use it. Definitely bullies using my tax dollars to fund their own sick needs.” She crossed her arms. “Well, Harry at the social club can help get the VFW boys on them if you want?”

“Steve’s installing a security system today,” Bucky offered, his arm burned with intensity and the sensation overwhelmed most of his senses.

“Sounds deliciously naughty,” Hannah smirked. “Once this trouble is over, you’re gonna have hours of sex tapes of you and him to enjoy.” She laughed and patted Bucky’s hand. “I’m kidding, James. Boy are you a prude!” she laughed over his flush.
“Haven’t exactly had a whole lot of experience, Hannah,” Bucky grumbled, hand tugging on his sleeve.

“Have you got any at all?” she asked, her tone soft and serious. “I’ve done that and it can feel great if you’re with the right man.” She offered a smile then changed the subject. “So, the way to take down a bully, even one with power and training, is by showing you have the bigger set of dangerous friends. Harry will get you the VFW, who won’t take kindly to one of their own being such an ass.” She nodded. “And I can pop down to my circle and see if some of the boys wanna come out of retirement and ride back into action. I’ll bet a good five of them will jump at the chance to dust off their hogs.”

Bucky nodded, feeling a small relief that Hannah was telling him and not asking him. He was done with making decisions.

“And if you let me, I can have them spread the word among their clubs . . . maybe bring on even more of them?” She grinned in anticipation. “And weapons should strictly stay out of this if you can,” she advised. “The best way to make someone use a weapon is to let them bring one. You show a weapon, those two punks will bring more.”

“Thank you,” Bucky nodded slowly again, his tone a little distracted like he was far off, thinking.

“So, you need to go upstairs and cuddle with your boyfriend and get some sleep? Or would you feel better calling Ava’s friend’s mom and checking on her before you go to bed with your hunk?” She smiled and patted Bucky’s hand again.

“I should check on Ava,” Bucky echoed and stood on trembling legs to grab his phone.

“Do you even have a landline any more or just the cellular?” The old woman walked to the living room to pick up Bucky’s phone and carry it back into him. “Here you go. Now, you call, then go to bed. I can tuck you both in if you want?” she offered with a lascivious eyebrow wiggle.

“I might take you up on that offer later,” Bucky said, trying to wink but the expression was half-hearted.

With a raucous laugh, the old lady went back to the living room to retrieve the coffee and pastries. She set about putting things away and cleaning things up as Bucky made his call.

Dialing Natasha’s number, Bucky held the phone to his ear.

“Yeah?” Clint’s voice sounded tired and muffled.

“Clint. It’s Bucky. Can you put Tasha on?”

“No, but I can go wake Ava if you want? Nat said you were supposed to call for her, before she made me promise not to wake her if you called before five.” There came the sound of someone rising and a small squeak which alerted Bucky to the fact that Clint had been sleeping on the couch of all things.

Bucky winced slightly and said, “I know . . . Steve told me to call.”

“Yeah, I got this,” Clint said then a sound of a crash followed by Clint’s loud, “ow, sonofabitch!” The man called out in a scream “Nat! The damn dog did it again!” The scream was probably loud enough to wake the entire house, actually.

Pulling the phone away, a slight ringing in his ear, Bucky groaned.
“Stupid dog, gonna shoot him,” Clint grumbled before the sound of a door opening came over the line. Gently, Clint’s voice called “Ava? Wake up, sweetheart.”

“Uncle Bucky?” Ava’s tiny voice muttered.

“Yeah, it’s him,” Clint said and the muffled sounds of the phone being passed occurred.

“Uncle Bucky?” Ava repeated, her voice tired.

“Say hello to Ava for me, Jimmy,” Hannah called out, loud enough to be heard over the phone.

“Is that Mrs. Garffly?” Ava asked, seeming a little more awake.

“Sure is, Squirt. She’s helpin’ me out. I’m sorry I missed dinner,” Bucky apologized trying not to sound as panicked as he felt.

“Steve said you had a nightmare and needed a special pill to sleep,” she yawned apparently without covering her mouth.

“That’s right. The medicine made me real tired, so tired I couldn’t get out of bed for a while.”

“He said it only works one time, so try not to get nightmares again, okay?” Ava sat up in the bed as her voice sounded more alert.

“I’ll try, Squirt. How are you? Lucky isn’t taking up too much space?” Bucky asked leaning against the counter, legs not feeling like they could support his weight.

“Fine. We had Tacos and Chester fell in the dog dish and Lucky poo’d in the hall,” she didn’t discriminate about her information, delivering it in one rush. “But Uncle Clint said it was ‘cause of his ‘bowels or something bothering him. Auntie Nat says that means Lucky’s got a tummy ache. I didn’t know dogs got tummy aches, Uncle Bucky.”

“Yeah, Lucky seems to get those a lot, huh?”

“Yeah, Uncle Clint said it was ‘cause his first owner thought he was a deer and shot him, which is silly. Lucky doesn’t look like a deer, Uncle Bucky. I think Uncle Clint made that up.” She wriggled in her bed. “You coming over today?”

Bucky closed his eyes and took a deep breath, “I sure hope so, Squirt. I miss you.”

“Miss you, too,” she echoed back, her voice a bit sad but her indomitable child’s spirit buoying her.

“I just called to check on you, Ava. I’m going to let you get back to bed.”

“Steve promised you’d call and Auntie Nat promised to let me wake up to talk to you,” Ava responded. “Steve always keeps his promises doesn’t he? Except the one not to make you sad.”

Sighing, Bucky nodded even though the little girl couldn’t see him, “We’re working on that, Ava.”

“Are you happier now, Uncle Bucky?” she asked artlessly.

Bucky was not ready for that question. “I - - I . . . yes, Squirt. Steve is making me happier.”

The smile was evident in her high-pitched voice. “Good.” After another breath or two, Ava said, “I love you, Uncle Bucky.”
“I love you, too. So much.” Bucky’s eyes blurred with tears and he wiped them away quickly.

“I love you so much,” she echoed, her voice fervent.

“I need to go check on Steve, now . . . I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay, Uncle Bucky. You take care of Steve. We can talk later. Chester says he misses both of you. Bye bye?” she paused.

Releasing a shaky breath, Bucky said, “Bye, Ava. I love you.”

The tone of the phone shutting off came to him.

Bucky set the phone down again and stared at it.

Hannah lifted her eyebrows and watched Bucky expectantly. “So, how’s Ava?” she finally asked.

“She’s okay.” Bucky answered, “I don’t know how much of this she understands.”

“They understand far too much and not nearly enough at her age,” Hannah commiserated. “Treat her with respect and explain things. It’s the best way to guide her, James.”

Bucky nodded, “I’m trying . . . I’m trying to do what’s best for her.”

Finally, Hannah turned and slid the cinnamon rolls, covered with saran wrap, in the refrigerator, Her eyes widening as she took in it’s fully stocked nature. “Wow! Had a bonus at work, James?”

“Yeah, it’s called Steve,” Bucky muttered, eyeing the fridge.

“Oh, a keeper then,” Hannah cooed with a delighted smile.

“Yeah,” Bucky said with a soft smile.

“Well, I’ll let you get back to your man and your bed. I’ll see myself out. When the sun comes up, I’ll call Harry and the circle.” Mrs. Garfunkel nodded and brushed her hands down her dress.

“Thanks again, Hannah.” Bucky said genuinely grateful for all her help.

“I am right next door, James, in case you need me.” The woman grinned cheekily. “Now, do what I would up there,” and she turned towards the front door once more.

After hearing the front door close with a soft click, Bucky stumbled over and locked it behind the elderly woman. Body and mind numb, the brunet made his way up the stairs and down the hall.

Bucky was honestly surprised that Steve hadn’t woken up, but he smiled when he saw the tall blond laying face down, still nude under the quilt, hands positioned under his head.

Quietly, careful not to bump into any of Steve’s injuries, Bucky pulled up the quilt and slid in close

As if instinctively, Steve turned towards Bucky’s heat, murmuring something. One hand reached over and lightly entangled itself in Bucky’s shirt.

Bucky curled up into the blond’s muscular chest, his head tucked under Steve’s chin. “I love you,
Stevie.” He murmured against the other man’s skin.

A sleepy soft voice echoed back, “love my Bucky,” but Steve barely stirred, just enough to firm his fist of Bucky’s shirt.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the love guys! You're all amazing!
As the light angled just right to cross over his eyes, Steve stretched, then froze at the feeling of someone in his arms. He'd never been allowed to wake in Brock’s bed, so opened his blue eyes and looked down, confirming what he had suspected and hoped. It was Bucky. A soft smile lit the blond’s face. He carefully stroked the brunet’s hair from his face.

Not being fully asleep in the first place, Bucky’s eyes opened slowly and he looked over at Steve. Smiling, wanting to forget about the night before, about how Brock and Jack were watching the house, the brunet said softly, “Good mornin’ Steve.”

“Morning, Bucky,” he said softly. Then he turned his head and muttered,”I need a toothbrush, ugh.”

Chuckling softly, Bucky shifted and yawned; he moved to get off the bed, “I think I have a spare in the bathroom.”

Offering a smile, Steve nodded. “Thanks. I’ll go get cleaned up.” He eased himself to a sitting position, letting out a hiss at the pain from his knife wound, then moved to stand up.

Frowning at Steve’s obvious pain, Bucky asked, “Do you need help?”

The tall blond paused then drew in a slow breath and nodded. “If . . . if that’s okay? My . . . leg hurts a lot.” He turned concerned blue eyes on his long time friend and newly admitted sort-of boyfriend.

Bucky flushed and nodded, “Yeah - - of course. Whatcha need help with?” The brunet rose to his feet and turned back to face the blond.

“Standing? Walking maybe? Not sure yet. It’s a little more tender than before, but I think that’s because of the really thorough cleaning you gave it last night.” He smiled, flushing. Steve began to try to rise again.

The brunet nodded and helped Steve get to his feet, much like he used to do when they were younger, and walk over to the bathroom. Steve wrapped an arm around Bucky as the slightly shorter man guided him.

“The shower is gonna be the trickiest part . . . there’s - - uh, a little step.” Bucky said as they crossed into the other room, “Luckily we don’t hafta worry about gettin’ you undressed.” The brunet joked softly.

Blushing bright red, Steve chuckled, too. “I . . . I’m used to walking around the house without clothes,” he admitted. “I can get some pajamas . . .”

“No, it’s fine,” Bucky said quickly, and then he blushed and ducked his head as best he could, “I
mean, when we get Ava back . . . you - - you shouldn’t walk around nude. But with just me it’s fine. Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Steve turned his head to study Bucky. Finally, he smiled again. “I should get pajamas for when Ava comes home then.” He turned and leaned on Bucky while lifting his good foot into the shower, then held onto the walls while he winced and lifted the bad leg in. After the effort, Steve leaned on the shower stall wall to catch his breath.

Frowning again, Bucky stood close by in case the blond passed out, “You okay? I - - I don’t know what to do. I mean, I used to help Ava with her bath’s but she’s started taking showers on her own now.”

“Heart racing a bit is all,” Steve panted. “I’ll need my morning meds when I’m done.” He glanced over at his boyfriend. “You . . . you don’t have to help unless you want,” but something in his tone bespoke Steve’s desire for the brunet’s assistance.

Bucky looked at the small shower stall; Steve’s body took up most of it and the brunet tugged on his left sleeve at the thought of his body pressed flush against the blond’s. “I - - uh . . .”

“I mean,” Steve spoke up, “maybe my back or the wound or something?” He blinked and flushed, head down. “I’ll keep the water on low so it doesn’t get everywhere while the door is open? Then when you’re done, I can finish up?” He didn’t meet Bucky’s eyes.

Swallowing, Bucky nodded and stepped closer, “Mind handing me the washcloth?”

With a relieved look, Steve’s head came up and he smiled. Turning the water on very low pressure, he wetted and soaped the cloth then handed it over, turning to let water run over his back and butt before angling again so Bucky could tend his back end. “Thanks, Buck.”

Bucky’s blush deepened to run down his neck as he carefully began to run the soapy cloth against Steve’s muscular body. Steve let out a whimper of appreciation, letting his head hang down.

“So - - uh,” Bucky cleared his throat as he lowered his hand to begin gently cleansing the area around the wound, “Ice cream cake, huh?”

“What?” Steve lifted his head, twisting his neck slightly to look over his shoulder.

“I saw the cake in the freezer? I’m assuming you bought it for Ava’s birthday,” Bucky stated; he tried to keep his eyes on Steve’s face, but the toned body in front of him was making it quite hard.

“Yeah,” he smiled. “I figured with all the confusion these last couple days, you hadn’t gotten a chance yet, so I thought I’d just add it to the list. But I had them leave it plain so you could decorate it if you wanted to?”

Bucky snorted and shook his head, “I can’t decorate worth a damn. Steve, have you seen my living room? I don’t have an eye for that sort of stuff.” The brunet’s tone was light and joking.

“Oh,” Steve flushed a bit. After a long moment, very softly, almost as if afraid to offer, Steve said, “I could try? I think I can do a tolerable job . . . at least for a six year old.” He ducked his head.

Smiling, Bucky nodded, “I’m sure you will do an amazing job, Stevie. If it’s just half as good as your paintings and stuff . . . it’ll be a piece of art.” The brunet continued to caress the blond’s skin gingerly, not wanting to hurt Steve.

Wincing Steve kept his head down, eyes squeezed shut, not saying anything. He seemed totally unaware of his semi-erection.
Bucky, catching the look, stopped immediately and pulled away, “Oh! I’m sorry - - I must’ve touched the wound or somethin’.”


Tilting his head and offering his boyfriend a concerned look, Bucky shook his head, “Ya gotta tell me the truth, Stevie. I can’t read everything off of facial expressions. You’re cryin’ . . . I’m sorry - - I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Oh,” Steve reached up and wiped his eyes and sighed. “I . . . I didn’t know I was crying.” His tone came out softly. He sighed and shrugged, looking miserable. “It’s just . . . that you called my work . . . art, and it’s not. Not anymore.” He looked away.

“What’cha talkin’ about?” Bucky smiled, “All the stuff you do is art! Remember in high school? They practically held a showcase just for your stuff alone.”


Smiling fading into a frown, Bucky asked in a soft, cautious voice, “Because Brock broke your hands?”

Without a word, Steve nodded. After a moment he said, “I’ve gotten most of my motor skills back, but I’ve never gotten my . . . art back.” He turned back to face into the stall. “It’s why I don’t show or sell any more.”

“Well . . .” Bucky licked his lips nervously, “That’s on you, Stevie. Only you can get your art back.”

A shudder wracked the large body and Steve nodded. “I have tried whenever I had time alone, Buck. I promise I did. But I had so little time to work on it.” He shook his head. “I . . . I think I should finish getting cleaned up before I become a fish.”

Bucky nodded, knowing he’d said something stupid, and handed Steve back the washcloth. “I’ll - - go make some coffee?” The brunet turned and began walking out of the bathroom.

“Thanks, Buck,” Steve called softly.

“Anytime,” Bucky called back over his shoulder. The brunet paused, “Wait - -” He turned back around to look at Steve.

Steve looked over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“You said that you don’t show or sell anymore . . . I - - I didn’t know you ever sold anything professionally?” Bucky asked, his tone curious.

“Not for a year now . . .” Steve confirmed. “But before I broke my hands, I sold a few pieces. Maybe twenty?”

“Your friend? Did he help you sell your art? What’d he say when you couldn’t do it anymore?” Bucky questioned, the brunet looked confused and like he was trying to figure something out.

Looking puzzled for a moment, understanding suddenly dawned in Steve’s eyes followed by embarrassment and fear. “I don’t have a friend. It’s . . . Brock made me paint under a different name,” he rushed on, glancing past Bucky as if he expected the admission to bring his angry ex
storming in.

“Oh . . .” Bucky’s eyes widened, “You’re - - you’re Roger Grant?”

Steve hung his head, as if ashamed, and nodded slightly. His voice sounded small. “Yeah?”

Bucky didn’t say anything for a few moments; he stared at the blond, eyes running down Steve’s body as if he were another person. “You’re Roger Grant,” Bucky repeated, “You said he was a friend? That he was gonna help my charges get dropped?”

With a nod, Steve confirmed Bucky’s words. “Yes,” he said softly.

“I - - I . . . well . . .” Bucky stammered, “Congratulations, I suppose? You were an artist . . . a very successful artist.” The brunet snapped his mouth closed before he could say anymore.

Steve looked up, misery and fear still playing through his blue eyes. He didn’t know what to say, absently running the soapy cloth over his chest as he watched Bucky.

“I’ll - - uh, let you finish up,” Bucky muttered and then turned on his heel and left the room without another word.

Steve stepped backwards into the shower fully and softly closed the door then let the tears wash down his face. Brock had told him that his hobby would get him in trouble . . . and Steve had never really believed him until now. The blond rushed through the rest of his shower then got out of the stall to dry with difficulty, not once calling out for help. He’d annoyed Bucky enough.

Finally dry, Steve took a breath and called out, “Bucky? Um . . . if you’re not too busy, could I . . . uh have help with my bandages?” He really hated to bug his boyfriend for help, but Bucky had insisted last night that he should ask for help like that. Steve certainly didn’t want to annoy him further by disobeying that edict. He kept his head down, staring at the floor.

Within a few moments Bucky walked back into the room with a forced smile, “Not busy at all.” The brunet set about getting the needed supplies and motioned for Steve to, once again, lay on the bed so that he could wrap the wound properly.

The blond silently lay down, hands resting on the mattress, prepared to shift for better access if suddenly Bucky took his rights, unlike last night. After all, no matter how much money he threw into the relationship, Steve was always the other half . . . cook, cleaner, and sex buddy. He buried his face in the pillow.

Bucky sighed heavily as he took in the blond’s position, “Stevie . . . we - - we aren’t doin’ anything like that. You can relax, please?”

Flushing, Steve let himself relax. He’d screwed up again. Promising himself to do better, to learn Bucky’s cues, Steve nodded. “Sorry? Force of habit I guess.”

Grumbling incoherently under his breath, Bucky shook his head and got to work on dressing the knife wound. After a few silent minutes, the brunet finished and said, “I’m sorry you had to go through any of this, Steve. I - - I don’t know how to help.”

The blond lifted his head and sighed. “I don’t know what I can do . . . how . . . I’m so used to being with him, Bucky, and you’re so different. I’m all confused.” He sounded as frustrated as he looked.

Flushing, Bucky hung his head but he let the blond continue.
“You don’t hit me. You don’t scream at me. You don’t want my money or anything.” He sighed. “You don’t even want sex.” Steve looked away. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do or say or . . . how to pay you back for anything you’ve done.”

The brunet looked down at Steve; Bucky’s fingers twitched and he looked lost, “I - - I’ve never had anyone - - I don’t know how these things are supposed to work. It’s just been me and Ava for a while . . . and before that - - I just didn’t feel like committing to a relationship.”

Pushing carefully onto his good, left side, Steve turned his head to face Bucky. “For Brock, I would cook and clean and tend his guests. He’d tell me what he wanted or needed, and I’d do it. But, I get the feeling things are really different with you. And . . . I like not being afraid you’ll hit me or scream at me for the littlest thing.” Steve took a breath. “But I can’t help feeling I’m doing things wrong and letting you down.”

Bucky shook his head and his fingers wrapped around his wrist, “I - - you aren’t letting me down . . . I’m just a pain in the ass. Always have been.”

“You said you’d talked to someone after the fire . . . and thought I should too?”

Grasping desperately at the distraction, Bucky nodded and said, “Yeah, while I was in the hospital I went to therapy, too. I stopped after I was discharged, though.”

“I . . . I want to . . . be normal again.” Steve sighed and pushed painfully to his feet then started rooting through the clothes Bucky had loaned him. “I know I’m not, but I can’t always figure out just what’s normal and what Brock told me was normal. You know?” He looked hopefully at his longtime friend.

“Yeah, I - - I think it’d be good for you to talk to someone.” Bucky took a deep breath, “It helped when I did it.”

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, hoping he didn’t put his foot in his mouth again, Steve ventured, “maybe it would help to see someone about your stress? Just for a little while?”

Fingers twitching again, Bucky swallowed hard again and looked away, “I - - I . . . insurance doesn’t cover it . . . and with Becca’s treatments . . . I can’t afford it.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask about that, Buck. Just tell me to shut up if it’s none of my business, but if Becca’s in a minimum security place for the, uh, criminally insane, why isn’t the state picking up the medical tab? That’s the law.”

Bucky shrugged, “The institution is - - well, it’s not a prison. She got transferred there a year after the fire.”

“So, she was released from custody? I mean, the state’s custody? They dropped charges? Or was
her sentence commuted? Because, it sure sounds like the state is screwing you over when it comes to either her term or her care or both. By law, they have to re-evaluate her if they think she’s not unstable anymore, then make her serve her sentence. But if she’s still too unstable to serve jail time, she’s supposed to be in a state institution, with therapists and doctors and stuff. And the state pays for that. So, if they’re charging you . . .” Steve looked puzzled, frowning as he pulled on a pair of sweatpants, forgoing underpants.

“I pleaded with the DA to reduce the sentence . . . I couldn’t stand the thought of her in prison.” Bucky bit his lip and looked down at his feet, “She don’t deserve to be in a prison . . . she’s sick, Stevie. I pay for most of her treatments.”

“And they agreed to just drop her mental help, too?” He shook his head. “Usually if someone’s deemed mentally unstable, they are sent to a care facility, not prison.”

“Have you seen the places that they send the criminally insane to, Steve?” Bucky asked quickly, head snapping up to look at Steve.


“Like you wouldn’t believe. I . . . I couldn’t let her be in one of those. I may not completely forgive her for what happened . . . but - - she’s still my sister and I love her. I know that it wasn’t completely her fault - - she needed help, real help, Steve. Not just medication shoved down her throat until she was numb.” Bucky’s tone grew sharper with each word he spoke, and his fingers clutched tightly on his left elbow, bringing the limb close to his chest.

“Okay,” Steve responded in that same calm manner. He reached over and gently took Bucky’s hand, prying the man’s fingers carefully from his scarred arm. “Did you want to visit her? I could go with you if you want and learn how this thing works? I know nothing of mental health issues.” He flushed.

“You’ll learn fast if you stay with me,” Bucky said bitterly, eyes falling to the floor.

“Then I’ll learn fast,” Steve nodded, rubbing his thumb soothingly across Bucky’s palm. “Because I plan to stay with you as long as you want me, Buck.” He lifted the hand to his face and kissed the brunet’s palm gently.

“I want you to come with me,” Bucky murmured quietly, “I always go by myself . . . I want you there.”

Offering a smile, Steve nodded. “Done. Just tell me when so if I need to I can arrange my work schedule.”

“I always go on Mondays,” Bucky said, “Usually I go in the mornings after dropping Ava off at the store with Pietro and Wanda . . . but we can go later, after you get off work?”

Thinking, still caressing Bucky’s palm, Steve nodded. “I can go right after the lunch break tomorrow, actually. They’re going to be shutting down most of the left wing for floor stripping and cleaning. That’s where I’m assigned this week because there aren’t any new shipments coming in to be catalogued. Will tomorrow be okay?”

Bucky stepped in closer; leaning over, he pressed his lips against Steve’s. “Thank you,” the brunet breathed, his lips only centimeters away from the blond’s.

With a delighted smile, knowing he’d done something very right, Steve breathed “any time, Bucky.” He sealed his mouth over the other man’s.
Bucky pulled up to the curb in front of the museum, he ducked his head to try and see if Steve was waiting for him. He smiled when he saw the tall blond standing a few steps away from the sidewalk; the blond wore his usual button-down and slacks.

Steve saw Bucky’s car pull up and he grinned brightly, the blond gave his boyfriend a quick wave before rushing down the remaining steps and sliding into the passenger seat, his limp pronounced. With another smile, Steve turned to Buck, the enjoyment he felt from working at the museum very evident though a shadow lingered in his eyes. “How’d things go at the store, Buck?” he asked.

Bucky shrugged slightly as he pulled back onto the street, “They were good, pretty busy actually. Nat’s thinking that we may need to hire on another person.”

“That sounds promising,” Steve replied then fell silent, unsure what else to say but enjoying being with Bucky. He smiled faintly as he watched the streets of rushing people go by.

Bucky looked over at Steve, a little hesitant, “Uh - - just so you know . . . sometimes Becca isn’t in her uh - - right mind? She can dissociate.”

Steve looked at the brunet and frowned slightly. “Buck, I wouldn’t expect her to be in that place if she was completely sound all the time. It’s why you have her there getting help.” He shrugged. “If she has problems because I’m there, I can leave, you know, wait in the car,” he offered, his voice light, not offended.

The brunet cringed and tapped nervously against the steering wheel, “She screams sometimes . . . hasn’t hit me or nothin’ . . . but she can get upset. I need you to promise that if she starts screamin’ you leave and let me and the nurses handle it.”

“Unless I’m asked to intervene, I’ll let those trained to help do the helping,” the blond promised.

Nodding, content with that answer, Bucky stared out the windshield.

The drive to the institution took longer than normal due to the heavy lunch traffic, and Bucky grew worried that they might actually not find parking at this hour. They finally pulled into a parking spot after a fifteen minute search. Already on edge from the parking fiasco, the brunet unbuckled Steve’s seatbelt and then his own before hurrying into the large building, the blond on his heels, limping slightly.

Janet sat behind her desk, when she saw Bucky she glanced down at her watch and shot Bucky a surprised smile, “James! I was worried you weren’t coming when you didn’t show this morning!” Her eyes traveled over to Steve and then back to Bucky, “You brought another friend? How wonderful!”

Signing his name in the visitor log, Bucky’s eyebrows pulled down in confusion, and he shook his head, “Another friend? What do you mean?”

“Your sister already had another visitor today . . .” Janet paused and shrugged, “You two just missed him actually. He left just a few minutes ago.”

Shooting Steve a concerned look before turning his attention back towards the woman, Bucky asked, “Who was he? He signed in, right?”

Janet frowned slightly, seeming to notice the look between Steve and Bucky, and nodded. She took the sign-in book and her eyes searched the page for a few moments before exclaiming, “Yes, a Mr. Jack Rollins.” She pushed the book towards Bucky again and tapped a few times with her
Bucky didn’t even tack on the required visitor’s badge before bolting down the hall towards Becca’s room. He could hear Steve close behind him, but Bucky couldn’t focus on anything other than making it to his sister’s room, making sure she was okay, that she was safe.

Usually Bucky would make sure to knock to announce his arrival to Rebecca but his fear and anxiety clouded his judgment. The brunet wrenched the door open and he sighed in relief when he saw his sister sitting calmly at her desk; she intently looked at a set of pictures in her hands.

“Becca!” Bucky breathed, he stepped further into the room; he didn’t notice how Becca’s whole body seemed to go rigid when he spoke.

Shooting to her feet, Becca whirled around and shoved the stack of pictures violently into Bucky’s chest, causing her brother to stumble back with a shocked expression. “You took her from me!” she shouted, blue eyes wide and unfocused.

Bucky looked down at the pictures and gasped when he saw surveillance pictures of himself and Ava. They were taken at different locations; the park, the house, there were even some pictures from their recent trip to the zoo.

“Becca . . . no - - didn’t take Ava from you . . .” Bucky’s voice sounded miserable and he focused entirely on his sister, momentarily forgetting Steve stood behind him.

Rebecca’s hand snapped out, connecting with Bucky’s cheek with a loud crack, her nails leaving a trail across the flesh, drawing blood. “You stole her from me!” Becca screamed.

As she pulled back for another slap, Steve’s hand shot out and he grasped her wrist firmly, yet not painfully. “Stop, Becca,’ he said quietly in his deep baritone.

Bucky backpedaled and he raised his hand to touch the tender scratch marks; his mouth dropped and he looked over at Becca in surprise.

“He’s been watching over her while you’ve been sick, honey,” Steve continued, softly, firmly. “Remember, honey? You haven’t been well.”

Rebecca tried to wrench her hand away from Steve, “Let me go! Let me go! He stole her! He stole her from me!” She wailed, tears running down her face.

Steve let go as soon as she demanded it. Calling in that same steady voice, only louder, Steve said “Nurse! You’re needed!” He stayed between brother and sister, his stance protective yet not threatening. “Becca, sit down, honey.”

A pair of nurses rushed into the room, bumping into Bucky as he stood frozen in shock; they wrangled Becca to the bed.

“No! Let me go!” Becca screamed, thrashing against the nurses’ strong hold. “I was trying to save her! He ruined it! He ruined everything!”

Steve scooped up the photos as Becca and her nurses struggled. He barely glanced through them then lifted his soft frown to watch the unstable woman. “Bucky, you need a watch list of who may visit your sister,” he intoned softly.

Bucky didn’t say anything, just continued to stare at his sister as she struggled on the bed. Blood trickled down from the scratch marks. His whole body trembled and his eyes welled with tears.
Taking charge of his silent, shocked friend, Steve turned and gripped Bucky’s right arm firmly, tugging him out of the room. He continued leading Bucky to the nurse’s station where he finally paused. “Bucky, tell Janet who may see your sister. Make sure they understand that it is a very exclusive list,” he ordered firmly.

Janet gasped softly when she saw the red welt from the slap and the marks adorning Bucky’s cheek. “James!” She breathed, “What on Earth?”

“The man who visited before us was not a friend. He is stalking James, and we are in the process of getting a restraining order on him. Now, Bucky, tell Janet just who may visit your sister.” Steve’s tone was firm, his eyes serious, as he watched the nurse on the other side of the desk.

Bucky’s eyes slowly moved to meet Janet’s, in a detached voice he began listing, “Me. Steve Rogers. Clint Barton-Romanov. Natasha Barton-Romanov.” His fingers twitched and he let out a low whine; Bucky’s pale-blue eyes unfocused and he could feel his legs grow weak.

Steve shook Bucky’s arm once. “Buck, stay with me, love.” He turned to look at the brunet. “Is Ava on the visitor’s list?”

“Ava.” Bucky repeated; he looked up at Steve with wide eyes.

“Yes, is Ava, your niece, allowed to visit her mother in this condition?” Steve met his eyes.

“No - - no . . . Ava . . . Ava can’t see Rebecca,” the brunet mumbled; his left arm flared, and he tried to pull away from Steve.

Frowning, worried, Steve refused to release Bucky’s arm. “We’re going now, Janet. Bucky will visit next week. He’ll call before coming to check on her condition, of course.”

“Yes, please, go take care of him.” Janet nodded; she looked at Bucky with concern all over her face.

“Always,” Steve intoned, and he led the man from the institution and into the car. Once he fumbled the passenger door open, he set Bucky inside and shut the door, coming around the the driver’s side and sitting down behind the wheel. Finally, he drew a breath and turned to Bucky. “Buck?”

Mumbling under his breath, Bucky’s body trembled and he stared out the window. After a few long moments Steve’s words seemed to reach the brunet, “Yeah, Stevie?”

“I need your keys if I’m gonna try to drive us home, Bucky.” He slid the photographs onto the console.

“Keys,” Bucky echoed, voice empty, “Keys.” The brunet slid a shaky hand into his pocket, and with some difficulty, pulled them out and handed them over to Steve. “Keys.”

Taking a deep breath, Steve nodded. “Okay, let’s see if I can remember how to do this.” Steve slid the key into the ignition and turned it, eyes widening as the car roared under his foot on the gas pedal. He flushed and eased off the gas then looked down to try to figure out the emergency brake. “This isn’t a stick, right, Buck? Cause when you taught me in school, it was on your dad’s automatic. I’ve never handled a stick.”

“Auto . . . matic,” Bucky repeated with a slow nod; he didn’t look over at Steve, instead he kept his gaze on the street outside.

Taking another deep breath, Steve said, “hang in there for me, Buck. I’ll get you home.” He threw
the car in reverse, backed carefully from the spot, and then began driving forward, watching the
road like he expected to be hit at any moment. Steve didn’t drive the car faster than ten miles an
hour, fifteen tops, he seemed so nervous. “God, they’re insane in this city!” he exclaimed as a taxi
nearly plowed into him then laid on the horn.

Bucky flinched and his fingers wrapped tightly around his left wrist, “Good . . . Steve.” The
brunet murmured, his tone barely above a whisper. “Doin’ . . . good.”

“Thanks, Buck. I haven’t driven since before graduation . . . last time you and me went to Burger
King.” Steve managed to pull into the flow of traffic, speeding up the car but his shoulders tensed.
It took a long time before he finally pulled up before the bookstore, thankful he hadn’t been
required to parallel park. He lay his head on the wheel, inadvertently hitting the horn and jumping
as a loud blare sounded. “Damn!”

Wanda, hearing the loud horn, looked outside and smiled at the sight of Bucky’s car. She quickly
told Pietro that she was going outside before leaving. She bounded over but stopped when she
saw a large blond, who looked quite overwhelmed, driving the car, and Bucky sitting in the
passenger seat . . . with blood running down the side of his face. She ran over to the driver’s side,
seeing that neither men were buckled, and pounded on the window.

Steve lifted his vivid blue eyes to the unknown woman and looked at the door, the window, and
all around. Finally, he rolled the window down and sighed, “Yes?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“Who are you? Why is Bucky bleeding? I’ll call 911,” She threatened, her hand already fishing
out her phone from the pocket of her jeans.

“Bucky’s hurt?” Steve questioned, but didn’t seemed to be surprised. He sounded more like that
was his answer. The blond turned to his boyfriend and reached over to unclench the fingers from
the scarred arm. “C’mon, Buck, we’re at the store now. You’re safe.”

Bucky made no movement to get out of the car; he didn’t really acknowledge that he’d even heard
Steve.

Wanda eyed Bucky worriedly, “Do you need Pietro to come help you take him inside?”

“If you can open the doors I can help him,” Steve answered and gave Bucky a worried look.
“He’s had a shock?” The tall blond reached for the photos still on the console. His bandaged
hands shook.

“I’ll say,” Wanda muttered and rushed over to open the passenger door; she didn’t make any other
movements towards Bucky. She’d never seen the man like this; his empty pale-blue eyes shook
her to her core. “You sure I don’t need to get Pietro? I don’t think he can walk?”

Almost frustrated, Steve fumbled his door open, hissing as he irritated his still healing burns.
Slipping painfully from the driver’s seat, sliding the keys into his pants pocket and the photos into
his jacket pocket, Steve limped to Bucky’s side and wrapped a strong arm under his arm, behind
his back. “Okay, Buck, get out of the car,” Steve’s voice once again turned firm, commanding
even. “You need to go inside the store. Ava needs you.”

“Ava?” Bucky looked up at Steve, “Ava can’t see me . . .”

“Well, what do you want me to do, Buck?” Steve asked quietly.

“Ava’s not here, Bucky,” Wanda piped up, “Nat and Clint took her to the park a few minutes ago.
They’ll be gone for a while.”
Relief filled Steve’s eyes. “Good, then we have time to get you cleaned up before she comes back.” He guided Bucky into the bookstore, limping under the other man’s weight.

Pietro, finishing up with a customer, shot Steve a concerned look before rushing over to help support Bucky’s weight. “What the hell happened? Why is he bleeding?”

“Let’s get him cleaned up and he can tell you what he wants you to know,” Steve answered evasively, having been well trained in keeping secrets by Brock over the years.

“Let’s get him to the bathroom.” Pietro nodded, “It’s in the back.”

“Thanks,” Steve said and helped the younger man bring Bucky into the back. “He’s mainly in shock, I think,” Steve continued. “But I’m worried over the scratches.”

Pietro looked at the open, bleeding marks and winced, “Yeah . . . those look bad.” They entered the bathroom and the young man helped Steve set Bucky down. “I’m going to go get the first aid kit . . . I’ll be right back.” And then Pietro left quickly.

Turning on the water and grabbing some paper towels, Steve began cleaning the wound, frowning softly.

“I didn’t steal her . . .” Bucky mumbled; he looked at Steve, “I promise . . . I didn’t steal her.”

“I know you didn’t,” Steve assured him quite calmly. “The court awarded you her.” He continued what he was doing.

Bucky winced when the paper towel dabbed against the open wound. “She hit me, Stevie.”

“Yes, she did,” he confirmed and sighed. Steve lifted Bucky’s chin with one hand to survey the damage. Seeing the pain and lost look in the brunet’s eyes Steve gave in and leaned over to gently kiss his boyfriend’s lips.

Bucky broke down. He let out a loud sob and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend, pressing his lips needily against Steve’s. The brunet clung to Steve as if his life depended on it.

Carefully, Steve opened his mouth and traced his tongue across the seam of Bucky’s lips, making a small noise in his throat. He caressed his hand up into Bucky’s hair and carded through the soft locks. His other hand still held the moist towels, but no longer touched the wounds, forgotten.

Deepening the kiss, Bucky pressed himself against Steve; the brunet’s eyes refocused slightly and his body didn’t tremble as violently. “Steve . . . Stevie . . .”

“Yeah, Buck?” he breathed into his lover’s mouth. “I’m right here, baby. Whatcha need?” Steve continued to stroke through Bucky’s hair, moving his kisses to the brunet’s jaw, cheek, then neck.

Groaning softly as Steve’s lips caressed his neck, Bucky keened and his hands gripped Steve’s shirt. “I love you, Stevie . . . I love you . . .” The brunet said the words like someone would speak a prayer.

Steve lifted his mouth from Bucky’s neck. He leaned his forehead against the brunet’s and murmured, “I love you so much, Buck . . . so very much.”

The door swung open and Pietro walked back into the restroom, “Sorry, I couldn’t find the kit. Wanda moved - -” the younger man paused as he looked at the two other men, “Oh, uh - - sorry? I didn’t - - I can leave?”
Steve merely took a slow breath and lifted his face, turning slowly to focus on Pietro. “I’m Steve,” he said softly. “Did she really call 9-1-1? She threatened to,” his voice sounded a bit worried now that he wasn’t focusing solely on Bucky.

Pietro shook his head and looked at Steve, “Nah . . . she was just worried. Can’t really blame her, though.” He looked at Bucky again and cringed, “They’re still bleeding.”

Blinking, Steve straightened and flushed, immediately beginning to tend the injuries once more. “Sorry, Buck.”

“S’okay.” Bucky muttered and closed his eyes, letting his head fall back to rest on the wall. “Steve . . . this is Pietro.”

“So the other one’s Wanda?” Steve asked before realizing just how goofy that sounded. He flushed brighter.

Pietro laughed, “Yep, she’s my twin. I beat her by, like, two minutes!”

Steve nodded but he seemed more intent on helping his boyfriend than listening to Pietro’s chatter.

A friendly bark came from the front of the store.

“Shit!” Bucky scrambled to his feet, “Shit! I’m still bleeding, Steve! Ava will freak out!”

“Yeah, calm down.” Steve turned to the younger man. “Tell Wanda we need that kit. Send her back here to help if she’s the one who moved it. Go distract Ava. She’s bound to have seen the car.”

Giving Steve a friendly salute, Pietro turned on his heel and walked out of the room. A few minutes later, Wanda hurried in with the kit in her hands. “Sorry I threatened to call the cops. I was just freaked out . . .”

“Makes three of us,” Steve muttered and reached for the kit, opening it to look for what he needed to tend Bucky’s scratches. “Bucky, if you don’t want Ava to know what really happened, you need to think up something to tell her. She’s going to ask about these bandages.” He began to tape gauze over the scratches.

Bucky groaned miserably, “What am I gonna tell her? That I got attacked by a squirrel?”

“Tell her you went to see her mother, to see how she was doing, and Becca wasn’t having a good day. She accidentally scratched you, and you had to leave so they could take care of her?” Steve temporized. “Or squirrel . . . squirrel’s good, too,” Steve said.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky nodded and looked at himself in the mirror. The scratches were covered but his cheek was still bright red and beginning to bruise. “Shit.” Bucky mumbled, “Second time this week I’ve been smacked.”

“Second time?” Steve asked.

Bucky froze and turned to look at Steve, “Oh . . . uh - - my neighbor came to visit yesterday while you were sleeping. Old lady with a mean arm.”


“It wasn’t you . . . I almost had another panic attack. She smacked me to bring me out of it,”
Bucky offered sheepishly.

Steve dropped his eyes. “I’d rather kiss you to bring you out of it,” he murmured, apparently having forgotten Wanda stood right there.

“Yeah, me too, but you were asleep.” Bucky shrugged, he looked over to Wanda, “Can you give us a few minutes . . . I promise we’ll be out soon.”

The blond turned bright red when his attention came back to Wanda.

Wanda smiled and nodded. She quickly turned around and left the restroom.

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat, “there’s - - there’s something I need to tell you. I’ve been meaning to . . . but I just couldn’t find the right time?”

Drawing a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Steve nodded and braced himself for whatever he might hear. Usually those words did not accompany good news.

“Mrs. Garfunkel, my neighbor, she’s kinda nosy . . . real sweet but is always watchin’ the street and the house.”

Steve flushed even brighter. “Definitely need pajamas,” he muttered.

Laughing slightly, Bucky nodded, “Yeah . . . she was ready to jump into bed with you.”

“What?” Steve squeaked, eyes widening, looking much as he had when the cute Sharon Carter had flirted with him when he was fifteen.

“Yeah,” Bucky flushed, “She saw ya from your window . . . saw the blood, too.”

“God, shoot me now,” the blond moaned, covering his face with both bandaged, wet, bloody-ragged hands.

Bucky took a deep breath, “Rumlow and Rollins are watching the house, Steve. She saw them. Rumlow was outside while he was talkin’ to you.” The brunet watched Steve intently.

Head shooting up, eyes wide, Steve went pale. “What?” He shook - - his large, muscular body actually trembled. “God . . . he found you. I . . . I . . .” Shaking his head, looking desperate, Steve turned towards the door, “I’ll move out and make sure they follow me . . . leave you alone.”

Bucky lurched forward, desperately, and grabbed Steve’s arm, “No! Please! You promised you wouldn’t leave me!”

Steve stopped and hung his head. “I don’t want them hurting you, Buck. How do I protect you?” He seemed unaware that the photographs had slipped from his jacket pocket during Bucky’s grab.

The brunet kneeled down and picked up one of the pictures, of him and Ava leaving the house, he held it up to Steve. “It doesn’t matter if you leave now, Steve! I’m a target whether you’re with me or not! This picture was taken the day after we got coffee!”

Blanching, Steve sank to the floor, drawing his knees up there in the small restroom. He hadn’t actually registered Becca’s pictures after all. “So, we need to come up with something more? The security system should be installed by now, and the locks changed,” he offered. “The clerk promised it would be done today.” After a long moment, the blond asked slowly, “Wait, the day after we had coffee? Why? How? How could he have known where you lived then? He didn’t have my phone.”
Bucky shrugged slightly, “Rollins is a cop, Steve. All Rumlow had to do was ask his buddy to look me up.” The brunet kneeled down in front of Steve, “Look, if you leave me . . . there will be more chances for them to get me . . . so if you really want to protect me . . . you’ll stay . . . please?” He knew he sounded desperate and needy but the thought of losing Steve again made Bucky feel like a hole would be punched through his chest.

Taking a deep breath, Steve hesitantly nodded. “I’ll do anything to protect you and Ava, Buck. I promise.” He reached out and gripped Bucky’s right hand. “You’re the best thing to happen to me since I left . . . I don’t deserve you, but you’re here . . . and I don’t wanna give you up again.” He raised the hand to his lips and kissed Bucky’s palm, then slid it against his own cheek, blue eyes shutting.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Bucky leaned forward and pressed his lips to Steve’s forehead. “C’mon . . . I gotta see Ava.” The brunet rose to his feet and offered his hand to the blond.

Steve let out a soft whimper and nodded. He opened his eyes and took the brunet’s hand, needing the assistance to get up off his injured backside. His bandages were still wet and soaked with blood and dirt. Steve began to pick up the rest of the photographs, the keys jangling in his pocket as he moved.

Hearing the noise, Bucky froze, “Fuck . . . I made you drive, didn’t I?”

The blond looked at the brunet. “You didn’t make me do anything. You weren’t up to it, so I . . .” he flushed and dropped his eyes. “Yes . . . I drove,” his voice had gone small. Steve fumbled the keys from his pocket and held them out, hand trembling.

Taking the keys gently, Bucky stepped forward and cupped Steve’s face in between his hands, “I’m not mad at you, Steve. I’m sorry I put you through that. It must’ve been scary.”

Steve’s blue eyes met Bucky’s steel-blue. “I haven’t driven since the last time we drove to Burger King, before high school ended,” he confessed for the second time that day. “I didn’t really need to at college, then Brock insisted I could walk everywhere in the city since everything’s so close.” He sighed. “I tried not to crash the car.”

Pressing his lips tenderly against Steve’s, Bucky pulled away slightly, “Thank you, Steve.”

“Uh,” Steve seemed at a loss for words, settling finally on a nod and a blush. He reached over and fumbled with the knob to the restroom.

Bucky flushed and stepped away; maybe he’d misread that situation. He hung his head and waited for Steve to open the door.

Finally, Steve dropped his hand and sighed. “You’re not mad at me?” he asked, as if checking the veracity of Bucky’s claim. “I touched your car . . . nearly got side-swiped by a cabby . . .”

“Even if you’d totalled my car . . . I wouldn’t be mad at you, Stevie.” Bucky mumbled, not lifting his head.

“Really?” He looked up, smiling at that, eyes lighting up with relief. “I . . . I wasn’t sure what my boundaries were . . . still aren’t. But . . . it’s good to know that I can drive you somewhere in an emergency without being in trouble.” He reached for the door again, still smiling and still having trouble opening the round knob.

Bucky lifted his hand and gently pushed Steve’s out of the way. “I got it,” The brunet said quietly before opening the door and slipping out of the room.
“Buck?” Steve breathed softly, letting his boyfriend push him aside. He watched the man walk out.

Forcing a smile onto his face when he saw his niece playing with Wanda and Lucky, Bucky called out, “Heya, Squirt!”

Steve watched from the bathroom doorway, hugging himself sadly and sighing. He whispered, “I do love you, Buck,” but stayed where he’d been pushed, not interfering in Bucky’s reunion with his niece.

Ava’s head snapped in the direction of Bucky’s voice, “Uncle Bucky!” She squealed and ran over, only to pause when she saw the bandages and developing bruise. “You got an owie.”

Bucky nodded softly and looked over at Ava, “Yeah . . . I - - uh, visited your Momma today. She wasn’t feeling very good. She accidently scratched me.”

“Like she accidently started the fire?” Ava asked innocently, her head tilting to the side.

Steve winced at that question and called out, to lighten the mood. “I told you to tell her it was a mad squirrel hoarding his nuts, but you insisted on the truth.” He knew the truth was as near as Bucky had said, so didn’t feel too bad saying what he did.

Ava giggled and ran towards Steve, “Steve . . . that’s silly!”

Instinctively, he swung her up into his arms and onto his hip, grinning at her. “Heya, doll. How’s it going?”

Bucky eyed the pair for a moment walking over to the counter, where he knew there was a mini-fridge with some waters. Bending down to open the fridge, Bucky pulled out a cold water and opened it.

“I’m good!” Ava smiled as she wrapped her small arms around Steve’s neck, “Did you kiss Uncle Bucky like Snow White?”

“I never kissed Snow White! Who told you that? Was it Grumpy? He’s always makin’ things up to get me in trouble,” Steve answered with a smile.

“You’re silly, Steve!” Ava giggled and wiggled in Steve’s arms, “I gotta show you something!”

Wincing in pain as her movement’s tugged at his hands, Steve thankfully let her down. “Whatcha gotta show me, doll?” He smiled at her, easing down to a kneeling position, grimacing but holding back the hiss of pain.

She ran over to Clint, “Uncle Clint you have my picture I made for Steve? You promised you’d carry it!”

“Right here, pumpkin,” Clint held out the picture carefully, struggling to leash Lucky at the same time, one-handed.

Ava grabbed the picture and ran back to Steve, “It’s you, Steve! See? You’re a knight!” The little girl pointed excitedly at the picture.

Steve smiled and teasingly said, “Are you sure I’m not the Tinman? I think I see Toto behind me?”

“No!” Ava exclaimed, she pointed at the black mess of scribbles, “No! That’s your horse, Steve!”
He nodded. "Well, he’ll have an easy job, Ava. I’ve never ridden a horse in my life. Guess he’ll get to play in the field and eat oats while I catch a cab to the tower to fight the dragon."

"Knights don’t take cabs, Steve!" Ava said, exasperated, "The stories that Uncle Bucky read me... the knights have horses!"

"Well, I guess you never saw Pretty Woman," he murmured.

Bucky choked on the sip of water he’d been taking. He coughed loudly a few times to expel the water from his airway.

Steve looked up. "No? She hasn’t?" With a nod, Steve eased up onto a comfortable chair. "Well, come here and let me tell you a story," he offered, patting the chair next to him.

Ava climbed up onto the chair and sat up on her knees to listen to Steve’s story.

"This oughta be good," Clint muttered, eyeing Bucky then Nat, knowing how inappropriate that movie was for young eyes and ears.

"I swear if he starts to use the word ‘prostitute’ I’m gonna hit him," Nat grumbled and reached over to grab Bucky’s water. She took a small sip and handed it back to the grumbling brunet.

"Well," Steve started. "How does the fairy tale start?" He sounded like he couldn’t remember.

"Once Upon a Time!" Ava said happily, she scooted closer to the edge of the chair so that she could rest her elbows on the arm.

"Oh, yeah, that’s right." He smiled. "Well, once upon a time, there lived a pretty girl whose family died when she was still in school. The girl had to find a way to live, because she had no money. So she would go out into the street and beg for any job someone would give her, so she could earn her food and a bed for the night." Steve began absently re-adjusting his soiled bandages. "Well, there was a handsome prince who lived in a tower in the city. And he was lonely, and thought he liked being lonely. But he had a ball he had to go to. And it was the law of the kingdom for everyone going to the ball to go with someone else." He looked down at Ava.

"Did he go with the girl? Did they live happily ever after?" Ava asked, leaning forward even more. Bucky worried that if she leaned over any more, she’d tumble over the edge.

"You wanna skip the entire story?" Steve asked back, he slipped an arm protectively in front of the little girl.

"No! What happened next, Steve?" Ava asked.

"Well, one day he asked his valet to find him a girl he could hire to go to the ball. He didn’t want to promise to stay with the girl, after all, because he thought he was happy being lonely. Remember? So his friend hired the pretty woman from the street. I think her name was Julie. And his name was Richard." Steve nodded as if satisfied with the names he’s chosen.

"Julie is a pretty name!" The little girl squealed happily.

"It might have been Julia, but we’ll call her Julie." Steve smiled and slid Ava back against the cushions of the chair. "And it is a pretty name for a pretty woman. Well, Prince Richard had two weeks to get to know Julie, and he wanted her to make a good impression. He didn’t want the other royal people to laugh at him for going with a poor girl. So, he had his royal tailor show her how to dress and walk and talk and all sorts of princess things." Steve smiled at the girl.
“Like The Princess Diaries?” Ava asked.

“Exactly, only these were grown ups not teenagers,” the blond assured her. “Because we are never too old to learn new things.” Steve nodded once. “Julie and Richard even talked and shared their hopes and dreams and even their fears. He found out she was afraid people would treat her like she couldn’t take care of herself. And she found out he was afraid of heights. Well, the valet got jealous when Julie wouldn’t talk to him. You see, she could tell, deep inside, if people were mean or not. And she knew that the valet was a mean man. So, she wouldn’t talk to him. He got angry and started telling people how poor she was and how she had to be taught to have manners and other mean things.” He looked at Ava, “just like Julie thought.”

“Like the bad man is being mean to Uncle Bucky?” She questioned, her face pulled into a thoughtful expression. Bucky groaned softly and turned to start organizing some books behind the counter, needing to concentrate on anything other than the story Steve was telling.

Steve drew in a sharp breath but then nodded, eyes worried. “Exactly,” he whispered. He cleared his throat to continue. “Well, she got upset and went back to her little hole in the wall on the street, swearing that she didn’t need to be with rich snobs, though she missed Richard terribly. Well, Richard missed her, too, and he found out just what his valet had done. So, angry, he fired his valet and when riding off in his limousine to find the pretty woman of his dreams. He found out from her best friend, Kim DeLuca, that she moved into a different tower, but this one didn’t have an elevator like his. People had to climb to get to the upstairs floors!”

Ava scrunched her nose, “Even though he was afraid of tall places? That’s so brave!”

“Right,” the blond said. “So, he called to her and she came out to her balcony. She said she didn’t need a knight who couldn’t face his fears. So, Richard climbed the tower and gave her a rose to prove he loved her.” With a nod, Steve shrugged, “so not all knights use horses,” he brought the story back to what his original point had been.

Ava looked thoughtful for a moment, “So, Richard is like you.”

Bucky paused from putting a book on the shelf in front of him to listen.

“Me?” Steve’s eyes widened and he looked surprised.

“You’re facing your fear of the mean man like Richard faced his fear of heights.” Ava stated simply, she looked over to where Bucky stood, his back to them, “To prove to Uncle Bucky that you love him.”

Steve bowed his head and whispered, “yes . . . I love Bucky . . . and I want to prove it.” He lifted his eyes to meet Ava’s, unable to face anyone else in the room, “but I get so scared and confused. I’m hoping Bucky is as patient as Julie . . . and knows I’m trying.”

Bucky’s hand tightened around the spine of the book he was holding; he rested his forehead against the hard wooden shelf and took several deep breaths.

“Huh,” Clint whispered to his wife, “not once did he mention women of the night . . .”

Natasha rolled her eyes and shook her head, “Alright, guys, it’s closing time. Time for everyone to go home.”

“Yay!” Clint called out then winked at his wife.

“Dude, you have only been here for an hour!” Pietro exclaimed.
“Dude,” Clint shot back, “I own this place and your job.”

Pietro blushed and ducked his head, “See you tomorrow?”

“Yup,” Clint answered merrily and finally tackled his dog to get the leash on him. “Gotcha!”

“C’mon, Ava.” Natasha called out, holding out her hand.

“Oh,” Steve called out, nervously, “Maybe the five of us can go out to eat? My treat?” He hoped to give Bucky and Ava more time together.

Natasha shot Steve an unreadable look; after a few moments she leaned over to Bucky and whispered something in his ear. The brunet only nodded in answer.

“Alright,” Natasha smiled, “There’s a cafe a few blocks down. It has outside seating . . . that way we don’t have to take the dog home.”

Steve flushed at having forgotten Lucky was there. “A cafe sounds great,” he assured her.

“We’ll walk Ava down there.” Nat stated, she gave Steve another unreadable look before motioning silently towards Bucky. “We’ll meet you down there. Bucky, can you lock up?”

Putting the last book in its correct spot, Bucky nodded, “yeah, we’ll be right behind you.”

Clint grinned and led Wanda and Pietro from the bookstore, walking an excited Lucky out the door. Steve watched them, eyes worried.

“C’mon, sweetie,” Natasha called again, “We’ll meet Steve and your uncle down at the cafe.” The redhead held out her hand again.

“Okay!” Ava scrambled to get off the seat, she ran to Natasha and took her hand. The bookstore owner gave Steve one last look before ushering the excited little girl out of the store.

Once they were alone Steve looked at Bucky. “Is it okay that I invited them for dinner? I . . . I wanted you to get more time with Ava?”

“Yes, of course.” Bucky nodded, finally turning around to look at Steve. The brunet grabbed his keys from his pocket. “It’s your money, Steve, you can invite whoever you want.”

Steve looked as if he’d been slapped. He nodded and walked from the store, not looking back.

Bucky took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. He winced slightly as the bandages on his cheek rubbed against the open wounds. The brunet growled, and followed Steve out of the store. Bucky turned and locked the front door of the shop. “You wanna drive over there? I bet your leg is killing you.” Bucky called out, not knowing if Steve was still even in earshot.

Stopping, Steve took a breath then turned, head down, and walked back over. He struggled the door open and sank onto the passenger's seat then fumbled the belt on without a word.

The brunet slid into the driver’s seat and looked over at Steve. Bucky frowned and shook his head, “I don’t even know why we’re fighting right now.”

“Are we?” Steve said faintly. “I did something you didn’t like, and I’m sorry.”

Stop saying sorry!” Bucky snapped, his hands tightening on the wheel.

Steve cringed, visibly cringed. He tightened his lips, pressing them together and nodded, looking
“Fuck!” Bucky groaned, “Fuck... get mad at me!” The brunet turned to look at Steve. “I’ve been nothing but a jerk to you! Get mad at me! Do something!”

“I’ve had worse,” Steve murmured, still looking out the side window.

“I can’t --” Bucky shook his head and wrenched open his car door. He jumped out of the car, slamming the door on his way out. The brunet began to pace, hands wrapping themselves in his hair.

Steve unfastened his belt with difficulty and managed to get the door open. He slid out of the car and shut the door, watching Bucky warily. He didn’t say a word.

“Stop acting like I’m going to hit you!” Bucky pleaded, eyes snapping over to look at Steve, “I’m not him!”

“Aren’t you?” Steve asked, quietly. “Brock was good for a year before he started the hitting. Jack hits his boyfriend.” He ran a bandaged hand over his bruised neck. “In fact, every pair I know, one hits and the other takes it. Why are we so different?”

Bucky staggered back, as if he’d been slapped again, “Fuck! Steve! I would never -- you know me! I would never hit you!”

“I know you’ve never hit me when we were friends, Buck, but we’re boyfriends now. Things are different.” Steve shrugged, his face impassive, his eyes neutral.

Bucky turned and began walking, in the opposite direction of Steve and the cafe.

“You’re not going to eat with Ava?” Steve called after him, worry in his voice.

“Why don’t you go? You’re a lot better with her than I am,” Bucky snapped back.

Steve called, “because she loves you, not me. You’re her entire world, her Uncle Bucky. Just because I can tell a story doesn’t make me better.” He kept his arms crossed, hands slipped under his elbows.

Bucky whirled back around, “You’re better in every sense of the word, Steve! You aren’t a fucking nutcase . . . I can’t go a day without a fucking panic attack!”

“I’m not? That’s news. I wince at too loud noises and jump when someone speaks to me. I can’t hold down a job more than one month at a time.” Steve slammed his mouth shut and shook his head. He whirled and strode, limping, towards the cafe, shoving his hands roughly in his pockets.

Bucky froze, “What do you mean? You can’t hold a job? What about the museum?”

He shook his head, unable to talk without giving way to sobs.

“Did you get fired?” Bucky asked.

He shook his head then nodded then stopped walking altogether. Slowly, softly, he said “they checked my records, because someone called me in. Said even if I was acquitted, it’s not a good precedent. They couldn’t take the chance since another call was made.” He hugged himself again.

“All year it’s been like that . . . they did a security check because someone called to warn them of my history, despite the record supposedly being sealed. He . . . he won’t let me out of the house.”
Bucky stared at Steve, mouth agape but no words came out.

“Any time I try to do anything on my own, he’s there, Buck. I can’t get away. I can’t even go for a walk without him . . . and I’m confused. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. What I’m allowed to do.”

Bucky’s anger melted away, but he didn’t step any closer to his boyfriend.

“I’m not stupid, Bucky. I’ve been watching people around me these last four years to see what other couples are like. I always thought maybe something was wrong, but anyone I get a chance to see up close? They act like Brock or Jack and his guy. So, I figured it out. One is in charge, the other obeys. I guess I got it wrong that the one in charge always hits. I didn’t know. That some don’t, Buck. But I’m trying to learn.” Steve finally unwound his dirty, ragged bandages and tossed them into a nearby trash can. “And Brock always makes me pay. And I know you don’t like it because I have more money than you. But it’s all I do have. I can’t go back to my apartment. So, all I have in the world is in my bank account. So, what am I supposed to bring to this relationship?” He hugged himself again, healing hands wrapped around his upper arms.

Bucky ran his fingers through his hair again and shook his head, “You’re so much more than just money, Steve. You’re kind. You’re loving. I mean - - fuck, most people would’ve dumped my ass after the first panic attack . . . but you’re still here.”

“I can’t leave you when you need me, Bucky! That’s heartless. Your panic attacks don’t scare me,” Steve said, lifting tear-washed blue eyes.

“They scare me, Steve!” Bucky shouted, “They fucking terrify me! What makes me any different than my sister? I’m terrified that one day I am going to hurt someone other than myself! What if I hurt you? Or Ava?”

“Is that why you keep pushing me to hit you? Because you want me to hurt you?” Steve frowned, looking troubled.

“Pain grounds me,” Bucky admitted, eyes welling with tears, “It’s why I tear into my arm.”

“You grounded pretty well with a few kisses today,” Steve murmured, flushing.

“Well,” Bucky swallowed, “I didn’t have you for the last three years. I’m used to the pain.”

Steve stepped closer then hesitated, “but you have me now?” he asked, as if unsure he was welcome but hoping he was.

Bucky looked up at Steve, and then nodded, “Yeah . . . I have you now.”

Steve opened his arms.

The smaller man rushed into Steve’s embrace and breathed in the other man’s scent.

The blond wrapped strong arms around his boyfriend, holding him close, one hand tangling gently in his hair. “God, I love you, Buck.”

“I love you, too, Stevie,” Bucky murmured, pressing his face closer to Steve’s toned chest. “Please don’t leave me?”

“I’m not going anywhere, baby. I’m here as long as you want me,” Steve assured him. He kissed Bucky’s head and sighed.
“Forever?” Bucky pushed, he didn’t care if he sounded desperate and needy. He needed Steve in his life.

“If that’s what you want,” Steve lifted Bucky’s chin, kissing him softly. “You think the others have made a mad run on the cafe in hunger?” he whispered softly.

Bucky smiled into the kiss, “Probably. You haven’t seen Ava hungry . . . she’s like a little lion or something.”

“I saw her eat a stack of pancakes I would have trouble with,” Steve joked, smiling at his lover.

“That’s my little girl,” Bucky said, smiling fondly. He pulled away slightly from Steve’s arms, the brunet groaned softly.

Steve slid his arm carefully around Bucky’s waist. “Let’s go get you some soup so you don’t have to chew.” He kissed Bucky’s forehead lightly.

“Yeah, soup.” Bucky nodded in agreement and walked back over to the car.

Steve limped over to the passenger side and winced as he opened the door with his uncovered hands. He slid into the car and reached for the belt.

“You are staying home tomorrow and actually resting, Rogers. With the security system it should be safe,” Bucky said firmly.

Lifting his head, Steve sighed. “I have nowhere else to go, Bucky,” he said honestly. “But I promise not to clean if you want me resting.”

“You should want to rest, Steve. That injury isn’t gonna heal if you keep reopening it.” Bucky put the car in reverse and pulled out of the parking spot.

The blond looked down at his raw hands and winced, feeling the slide of blood at the back of his thigh from the knife wound. He sighed. “I have a tough time healing as it is with the blood thinners,” he murmured.

“I don’t remember you taking blood thinners as kids . . . when did that start?” Bucky asked as he pulled onto the main road that the cafe was on.

“About a month after . . . well, about four years ago. I had a bout of dizziness and fainting all the time, and the doctor said I had a heart condition. He gave me a strict diet, several pills, and an exercise regimen to follow.” Steve shrugged. “Been on two different heart meds ever since. Technically, sugar and caffeine are not on my list of allowed foods.” He flushed slightly.

Bucky frowned, “Maybe we should get a second opinion? Ya know? Someone other than Brock’s doctor.”

Steve frowned. “How did you know it was Brock’s doctor?”

“When you gave me that . . . sleeping pill. You said if I needed more that you’d take me to Brock’s doctor. Figured it was the same guy that gave you your heart meds.”

“Oh.” Steve nodded. “Yeah, it is. I’m on those pills for sleeping. And the mood stabilizer to control my temper.” He lifted his eyes to watch out the windscreen, seemingly embarrassed by his medical history but willing to explain it to Bucky, his new boyfriend.
“Your temper?” Bucky asked incredulously, “You gotta be kidding me.”

“Yeah, you know how I was always throwing myself headfirst into fights? Well, I don’t do that any more. I’m on medicine to control that,” Steve explained, flushing.

“That’s why you’re so calm all the time?” Bucky asked, sneaking a look at his boyfriend before turning his attention back to the road, “You didn’t have an anger issue, Steve. You don’t need those drugs.”

Steve sighed. “The doctor prescribed them, Bucky, after extensive tests and discussion with me and Brock. He felt I needed them, and they have worked. Along with the sleep medicine I take whenever Brock feels I’m getting out of hand again.” He continued to blush, now looking out the side window, totally embarrassed to be discussing his weaknesses.

Bucky shook his head, “I’m just sayin’ maybe you should look into gettin’ another doctor. At least get a second opinion.”

“I’m going to have to, aren’t I?” Steve asked very quietly, almost inaudibly.

The brunet pulled into a parking spot outside of the small cafe; he could see Nat, Ava, Clint, and Lucky already sitting at a table. Bucky gave his boyfriend a concerned glance, “I can call up my old therapist? He won’t be able to help you with your heart medication . . . but the mood stabilizers he can look into?”

“I’m almost out of my prescription, and I can’t go back to Brock’s doctor, so,” he sighed again, still embarrassed. “Yeah, thanks.” Steve reached to try to unfasten his belt.

Bucky reached over and pressed the button to release the seatbelt.

“Thanks,” Steve said again, keeping his head bowed in his shame. He fumbled his way from the car.

Bucky got out of the car, and from across the hood he said to Steve, “You don’t got nothing to be ashamed of, Steve. Illnesses aren’t anything we have any control over. Trust me, I know.”

The blond lifted his face and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. He nodded and turned to join the others at the table, staying quiet.

Clint lifted an eyebrow and glanced towards Bucky. “Ava was about to go hunt squirrels she’s so hungry,” he commented in a teasing tone.

Bucky sat down in a chair between Steve and Ava and smiled at the little girl, “Was she? Well, that’s not very healthy . . . I don’t think you’d like squirrel, Squirt.”

“Squirrels are high in cholesterol, I hear,” Steve said, but his voice was muted, quiet. He kept his head down.

“What’s colestraw?” Ava asked as she sipped on her child-sized juice.

Steve said, “I’m not exactly sure. There’s good and bad. And if you get too much bad, it can hurt your heart.” He ran a finger over the filigree design of the wrought-iron table, his eyes following the intricate pattern.

Bucky shot his boyfriend another concerned look before looking down at the menu, “Oh, look Ava . . . they have chicken nuggets?”
Clint watched Bucky and Steve then glanced at his wife, a concerned look in his eyes. He sipped his soda and slipped a bowl of cold water to the dog.

Nat quirked an eyebrow at the two men across from her, before saying, “So, Steve . . . how are things at work?”

Steve literally winced.

Bucky shot his redhaired friend a glare, but didn’t say anything; he continued to help Ava through the menu.

“They’re refinishing the west wing floor right now,” he said softly, not looking up. “Should have it done by the end of the week so they can re-open those exhibits.”

“Reason I ask is . . .” Natasha paused to take a drink of her tea, “Well, Clint and I have been wanting a mural painted for the left wall of the bookshop. It’s too white. It needs a little something.”

Steve went pale. He stood, almost knocking over his chair, but he righted it with a painful hiss when he used his raw hand. “Gotta go,” his voice sounded strangled, and he ran inside the cafe.

Bucky sighed and handed the menu to Clint so that he could help Ava choose something, before slowly standing up to follow his boyfriend into the busy cafe.

The lady behind the counter looked up. “Help ya?”

“Yeah . . . uh - - did you see a tall blond? Real bright blue eyes?” Bucky asked.

“In the gents,” she gestured with her chin towards the men’s room.

“Thank you,” Bucky nodded and walked over to the restroom. Cautiously, Bucky knocked on the door, “Steve? Baby?”

No answer came from inside.

“Steve?” Bucky’s heart pounded and his fingers twitched by his side, he knocked again, “It’s Bucky . . . I’m coming in, okay?”

Still no answer came through the thick door.

The brunet tried the doorknob and, thankfully, it was not locked. Bucky stepped into the bathroom.

Steve was on his knees in front of the toilet, retching into the bowl, apparently dry heaves.

“Steve!” Bucky rushed over to the blond, “She didn’t mean nothing bad . . . she was just tryin’ to help. You - - you can say no.” He soothingly rubbed Steve’s back, wincing as another painful heave wracked through the blond’s body.

After a few more painful, gut wrenching heaves with nothing coming up, Steve lay his head on the cold porcelain, despite the filth of the public toilet. He felt too sick to much care at the moment. Taking a slow breath of the foul smelling air, Steve choked out, “I’ll find her a recommendation.”

“Do - - do you want me to take you home? You look real pale.” Bucky asked, worried.

“No, you spend time with Ava,” he sighed, feeling his stomach clench but fighting the sensation. “I can catch a cab.”
“Ava will understand. Come on,” Bucky helped Steve to his feet.

Steve felt too weak to protest so allowed Bucky to help him up, leaning heavily into the leaner man. Tears leaked down his face.

Trying to ignore the strong smell of bile, Bucky pushed down his own upset stomach and guided Steve out of the bathroom.

The lady behind the counter grimaced. “Thought so,” she sighed and called out “John, go clean the john!”

Bucky helped Steve into the car, “I’ll be right back,” the brunet said softly.

“I’m supposed to pay,” he protested weakly, fumbling painfully for his wallet.

Scoffing, Bucky shook his head, “You can get the next one, Steve. Don’t worry about it.”

He collapsed back into the seat without further protest, letting his eyes close.

Bucky ran over to where his friends sat.

“What’d we say?” Clint asked, worriedly looking towards the car.

“He - - uh, he’s had a rough day?” Bucky supplied meekly.

“So he got sick suddenly?” Clint nodded as if accepting that answer, though he frowned. “Take him home. We’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, well as long as Steve isn’t too sick, but I should be able to open the shop.” Bucky nodded tossing another look over to where Steve sat in his car.

Rolling his eyes, Clint said, “and if he is, take him to a doctor, Bucky. I can open the da . . .” his eyes fell on Ava and he changed it to “dag-blam shop if you call me.”

“I’m sorry, Bucky.” Nat called out, looking genuinely upset, “I thought he’d be happy?”

“Why’d offering him a chance to paint tip him over the edge?” Clint asked into his soda.

“I’ll call you guys tomorrow to - -”

As if on some sick cue, Bucky’s phone rang.

“You’ve gotta be fu - -” Bucky cut himself off, eyes flicking to Ava. He answered the call with a harsh, “What?”

“Is this a bad time?” The curious voice of Detective Wilson asked.

Bucky released a deep sigh, “Uh - - kind of? What’s up?”

“Well, call me when it’s a better time. I need a set of final signatures against Jack Rollins? Rogers called today and said you both wanted to extend the restraining orders to include him, as well?”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded, “Yeah . . . can you come by the house sometime tomorrow? I’m making Steve take a day.”

“As bad as that?” The detective sounded concerned. “Of course. I’ll call before I show up. And
I’ll have the papers to restrict access to your sister? He said you were interested in that, as well?”

“Yes . . . thank you,” Bucky breathed, realizing that while he’d been having so many panic attacks, Steve had been busy getting things done. “Thank you,” Bucky repeated, “But I need to let you go . . . I gotta get Steve home . . . he got sick.”

“Again? That’s an awful lot of sickness over the past year,” Sam murmured then said, “alright. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Bucky hung up, slightly confused as to what Sam could have meant by that, and shoved his phone back into his pocket.

Clint sat watching Bucky, a worried frown on his face. “Ava,” he said softly, “gonna give your uncle a goodnight kiss?”

Ava looked up at her uncle with tear-washed eyes and Bucky pressed a kiss to the little girl’s forehead. “Goodnight, Ava. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.” Ava’s lip trembled and she hugged Bucky tight, “I love you, Uncle Bucky.”

“I love you too, Squirt.” Bucky hugged her back and then released her. He turned his attention back to Clint and Natasha, “Thank you, guys.”

With a nod, Clint opened the menu. “Of course. If he’s sick, you don’t want him near food. Take him home to rest. We’ll all talk tomorrow and you can show Ava the new security measures on the house.” He acted as if nothing untoward was happening, just a routine night. “Do you think Lucky would like some meatballs, Ava?”

With a nod, Bucky gave them all his final farewells. He jogged back to the car and slipped into the driver’s seat. “You okay, Steve?”

“Hmmm?” Steve opened his eyes, a dazed look in the blue depths, confusion running across his fine features. “What?”

“I asked - - uh, if you’re okay?” Bucky repeated as he pulled out of the parking spot. He felt bad for waking the blond.

“Yeah, I think so, Buck,” Steve answered, sounding less puzzled and a little more alert. “Stomach still turning a bit, but I shouldn’t be embarrassing you more tonight.” He sounded half out of it.

“You’re not embarrassing me, Stevie. People get sick . . . it happens.” Bucky offered with a gentle smile.

“Oh,” Steve muttered, shifting in the seat, eyes closing, “okay, Buck.” He sighed.

The rest of the ride was quiet, and Bucky pulled into his driveway just as the sun was beginning to set. The brunet turned off the car, stepped out and rushed over to help his boyfriend get out. Bucky scanned the area to look for any unknown cars or suspicious people lurking around.

Steve opened his eyes again and frowned softly, but he let Bucky help him up. Leaning on Bucky, Steve merely stood and waited for his boyfriend to move.

Bucky helped Steve up to the front door and frowned when he realized he didn’t know the code for the front door.

Reaching out, Steve punched in their new security code and the door disarmed smoothly. He
pushed the latch and looked at Bucky. “I’ll show you how to reset it and everything tomorrow?” he asked softly.

“Of course,” Bucky smiled gently and lead the blond into the home. “You really should try to eat something . . . you haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

“I’m hungry,” Steve confirmed and stood up, limping towards the kitchen.

“No, you sit and rest!” Bucky exclaimed, “Go to your room . . . I’ll bring up some soup and crackers.”

He froze and stood as if uncertain how to respond. Slowly, Steve turned and pulled himself up the steps, leaning on the railing when his weight was on his bad leg. He didn’t say a word as he made his way to his room, but he didn’t hang his head, either.

Bucky sighed when Steve made it up the stairs. His cheek throbbed and the scratches burned.

The brunet made his way into the kitchen and began to heat up some chicken-noodle soup. He pulled out some crackers and laid them out onto two plates. After the soup finished heating up on the stove, Bucky poured it into two bowls and set the bowls onto the plates. Picking up the plates, Bucky carried the dishes up the stairs and into the guest bedroom.

“You like chicken noodle, right?” Bucky asked as he stepped into the room.

Steve was stripped nude once more, laying on his left side on the bed, trying to reach the bandages on his right buttock. He was flaccid, but still well hung. Looking up, the blond nodded. “Yeah, my favorite,” he offered a small, tired smile.

Bucky tried to force down the blush that he felt creep into his cheeks at seeing Steve nude. Clearing his throat, Bucky nodded, “That’s what I thought . . . how about you try to eat and then I can help you with the bandages again?”

“Okay,” Steve instantly straighten his twisting body and lay there on his side. “Do you want me to eat sitting up? I don’t think I’ll spill . . .”

“Whatever is most comfortable for you, Steve.” Bucky answered softly as he stepped closer to the bed.

“Actually, sitting is a genuine pain in the ass right now,” Steve said with a slight smile. He seemed to have done a total reversal in attitude and was happy once more. If it wasn’t for the fact that Brock’s doctor was the one who prescribed Steve drugs, it appeared that the mood-stabilizer might be needed for bipolar disorder.

Bucky set down one of the plates carefully onto the bed in front of Steve. The brunet then sat on the edge of the bed and began to nibble slowly on a cracker.

Steve began spooning the soup up, very careful not to spill. He dipped crackers carefully and ate. After a moment, he looked up. “Buck? Everything okay?”

Bucky turned his head to look at Steve from over his shoulder, “Oh, yeah . . . everything is fine.” The brunet picked up the spoon and blew on the hot liquid before bringing it to his lips. He winced at the movement, the scratches pulling tight against his skin.

The blond winced in sympathy but kept eating quietly. He continued to watch Bucky, dropping his eyes only to make sure he didn’t slop the soup. Finally, he softly asked, “Bucky . . . are you in a lot of pain? I can get you some painkillers from the medicine cabinet . . .”
“It’s fine . . . if it get’s too bad I’ll get them myself, thank you though.” Bucky paused for a moment to bring up another spoonful of soup.

With a nod, the tall blond finished his soup, dipping the last bit of cracker and eating it quietly.

“I just can’t believe she hit me . . . she’s never done that before,” Bucky muttered; his eyes dropped and his stomach clenched uncomfortably. The brunet set his half eaten meal on the bedside table with a small frown.

“We have no idea what lies Rollins fed her, Buck,” Steve looked at his boyfriend. “He wouldn’t have just given her the pictures.” Slowly, Steve paled. “He may have spread the lie about me . . .” Lifting worried blue eyes, Steve said, “any mother would go ballistic if she thought her kid was living with a pedophile.”

“No, she was mad at me, Steve. Had the lies been about you . . . she would’ve gone after you.” Bucky sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

Nodding, the blond sighed with a sad frown. “I don’t know what to say. I’m not sure how she thinks.”

“Join the club,” Bucky snorted bitterly, hissing when the expression caused the bandage to pull at the wounds.

“Maybe you should undo the bandage, eat, then put it back on, Bucky?” Steve suggested. He lowered his eyes and began muttering something softly under his breath.

Bucky gently pulled away the bandages covering his cheek and grimaced as he pulled them off the bruises. He walked into the bathroom to throw away the soiled bandage.

Steve’s medicine bottles were lined up neatly on the sink. The brunet paused and looked at each bottle. One claimed to be Coumadin to be taken regularly. Another claimed to be Aprotinin, also to be taken regularly, at the same times. A third was called Xenafanol and was to be taken *for sleep enhancement and anti-anxiety dreaming.* The fourth was listed as Lithium, to be taken regularly for *extreme mood swings.*

Bucky shook his head at the drugs as he carefully set them back onto the counter. He couldn’t believe that Steve had a heart problem and needed to take medication for his *extreme mood swings.* The brunet eyed the Xenafanol and he couldn’t help think he’d heard the name somewhere; he’d look it up after Steve fell asleep.

From the other room, Steve’s voice called, “Buck? Can you get my night dose, please? It’s in the medicine sorter, marked Monday Night?” The medicine sorting container sat right next to the bottles of meds, but did not contain the Xenafanol medicine dose, which was the one Steve claimed he only took when Brock told him to.

“Sure thing,” Bucky called back, although he didn’t know about the medication Steve was taking, he wasn’t about to deny them to him.

Grabbing some more antibiotics and bandages, Bucky walked back into the bedroom and offered Steve a smile. He handed the blond his pills and set the medical supplies on the bed.

With a smile in return, Steve took the meds and swallowed them down without a drink, since his glass was empty. He turned over onto his front and did an odd shuffle move, as if fighting the urge to shove his ass in the air. Finally, Steve seemed to win his struggle as he settled calmly, leg’s spread enough to care for the wound, but not spread in an offer of sex.
With gentle hands, Bucky removed the bandages again and began to clean the wound.

Trails of blood, coagulated and thick, had run from the wound which obviously kept reopening every time the blond sat or stood or walked, marking his thigh in red rivulets.

“You really should try to get up as little a possible tomorrow, Steve.” Bucky said as he wiped away the blood that trailed down the blond’s thigh.

Looking at his boyfriend, Steve nodded. “Okay,” he agreed softly, wincing as he repositioned his raw hands on the blanket. “I’ll try.”

Wiping away the last of the blood, Bucky put the antibiotics on the cut and began to wrap the wound.

“Buck? That’s not healing right, is it? It needed stitches and I never got them.” He put a hand on Bucky’s wrist to stop him wrapping the wound, eyes worried.

“It’s in a weird spot . . . I can take you to the doctor tomorrow, maybe there’s something they can do.” Bucky offered.

“Yeah,” Steve sighed. “I think I should go. Brock said people wouldn’t see what I’d . . .” he swallowed then said, softer, “he’d done. So I wouldn’t have to be ashamed, he said.” The blond lifted his eyes. “I . . .” Steve fell silent abruptly.

Bucky nodded and pulled the quilt up over Steve’s body again, taking the bloody bandages with him. “Get some sleep, Stevie. I’ll take you to the doctor’s tomorrow morning.”

Yawning, Steve nodded. “You’ve been real good to me, Bucky. Maybe soon you’ll let me be good to you.” With that he pulled the quilt closer over his shoulder and closed his vivid eyes, sighing.

The brunet threw away the bloody bandages, and grabbed the dishes. He offered Steve’s sleeping form a small smile before switching off the light.
Bucky made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen. The brunet washed the dishes, dumping his half-full bowl of soup down the drain; he put the last dish on the drying rack and wiped his hands on his jeans. His cheek still throbbed, aching, and the cuts along his cheek burned; he highly doubted he’d get any sleep. His mind still reeled from the events of the day.

The phone rang.

Jumping at the shrill noise of his ringtone, Bucky fumbled to grab his phone from his pocket. The brunet whimpered quietly when he saw Steve’s name flashing on the screen; he really couldn’t deal with this right now. “Just leave us alone, Brock,” Bucky snapped as he answered the call.

“Just wanna talk, Bucky.” The man’s low rasp came out sounding somewhat reasonable and friendly.

“And I really want you to stop calling me,” Bucky ground out, eyes snapping to the stairs, Steve was sleeping upstairs, completely vulnerable.

“Ah, but we can’t negotiate if we don’t have open communication, can we?” the man asked. “Send your kid to a summer camp, maybe? That’s a good place for kids. Lots of sunshine and fresh air. Get her out of the way while you break in my boyfriend.” The tone remained friendly, conversational.

“Fuck you! Leave her out of this! She’s just a kid, Brock!” Bucky growled, his tone low and protective.

“I ain’t interested in kids, Bucky. Relax. I don’t want anything to do with the bib-droolers.” Brock took a slow, steady breath and chuckled, “so, how’s the mood swings going for you? He get manic yet, or just the depressed bits? You know, I figure he’ll run out of medicine in a few days. Gonna need to control his rages or he might just go off the wall.”

“He doesn’t need medication! You are manipulating him! You fucking asshole!” Bucky barked, walking into the living to glance out the front window, trying to see if he could spot Steve’s ex-boyfriend.

“Right,” Brock chuckled softly. “Tell that to the professional who diagnosed him, Bucky.” Brock’s car sat very evident in the shine of the neighbor’s new spotlight. He watched the windows casually and as soon as Bucky came in view, he stepped from the car and waved.

“Wanna come out and talk?”

Bucky’s fingers wrapped around the baseball bat, “We have a restraining order. If you don’t leave I’m going to call the cops.”

“Ah, yes. Says I can’t come real close, doesn’t it? Think I’ll stay put then. But, it makes it difficult to tell you what’ll make me stop, doesn’t it, if I’m not allowed to talk to you.” Brock slid back into his car, easily, as if without a care in the world.

“What do you want, Brock. What will make you stop?” Bucky growled, fingers tightening around the weapon in his hand. He continued to stare out the front window, looking at Brock’s car warily.

“That’s right. Now you listen to reason,” he chuckled. “You want my fuck toy? Take him. He’s not a very good lay anyway, cold in the sack and cries all night when he’s done. But I want the
“All of that’s Steve’s!” Bucky snapped harshly, “You can’t take it!”

“My fucking hard work, Bucky!” Rumlow snapped back then took a breath as if calming himself. “Everything he was, I made him. I got him those contacts and the right people to look at his pathetic drawings of some guy on a bridge or some lone shadow in a group of trees. No one really wants that kind of sad-ass crap.”

“You aren’t taking anymore of Steve’s life away. I won’t let you. You are a sick, manipulative asshole,” Bucky stated, his tone lowering to a menacing whisper, not wanting to wake Steve.

“Right. Well, I refuse to give him the access codes to the account. I’ll change the fucking apartment locks, any way. I tried to be diplomatic. You just want it all, don’t you? You want the guy and the fucking seven million? I don’t think so!” The phone hung up.

Bucky staggered back. *Seven million*?!

The brunet continued to watch the street outside, his heart pounding in his ears.

Slowly, someone slipped out of the shadows from the side of the house and hurried to the car, seeming to shrink in the bright spotlight. He slid into the passenger side and the car drove off without more than a low purr of sound.

Bucky collapsed to the floor and covered his mouth with his trembling right hand, the fingers of his left twitching uselessly. He backed up to the wall, the bat clattering to the hard tile by the front door. Quiet sobs wracked through his body, desperately trying not to wake Steve.

“Buck?” The voice sounded concerned from upstairs. Steve stumbled down, totally nude and looking like a zombie more or less, his eyes were practically shut and his features sagged. “You there?”

“I - -I’m fine, Steve!” Bucky called back, lowering his hand, trying to keep his tone even, “Go - - go back to bed! I’m okay.”

“Meds ain’t working,” he muttered and his shuffling limp sounded on the top step. “Had a ‘mare tha’ he was tryin’ to get in the side window . . . but he stopped . . . Think he said somethin’ ‘bout stupid wires?”

Bucky froze. Had Rollins been trying to get into the window while Bucky talked to Brock? The brunet’s stomach heaved and he felt the soup he’d just managed to get down making its way up his throat.

A second shuffling thud marked Steve making it down another step. “Buck?” His voice sounded lethargic, drugged.

The brunet scrambled to his feet, hand clamped tightly over his mouth as he bolted into the kitchen. Barely making it in time, Bucky threw up violently in the sink. His eyes watered and the cuts on his cheek burned with more intensity as he retched.

After several long minutes and shuffling thuds, the sound of Steve dragging his feet across the hallway came to Bucky. The man shuffled inside, looking out of it. “You ‘kay?” He shouldn’t have been so strung out if he’d only taken the heart and mood stabilizer meds. Steve shuffled over to Bucky, barely lifting his feet, his face almost slack, eyes drooping.

“I’m fine, Steve.” Bucky croaked, “What did you take, Steve?” The brunet spat into the sink and
After the dream, took the sleep stuff,” he answered, looking more like he was on tranquilizers than dream inhibitors. “But think they no good? Shoulda wait till you tole me to.”

Bucky whimpered slightly. Steve would be out for several hours, and the brunet suddenly felt like his house was too big . . . there were too many places for someone to hide.

Straightening with a slight grimace, Bucky rinsed out the sink and walked back over to Steve. “Let’s get you back to bed, yeah?”

Steve seemed to lean to one side, but he seemed devoid of pain from his numerous injuries. “You gonna come ta’ bed with me?” Steve asked, voice barely registering interest.

“Gotta watch the house, Stevie.” Bucky said quietly as he wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist.

“We got alarms?” Steve asked as if uncertain. Steve leaned into his boyfriend and barely even flinched when a loud pounding came on the front door, setting off the alarms in the process. The pounding stopped and Hannah’s voice called, “What the hell?”

“Fuck! Stay here, Steve!” Bucky muttered and detached himself from his boyfriend.

“‘kay,” Steve muttered and leaned against the counter.

Bucky rushed over to the door and quickly punched in the code he’d seen Steve use earlier to deactivate the alarm. Opening the door with an exasperated, overwhelmed look, he simply stared at Hannah.

The old lady from next door stood on the step with a golf club in one aged hand and a plate of something that smelled chocolatey in the other. “Might wanna tell the cops I’m a false alarm, Jimmy,” she said, grimacing.

“Shit. Yeah - - uh . . . come in? Steve’s in the kitchen . . . I was trying to get him back to bed.” Bucky sidestepped to allow the older woman inside.

With a nod, Hannah grinned and walked in. “Oh, I get to see your boyfriend?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively and headed for the kitchen.

“He ain’t feeling too well.” Bucky commented as he shut the door, locking it.

“I can make him feel a load better, Jimmy. Show you how if you want? I’ve been around awhile,” she quipped and put her offerings on the dining room table as she passed.

Bucky looked down at his phone by the front door; he must’ve dropped it when he collapsed. He saw he had a missed call from the security company.

Sirens filled the air, coming closer.

“Fuck me.” Bucky grumbled; he ran his fingers through his tangled brown hair. He felt completely overwhelmed . . . he just wanted the day to be over.

“Well, if you wish,” Hannah called, the very nude and listless Steve draped against her. “Tell them I was distracting you? Or you can report that creepy thief that got into the car that drove off a bit ago.” She grinned and guided Steve towards the couch. He obediently let her lay him down. Despite her innuendos, the old woman kept her hands respectfully away from his private bits.
A knock came to the door. “Police. Do you need help?”

Bucky groaned again and turned back to answer the door.

Steve muttered under his breath and he sagged into the cushions, lying on his front, his bandaged rear up for all to see. The cop glanced over briefly then back at Bucy, face impassive.

The brunet shook his head, “No, my neighbor accidentally set off the alarm. It was a false alarm.”

Steve muttered into the pillow again, sounding slightly agitated, but he didn’t lift his head.

Hannah frowned. “Uh, Jimmy? Your guy wants something?” The policeman glanced over again, frowning softly.

Bucky shot both Steve and Hannah a concerned look, “Hannah? Can you turn his head? Doesn’t look like he can breathe? He’s on really heavy tranquilizers.”

“Oh!” She shook her own head and reached over to turn Steve’s face from the pillow.

His voice became clearer as he muttered what sounded like “vi . . . do . . .”

“Vido?” Bucky repeated, he looked back at the policeman.

With a shrug, the elderly woman shook her head. “Not sure.”

The cop frowned and guessed, ‘is he intoxicated, sir?”

Bucky really wanted the floor to open up and swallow him; he wanted things back to normal. “I - - uh . . . no? He’s on medication . . . some pretty heavy stuff.”

Still frowning, the cop nodded but narrowed his eyes. “What kind of medication?” he asked cautiously.

Steve again muttered “vi . . . do . . .”

Shifting uncomfortably under the cop’s near glare, Bucky answered, “Some stuff for his heart . . . he also just took a type of tranquilizer.”

“Does he need an ambulance, maybe? His hands are bleeding . . . and his leg.” The cop bounced on his heels, as if he wanted to walk into the house but didn’t dare uninvited. “A heart patient shouldn’t be taking tranquilizers . . .”

Bucky frowned and looked over at Steve again, “Yeah . . . maybe a hospital would be good? I was gonna take him to the doctor tomorrow.”

Looking relieved, the cop nodded and pressed the button on his shoulder radio, “need rescue here. Got a victim with bleeding and possible tranquilizer overdose. Looks to be having difficulty breathing, as well.” Without waiting for further comment, the cop walked in and directly to Steve. “You sure he wasn’t taking anything . . . recreational?” The man reached down and frowned at the pulse he felt. ‘Erratic heartbeat . . . do you have any idea what meds he took, sir?’

God I sure hope not.

Hannah patted Steve’s hair as she stepped out of the way. She threw Bucky a worried look.

“Maybe I should wait to mention the prowler?”

“Prowler?” the cop looked over with another frown.
Bucky shrugged softly, “We’re - - I’m being stalked? It’s why we installed the security system . . . they came to visit again tonight.”

“Right,” the cop nodded and looked towards the doorway as if hoping for backup.”So, this prowler you saw . . . was it the stalker, do you think?”

“One of them. The other waited in the car outside in front.” Bucky offered, eyes falling to the floor. His arm and scratches burned, and his fingers twitched.

“Two stalkers?” another siren sounding brought relief to the cop’s face. “And the one who got out of the car . . . did you see what he did?” The cop’s eyes fell to Bucky’s hand movements and he lifted his eyes. “Did you take anything recreational tonight, sir?” his voice sounded worried as he reached for his radio again.

Bucky wanted to cry. He wanted to scream and throw something. Instead he shook his head wildly, unable to form words.

“Vi . . . do . . .” sounded from Steve, soft and almost a sigh.

The cop nodded and pressed the button. “Dispatch, is there an order of protection on anyone at this location, please?” He waited as someone called back in a scratchy, broken affirmative.

“James Barnes and Steven Rogers both have protection orders against a Brock Rumlow and a Jack Rollins. Also, their case is being handled by Detective Wilson. Strict orders to contact him if anything happens.”

With a nod, the cop offered the haunted man a soft smile. “Why don’t you sit down, Barnes or Rogers?” He pressed the button, “Alert Wilson to come to the house. We’re sending one to the hospital and there was a possible attempted break in.”

Bucky didn’t move to sit down, instead he stared at Steve’s nearly unconscious form with large, worried eyes. He grabbed his arm and began to run his thumb over the burning skin beneath it.

Frowning again, the cop barked out, “name?”

“Bucky . . . uh - - James Barnes.” Bucky muttered, eyes still not leaving Steve’s body.

“Right. Mister Barnes. You need to get me any medicines you and your boyfriend are taking, got that? Right now.” He continued to order the distressed man sharply, having broken through his daze with his sharp voice once.

“I didn’t take nothin’.” Bucky murmured but moved to go get the medication like the policeman had asked.

The ambulance pulled up and a pair of EMTs came in with their rolling stretcher. They began checking over Steve, shooting questions at Hannah and the cop that neither could answer, then carefully moved the man to their stretcher, belting him in under a covering sheet. Steve still muttered the same phrase.

Coming back down the stairs, with the medication in hand, Bucky handed them over to the cop without a word.

The cop nodded. “You’re going to the hospital with him?” the man asked as he glanced over the meds. Blinking in shock, he reread the labels and asked, “he’s not taking these all, is he?”
Bucky looked over and nodded, “I think so?” He hugged his left arm to his chest, the fingers still twitching madly.

The man shook his head at the brunet. “A blood thinner and blood thickener? At the same time?” He growled low, pulling out a notebook and pen. “Who the hell is this doctor, anyway?” He began copying the information and quickly handed the four bottles to the EMT closest to him. “Mr. Barnes? Your boyfriend is in serious danger. These drugs counteract each other!”

The cop’s words seemed to process through Buck in slow motion, he continued to stare at Steve with a look of mixed horror and misery. “I - - I told him he needed to get a second opinion.” The brunet mumbled helplessly. His pale blue eyes unfocused slightly.

As another car pulled up, the initial cop looked relieved. “That should be Wilson. Look, you should go to the hospital with your boyfriend, Mr. Barnes.”

Detective Wilson rushed into the room; he looked at Steve in the stretcher with worried eyes, “What happened?!” He turned to look at Bucky, wincing slightly at the sight of a large bruise and three angry, raw scratch marks on his cheek; the brunet looked to be on a verge of another panic attack.

Steve whimpered now, “vi . . . do . . .” he tried to sluggishly move his arm when an EMT fought to put an IV in.

Sam turned back to Steve, “Vido?” The detective paused as if thinking over the word, “Video? What video, Steve?”

“larm?” he slurred and finally gave up, letting the EMT put the large bore needle into him.

With a shrug the cop said, “he’s been saying that the entire time I’ve been here. Their security alarm went off. First Mr. Barnes told me it was his neighbor, but she said it was a prowler.” He showed his notes about the meds and such to Sam. “And it looks like his doctor is trying to kill him or throw him in a coma.”

Shaking his head, Sam looked at the EMTs, “He going to be okay?”

One looked up at Sam’s words.”We’re flushing him out and putting activated charcoal in him to combat any toxins.” The man started wheeling the stretcher towards the ambulance outside. “Convince his friend to come along, if you can. He shouldn’t be alone.” The man didn’t make it clear whether he thought it was Steve or Bucky who shouldn’t be alone.

Sam turned back to Bucky and place a hand on the brunet’s shoulder, “Bucky . . . c’mon, snap outta it. Steve needs you.”

Suddenly Steve screamed, “No! Not leaving Bucky!” He tried to sluggishly fight.

At the sound of Steve’s scream, Bucky’s eyes refocused and he dropped his arm.

Sam winced and looked at the brunet. “Go, I’ll close this place up and follow as soon as I can.”

Bucky’s eyes hardened with determination and he nodded at the detective, “Thank you.” He mumbled and rushed out of the home to meet up with the EMTs.

Steve kept fighting, panting, as the EMTs held him down. “Can’t give him anything! Not with that cocktail in him!”

“Steve, baby . . . it’s okay, please calm down. I’m right here, I ain’t leaving you.” Bucky cooed
gently, but he didn’t touch Steve, not wanting to get in the way of the EMT’s.

Instantly Steve relaxed at Bucky’s voice. “Not leavin’ you, Buck,” he drawled.

“Oh, for the love of . . . you can sit in the back with us, but stay out of the way. Just, for Heaven’s sake, talk to him. We need him calm!” The EMT climbed into the back and guided the stretcher in as the other man pushed. Finally, locking it in place, the one outside the ambulance headed up front to slide behind the driver’s wheel. “Need a hand up,” the remaining EMT asked Bucky.

Bucky shook his head and climbed up into the ambulance, sitting down in the back corner trying to be as out of the way as possible.

Steve turned his head, looking at Bucky through half-lidded eyes. He sighed and muttered incoherently. The paramedic nodded and continued working, calling out information to the driver.

“It’s gonna be okay, Stevie. They’re gonna make you all better.” Bucky called out, still not touching Steve, afraid of inhibiting the EMT. “Just relax.”

“You need a doctor, too, sir?” the EMT asked, nodding his head towards Bucky’s face.

“No, I’m fine,” Bucky said immediately, eyes snapping to meet the EMT’s. “Just focus on him, please?”

With a shrug, the man nodded and monitored the patient’s vital signs. “Sir,” he answered. It took only minutes to get to the nearest rescue clinic and the ambulance pulled up in front of it. The EMTs actually unloaded Steve at the twenty-four hour clinic instead of taking him to the hospital. “C’mon, here’s his stop,” the one in the back said to Bucky.

Nodding, Bucky got out of the ambulance and followed the EMTs as they wheeled Steve in past the doors. The brunet hadn’t been to the doctor’s since Ava had gotten the flu; he tugged on his left sleeve and tried to make himself as small as possible while still following Steve.

A nurse hurried over and listened intently as the EMT gave Steve’s information, then accompanied the stretcher into the other room. A second nurse stepped next to Bucky and frowned softly. “No one else here at the moment. You can be seen immediately.”

“I’m fine . . . Steve needs me.” Bucky pleaded desperately, looking at the nurse with wide eyes.

“I can treat you at his bedside if you prefer,” she offered more than reasonably.

“I - - I don’t need treatment. I’m fine.” Bucky repeated, tugging on his sleeve.

“Fear of doctors or treatment is common,” she assured him, gently taking his hand. “Let me at least wash those scratches. A fight?”

“I guess you can say that,” Bucky mumbled, neck craning to see if he could see Steve.

The nurse guided Bucky into the room where Steve had been transferred to a regular ER bed. She sat Bucky on the rolling stool and pulled over a bottle of saline, a kidney dish, and some gauze. “Were you out drinking with your friend?” her voice was non-judgemental.

“I - - I don’t drink.” Bucky offered, eyes falling and staying on Steve. A couple of nurses worked diligently on the now unconscious man.

“His designated driver?” She smiled softly as she carefully began to clean the scratches. The blond was familiar, from high school maybe.
“We weren’t drinking,” Bucky supplied numbly, he hissed slightly as the nurse began to clean.

She continued working. “Some of these need stitches. You’re James Barnes, right?” She worked carefully but efficiently. “Happened around lunch time, by the healing so far?”

Bucky turned to look at the nurse for the first time; his mouth dropped open slightly, “Sharon Carter?”

She nodded, laughing softly. “Tapper. Sharon Tapper now.” She let him see the wedding and engagement set she wore on her left hand. “Neal married me two years ago, actually.” She tended his cheek quietly. “So, Steve’s grew up huh?” She sounded impressed, recalling the skinny, feisty youth Steve had been in school.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered quietly, he was so distracted by watching Steve he didn’t even notice as Sharon began to stitch up the wounds.

“You two were so good together. Everyone wondered if you were a couple.” The nurse reached for the saline again. “One more rinse and I’ll bandage the stitches.”

Bucky groaned, not wanting to see another medical bill in his mail box. He really couldn’t afford this trip to the clinic. He knew how these things worked, he’d probably be charged for the ride to the clinic too.

Finally, Sharon nodded. “All set, James. You’ll have some devilishly rakish scars to add to your already beautiful looks. Let me print you up the care instructions.” She turned to walk out.

Whimpering softly, Bucky wrapped his arms around himself. More scars? The brunet watched Steve intently, fingers wrapping tightly around his biceps.

Finally it seemed a doctor checked over Steve, consulting notes and he medicine bottles. He nodded, adjusting the flow of the IV bag and stepped back, making a note on the chart. Finally, he turned and offered Bucky a quick assessing glance. “So, are you the friend? Boyfriend? A stranger off the street?”

“Boyfriend?” Bucky’s quiet voice came out as a question.

“You don’t sound so sure,” the doctor tilted his head. He shrugged. “New relationship then.” He sat on a different chair. “Name’s Banner. Can you tell me, if you know, when he started seeing Doctor Connors? The man who prescribed the medicine?”

“I think he said . . . four years ago?” Bucky answered, curling into himself slightly.

With a nod, Doctor Banner wrote that down. “And did Mr. Rogers tell you what the medicine was for? Why he was prescribed them?”

“A heart condition . . . and for sleep, getting rid of nightmares . . . and anger issues? He doesn’t have anger issues, Doctor,” Bucky stated meekly.

“And what about a heart condition?” he asked, writing down what Bucky said, as if he took Bucky’s word as valuable.

“Said he kept fainting and whatnot . . . that’s when the doctor prescribed him those pills. I - - I don’t know . . . we just reconnected a little over a week ago.” Bucky muttered, fingers tightening around his arms. He couldn’t afford to freak out here; they’d admit him . . . he needed to stay focused.
“I know, it’s a lot to ask if your new boyfriend shared his medical past with you. But I can only hope to piece together as much as possible.” The doctor wrote down the information. Finally, he said, “do you know which medicine was the first he was put on? If he was assigned heart meds first or if the heart meds were after the other ones?”

“I - - I don’t know.” Bucky’s eyes fell and he licked his lips nervously.

Nodding, Doctor Banner put down the chart and pen. “Well, I’ll ask him when he wakes up.” He offered a small smile to Bucky.

Bucky looked up at Doctor Banner, “He’s gonna be okay, right?”

“Yes, you got him help quickly enough.” Doctor Banner nodded encouragingly. “That combination can be deadly, but we’ve got him flushed out and on medications to stabilize him. He should be awake in a couple of hours.” Leaning forward slightly, the doctor asked gently, “do you have any questions for me?”

“He didn’t have a heart condition before . . . does he, really?” Bucky asked, almost cautiously.

“Well, according to his EKG? He’s got a slight abnormality, which we can keep an eye on. He doesn’t need such serious drugs. Maybe not any, in fact.” The doctor nodded. “It looks like he has a murmur, which he would have been born with, but it’s not usually something too serious and can be handled with low maintenance.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, he clenched his fingers tighter to keep himself from shaking.

Doctor Banner’s eyes followed Bucky’s movements. “I have it listed that your boyfriend has a restraining order? It’s not on you, is it?” The doctor’s voice came gently.

Bucky whimpered, a soft, pitiful sound. “No! I’d never hurt him . . . it’s against his ex and his ex’s friend.”

“Good.” The doctor nodded. “And his ex is the one who took him to Doctor Connors, maybe?” Bruce made a note in the chart once more.

“Yes, sir.” Bucky answered quietly.

“Well,” standing, the doctor gestured to the sleeping man. “We treated his leg wound and hands. The stuff we put on his palms is kind of like a false skin and should help his body replace what he’s lost. His leg should’ve been stitched but since it wasn’t, we packed it with gauze and will be tending it while it heals from the inside out.” He turned a smile on Bucky.

“It kept bleeding. I - - I tried to help. I was gonna take him to the doctor in the morning.” Bucky repeated, his foot tapped nervously against the floor in an effort to distract him from his flaring arm.

“Bleeding that much isn’t good. The blood thinner he was taking was a higher dose than the coagulant, so he was prone to bleed. But, it did do the service of keeping the wounds clean.” Doctor Banner nodded. “I believe you. He seems pretty healthy, in fact. You’ve taken good care of him.” Stepping closer, Doctor Banner asked “may I?”

Bucky’s eyes snapped to meet Banner’s, he shook his head and curled up further into himself, “I’m . . . fine.” He offered quietly.

The doctor sighed and shook his head. “What’s the problem,” he asked gently. “Are you afraid of me? The clinic?”
Shaking his head slightly, Bucky flushed and looked away.

“No insurance?” the doctor hazarded.

“Crappy insurance,” Bucky muttered helplessly.

“Ah . . . what’s your name? I’m Bruce,” the doctor continued in a gentle tone, carefully taking Bucky’s right wrist, fingers on his pulse point.

“James Barnes . . . you - - you can call me Bucky,” Bucky mumbled as he reluctantly let Bruce help him.

“Thank you, Bucky, for your trust.” He smiled and let go of the wrist to move his hands gently to Bucky’s left arm, sliding his sleeve up to look at the injuries. “Do you know where you are, Bucky?”

“A clinic?” Bucky offered.

With a nod, Bruce softly said, “can you remove your shirt, please, so I can see these better? I know a few things about old burns.” He pulled his chair over and sat on Bucky’s level. “And do you know the name of the clinic you’re at right now, Bucky?”

Bucky stared at the doctor for a few minutes, his eyes moved over to Steve’s sleeping form and then snapped back to Bruce. With a shaky breath, the lean brunet took off his long-sleeved shirt and let it fall to the floor in a heap.

Seeming satisfied with the concession, Bruce began unbandaging Bucky’s arm and looking over the scars, scratches, and open wounds. “Do you scratch when you are anxious?”

“The scars start crawlin’ . . . like there are bugs under the skin.” Bucky wished to pull away his arm but he didn’t.

“To crawl,” Bruce repeated with a nod. “Very much psychosomatic anxiety condition, Bucky. You already know that, don’t you? You feel anxious or pressured or scared and your body demands attention by acting like your arm’s on fire or healing wrong. When, in reality, except for the new scratches, it healed some . . . three years ago?”

“Doctors said I was lucky to keep my arm . . . a beam fell on it.” Bucky’s eyes fell again and he flushed in embarrassment at having his arm on display.

“Yes, you were. And now you’ve gotten so much better after those burns and that muscle injury. Did it burn to the bone? I don’t think so,” he answered himself, “or the pain would be intense all the time.” He nodded and let Bucky’s arm go briefly while he turned for supplies to treat the new wounds. “I’ll prescribe you a very mild anxiety medicine, Bucky. You should take it with meals, regularly. It will help settle your nerves a bit.” He looked at him. “Nothing drastic, you’ll still get stressed and worried and all the other emotions you normally would get. But it will help calm the underlying worry so you can deal better with the bigger things you’re facing right now.” Bruce finished sealing the bandages and started putting supplies into a bag. “You can come here to get refills.”

“I - - I can’t afford any medication, Doctor Banner . . . my insurance won’t cover it.” Bucky blushed deeper and his voice barely came above a whisper.

Shaking his head, Bruce sighed and smiled. “My silliness. I forgot to tell you. You are in the Maria Stark Free Clinic. It’s specifically designed to help people in protective custody or under
protective orders. It is totally free, paid for by the Howard Stark trust.” He smiled gently. “As awful as the thought is, as long as that protective order remains active, you will receive full free treatment here, as well as your dependants. Mr. Stark designated it after a stalker killed his wife at a public emergency room.”

Bucky’s mouth dropped open and he shook his head; snapping his jaw shut the brunet listened to what the doctor had to say.

“The restraining order is the reason those EMTs brought your boyfriend to this clinic instead of a hospital, Bucky.” Bruce stood. “I hope that helps relieve some of your worries so you can concentrate on getting better and taking care of him. We can send in a cot for the night if you want?”

“I can’t leave him,” Bucky muttered as his eyes moved to look over at Steve again.

“A cot it is,” Bruce confirmed. “And a hot meal, perhaps? You look like you could use something to eat now you might be able to hold it down?” He smiled. “Tomorrow, you’ll be meeting with Mr. Tony Stark, Howard’s surviving son, to review your case. If he thinks you’re legit, and the detective waiting in the hall can certainly back you up, he’ll make sure you’re both taken care of medically, in honor of his mother.” Bruce nodded, picking up Steve’s chart. “Any questions?”

Bucky shook his head, “No . . . thank you? I - - I haven’t had a doctor look at my arm since I was released from the hospital.”

“Tomorrow, if you’d like, I can do a complete check up for you? But I think tonight you’ll want food and rest more than me prodding?” He smiled gently, his voice having never raised above a soft tone the entire time.

“Should I speak to Detective Wilson first?” Bucky asked, his body felt exhausted but his mind still ran a mile a minute . . . he couldn’t sleep if he tried right now.

“That is your choice. I can deny him the room if you wish, or I can send him in. What would you like to do, Bucky?” He leaned forward slightly, “your life is in your control now. You don’t have to give control to anyone . . .” Quickly thinking of something, he added softly, “do you want to arrange counseling for your boyfriend? You said his ex is the one who did this? Or even for yourself?”

“Yeah . . . counseling would be good for him.” Bucky answered, looking over at Steve again.

Bruce didn’t push. He merely nodded, made some notes and excused himself. A moment later, Sam walked in, clearing his throat.

“Hey?” He glanced over Steve and Bucky, whose shirt was still heaped on the floor. “Wanna talk?”

Bucky’s eyes snapped to look over at Sam, the brunet leaned down to pick up his shirt but didn’t move to put it back on. “Can they be arrested? They broke the restraining order.”

“We’ve got the video of Rollins trying to break in the downstairs window, so yeah, he’s going down. And we’ve got to do measurements for the distance of the car Rumlow stood next to. Was he on the phone with you? Could we check phone records? If so, he broke the order by contacting you, Bucky.”

Bucky nodded, “He called me using Steve’s phone.”

“Damn, then it’ll be harder proving it was Rumlow on the line.” He frowned.
Turning to face Sam, Bucky whispered, “Steve always records his phone calls . . . if you can get the phone - - maybe the whole thing was recorded?”

Sam nodded and jotted something down in his notebook. “I’ll see if Rollins has the phone on him. We’ve already got Captain Fury down arresting him. Thank God we got that call from . . .” he eyed Bucky and said, “Mr. Grant.”

“How told me,” Bucky said softly, looked back at his boyfriend, “Rumlow is after his money now . . . seven million dollars, apparently.”

“Damn!” Sam swore, shocked. “Yeah, Roger Grant sold to some of the biggest names for three years. I never put the math together, though.” He notated his book again.

“The longer Rumlow is out . . . he’s - - dangerous, Detective.” Bucky said.

“Did Steve sign any papers for Rumlow to access his money, Bucky?” The dark eyed detective looked up, concerned.

The door opened and Bruce came in with two pills and a small cup of water. “Your dose, Bucky. Should take only the edge off. Don’t worry. It’s not a mood inhibitor or anything. Won’t even make you sleepy,” he assured.

Bucky took the cup of water and pills with a thankful smile to the kind doctor. Swallowing them down with a sip of water, the brunet sagged slightly in his chair.

Bruce nodded. “Why don’t you look up your med on the internet if you’re worried.” He smiled, inadvertently reminding Bucky to look up Steve’s as well. The doctor left, shutting the door quietly.

“I think the only thing Rumlow doesn’t have access to is Steve’s inheritance from his mother,” Bucky answered the detective’s earlier question.

Sam nodded. “As soon as you can, you both need to work on getting Rumlow shut out of Steve’s accounts and get him evicted from Steve’s apartment. He owns that half of the floor in that building, so he can easily get Rumlow removed if he signs the right forms.”

“I don’t know when they’ll discharge him . . . but I’ll take him to the bank as soon as I can. As well as the apartment complex.” Bucky nodded and ran his fingers, which had stopped shaking, through his hair.

With a smile, Sam nodded, noting Bucky’s calming demeanor. “Good. The landlord can’t stop you, if Steve signs the papers, since he doesn’t own that apartment.” Looking over at the sleeping blond, Sam asked, “Ava okay? Steve refused to tell me anything more than you’ve got her safe with friends.” He looked at Bucky with worried eyes.

“I don’t know how much she completely understands . . . but she’s safe. I can’t risk her being at home, even with the security system, when Rumlow is watching the place. He said he isn’t after her . . . but after I help Steve remove Brock’s access to the accounts and the apartment,” Bucky grimaced, “He’s gonna be pretty upset. I am not risking her safety . . . until that bastard is locked up . . . I can’t risk her being home.”

The detective nodded and leaned towards the brunet. “Look, I’m working this as hard as I can. As I told steve, the chief thinks it’s a bunch of bull and wouldn’t assign me help . . . or let me access the FBI.” He shook his head. “But with Fury back, I’ve got help now. We’ll find something on this guy.” Pausing, glancing at Steve, Sam asked softly, “think Steve’ll press charges on Rumlow
Bucky winced at the thought of the footage showing how Steve got that nasty wound. “I can try to convince him. . . but I’m not sure.” He shook his head, “Rumlow messed him up pretty bad. . . I’m worried that if Brock plays his cards right. . . Steve’ll go back to him. . . even after everything that asshole did to him.”

“What do you think Rumlow can say or do to get him to return, Bucky?” Sam asked, interested.

“While I was asleep the other day. . . Rumlow called me again and Steve answered. Brock apologized and begged for Steve to come back. . . Steve even told the asshole that he was staying with me. . . I don’t know a whole lot about abusive relationships but. . .” Bucky looked over at Steve, biting his lip gently, “Rumlow had complete control over Steve for years.”

“Abusers control their victim completely if possible. Some lock up food, control the phone, refuse visits with family. The victim believes he or she isn’t worth independent thought or behavior, eventually believing the abuse and derogatory behavior. Steve, if the relationship is true to standard, probably is convinced that Rumlow was the best he could do, and is probably in shock that you even want him around. He’s probably waiting for you to start acting just like Rumlow, because that’s all Steve knows. He expects to be hit, have food withheld, have any conversations monitored, have his phone monitored if he even gets a new one. He probably expects you to rape him, too, going by that footage I’ve seen.”

Bucky grimaced, thinking about Steve and his earlier conversation, at the mention of ‘rape’ Bucky growled protectively.

“He was in the relationship since the second year of college? So, he was maybe nineteen or twenty and never had a normal, healthy relationship? Then he expects all relationships to be this way, Bucky. It’s a big load taking on his baggage, too.”

“I’m not exactly the easiest person to be with either. . . we all have baggage,” Bucky murmured looking at the blond with sad eyes.

“But the thing is, Bucky, that’s not going to shake Steve. He’s had worse . . . far worse. He’s been raped and brutalized and been cut by a knife while being threatened. I’ve pulled his medical file, and his broken hands? Brock ordered him to lay his hands on the sill and slammed the window three or four times. Broke every bone in both hands. The guy only got out of traction and braces just before starting work at the museum, for another of Brock’s friends.”

Bucky flinched, imagining Steve holding his hands under the window sill and letting his hands be broken. “I - - I don’t understand. He’s bigger than Brock . . . why didn’t he fight back?”

“Victims think they’re in love, and so Steve did all that out of loyalty. But, if he’s switched his loyalty to you, then he’d do the same for you. He’ll do anything he can to make you happy and comfortable, and Brock’ll have to find something extremely earth shattering to draw him back.” Sam sighed. “He was a scrawny teen, right? Maybe Brock was the first one to call him beautiful? I don’t know. I’m not a psychiatrist.”

Bucky sighed, “I called him beautiful in high school and he shoved me so hard I had a bruise on my chest for a week.”

Sam frowned. “Like I said, I don’t know. Maybe he didn’t believe you? Maybe he thought you were messing around? He needs mental help, Bucky. And the doctor can probably explain it to you better.”
Nodding, Bucky slumped, the long day catching up with him. His body ached and he wished he could sleep for years.

A knock came on the door and two interns brought a cot in, unfolding it and making it neatly. Sharon walked in with a tray of food. “Here, James. Have dinner and rest.” She looked at the detective. “It’s past visiting hours. You can come back tomorrow?”

Sam stood and nodded. “Bucky? You okay with me leaving?”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded as he slipped on his shirt again, “I don’t think Brock will know where this place is . . . he left before the ambulance got there. We should be safe. You need rest, too, Detective.”

With a smile, Sam said “I didn’t get to mention this place last time we talked, but I wanted to. They have security around the clock on both doors here.” The detective offered his hand for a shake then left, trailed by the interns.

Sharon smiled at Bucky. “Eat. Leave the tray on that table. We’ll clean it up tomorrow while we clean the room. That’ll happen when Steve is brought to therapy for his leg.” She walked to the door.

Bucky nodded and looked at the food, a steaming bowl of stew and a fresh roll, apparently homemade. Slowly, the brunet finished off the plate and when he was finished he set it on the table. Walking over to the cot, Bucky laid down, fully clothed and curled up on his side. He looked over at his sleeping boyfriend and cautiously, afraid of hurting the blond, reached over with his left hand and took Steve’s limp hand.

“Love you, Stevie.” Bucky murmured, he didn’t let go of Steve as he let his eyes shut.

***********

Steve’s eyes fluttered open and he stretched, wincing, looking around, his memory foggy. He looked down at the cot beside him and frowned, but kept holding Bucky’s hand. Not wanting to waken the man to ask what was going on, he let his eyes slowly close as he continued to watch his boyfriend. Every sound from the hall sent Steve’s eyes flying open, and finally he gave up, watching instead as light changed under the doorway to dark and, hours later, while Steve held Bucky’s hand in his bandaged one, turned back to bright. A soft knock sounded but Steve stayed quiet, unsure if they were in a safe spot and not wanting to draw attention to his defenseless boyfriend.

Bucky stirred slightly but didn’t wake, only tightening his hold on Steve’s hand slightly.

Steve whimpered at the grip on his injured hand. Softly, he called “Bucky? Where are we?” He didn’t take his hand away.

Bruce opened the door and nodded. “Sorry to wake you, but it’s time for your morning check, Mr. Rogers. Mr. Barnes.”

“Where are we?” Steve asked louder.

“The Maria Stark Free Clinic,” Bruce responded.

At his name being called, Bucky shot up, his hair sticking out wildly in different directions, and looked over at Steve. “Stevie?” His voice was slightly raspy due to just waking up.

“Right here, Buck,” the blond replied instantly.
Bucky blinked a couple times, the events of the day before crashing down on him. He looked over at Bruce. “Mornin’ Doc.” The brunet scrambled to sit cross-legged on the cot, still holding Steve’s hand but in a soft grip.

“Breakfast,” the new nurse said, lifting a rather large looking covered tray. “We don’t know about dietary restrictions, so took a chance with eggs and toast and some bacon?”

“Good morning, Bucky. Sleep well?” Bruce offered a smile.

“Not allowed bacon,” Steve muttered, still leaving his pain-filled hand in Bucky’s grip.

The blond nurse put the tray on a table and pushed the button to make Steve’s bed rise. “My name’s Kestrel Riley. I’ll be your day nurse and help you with physical therapy and bathing and other stuff.” He offered a smile and transferred the tray to a flat, rolling table that both patients could reach. “Mr. Stark will be here in an hour or so to meet the new arrivals.”

Steve looked confused and turned to Bucky for guidance.

“We’re at a clinic . . . uh - - for people with restraining orders - -” Bucky stated but was quickly cut off.

“There’s such a thing?” Steve’s eyes opened wide and he smiled slowly. “That means you can get help, Bucky? For your arm?”

Sheepish, Bucky nodded and cleared his throat.

Bruce smiled. “After breakfast, Nurse Riley will help you both get cleaned up and into fresh clothes. Scrubs okay or do you prefer johnnies?” His voice sounded teasing.

“Scrubs are fine,” Bucky smirked and dropped Steve’s hand to lean forward and grab a single piece of bacon off the plate. “Doc Banner gave me somethin’ for my anxiety, Stevie. Says it’ll help with the scratching.”

Steve immediately brought his hand to his lap, eyes becoming less strained. He picked up one of the forks and carefully tried to feed himself. Looking up startled, Steve frowned. “But won’t it knock you out? I mean, anxiety meds are pretty strong . . .”

“About that, Mr. Rogers,” Bruce said gently, “we’ll be reviewing your medicines and re-evaluating what you need to take and what you no longer should be on.”

Steve frowned, confused but nodding. “If you’re the doctor Bucky says I should see for my second opinion, okay.”

After finishing the piece of bacon, Bucky reached over and grabbed a piece of toast off the tray. “Doctor Banner is real nice, Stevie. He’ll help you out.” The brunet bit into the toast, much different from the small appetite he’d been displaying over the last few days.

Steve nodded and began to eat cautiously again. Finally, he looked up, puzzled. “You’re not showing me your credentials and awards?”

“Do you want me to?” Bruce asked, sounding gently curious. “Is that what Dr. Connors did?”

With a nod, the tall blond said, “that’s what Brock made him do, to prove he was a legitimate doctor.”

“Doctor Banner is good, Steve.” Bucky said softly after he swallowed the bite he’d been chewing.
Steve looked at Bucky and nodded, falling silent, accepting Bucky’s word for it.

Suddenly, Bucky sat up straighter, “Shit! What time is it?” The brunet looked around the room for a clock.

“It’s six in the morning,” Doctor Banner replied calmly.

“I need to open the shop . . . I never called Clint to say that I wouldn’t be in.” Bucky looked slightly flustered as he ran a hand through his hair, trying to pat down the wild strands.

“Do you need a phone?” Bruce asked, reaching into his pocket to retrieve his own phone. He offered it, quickly tapping in his password.

Bucky patted his own pockets and realized he must’ve left his own phone at home; with a grateful nod the lean brunet took Bruce’s phone. “Thanks.” Bucky rose to his feet and left the room to make the call to Clint.

A perfectly wide awake reply to the first ring came. “Yes?”

“Hey, Clint. I - - I don’t think I’ll be able to make it today.” Bucky paced in the brightly lit hallway.

“Are you okay, Buck? Are you hurt?” The store owner sounded worried.

“Steve had to be taken to the hospital last night . . . he - - uh . . . might have accidentally overdosed on some pretty heavy tranquilizers.” The brunet winced when his fingers caught on a tangle as he ran his fingers through his hair.

“How the hell did he get ahold of tranquilizers?” Clint asked, surprised. “Do you need me to come down there? Give you a ride or anything?”

Bucky sighed, “Brock’s doctor prescribed them to him.”

“Bastard,” Clint’s voice dropped softly to a near whisper. He raised his voice again. “Are you at the hospital right now, Bucky?

“Yeah . . . it’s more like a clinic? The Maria Stark Free Clinic?” Bucky offered.

“Yeah,” Clint said, “heard of that. A place for people in danger, I think.” He made a few clicking or tapping noises then asked “they able to help Steve?”

“They’re flushing his system and giving him drugs to counteract all the shit he’d been taking.” Bucky released a deep breath, quietly, almost a whisper, he added, “Brock and Rollins were at the house last night, Clint.”

“Yeah?” Clint asked, as if he wasn’t hearing anything surprising in the least. “Well, I don’t think you gotta worry about the one guy, Bucky. He’s been locked up. It was across the news this morning that some cop was caught for stealing evidence and trying to break into houses.” Clint whispered something to someone nearby then spoke into the phone again, “name of Rollins, Nat says.”

Grimacing, Bucky knew Brock would be livid . . . without a man on the inside of the force, Rumlow would lose a lot of his power. “Jack Rollins,” Bucky leaned up against the wall and ran his free hand down his face.

“Jack . . . Johnathan . . . yeah, Jack’s a nickname for Jonathan, right?” Clint asked, shuffling
“No. . . the bastard is smart. He hid behind Rollins and used Steve’s phone to call me. . . . so it’d be hard to actually prove that he’s the one contacting me. He didn’t get close enough to the house last night to break the restraining order, either.” Despite getting the most sleep he’d gotten in a few days, Bucky still felt exhausted and his stitches throbbed dully.

“Well, he’ll screw up soon, Buck. Just be careful. Nat said to take some time with Steve while the guy’s in the hospital. We’ll work things out later for coverage.” Clint made another noise and the unmistakable sound of the cash registering being brought online came over the phone.

“Thank you,” Bucky breathed in relief, “How was Ava after we left? I hope she wasn’t too upset.”

“Well, she was a bit unhappy, said something about you needing kisses and a tower or something.” Clint moved to another location of the store, “but I promised she could come in this morning so she stopped pouting. She’s brought Chester and a couple other toys and has them set up in the children’s section with Lucky.”

Bucky nodded and pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to sort through his thoughts. “Thank you guys, again. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Look, Bucky, we do want something in return.” Clint paused then barrelled on, “Nat and I want to know why he freaked out when we offered him the mural job.”

“Well,” Bucky paused to take a deep breath, “Last year, Brock broke both his hands by slamming them over and over again under a window sill. Steve just got out of braces and whatnot just over a month ago . . . I guess he hasn’t really done art since. He doesn’t believe he’s good anymore.”

“Damn bastard,” Clint breathed under his breath, but the sensitive microphone on the phone picked it up. “Okay, I’ll let Nat know. You take care of him and see if you can maybe get here for lunch or something to eat with your girl, okay? She’d really like that.”

Bucky felt a pang of guilt swarmed in his chest. He nodded and said softly, “Yeah, I’ll try to make it.”

“Hey, Buck. If you can’t come, don’t hesitate to call. Hearing your voice calms her down. In fact,” Clint paused and asked, “you wanna talk to her a few minutes right now?”

“Please?” Bucky muttered.

“Gotcha,” Clint said back then apparently pulled the phone away from his face to call out, “Ava? Some guy wants to talk to you. Should I tell him to get lost? He says his name’s Bucky?”

Bucky could hear Ava shout something, followed by the sounds of her feet running over to Clint. “Uncle Bucky! Let me talk to him!”

Clint apparently passed the phone.

“Uncle Bucky!” Ava squealed into the phone; Bucky could practically hear her beaming smile.

“Good morning, Squirt. How did you sleep?” Bucky asked, a small smile making its way onto his lips from hearing his niece’s voice.

“Good, Uncle Bucky. Chester stayed up all night watching so I didn’t have any bad dreams.” The little girl’s voice sounded full of energy. “Did you sleep good?”
“Sure did,” Bucky said, “Chester must be real tired, you didn’t have any bad dreams though?”

“Not even one. Auntie Nat says leopards don’t mind staying awake at night, so Chester’s sleeping now in the beanbag chair.” The girl seemed to be moving something, and Clint’s soft grunt came, indicating he’d picked her up to put her on the counter. “Did Steve sleep good?”

Bucky paused, not sure how to answer the question. He didn’t want to scare Ava by telling her Steve had been taken to the hospital. “Yeah,” The brunet didn’t know if it was a lie or not, “But he’s still feeling a little sick. I had to take him to the doctor last night.”

“Did the doctor make Steve feel better, Uncle Bucky?” Ava seemed suddenly very interested.

The brunet turned to look at the shut door of Steve’s room, “Yeah, I think so, Squirt. But Steve may have to stay with the doctor for a few more days to get all better.”

“So his eye and hands and leg won’t hurt any more?” She asked, proving just how observant the little girl had been.

“Exactly,” Bucky smiled softly.

“And is the doctor making you feel better, too? So your neck feels better?” Ava referred to Bucky’s habit of rubbing the back of his neck, apparently having translated the nervous habit as pain.

Bucky closed his eyes and released a shaky breath, “Yeah, Squirt. The doctor is making me feel better, too.”

“Good,” she said firmly. “Uncle Clint’s getting breakfast for us at the store. Are you coming later? Please?” Ava asked, her voice dropping a bit at the plea. “I’ll be good, I promise!”

“Oh, Ava,” Bucky had to push down the whimper that wanted to break past his lips, “Squirt, you aren’t staying with Uncle Clint and Auntie Nat because you’ve been bad . . . you know that.”

“I know that,” Ava assured her uncle. “I’m with them so the bad man doesn’t steal me. Steve already told me.” The girl paused, “but if, maybe, you want to come and think I’ll be bad to make Steve feel bad, I promise I won’t?” Where she’d ever come up with that idea wasn’t clear.

“I’ll try my hardest to see you at lunchtime, okay?” Bucky offered, guilt crashing through him in waves.

“Oh,” Ava chirruped happily. “I’ll save you a chair.” She paused then added in a firm voice, “And I’ll make sure Auntie Nat saves a chair for Steve, Uncle Bucky. We like him.”

Bucky smiled, if only Steve could hear that. “I don’t know how long Steve needs to stay at the doctor’s, Squirt. But I’m sure he’ll really like that you’re saving him a seat.”

As if thinking over that, Ava suddenly surprised him by saying, “Okay, then you can bring him lunch from the store, right? The doctor will let him eat food . . . not sick people food?” She moved on the other side. “Uncle Clint said we’re going to have Strawberry Shortcake for dessert.”

“Well, I can’t miss that, can I?” Bucky laughed softly, straightening off the wall, the brunet added in a more serious tone, “I love you, Squirt.”

“Oh, Uncle Bucky. Uncle Clint says I gotta go.” She paused then added quickly, “Oh! Uncle Bucky? I love you so much!”
“I love you, too, Ava.” Bucky smiled again and waited for either the phone to disconnect or for it to be handed back to Clint.

“Howdy, Buck,” Clint’s voice came after a moment. “So, if you can’t come, try to call, okay?”

“I promise to call if I can’t make it.” Bucky reassured his friend.

“Good, if you need to, Buck, use the alarm feature on your phone, okay? Never hurts to have a reminder.”

“I won’t forget, Clint, I promise. By then I’ll be practically running out of here . . . you know I don’t care for hospitals.” Bucky said seriously.

“Hey, Buck, between you and me, okay? The ladies are in the kid’s section and can’t hear. Are you doing all this for Steve because you wanna rescue him? Or is he really worth this?” Clint’s voice came as a whisper.

Bucky froze at the question, having been thrown off-guard. After a few tense moments, Bucky sighed and said firmly, “He’s worth it, Clint. He’s worth everything.”

“So you guys sorted out high school, then?” Clint sounded satisfied. “Good. We are all idiots in high school.” Finally, Clint raised his voice back to normal. “Well, Nat’s come in to give me the evil eye. I’m on register until the twins arrive. See ya for lunch, Buck.”

“See you then.” Bucky said back.

Clint turned off the phone.

Bucky took a deep breath and shook himself, before turning around and walking back into Steve’s room. The brunet offered Bruce back the phone, “Thanks again, Doc.”

“Of course. Finish your breakfast. Steve’s already done, and Nurse Riley will be wanting to bring you both to physical therapy so that you can learn what to do to help Steve recover from his leg and hand wounds.” Bruce smiled softly.

Taking another piece of bacon, Bucky looked over at Steve and smiled.

The tall blond was seated in a wheelchair on a pillow, dressed in a hospital gown. Smiling, Steve kept his hands loose in his lap, actually looking relaxed despite his confusing wake up that morning. “Doctor Banner explained a few things while you made your call . . . things that made a lot of sense.” He shrugged and flushed lightly. “I’m sorry I panicked?” For the first time, Steve sounded more casual than ashamed.

Bruce nodded. “We’ve also given him the first of his new medications. And your’s is right by the plate, Bucky.” Bruce smiled. “I’ll be back after therapy, with Mr. Stark.”

Bucky finished his piece of bacon before picking up the pills and swallowing them down with a sip of juice. He’d be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t nervous about meeting with Tony Stark . . . the man was a billionaire!

Bruce nodded. “We’ve also given him the first of his new medications. And your’s is right by the plate, Bucky.” Bruce smiled. “I’ll be back after therapy, with Mr. Stark.”

Bucky finished his piece of bacon before picking up the pills and swallowing them down with a sip of juice. He’d be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t nervous about meeting with Tony Stark . . . the man was a billionaire!

The brunet remembered his promise to Clint and Ava, “Will the meeting be done in time for lunch? I - - I gotta see my little girl.”

Nodding, Bruce assured him, “Tony’ll be around about eight, so you’ll have plenty of time to meet with him before lunch. If you need to leave the clinic, we can call a security guard to accompany you? You came in an ambulance, so don’t have your car right now, but you can
always bring it back and park in the garage next door. It’s reserved for staff and patients.”

“The shop isn’t too far from here . . . I can walk. I’ll have Clint or Nat drop me off at the house so I can grab some things after lunch,” Bucky said.

Nodding, Bruce headed for the door. “I’ll be back, then. Relax if you can. Concentrate on getting better.” He paused as he opened the door and turned, softly stating, “if you have dependants, Bucky, Steve, they can be screened and allowed into the clinic. We have family suites for people who are kept for a long term basis.”

Bucky wanted to be with Ava again; he missed her terribly, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to move her again. Clint and Natasha’s home was familiar to her; she felt safe there.

The doctor let himself from the small room as the nurse turned his green eyes on Bucky. “You didn’t eat much?” His voice came out pleasant and soothing, not judgemental.

“I’m not all that hungry,” Bucky said honestly as he shrugged.

With a nod, the nurse reached down to unlock the brake on Steve’s wheelchair. “Well, then we’ll go to therapy. When you get back, if you’re hungry, I can get you something or show you where the cafeteria is.” He began wheeling the larger blond from the room, stopping stock still at the sight of the dark-skinned detective standing in the hall in front of the room. Licking his lips, appearing suddenly nervous, the nurse’s eyes widened and he practically whispered, “may I help you?”

Sam smiled. “I’m here for these boys, actually,” he said to the nurse. “But I can wait.”

“Is something wrong, Sam?” Bucky asked quickly.

“No. I just wanted to inform you that Jack Rollins was arrested earlier this morning, and several pieces of stolen evidence were found in his apartment. Brock Rumlow, who was in the apartment, is being held on questioning for twenty-four hours.”

“Steve’s phone?” Bucky asked hopefully, knowing that if they’d recovered the phone there was a chance that Rumlow could be taken down as well.

“Yeah,” Sam sighed. “Back in evidence and being looked over by forensics. I told them to keep an eye out for any recordings. The Chief seemed put out, but didn’t interfere . . . yet.”

“If you can prove that Brock called me last night . . . he’ll get arrested, right?” Bucky questioned.

“Yes,” Sam stated firmly. “Fury’s keeping an eye on the forensics people so the phone doesn’t go missing or anything.” The detective seemed to feel things were looking up as he offered a smile. “If you need to run around and do things, today’s the perfect day to do it because Brock is locked away.”

Bucky nodded, feeling slightly relieved that he wouldn’t have to worry about Rumlow while he walked to the bookstore or had lunch with Ava. “Good, I hope the call was recorded last night. That way Brock goes down.”

“He might go down for more than breaking a restraining order, Bucky, Steve,” Sam assured, offering an absent smile to the patiently waiting nurse. “You see, we’re checking out those meds, and one of them is illegal in the United States . . . so, Doctor Connors is being investigated.”

Steve’s eyes opened wider and he asked softly, almost fearfully, “one of my meds?”
Sam nodded. “Yeah. I’m afraid so. The symptoms are horrible and it can be deadly.”

“It’s the Xenafanol, isn’t it?” Bucky hazard, shooting Steve a concerned look before looking back at Sam, “I thought I may have heard that name before . . . I think I might have seen a news report on it or something.”

The cop nodded and ran a hand through his dark curls. “Yeah, it’s the Xenafanol. It’s an experimental tranquilizer that is known to cause a normal person to manifest manic-depressive or bipolar tendencies as well as causing erratic bouts of near-coma like sleeps.”

Steve went pale and closed his vibrant blue eyes, hands clutching the wheelchair arms despite his still painful burns. “Doctor Connors gave me something that dangerous?”

Bucky knelt down in front of Steve and placed a hand on Steve’s knee, he began to rub his thumb soothingly across the skin. “He’ll be arrested for that, Stevie. Or at the very least . . . he’ll get his medical license revoked.”

“Hate to say it, but he had two opposite drugs on your list, too. They kept fighting each other and could have contributed to your collapse last night.” Sam frowned softly, watching the pale man in the wheelchair shake his head, lips pursed. “The lab is checking the last one since it doesn’t match the appearance of any other medicine we’ve got listed . . . especially Lithium, as the bottle claimed it to be.”

Bucky looked up at Steve with concern, the brunet continued to run his fingers over the blond’s skin.

“And . . . and Doctor Connors did this on purpose?” Steve let his eyes open at last, his voice faint. “I . . . I have to change my next of kin forms!” The blond seemed to just realize this. “I need to change my life insurance and everything.”

“Baby . . . we’ll get all that stuff taken care of once you’re better. Just focus on healing right now,” Bucky cooed gently.

“Bucky . . . I think Brock was . . . trying to . . .” he dropped into silence, bringing his hands to cover his face.

Bucky sighed softly and nodded, although Steve couldn’t see the sign of agreement. “But he’s out of your life, Stevie. He can’t hurt you anymore. I won’t let him.”

Slowly, Steve lifted his head and studied Bucky. With a nod, he dropped his hands and took a deep, slow breath. “I need the therapy . . . ” he whispered.

The nurse turned the chair without further words with the cop and pushed Steve towards a gymnasium set close by.

Bucky stood up, he looked over at Sam, “Thank you for stopping by, Sam.”

The detective nodded and sighed. “I wish it was better news, but I thought you should know.”

Bucky paused and looked out the door where he could see Riley pushing Steve down the hall, “So what’s with you and the nurse? The guy paled when he saw you?”

Sam shook his head, flushing slightly. “Don’t know him, actually. Never met him before.” Sam looked after the attractive blond nurse.

The brunet made a small noise, “Maybe you should ask for his number?” Bucky suggested with a
small smirk, looking much like the cocky teenager he used to be.

With a flush barely registering on his dark skin, the detective looked at Bucky. “You think?” He shook himself. “He . . . he’s awfully cute,” Sam said with a hint of nervous interest in his voice.

“Don’t let him get away, Detective.” Bucky called out in a friendly tone as he began to walk down the hall towards the gym where Riley had taken Steve. “Trust me . . . nothing hurts more than that.”

Looking thoughtful, Sam nodded, watching as Bucky walked into the therapy room.

Steve looked over, lying on his side on one of the long padded tables. Riley helped him to work on his strength in the injured leg but was being careful of the packed wound.

Bucky stepped closer to where Steve and Riley were, watching the process of the nurse working out his boyfriend’s leg.

The nurse sent a smile to Bucky and called, “come on over. You can help him do this, you know. After the leg, we’ll work his hands. He has some fine motor control, but it looks like some older injury’s keeping him from full use.”

Cautiously, Bucky made his way over to the table, “I - -I don’t wanna hurt him.”

“Which is why I’ll show you how. Physical therapy goes better with a loved one helping out.” Riley gestured for Bucky to step right up as Steve smiled and flushed slightly. “Now, put your hands right here. You’re only helping support his weight as he moves his leg. There’s not real work out for the leg, just keeping it active while he’s on bed rest for the next few days, so he doesn’t lose a lot of muscle tone.”

Bucky slowly moved his hands to where Riley had shown him, and Steve began to once more stretch and bend his leg carefully, never taking his eyes from Bucky’s face. Softly, the blond said, “they changed your bandages?”

Flicking his eyes to look over at Steve, Bucky nodded once, trying to keep his eyes off of his boyfriend’s ass. Steve’s hospital gown opened in the back and he wore no underwear. Bucky cleared his throat, “Yeah . . . had to get stitches, actually. Sharon said I’m gonna have some more scars.” Bucky tried not to let the bitterness he felt leak into his tone.

Worry creased Steve’s face as his eyes roved Bucky’s face, especially his bandages. Finally, he said, “she was lost and scared, Bucky. She didn’t mean it . . . not on a good day. She . . .” he fell silent and sighed, eyes troubled. He didn’t seem to register that Bucky mentioned scarring.

Bucky shrugged softly, “I know she didn’t. She never does. She’s not in her right mind.”

“Never does? Buck, you said she never hit you before,” Steve’s tone grew even more worried. He reached out a hand to lay on the bitterness he felt leak into his tone.

Frowning, Bucky looked down at his hands, positioned carefully on Steve’s leg.

Softly, Steve asked, “has she hit you before, Bucky? I don’t blame you . . . for not saying. It’s . . .” he sighed, “it’s not easy to say it when someone does that . . .”

“She’d never hit me this hard before . . . usually she just smacks my chest or something when she gets upset. And she’d never used her nails before.” Bucky couldn’t meet Steve’s eyes; instead he kept focusing on his hands.
Stroking Bucky’s wrist carefully, Steve said, “at least she has a good reason . . . mental illness, confusion, fear.” He kept his voice soft, gentle. “Brock’s just an angry control freak who can’t let me go.” Steve seemed surprised suddenly that he knew that . . . but the hard part was convincing the abused blond on a regular basis.

Bucky nodded, swallowing hard, “Yeah, I suppose. We’ll get Brock, baby. Sam’s working real hard.”

Nodding, the muscular blond offered a determines smile. “Yes, and we’ll find a way to help Becca, too, Bucky. We’ll help her get better.”

Riley silently had Steve switch to a careful sitting position and began to work Steve’s hands with a hard therapy ball. Nine times out of ten he was able to squeeze, but the tenth time he seemed to lose his strength and drop the ball. The nurse sighed but kept working patiently. “As you can see, Steve has a lot of control back from his former trauma, but his hands don’t work all the time. The healing burns can’t be helping with pain.” The nurse looked at Steve who looked more determined than pained.

Bucky knelt down to pick up the hard rubber ball and handed it back to Riley.

The nurse shook his head with a smile. “Give it to Steve, Bucky. He’s the one in therapy.”

The brunet flushed and nodded, handing the ball back to Steve.

“Thanks, Buck,” Steve said, softly. “Repetitive motions are the problem . . . and fine control, like . . . holding a pencil or pen.” He flushed.

“So, we’ll add writing and doodling to your therapy. You need to practice again, like you did as a child, to get that movement back. Were you practicing that during the last year?”

Flushing bright red, Steve dropped his head in shame. “No . . .” he whispered, “Brock wouldn’t let me write because he didn’t want me to start drawing. He said I’d just embarrass him because I was not good at it anymore.”

The nurse nodded, a slight frown on his face. “Well, he’s wrong and you will start practicing now, won’t you? Bucky, you’ll help him? Massage his hands when they start cramping? Pick things up that he drops? Encourage him?”

“Of course,” Bucky nodded with a soft smile, “it’d be my pleasure.”

Steve lifted his face, hope in his eyes. He continued to whisper, “I want to draw again, Buck . . . I really do. I . . . miss it. I look at the art around me and it feels like my heart is gone sometimes.”

“Then you’ll draw again, Stevie . . . and I’ll be there every step of the way,” Bucky said, the smile not dropping from his lips.

A bright smile came to Steve’s face and he nodded, eyes lit up like a sunny day. “Together . . . we’ll help each other . . .”

“Till the end of the line, punk.” Bucky shot Steve a quick wink.

A flush of a different kind crossed Steve’s face and he ducked his head, carefully switching the ball to his other hand to begin the exercises.

With a smile, Riley said, “later this afternoon, we’ll set up counseling for you both.”
Bucky wanted to protest, say that he didn’t need therapy.

The nurse carefully watched Bucky, seeing the emotions race through his eyes. Finally, he said, “Steve will need victim’s counseling, and you’ll need counseling for the loved ones of abuse survivors.” He waited for the brunet’s reaction to that clarification.

Releasing a small sigh, Bucky nodded and said, “Yeah, alright.”

With a nod Riley sat back. “Good. You’ll learn how to deal with his emotional needs and the information he might feel he needs to share. The victim’s family is often the forgotten victim. They feel helpless and weak and don’t know how to help their loved one. This counseling with give you tools to help Steve when he’s out of the hospital.” The nurse leaned forward, eyes meeting and locking with Bucky’s. “It can be applied to other victims, too . . . the information can help you deal with other people who may need help.”

Bucky’s mind was reeling; he didn’t think of how much help Steve would need or how being in a relationship could affect his and Ava’s life. However, hopefully with the counseling he could learn how to deal with everything that came along with being Steve’s boyfriend . . . and maybe even learn some things to help with his and Becca’s relationship.

Steve swallowed nervously. “Sounds like a lot of work for you, Bucky,” he murmured, eyes worried.

“I can handle it, Stevie. Anything to help you.” Bucky looked over at Steve and offered him a smile, “Plus . . . it might help me with Becca.”

Suddenly confidence and hope radiated through Steve’s look. He nodded. “Yes, that’s good. Anything to help with Becca.” He seemed to like the idea that Bucky wasn’t just working to help him alone. Steve’s self-confidence . . . feeling of self-worth, needed a lot of work before he’d realize that maybe he, alone, was worth that kind of effort.

Finally, Riley reached over and stilled Steve’s shaking, still working hand. “Enough. Take the ball with you, Steve, but only ten reps every couple of hours for now. You need to build up slowly. Practice writing or drawing for about ten minutes a day for now. I want you to treat this like the type of exercise you did to get in such good shape.”

Bucky found his eyes trailing down Steve’s body, not for the first time, in appreciation of the toned muscles. Bucky had thought Steve looked beautiful when he was a scrawny kid in high school . . . but the muscles were definitely a plus.

Steve nodded. “Thank you, Riley,” he said softly, smiling. He let his hands rest in his lap for a moment as Riley adjusted the sheet over him in preparation of moving him back to the wheelchair and bringing him to his room.

Helping Riley move Steve back into the wheelchair, Bucky stepped back to allow Riley to maneuver the chair to the room.

The nurse wheeled Steve out, leading Bucky, and took them back to the small intake exam room they’d spent the night in. Once inside, he situated Steve carefully back in the bed and pulled out both patient files, Steve’s and Bucky’s, laying them on the table. He began to record something in Steve’s as Bruce’s voice, conversing with an unknown male’s voice, came from the hallway.

“A pair of men came in last night, both with double restraining orders. One of the perpetrators, a police officer no less, has been arrested and is awaiting court. The other is still at large, and is listed as a military special forces policeman,” Bruce was saying. “These men have been terrorized
so bad they had to find a safe house for the little girl. Mr. Rogers came in with injuries dating back at least four years, most recently a severe knife wound that came close to cutting his sciatic nerve and crippling him. His hands were burned as well. The other man, Mr. Barnes, has facial injuries unrelated to this case, but has been severely mentally traumatized. He’s malnourished and displays severe anxiety behavior.”

Bucky flushed, hanging his head as he wrapped his arms around himself, trying to make himself as small as possible.

Riley placed a gentle hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “That’s not your fault, Bucky. That was done to you. That would be Tony Stark. He’s here to see if the patients admitted overnight qualify for the clinic. I assure you, if he dismissed the pair of you, he’s out of his own mind!”

“Sounds like they need a safe house,” the second man answered, worry in his voice. The door opened and Bruce led a smaller man with a neat goatee and very fine designer suit into the room.

The man, apparently Tony Stark the billionaire, smiled grimly at the pair, eyes taking in their conditions. The first words out of his mouth, though, were surprisingly, “you need somewhere safer for your kid?” It was a question, not a judgement.

Head snapping up to meet Tony’s, Bucky’s mouth opened and then shut again, trying to form words.

Brown eyes serious and steady, the man let his eyes fall on Bucky, as that was the patient who had responded. He kept his posture relaxed, hands visible and empty, a very non-threatening man.

“I - - I don’t think so . . . she’s with friends . . . they live in a gated community. I - -I don’t wanna freak her out any more than she already is.” Bucky murmured, arms still wrapped around himself, although he didn’t claw at his scarred arm.

“Sensible,” Tony answered. “If you change your mind, Bruce can give you my contact info and we’ll have the lot of you moved to my mansion until the stalker is caught and you guys can get to a safer arrangement.” Tony looked over the blond then back at the brunet. “Hate to tell you, Stalkers only get minimum time. Maybe five years. What do you plan to do while he waits to get out?”

Bucky blanched and his eyes widened, he hadn’t thought about what would happen when Rollins and Brock, when they finally nailed the bastard, got out. Undoubtedly, they’d be angry and looking to get revenge on the men that got them arrested.

A sigh from Steve alerted Bucky to the fact that the blond actually wasn’t surprised by the question. “He always gets out,” Steve said, his eyes troubled, his tone defeated.

Tony nodded. “The more we can find on him, the more we can keep him locked away. Both cops, huh? Well, cops don’t take kindly to one of their own being the bad guy. They’ll hit the pair hard for this. Anything more you can provide, any help with the police, will go better.” Tony tilted his head. “You do plan to continue cooperating with the police?”

“Yes,” Steve breathed.

Bucky simply nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

With a nod, Tony gestured towards the medical charts. “Mind if I look the notes over?”

The blond merely looked to Bucky for permission.
Eyeing the file with apprehension, Bucky cleared his throat and hugged himself tighter, “Sure, go ahead,” he mumbled meekly.

Tony nodded and flipped open both files, glancing through them. After a few minutes, he nodded and closed the files. He turned to Bucky. “Do you want me to move your sister to a safer hospital? Maybe even here?”

The question surprised Bucky; he looked at Tony, “She’s - - she’s not stable . . . she can get pretty violent.”

“Judging by the fact that she gave you so many stitches? Yeah, she needs continual observation and help. But she’s in a low security treatment facility. They aren’t equipped to protect a patient who needs protective orders. So, I can move her here and she’ll get round the clock treatment, like there, but with heightened security.” He finally crossed his arms. “This clinic actually encompasses the entire building, not just a couple of offices. And it has long term care facilities for the ill, both physical and mental. We even have an assisted living area for the elderly or handicapped.”

Bucky looked over at Steve, he knew his boyfriend couldn’t make the choice for him . . . but Bucky felt slightly overwhelmed.

Looking at Bucky, blue eyes meeting pale grey-blue, Steve offered, “it might make her confused to move, Bucky, but it might be safer. And she might get the individual care she seems to need?” He winced as if he’d spoken out of turn and expected punishment.

Looking back at Tony, Bucky nodded once, “Yeah . . . okay . . . she’d be safer here.”

“Yeah, she would.” Tony said. “Do you plan to stay here, as well? You can be moved into a double apartment with him,” Tony gestured to Steve,” while he heals. Bruce said might take a couple of weeks?” Apparently, Tony had decided their case was legitimate.

Bucky nodded quickly, he didn’t want to stay at home by himself. Not while Brock was still out.

With a firm nod, Tony looked to Bruce and Riley. “Okay, double apartment and get our staff over to the sister’s place to transition her. Be gentle with her. Don’t wanna overwhelm the poor woman. And take Mr. Barnes home when he’s ready to pack up stuff for them and make sure someone watches his place while he’s with us. I want security with him when he visits his little girl or works, unless he specifically denies the protection.” Tony looked at Bucky. “I recommend the security, but I don’t push my guys on anyone. That’s not freedom.” He shrugged, uncrossing his arms.

Bucky nodded, not really agreeing to the security detail, but also not denying it right off the bat.

Tony took one step, and only one, closer to Bucky, apparently determining that the brunet was the one in control in the relationship. “Listen carefully to me, Mr. Barnes. This place was set up because my mother was killed by a stalker in a public hospital. She died so you both could be safe. I want you to consider your safety, and that of your family, carefully when you go about your business. A taser or personal weapon if you refuse security guards is best. Don’t make yourself an easy target.” He nodded and turned. “You said there was a woman who came in last night, too?”

Bruce nodded, offering a smile for Bucky and Steve, who kept his head bowed. “Right this way . . .”

“Oh!” Tony turned to Bucky. “If you can, a picture of your two stalkers, even the one in jail, for
my security can help us deny them medical care in case they try to sneak in as patients.” The man turned and led the doctor from the room, leaving the two patients and the nurse behind.

“A whirlwind,” Riley said softly,” but has a good heart below the gruff exterior.”

Bucky slumped, leaning against the wall, he finally felt like he could breathe now that Tony was out of the room. At least Steve and Becca would be safe.

“I think a taser’s a good idea,” Steve offered softly, finally lifting his head. He didn’t demand Bucky accept a bodyguard, at least. “I can get it for you if you want?”

Not looking at Steve, just at the floor beneath his feet, Bucky nodded again. “I don’t want some guy following me wherever I go . . . I couldn’t work knowing someone was watching me.”

“I know how you feel,” Steve confirmed with a relieved chuckle. “I hate being followed.” He smiled. “I can order the taser through Sam and get it here in a day or two, maybe?” He hesitated then offered, more softly, “maybe get one for myself, too?”

“Yeah, I want you safe.” Bucky murmured, still not looking up.

A light in Steve’s eyes confirmed that Bucky had said something entirely right, giving Steve permission to get personal protection. Steve smiled softly. “Thanks, Bucky,” he said. “I promise not to use it on you.” He flushed suddenly.

Riley chuckled, actually chuckled, at that as if it were a perfectly normal statement. “Yeah, I’d be a little worried if I thought my significant other would pull a taser on me if I forgot to bring the butter and milk home.” He offered the couple a smile, obviously trying to treat them as if they were perfectly normal, despite the circumstances.

Bucky finally lifted his head and dropped his arms, he looked over at Riley and then at Steve, who smiled hopefully back.

“Want me to show you to your apartment now? Let you get a bit comfortable before you go meet your little girl for lunch?” The nurse smiled at the nervous brunet.

“How long does Steve need to stay in this room?” Bucky asked quietly.

“This specific room or the apartment you’re going to? He can move from here immediately. He’ll be assigned the apartment as long as he needs for that leg to heal so he can walk on it and it doesn’t need packing regularly. After that, it’s up to you two how long you stay here. If you wish to leave, Tony will help you make sure your security is state of the art wherever you settle, whether it’s back home or somewhere else. If you wish, he can also make sure the security for your girl’s home is state of the art, just in case, as well as your workplace. It’s part of his services here, so comes included in his efforts to protect people. IF you wish, he accepts private donations, too, but it’s not necessary. He just wants to help.” Riley reached for the charts to shove them in the pocket on the back of the wheelchair then scooped up Bucky’s clothes from where they had been untouched all night. He bundled the clothes with Steve’s and looked to Bucky. “Did I answer everything, or you want more info? I can answer any question you have. I’m Steve’s physical therapist while you’re both here.”

Bucky looked at Riley, trying to process all the new information. He looked down at Steve pleadingly, hoping that his boyfriend would tell him what he wanted to do.

“Let’s go see our apartment, Buck,” Steve offered at Bucky’s confused look. “We can make plans once Sam comes back?”
“Okay,” Bucky agreed quickly.

“Oh,” Steve looked up with interested eyes once Riley started pushing his chair down the hall, “if Becca’ll be living here, what’s the rules for Bucky visiting her?”

Riley nodded. “She can have visitors anytime during daylight hours, actually, but you may want to consult with her doctor once she’s settled. If she’s lucid when we bring her in, Bucky can meet her to show her the apartment she’ll be given, make her feel welcome and not alone? But that’s up to her mental state when she comes later today.”

“I don’t know if she’ll want to see me anytime soon,” Bucky mumbled as he followed close behind Steve and Riley.

The nurse looked at Bucky with a nod of apparent understanding. “Why don’t we wait and see how she’s doing this afternoon? If she seems to be calm and lucid, we can have you pop in or even just suggest it. If she’s not, we can hold off the meeting.”

He turned them into a first floor apartment down a different wing of the clinic, in an area Bucky would’ve thought was part of the building next door. There was a small living room and kitchenette combined as well as two bedrooms and a bathroom. Curtains hung at the lone window, pulled back to let in light but thick enough to block any light or shadows being seen if they chose. The window faced a small courtyard enclosed on all sides by the actual building, other apartment windows looking out on the small, grass-filled space. A door, next to the window, obviously led into the protected space. The furniture of the apartment was simple, a couch, two chairs and a dining table, and a bed and nightstand in each bedroom. The linens were clean and white with towels and washcloths as well as sheets and blankets and pillow cases. The apartment was reminiscent of a furnished assisted-living apartment. This particular set of rooms had enough space for a wheelchair to move comfortably throughout, and there were safety bars in the bathroom shower/tub combo and one bedroom.

Bucky looked around the small space, taking in everything and then looked down at Steve with a small, hesitant smile.

The blond looked back up at his boyfriend. “It’s not bad?” he offered. That, coming from the lush apartment he’d been a prisoner in then Bucky’s two-floor layout. Steve certainly seemed to accept whatever happened to him with good grace. The muscular wheelchair-bound man smiled back at the brunet. “We’ve even got grass. Didn’t have grass back in Manhattan,” he said.

“I’m not sure if most New Yorker’s even know what grass is.” Bucky snorted softly as he looked out the window into the small courtyard.

Riley glanced out the window. “You’re free to meet your neighbors, but don’t get upset if they refuse to answer their doors. They’re victims, too. Across the way is a boy and his aunt, Peter and May, victims of a housebreaking and continued death threats. To the left is a bum victim that’s been here for some months, a man named Wade Wilson. He keeps to himself. And on the right is a woman named Sharon, who works here. Her husband lives with her, but he’s in a wheelchair from a train shooting a couple years back. The shooter’s been threatening them.” Riley looked at Bucky. “However, if you don’t want your story spread, we won’t spread it. But know that all the people here are victims of stalking or other ongoing violent crimes.”

Steve’s eyes widened and he shook his head. “So many victims?” He looked at Bucky. “So many people hurt?”

With a nod, Riley answered him, “yeah, Brock and Jack? They’re not unique . . . rare, but not unique.”
Bucky felt queasy and he leaned against the wall to steady himself; he shook his head.

Checking the fridge to make sure it had been stocked for the new occupants, Riley turned back to Bucky and Steve. “Feeling a bit overwhelmed? I can help with that. Think about what’s the thing that’s been making you most tired recently.” Riley closed the fridge. “Go ahead, Bucky, you first. What’s making you most tired recently?”

Looking over at Riley, Bucky shook his head again. The list of things that were making him tired could go on for hours. After a few moments, he said softly, “Making all these decisions.”

“Good, Steve?” Riley turned to the blond.

Steve flushed and ducked his head. “Being out of control? Not able to take my life in hand?”

“Perfect,” Riley chuckled. “Then I prescribe that while you’re in this apartment, you give the role to the other guy. Bucky let Steve make the decisions, about dinner, about television, about anything you wish . . . even bed and bath time. Steve, you take your courage in hand and make those decisions. You tell Bucky when and what you’ll both be doing in this apartment. Once out of the apartment, Bucky gets control again, but in here, without resorting to screaming or punishment or violence, Steve’s in total charge.”

The thought of not being forced to make decisions made Bucky breathe a sigh of relief.

Eyes widening, Steve’s head shot up and he looked uncertainly at his boyfriend, afraid to take the control . . . just steal it from the other man. But . . . the relief on Bucky’s face, the temptation to have a say at last, made Steve long to do it. He nodded. “If Bucky wants to make one last call and agree to this, I can make the decisions in here.” He bit his lip. “Buck?”

“Yes . . . please?” Bucky whimpered as he looked over at Steve with hopeful eyes.

“No,” Riley instructed firmly. “There are rules to obey when doing this, okay? If at any time, you want control back, Bucky, you step out of the room and tell Steve. Steve, you cannot use force, or strong, hurtful language, or anything demeaning. You have to consider that Bucky trusts you enough to do this, so don’t abuse that trust. Bucky, if you feel that something’s not going right, you still have a voice. Just because you agreed to try this out, doesn’t mean you have no free will at all.” Riley crossed his arms, staring at the men until Steve nodded. “I suggest that before your lunch date with your girl, you both come up with a list of times Bucky or Steve should be allowed to be on their own . . . to go out for appointments, work, and other things. Therapy and appointments should be on that list, but it should be flexible, too. And, I want Steve to be the one who writes the list, so he can exercise his hand.”

“I can do that,” Steve said, licking his lips, taking his fear and pushing it down. Bucky wanted him to be in charge, and Steve wouldn’t let him down. He could prove to the leaner man that he was able to take charge and run things . . . he wasn’t as incompetent as Brock made him feel at times.

Nodding, Riley looked to Bucky. “Do you agree to these terms, Bucky?”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded, eyes flicking to Riley and then back to Steve.

Without waiting for Riley’s cue, Steve nodded and wheeled himself awkwardly to the dining table. He took a breath and gently asked, “Bucky? Can you get me pen and paper so I can write our list?”

With a smile, Riley gestured towards the nightstands in the bedrooms, but he remained silent.
Bucky hurried into the bedroom without a word and grabbed the supplies Steve had asked for; feeling his anxiety dissipate, the brunet handed the pad of paper and the pen to his boyfriend with a smile.

With a nod and a smile of thanks, Steve began to smooth the paper on the table. He lifted the pen. “So, you’ll have breakfast with me, but lunch and dinner with Ava, okay?” He looked at Bucky. His tone was congenial, but firm, not really questioning. The item was actually logical, considering the logistics of where they were currently living, too.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Bucky agreed as he sat down in the chair next to Steve.

With a nod, Steve began to write in a large, almost childish scrawl, proving just how much Brock had forbidden him from relearning his fine motor skills. “Okay, if we have appointments, therapy, medical, and even outside appointments, we have to put them on a paper by the door so we know where the other one is going. No disappearing without a word, okay?” He looked at Bucky.

“Of course,” Bucky nodded as he tucked a lock of hair behind his ear so he could look at the paper.

Steve added that agreed on item. He looked thoughtful then smiled. “We should make a list of shows and stuff we absolutely hate, so we don’t torture each other with something like that. But we should have a list of shows we hope to see, so we can arrange a viewing schedule with each other?” Obviously the rules he set down might even work in the long term, after this mess ended.

Riley walked out softly, leaving the boyfriends to organize their lives.
This chapter will deal with abusive language, physical violence, and attempted rape. Please be advised if these subjects make you uncomfortable.

Clint sat on a bench outside the bookstore, Lucky on a leash, a plastic bag at the ready for when Lucky chose to go. He looked up when a car pulled up, the driver allowing Bucky to step out on the curb. With a serious look, the store owner checked his watch then looked at Bucky, frowning softly.

Jogging over to where Clint sat, Bucky flashed his friend a smile, seeming relaxed for a man who spent all night at a clinic. “Hey . . . I know I’m early.”

“Humph,” Clint looked towards the door. “Not early enough, Nat’s got your kid working the register!” He sighed. “Only for when kids come in, which gives Ava and those customers a kick, but I’m not too sure about this.” He rolled his eyes, but his smile slipped out, a teasing smirk that Clint never could hide for long.

Bucky laughed and looked into the store from the front window, smiling when he saw Ava handing a customer their change. The little girl stood on a stool with Nat close behind her incase Ava were to fall. “She’s probably handling the customers better than me,” he said with a laugh.

“Nah, at least three guys and two girls asked where their ‘regular’ was today.” Clint stood, and clicked his tongue at Lucky. The dog looked up and trotted to the door, ignoring Bucky apparently. Clint laughed. “Weird dog,” he said fondly and opened the door for Bucky to enter. “You seem happier today, Bucky,” Clint said softly from behind him. “Yo! Newbee! Your manager’s here. Look alive!”

Ava’s head snapped up to look at the door and she squealed when she saw Bucky. “Uncle Bucky!” she screamed happily.

Nat smiled and helped the girl off the stool so she could run and hug her uncle. The red-haired woman studied her friend carefully, noting his relaxed smile and general comfortable attitude. Something had obviously changed, and she intended to support this . . . if it wouldn’t hurt him. “Bucky,” she called, “you’re on time.”

Bucky knelt down to scoop up his niece and press light kisses on her face and hair. He looked over at Natasha, still holding Ava in his arms, and nodded, “Yeah . . . I know, big shocker.” He teased lightly.

“So, ready for lunch?” She looked behind Bucky at the door.

“Ava nodded frantically, “Yes! Can we get chicken nuggets?” She looked at her uncle pleadingly.

“You are a chicken nugget!” Clint said fondly. “I’m going to stay and watch the store today. You guys go have fun. Bring me back some sushi or pizza or something.”
“You don’t want chicken nuggets?” Ava asked looking mildly shocked, “Those are the best food ever!”

“Nah, I don’t think there’ll be enough for both of us, Ava,” he responded lightly. Grinning, Clint led the leashed dog to the back where his food and water bowls were.

Bucky hitched Ava up higher and moved to open the door for Natasha, “So, where are we going?”

With a smile, Nat walked out of the shop. “He’ll get what I feel like getting him if he doesn’t want to come along,” she assured the other pair. Turning with a grin and a wink, Nat said “somewhere that doesn’t serve a certain happy meal food.” And the woman led Bucky to her car, unlocking it and opening the door to the back, where Ava’s second car seat had been placed.

While buckling in Ava, Bucky shook his head with a smirk, “You’ll start another world war.”

“No I won’t. She’ll be far too busy to complain,” Nat responded. Glancing down the street both ways, Nat crossed into the road and slipped into the driver’s seat. “So, Steve’s not coming?”

After he finished with Ava, Bucky hurried over to the passenger door and slid into the car. As he buckled himself in, he shook his head, “No, he’s on bed rest for a few days.”

“No,” she answered without asking for details. Instead, she pulled smoothly into traffic and drove them, without conversation, to a nearby children’s pizza restaurant with a vast play area. The place had opened only two months before, and Ava had never been there. Nat parked in one of the spots next to the restaurant and slipped from the car, walking around to open the door for Bucky. “Here we are.”

Bucky gave Natasha a smile and stepped out of the car.

The woman quickly let Ava out of her seat and the car then turned her to look at the colorful building. “Pizza?” she asked lightly.

Ava grabbed her uncle’s hand and began pulling him towards the building, “C’mon, Uncle Bucky!”

Bucky turned to look at Nat from over his shoulder as he allowed himself to be led away.

“I figured a break from your normal routine would be . . . nice,” she informed him without further explanation.

Once inside, Bucky smiled softly at the loud atmosphere. Kids ran around with their parents following close behind.

Nat found a bright orange table that clashed with her hair and slid into the booth. “Okay, Sweet, you can play before you eat, but if we call, you come!” Nat looked at Bucky. “There’s a guard on the playground, only the person who leads her in can retrieve her. I checked in advance.”

Ava let go of Bucky’s hand and bolted into the play area, immediately finding another little girl to play with.

“Go show him your ID and tell him which is your kid. I’ll order food and wait here for you.” Nat picked up a menu.

Bucky quickly went over to the guard and pulled out his ID.
The guard looked at the card and nodded. “Okay, sir. Go sit at your table. I’m gonna call your kid to point you out. If you signal, I’ll see it and call the cops.” He crossed his arms, frowning softly, taking his job seriously.

Bucky nodded, understanding the strict rules more so now than he would’ve a few weeks ago, and left to go sit down across from Natasha, who smiled at him, relaxed.

After Bucky settled, the guard walked over to Ava and asked, softly. “Your name is Ava?”

Ava looked up at the tall man and nodded, looking a little scared.

“Right. I’m Karl, the guard at the front gate.” He gestured to his post. “I want to know if you’re here with an adult? Can you point her or him out to me?”

Smiling brightly, Ava nodded and pointed at the table where Bucky and Natasha sat, “That’s my Uncle Bucky and Auntie Nat,” she informed happily.

Karl smiled broadly and nodded. “Good. He said he was, but we don’t believe every stranger who comes along. Go ahead and play. I’ll keep you safe, Ava.”

“Okay.” Ava nodded and turned back to the little girl she’d starting playing with.

The guard watched a moment then turned and walked back to his post, frowning softly. He signaled Bucky to approach.

Bucky hurried over and nodded, “Yes, sir?”

“Bucky? What’s Bucky stand for, Mr. James Barnes?” Karl asked. Obviously he’d gotten the nickname out of Ava.

“Middle name’s Buchanan,” Bucky offered with a small smile.

Finally, Karl smiled and nodded. “Okay. If you get sick or have an emergency, is there a person who can come get her? Give me a name and description? Otherwise we send the kid to the police station to await a temporary guardian. Too many fake freaks out there trying to kidnap kids, you know?”

“Natasha Romanov,” Bucky nodded, answering the guard’s question, “Red haired woman we came in with.”

“The woman you’re with? Auntie Nat?” Karl asked, looking serious but friendly now that he trusted Bucky was a legit guardian. “Got it. Go relax, Mr. Barnes. Your Ava is safe in my playground.” He nodded.

“Thank you,” Bucky gave the man a smile and turned to walk back to the table. He slid into the chair and gave his friend another smile, “This place is great, Nat.”

She nodded. “When they opened a couple months ago, they dropped off fliers. I had them checked out.” She sipped the water that had arrived while Bucky was talking to Karl. “Figured, once they cleared, I’d check it out in person.”

Bucky nodded and took a drink of his own water.

“Ever notice how some people are dumb enough to make their kids eat before they can play? Great way to make the kid puke.” She pushed the menu over to Bucky. “I was thinking a medium pizza? Or we can order different things and swap?”
“Medium pizza is good,” Bucky said with a nod.

“Hmmm . . .” she looked him over. “Whatever happened last night, there’s a definite improvement going on here. You seem . . . happier?” She leaned forward to lower her voice. “Spill.”

Bucky laughed and tucked a lock of hair behind his ear, “Steve and I came to an agreement that helps both of us.”

“I take it this doesn’t involve sex yet?” she asked quietly, her eyes amused though her face looked serious.

Blushing brightly, Bucky shook his head, “I - - I’m not ready for that, yet. Steve knows. I don’t wanna rush things more than we already are, ya know?”

Nat nodded. “Makes sense. At least you’re still the sensible Bucky I know and love. So, you and Steve found some kind of compromise. Didn’t know you needed one.” She looked at the menu. “Hawaiian? Meat or veggie? Plain Cheese? Ava likes pepperoni, right?”

“Yeah, usually we just get cheese and pepperoni . . . she doesn’t like veggies much on her pizza,” Bucky paused and then nodded again, “And yeah . . . he wanted more control in his life and I wanted less . . . I don’t know if that makes much sense.”

“Sounds like you’re sick of being the daddy all the time,” Nat commented. “Pepperoni and Cheese it is.” She looked up. “Also sounds like you guys are doing a therapy thing. That might be good . . . if he doesn’t start abusing the trust, Bucky.”

“Steve wouldn’t do that,” Bucky said quickly, “He’s not like that.”

“Don’t get offended if I keep a close eye on him, though. You’re my friend, and I keep an eye on my friends,” She settled back, raising her hand for a waitress to come over. Before the woman arrived, Nat said softly, “I’m glad you’re letting someone else make some of the calls, though. Most parents have a second one helping. It’s overwhelming, being a single parent.”

Bucky looked over to the play area and smiled when he found Ava, “Yeah, it can be . . . but I finally feel like I can do this.”

Smiling fully, Nat nodded, her eyes dancing slightly. “Good. So, we clean up the yard and Ava will go home to two fathers, is that it?” she hinted gently, but turned to the waitress and said “A medium cheese and pepperoni, please. Some apple juice. And a calzone, mushroom, to take out.” Nat turned back to Bucky when the waitress hurried off. She studied her friend. “You did consider what this would mean if everything works out and you keep Steve? That you’re putting another parent figure in the house?”

“Yeah, I know . . . it’ll take some getting used to . . . but I think Steve and I will be able to figure it out,” Bucky said as he turned back to look at Natasha.

Surprisingly Nat nodded. “I think he’s good with Ava so far. Still withholding final judgement.” Natasha had always been brutally honest with her friend.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” Bucky smiled genuinely at her, “I can’t thank you and Clint enough for everything. You two have been life savers these last few days.”

“I’m sorry if you thought I was pushy insisting on taking Ava while you sort this mess.” She sipped her drink, leaving the rest unspoken.

“No, you were right. I - - I wasn’t thinking straight.” Bucky took another drink of his water.
“Bleeding heart, that’s the Bucky Barnes we know and love,” she chuckled. “Steve needs the help. You saw that. Now, we just get through it.” She smiled at the sight of Ava running past inside the playground enclosure. “She’s happy and healthy, and that’s what matters.”

Turning to look at Ava again, Bucky smiled and nodded, “Yeah.”

“Does Steve want to play father?” Natasha asked softly. “He’s good with her, but does he actually want the long term commitment of children . . . even one?”

Looking at his friend, Bucky tilted his head, “We - - we actually haven’t talked about that . . . there’s been a lot going on.”

“Clint wants kids,” Nat continued in that same soft manner. She sighed and shook her head. “Don’t think I want to deal with diapers and morning feedings and that kind of thing.” She looked to Ava. “But I do love kids . . . older than infant, but Ava’s great.”

“You could adopt?” Bucky offered. “There’s a lot of kids in need of a home.”

She looked at him, her eyes thoughtful, before she dropped the subject completely. “So, Clint said Steve can’t draw anymore. Did he think to add that attack to the list of things Rumlow needs to be locked up for? If he’s got security footage, he might have a case of assault.”

Accepting the sudden change of subject, Bucky shook his head, “I don’t know . . . Steve had Brock locked up last year when it happened. But then he dropped the charges and went back to him.”

“Oh, there’s no case if he’s dropped charges,” Nat said with a shake of her head. “How about for this newest attack? The leg and eye and neck?” She didn’t seem to judge Steve for going back into that situation, even after such a brutal attack.

“I’d hope so,” Bucky muttered.

“I’ve been looking into this, Buck,” Nat met his eyes. “Stalkers get very little time in jail. The laws aren’t strong enough yet. But, for assault, with a deadly weapon like a knife no less, he can be locked up for twenty or more years. Especially if he has a history of continual violence. All of the medical records for Steve’s injuries can be used in this case, if Steve presses charges for this last attack.”

“I’ll talk to him . . . see if I can convince him to press charges.” Bucky nodded, determined to put all this with Rumlow behind them.

“That’s all we can do.” She sighed. Slowly, tracing condensation on the side of her glass, she asked, almost absently, “Does Steve realize he was a victim? I mean, really realize just how Rumlow abused him? Hurt him? Controlled him?” She looked up.

“I’m not sure . . . hopefully with counseling he’ll be able to come to terms with what happened to him.”

“And you?” Nat leaned closer, lowering her voice again. “Can you come to terms with what he threw himself into?”

Bucky looked at his friend intensely, “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“You need to understand, Bucky, that it wasn’t your fault he wound up with Rumlow. He made that move two years after you and he fought.” She reached out and gently lay a hand over his.
“I just can’t help but to think that if I hadn’t messed up our friendship . . .” Bucky started but she quickly cut him off.

“Messed up? By telling him you’re gay and you love him?” She rolled her eyes. “Bucky, you were what, sixteen? You were a kid. Kids do things like that all the time. Just like he ran from the first fight in his life when he ditched on you. For once, your headstrong friend met something that scared him.” She shrugged. “Neither of you meant for things to turn into this situation. So, don’t blame yourself. You and he are working things out.” She shook her head. “What I’m worried about, Bucky, isn’t how he and you wound up where you are, but where you’re going from here. The past can’t be undone.”

“I know . . . we’re working on it. I’m gonna start counseling on how to handle Steve’s needs . . . as an abuse survivor.” Bucky stated.

“And yourself? How to deal with being so defenseless in this situation? How to find help and safety?” she pushed.

Bucky shrugged softly, “Yeah,” he looked over at Nat, “There’s one thing I don’t understand . . . I haven’t been able to wrap my head around it.”

“What is it?” Nat sipped her water, eyes serious, attention fully on her friend, intent on helping him through this problem.

“Why? Why did Steve never fight back . . . he’s bigger than Rumlow . . . he could’ve overpowered him. Why did he allow himself to be abused like that?” Bucky’s eyes fell to look at the glass of water in his hands.

Nat nodded. “I can think of two reasons right off the top of my head. Either Rumlow began dating him when Steve was still tiny. Or maybe Rumlow had a weapon of some sort.” She sighed. “If you ask him, will he tell you?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky admitted honestly.

Looking towards Ava, Nat added, “It’s also possible that he had sex with Rumlow before the abuse started, but Rumlow somehow convinced him that gay sex involves domination. That might have lead into regular abuse.” Nat looked at Bucky.

“I just hope I can help him,” he said quietly.

“If it’s the sex theory, Steve will have a lot of trouble separating abuse from sex, Bucky. He might think you don’t love him without hitting him. Sounds like counseling it definitely a must.” Nat put down her glass.

“That’s why I agreed to the counseling . . . I don’t wanna do or say the wrong thing.”

“Good,” Nat smiled at Bucky gently, her eyes worried, though. “One last question and I drop this subject for now, okay?”

“And what is that?” Bucky asked, quirking a brow.

She met and held his eyes. “How certain are you that Rumlow can’t sway him back?”

“I’m not,” Bucky admitted not looking away.

She nodded and placed a hand over his again, squeezing gently. “Think about the excuses or threats Rumlow could use on him. If you need our help, Clint and I are here.”
"I know," Bucky smiled softly, "Thank you, I mean it, Nat. I can’t thank you two enough for everything you’ve done for me."

She nodded, smiling once more. "That’s what friends are for. To help bury the bodies." Looking up, she nodded and moved her glass so the waitress could put down their food order. "Wanna go get Ava?"

Bucky nodded and walked over to the play area, stopping at the entrance.

Karl, seeing Bucky, said, "I’ll get her." He walked directly to Ava and said, "your Bucky is here for you, Ava." Karl offered his hand to her.

Taking the man’s hand, Ava waved to the other little girl and allowed Karl to lead her away.

"Bye bye, Maria," the man said and led Ava to her uncle, delivering her safe and sound as promised. He let go of Ava’s small hand. "Bye bye, Ava."

"Bye!" Ava smiled and took Bucky’s hand again. Bucky smiled at Karl and then turned back to walk to the table.

"We got your favorite, Ava. Pepperoni and cheese," Bucky said with a smile as they reached the table.

The red-haired woman had already served slices up on individual plates, pushing the cup of apple juice towards the girl’s seat. “And juice,” Nat said.

Ava climbed up onto the chair next to Bucky and smiled, “Does Lucky like pizza, Auntie Nat?”

“Lucky likes eating dog poo if he gets the chance. I wouldn’t trust his opinion of anything.” She sipped her drink, smiling.

Scrunching her nose in disgust, Ava said, "That’s gross." The little girl took a drink of her juice from her straw and then picked up the piece of pizza from the plate.

“Ava, I want to ask you something, Sweet,” Nat said, smiling. “You remember that bad man? Have you seen him around the store?”

“No,” Ava said through a mouthful of food.

“Chew your food and swallow before talking, Squirt,” Bucky said with a smile.

With a nod, Nat smiled at Bucky; apparently she’d asked the question to prove that his little girl was still safe. A way to help relieve his stress, it seemed. “Good.”

******************

Several days passed in a routine set on paper that first day. Physical therapy, followed by regular house chores in the small apartment and a visit from Tony Stark, checking up on them regularly. Bucky went to lunch, came back for their different counseling sessions, then the evening was theirs to do as they please. Bucky went to dinner while Steve fell asleep early, then when the brunet came home, Steve played board games with him unless he was too tired. The pair went to bed, and it would start all over again. Life in the apartment was almost ideal, and rather felt like they were in a holding pattern, waiting for real life to begin again . . . for when Steve was healed enough to leave the confines of the clinic and they moved back to the townhouse.

Finally, after a full week, Steve was cleared. Bruce had seemed delighted with the quick progress.
Steve made and had showed Bucky how to continue with the leg wound packing and dressings, but cleared them to leave if they chose, as long as they continued coming in for counseling. At last, the pair was back in Bucky’s house, Steve’s limp barely noticeable, not because he hid it, but because he was healing and on regular low-dose pain medication.

With a smile, Steve closed the freezer and turned to Bucky. “We’ll need to replace some stuff in the fridge, but the ice cream cake didn’t get bothered by the power outage last night.” He walked, barely limping, to the island and slipped into one of the tall stools, more comfortable practically standing than sitting in a low chair.

Bucky pushed off from where he’d been leaning against the counter. “Well, that’s a relief. That cake is too pretty to go to waste.” He offered his boyfriend a smile.

Steve flushed. “You still want me to try to decorate it?” He met Bucky’s eyes.

“Of course, ain’t no one better than you, Stevie,” Bucky drawled in his Brooklyn accent, smirking as he stepped closer.

Laughing softly, smiling at the accent, Steve nodded, letting Bucky boost his confidence. “Okay. I’ll do it right before the party.” Steve pulled over a notebook and pen that had been sitting on the island. “Bucky? I know we moved back in last night, but . . . did we want a list of rules here, too?” He sounded hesitant.

Bucky leaned his forearms against the island casually, he looked over at Steve and nodded, “Yeah . . . I’d like that.”

“Oh,” Steve said, not familiar with that song. Thinking again, he said, “okay, if she’s got a routine, I don’t want to interfere.”

Bucky snorted and shook his head, smiling, “Don’t mean I make her sing it here, Stevie. You can teach her to clean . . . just don’t yell at her or nothing.”

Eyes widening, Steve shook his head quickly and began to write across the top of the page. “I wouldn’t yell at her, but I’ll add it to the list.” He wrote ‘no yelling or abusive language.’ Looking up at Bucky, he swallowed. “Momma taught me to make a game of cleaning up, putting the toys to bed so they could rest until next playtime.”

“That could work with her,” Bucky supported the idea.

“She also taught me that everything has a place it wants to be so it can be found again. Like dishes
on certain shelves when I got old enough to reach them. It helped me think about keeping things neat and organized.” He shrugged, but added ‘toys need rest’ to his list. “I was always able to find my art supplies and school stuff because of that.”

Bucky looked down and then back over at Steve, apprehensively he asked, “Can I add a rule?”

“You can add as many as you want, Bucky. It’s your house . . . we share it.” He offered a careful smile, eyes worried.

“You always tell me if I’m doin’ something that makes you uncomfortable . . . I - - I can’t always tell by your facial expressions” Bucky said, voice barely above a whisper.

“Uncomfortable,” Steve repeated carefully. “Um . . . like what?” his eyes looked worried.

“I don’t know . . . that’s why I’m askin’.” Bucky stated.

“Okay.” Steve wrote it carefully on the page then looked up. “Should I tell you what I think you mean and you tell me if I’m right?”

Nodding, Bucky looked over at Steve.

Steve nodded and blew out his breath then drew it in carefully. “Okay . . . um, I . . . I like to keep the house clean and you don’t mind stains. That . . . that bothers me?” Steve gripped the island as if he was preparing to duck.

Bucky smiled gently and nodded encouragingly, “Perfect, Stevie.”

Eyes lighting at the gentle praise, Steve beamed happily. “That’s okay? I mean, it’s your house and I don’t want you uncomfortable, either. I . . . I . . .” he sighed and ran a hand through his hair, the burns all but healed now. “I hate bringing him up, because he is . . .” Steve looked up. “Brock always told me I was a dirty pig,” he flushed. “So, I got used to being as clean as I could. Stains make me . . . think I’m going to get my face rubbed in it and yelled at.” He flushed.

“No!” Steve shook his head, raising his hands. “I don’t mean that, Buck. I actually don’t mind if someone spills or something. It’s part of being alive, making a mess. But I can’t just leave them, even if I’m busy. Does that make sense? I get a . . .” suddenly, as if understanding something for the first time, Steve leaned forward, hands grasping the granite, eyes intent. “My hands start to itch and I need to clean.”

Bucky knew that feeling all too well. However, ever since Doctor Banner had given him the anxiety medications his arm hadn’t really flared up at all.

“And I really don’t mind cleaning up after you or Ava or anything. I actually feel more useful if I’m doing something. You’re always working and caring for Ava. I don’t have much to contribute, since you don’t like my money.”

Bucky hung his head, “It’s not that I don’t like your money, Stevie . . . you should be proud of what you make . . . it’s just - - you have to see it from my side?”

“Explain it?” Steve asked, his breath held a bit.

“I had barely gotten my life back when I got Ava,” Bucky took a deep breath and looked at Steve, “Nobody thought I’d be able to care for her . . . that I was too young, too inexperienced to know what she needed. They wanted me to give her up, Stevie. And I couldn’t do that . . . I proved to
everyone that I knew what I was doing and that I could care for her.”

Softly, Steve said, “and you’ve done a great job, too, Bucky.”

“Thank you,” Bucky nodded, “But . . . that’s why I don’t like people helpin’ me.”

“I don’t understand,” Steve sighed, looking sorry. “I must be stupid about this.”

Bucky reached over and placed his left hand on Steve’s, “You ain’t stupid, Stevie. Never. Tell me what you don’t understand.”

“You’ve raised and cared for Ava without any help or very little. You’ve proven you’re a great father and the person she belongs with. But I don’t understand why that means you can’t accept me buying groceries and paying for security and other stuff. It’s not like I’m paying for Ava or anything.”

Sighing, Bucky nodded and squeezed Steve’s hand. “I didn’t want you to think I was desperate. That I only wanted you for your money . . . because I don’t care about the money, Steve. I care about you.”


“Sure.” Bucky nodded.

“And you can say no, Bucky.” Steve drew a deep, shaky breath then let it out, forcing calm onto himself. “I want to donate my art money to Maria Stark’s clinic. The seven million? I don’t want it.”

Bucky’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything.

“And Momma’s inheritance? I want to keep it saved for big things, like if we have an emergency or want a really nice wedding when Ava turns thirty or something?” He started playing with the pen, knowing that took out a serious chunk of the money Bucky had been referring to. “That leaves my own money, the stuff I earned already and win from any settlement against Jack and Brock in civil court. For my injuries. Sam said it’s a good idea to sue them for hurting me.”

Finally, he fell silent, eyes dropping, waiting for Bucky’s reaction.

Bucky looked at Steve for a few moments, his hand still on the blond’s. After almost a minute of silence, Bucky nodded, “Alright.”

Steve lifted his eyes, uncertainty in them. “You worried about the money, so I thought of a way that it doesn’t matter? Then I only have normal money, like everyone else?” He didn’t want his money to come between them, to keep upsetting Bucky or making him feel inadequate or small. “I can sell the apartment, too, and can put the money aside for . . . I don’t know . . . something.” He knew exactly what he wanted to do with the money from the apartment, but was afraid Bucky would turn him down flat.

“It’s a good compromise.” Bucky nodded again, seeming to think things over, “As long as you’re sure. I don’t wanna push you to give up that much money.”

Steve put his other hand on top of Bucky’s and said, voice low and serious. “I may never be as good as I once was for art, Bucky, but I’m not incapable any more. Not since you’ve come back into my life and helped me see what I can do for me.” He took a breath. “I don’t like you feeling bad. The money makes you feel bad. So, I thought I’d get rid of it, but keep enough in case you or I or both of us need it. Then we don’t have to worry, either, because of the savings.” He tilted his head, eyes watchful. “And if I get a job, I can continue to contribute. Until then, I’ll clean and
Bucky looked over at Steve with wide eyes, “Yes! Of course . . . I’m not gonna keep you from working.”

Relief flooded the blond and he smiled his angelic, sunshine smile. “I like getting out and talking to people, Buck. I don’t like being stuck inside the house all the time, even if I don’t mind being busy. Thanks. I really like working.”

Bucky bit his lip and looked at Steve, “I - - I may have an idea?”

With a nod, Steve kept his hands under and over Bucky’s. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“And you can say no,” Bucky said firmly.

Slipping his hands free at last, Steve picked up the pen and wrote down ‘we can say no.’

“Well . . . Nat and Clint still need someone to help around the store when the twins are off. It’ll just be temporary while you look for a job in your field,” Bucky said cautiously, afraid of offending his boyfriend.

“So, it would be part time?” Steve asked, relief in his eyes when Bucky didn’t suggest Steve do something ‘from home’ like Brock had occasionally. “I don’t know how good I’d be on their mural, but I can learn to sort books and help customers and run a register.”

“You don’t hatfa do the mural . . . they still want you to do it, but they understand - -”

“They do?” Steve seemed to freeze. “They . . . know about . . . the window?” He flushed brightly, ashamed. His head bowed. “That Brock had to do that?”

“Brock didn’t have to do that, Steve. He hurt you to be mean . . . that’s it . . . but yes, I told Clint and Nat what happened. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything until I talked to you. But they were worried because of what happened at the cafe.” Bucky looked apologetic.

Taking a shaking breath, Steve nodded, not looking up. His voice was small, worried, as he slowly asked, “Bucky, are . . . are they going to yell at me when I do something dumb?”

“No, never,” Bucky said firmly, eyes hardening slightly.

Steve looked up, still flushed, still looking worried. “Can I add another rule?”

“Of course,” Bucky smiled softly.

“I want to add that we should be allowed to say what we’re feeling. That we won’t get in trouble for being afraid or sad or even angry. That we can always talk about our feelings?” He nervously fiddled with the pen.

“That’s a great rule, Stevie.” He nodded.

“And . . .” Steve drew a breath, meeting Bucky’s eyes, “when we want to say how much I love you. I can just do it, right?”

Bucky’s eyebrows furrowed, a little confused by the question.

“I mean,” Steve rushed on at Bucky’s silence, “that if I don’t want to say it, you won’t get mad, either, right?” He flushed, hanging his head, waiting . . . waiting for the shoe to drop. He felt like he was always waiting to see just how many rules could be broken or thrown away before Brock
was right and someone would snap.

“I’ll never force you to do or say anything, Steve, never. I promise.”

Steve lifted his face, worry in his blue eyes. “But . . . okay,” he fell silent.

“Stevie . . . remember my rule? I need you to be honest with me . . .” Bucky looked at Steve’s dejected appearance with a slightly confused expression.


“I know . . . but what did I say to make you uncomfortable?” Bucky pushed.

He nodded, and twisted his hands together suddenly, putting them in his lap as if afraid they would be a target. “You said it was fine to say if I have negative emotions, that we both should do that. And that I don’t have to do or say anything if I don’t want to.” Taking a shaky breath, Steve said, so low he was barely whispering, “but you don’t want me to say I love you, and I understand."

“What?” Bucky mentally went over the conversation trying to think of where Steve could’ve gotten that. “You can say I love you whenever you want, baby. I’m sorry I made you feel like you couldn’t.”

Steve raised his eyes. “You didn’t seem comfortable with that?” He worried. “I want you comfortable, too, Bucky.”

Bucky shifted off the counter and moved over to Steve, slowly to allow Steve to react if needed, the brunet pressed his lips to Steve’s forehead. “I love you.” He moved to kiss Steve’s cheek. “I love you so much.”

Steve gasped and let his arms go around his boyfriend, turning his mouth to meet Bucky’s. After a long kiss, he breathed into Bucky’s mouth, “I love you so much, Buck.”

Smiling, Bucky said softly, “I’ll never get sick of hearing that. You can say that a hundred times a day and I would never stop you.”

Steve smiled and kissed again. “I like saying it.” He sat back a little, his eyes going to the clock on the wall. “You asked me to remind you when it turned four o’clock so you could get cleaned up?” He looked at the brunet in his loose embrace.

“Shit!” Bucky pulled away, “I’m gonna be late . . . again.”

“No, it just turned four, Bucky. I wouldn’t let you down.” He smiled and let the man go. “You have time, like we scheduled.”

Bucky gave Steve a quick kiss, “I love you,” he repeated before turning to walk out of the kitchen.

“I love you, too, Bucky.” Steve said firmly, smiling, even his eyes danced. He listened as Bucky ran up to the shower upstairs and began getting cleaned up. Adding the last few rules they’d agreed on, Steve hung the list on the fridge next to the paper which they would write on to say where they were going if they had to leave. Stepping back, the ringing of Bucky’s phone drew his attention. With a frown, he reached for it and his eyes widened in horror as he saw his own name. He knew who that would be.

Steve carefully answered the phone with his customary almost insecure question, “Hello?”
“So, you are fucking him?” Brock growled.

“No, sir,” Steve answered immediately, his voice small. Brock had managed in one sentence to make him feel small and inadequate and dirty.

“Yes you are, Slut. Why else would you be picking up his phone?” Brock rasped.

“He’s in the shower,” Steve instinctively explained then winced when he realized he’d given out information.

“Shower? Too dirty from sticking his dick inside you?” Brock’s icy tone snapped.

“No, sir. We aren’t lovers, Brock,” Steve said, tone fearful and small.

“Then, leave him,” Brock ordered simply.

“I can’t,” Steve whispered, eyes welling. “I can’t leave him again, Brock. He needs me.”

“I don’t give a damn what he needs! You are coming home. Bad things happen to people who cross me. If you come home . . . I won’t hurt him.” Brock offered, as if proposing a business deal.

“Brock . . .” Steve hesitated then said, “you hurt me, Brock. I . . . I want to stay where I won’t get hurt.”

“I only give you what you deserve, Slut,” Brock growled, “That’s a really nice townhome he has. Would be a shame if it burned . . . wouldn’t you say, Steve?”

Steve’s eyes widened and he walked to the window, looking out instinctively as if he thought he might see Brock waving at him or something. “Don’t burn Bucky’s home? Please, sir?

“Come home. Or else poor Bucky will have a whole body set of scars to match his arm and face.” Brock’s car was parked where it had been the night Steve went to the hospital. He got out of the car to stare at the window Steve looked out of.

Fear ran through Steve. Brock must have seen Bucky in the last week or he wouldn’t have known about the scratches. “I . . . but I should tell him I’m leaving. I can’t just walk out . . .” he temporized. Steve moved away from the window and back to the kitchen island, eyes desperate. Brock was very capable of hurting the helpless man.

“I’ll tell you what . . . since I am a very nice, forgiving boyfriend . . . I’ll give you until tomorrow morning at nine to come home. If you don’t . . . well, I’m sure I can figure out a way to play with Bucky. I wonder what that pretty little mouth looks like while he’s screaming?”

“Nine in the morning,” Steve echoed dully, a twisting core of ice settling in his belly. He knew he had to protect Bucky . . . Brock has just said he’d burn down the house and probably Bucky in it.

“Good boy, I’ll see you tomorrow,” Brock said as if talking to a dog and then hung up.

Steve pulled the phone from his ear and watched as the little red indicator shut off, marking the end of the recorded call. He closed his eyes and let the tears spill over. Blindly, Steve put Bucky’s phone on the kitchen island and collapsed onto a stool and wept as softly as he knew how. After long minutes of pain and grief, Steve’s sobs and moans dropped off. He finally rose to his feet, unaware of his surroundings, so used to coming out of a crying jag in his 30th floor apartment. Thus, Steve moved numbly into the living room and began tidying things, intent on not upsetting anything or anyone. He would leave this house spotless when he went home.
“Steve?” Bucky’s small voice called out from the bottom of the stairs. “Steve . . . why? What are you doing?”

“Cleaning,” Steve answered dully, his voice small. He lifted his face, eyes miserable, and cleared his throat. “Cleaning this place up. Just give me a few minutes, sir, and I’ll have it good as a showroom.” He seemed unaware of his own response, moving to straighten the contents of the shelves.

Shuffling forward, hair still dripping from his shower and his shirt slung over his left shoulder, Bucky called out as he stepped in front of Steve, “Stevie . . . it’s okay. You don’t hafta clean. You’re with me . . . with Bucky?”

The muscular, wounded blond stopped and let his head hang in dejection. “With Bucky,” he repeated on a sob. “Yes, I’m with you for now.” He took a deep, stuttering breath.

Bucky stumbled back, as if he’d been slapped, “For now? What do you mean?”

“I . . . your phone is on the island,” Steve said but stopped moving, eyes flicking fearfully towards the window.

Bucky turned and looked out the window, not seeing anything other than a stray cat run across the street. Looking at the blond again, Bucky’s frowned deeper. “Rumlow called, didn’t he?”

“Yes, sir,” Steve sighed, his voice hitching, troubled. “He wants me to come home.”

“Y - - you’re not going, right?” Bucky asked softly, his heart pounded in his chest and, for the first time in a week, his arm flared.

“I don’t want to go back to him, Bucky,” Steve turned his head, eyes miserable. “He’s threatening you . . .”

“I can handle myself, Stevie, I promise. You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Bucky pleaded with Steve.

 Unsure how to tell Bucky, not wanting to see the horror of the nightmare dawning over Bucky’s face, Steve hesitated. “Do . . . uh . . . do you have fire insurance, Bucky?” He watched, eyes worried.

Bucky’s eyes hardened and he asked incredulously, “I - - uh, yeah? He’s threatening to burn my house down?”

“Just . . . well . . . he said something about . . . how . . . vulnerable?” Steve trailed off at Bucky’s look and tone, turning his face into his arms. Finally he whimpered, “with you in it, Bucky . . . I can’t let him hurt you!”

“He’s not going to,” Bucky stated firmly, “He’s just trying to scare you.” The brunet couldn’t help but think of Becca’s house, engulfed in flames and the thick black smoke billowing out of the windows.

“He’s succeeding,” Steve sighed, tone small. “Nine o’clock,” he frowned and stopped talking, closing his eyes.

“Nine o’ clock?” Bucky asked, “What happens at nine o’clock?”

Turning his head and looking terrified, Steve shook his head. “Um . . .” he gulped. “He . . . he said at nine o’clock . . . I . . .” Steve choked up and couldn’t answer, his eyes flicking to the kitchen.
doorway in fear.

“If you don’t go back by nine o’clock he’s going to burn down my house?” Bucky pieced together.

Nodding, Steve closed his eyes and hung his head. “I’m sorry, Bucky . . . sorry . . .”

“You don’t have nothin’ to be sorry for,” Bucky cooed gently.

“I thought I could help . . . but I don’t have time. I can’t do enough,” Steve moaned and pushed to an awkward upright position with the re bruising of his buttock, possibly even tearing the healing flesh. His leg and butt hurt so bad, but not as bad as his heart and gut. He felt like throwing up, like curling into a ball and giving up.

“You’re not going back, Stevie. I - - I can’t let you. We’ll figure it out,” Bucky rushed out, desperate to keep Steve here, with him, safe.

“I want to stay,” Steve sobbed and moved, as if to hug Bucky, but held himself back, eyes wide and tear-washed. “I don’t want to be with Brock.”

“Then you don’t have to, baby.” Bucky’s eyes welled with tears, fingers beginning to twitch, “Please . . . stay? I can protect you.”

Steve nodded. “If you want me, I’ll stay . . . as long as you want me, Bucky.” he promised again, voice miserable, earnest. “Should . . . should we tell Sam? Or go back to Tony’s clinic?” Steve finally reached out a hesitant hand and touched Bucky’s arm, fingers stroking as if he needed to touch, to reassure himself that Bucky wouldn’t pull away or disappear.

Bucky nodded, tugging on his shirt, “The house isn’t safe.” The brunet sighed and looked around his home, not wanting to leave but seeing no other choice.

“I’ll get your phone?” Steve offered quietly, one hand still grasping Bucky’s arm. He turned to look back at the kitchen, where he’d left the phone.

Nodding, Bucky turned to go upstairs, “I’ll go pack up another bag.”

“Okay,” Steve swallowed. “Do you think I should bring the cake?” he asked, revealing that his fear was great enough that he was having trouble prioritizing. Steve let go of Bucky and began to heavily limp into the other room, blood staining the back of his sweatpants.

“No, baby, leave the cake. It’ll be fine,” Bucky said softly as he climbed up the stairs.

Nodding, Steve scooped up the phone and limped back to wait in the living room quietly. He seemed unaware of his injury, watching the steps intently.

After a few minutes, Bucky came back down, a large black duffle bag slung over his right shoulder, his left fingers twitching.

“Did you remember our medicine?” Steve asked softly, twisting the phone between his fingers and reaching for the bag.

“Yeah . . . I’ll take it when we get there,” Bucky said, but he didn’t let Steve grab the bag from him.

He gave up trying to get the bag. “I’ll take my night meds with my dinner,” Steve answered back. He slowly looked out the window, studying the street, then opened the door and lead Bucky to his
car. Steve continually scanned for danger, for Rumlow. He turned to look at Bucky. “He was out here when he called. I swear it.”

“He was trying to scare you,” Bucky repeated as he unlocked the car and dropped the bag in the back seat. He quickly got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

Steve slid in with a wince and twisted the phone in his hands again. He sighed. “I’m sorry, Bucky. I’m sorry this happened again.” He fumbled the belt, not because of injury this time but because of nerves.

“He’s not gonna stop until he’s locked up,” Bucky murmured as he pulled out of the driveway and onto the main road.

With a nod, Steve glanced over at his boyfriend. “If he’d break the restraining order and step too close, we could get him locked up while they work on a bigger case,” he breathed with a slight hitch, but he had started to get himself under control.

“He’s too smart.” Bucky shook his head and accelerated the car as he guided it onto the expressway. “How did he get your phone anyway? Isn’t the police supposed to have it?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know. The call came from me, to your phone,” he held up Bucky’s phone. “It didn’t set off your ringtone . . .” he looked at the phone in his hands. “He must know your number already. Maybe called from a different phone?”

Bucky shook his head, hands tightening on the steering wheel, “Fuck!”

A glint of red flashing from the phone in Steve’s hands indicated a recording. The blond looked out the window, biting his lip. “He might’ve used his own phone . . . or a pay phone or something?”

“Please tell me you recorded it or something? I can run the phone over to Sam after I drop you off at the clinic.” Bucky didn’t tear his eyes away from the road, needing something to distract him from his itching arm.

Steve’s head turned and his eyes widened and then he nodded, looking as if he expected as much and was finally correct. “Yes, sir. I record everything,” his voice came softly.

Bucky grimaced and shook his head again, “it’s okay, baby. I’ll take my phone over to the police station after I drop you off to get that leg looked at. We’ll get him, okay?”

Nodding, Steve said, “okay.” He looked down at his lap, his hands steady, his voice calm, accepting and controlled.

Bucky didn’t say anything as he pulled into the parking lot of the clinic.

When they parked, Steve looked up at the nondescript clinic building. He sighed, let himself out of the car, and stood on the sidewalk, patiently waiting for Bucky. After over a week of uncertainty, Steve finally seemed under control, like he was at last comfortable. The blond held out the phone to his boyfriend, eyes downcast.

Bucky hurried out of the car, forgetting to lock the doors, as he took his phone from Steve and slipped it into his back pocket. Wrapping one arm around Steve, Bucky helped him limp into the clinic’s entrance.

The tall blond didn’t resist in any way, but he did walk when directed. He moved under his own power, not leaning or stumbling, just limping.
“It’s okay, Stevie. We’ll get him,” Bucky repeated, unsure if he was trying to reassure his boyfriend or himself.

Steve lifted his face and nodded, eyes sad but alert. “Yes, everything’s okay, Bucky. We’ll get him,” he repeated back, sounding confident at the moment despite his passive demeanor.

Finally, Bucky saw Doctor Banner standing by a counter talking to a nurse, “Doctor Banner!”


“Brock called again. Was outside the house,” Bucky reported as he entered the room Bruce had gestured to.

Bruce nodded and began to help Steve undress. “Did you call the police?” He winced at the bloody sight of the bandages on Steve’s buttock and thigh.

“I’m going there now,” Bucky stated firmly, “I had to drop him off because he was bleeding again.”

“I’ll take care of him, Bucky. You be careful and go straight to the precinct,” Bruce assured the brunet.

The blond looked over at Bucky, “I’ll be okay, Bucky,” he assured him. “I’ve had worse.”

Bucky nodded and gave his boyfriend a quick kiss, “I love you, Steve.”

Steve kissed him back, his demeanor still passive though he met the kiss willingly. “I love you, Bucky,” his voice cracked and he cleared his throat, looking down.

“I’ll be back, okay? Stay here?” Bucky asked as he stepped away from Steve.

“I’ll be wherever you need me to be, Bucky,” Steve assured him. He offered a nod but no smile, no frown.

Nodding, Bucky turned and left the room, running down the hallway and out of the entrance. Jogging over to his car, Bucky slid into the driver’s seat and started the vehicle. He pulled out of the parking spot and back onto the road, heading towards the police station.

After a few minutes, a cold, sharp pain pierced his neck very slightly. “Drive to my place, Bucky,” Rumlow rasped from the back seat, his voice calm but menacing.

Bucky jumped, causing the vehicle to swerve slightly, but he managed to correct it. His eyes snapped up to the rearview mirror and he could see Brock’s cold eyes staring back at him. “Fuck you!”

“Not a bad idea,” Rumlow growled back. “But not in the car. Drive to my place or I slit your throat then find your little girl in that bookstore she plays at.”

Bucky’s heart pounded and he swallowed hard. Brock knew where he could get to Ava; he couldn’t let this psycho any where near his niece. “Alright . . . alright.” Bucky turned on a street, away from the station, towards Steve’s old apartment. “Just . . . don’t hurt her okay? I’ll do whatever you want . . . just don’t hurt her.”

“Oh, you’ll definitely do what I want. And then, you’ll happily give me Steve back,” Rumlow growled, twisting the knife slightly, not drawing blood but reminding Bucky of the weapon. “But
first, you need to make it up to me for taking him away for a week. You’ll take his place and do his work.”

Wincing as the blade pinched his skin, Bucky kept his eyes on the road. “You - - you don’t have to do this. If you get out . . . I won’t go to the police? I won’t tell anyone.”

“Well, that’s mighty nice of you,” Rumlow said, sounding eerily reasonable. “But, you see, I don’t think you appreciate Steve the way I do. He’s unhappy with you. Every time I call, he sounds terrified and like he’s crying. So, I’ll show you just what he means to me. And, in the end, you’ll realize that Steve belongs with me, and your little girl belongs with you.”

“Leave her out of this!” Bucky snapped, hands tightening on the wheel.

“Mind your manners, Bucky. I won’t touch the brat if you give my Steve back!” He snapped back, sounding extremely angry. “Right there. Park there. The apartment is just ahead.”

Bucky pulled into the spot; he just needed to wait this out until he could gain the upper-hand. Until he could take Rumlow by surprise. He parked the car and waited for further instructions.

“Good boy. I knew you weren’t stupid. Okay. Get out slowly and don’t do anything stupid. Remember, I know where your girl plays.” Brock slid from the back seat, knife at the ready.

Shakily, Bucky stepped out of the car and shut the door softly.

“Good, now into the apartment.” Brock slid the knife down to Bucky’s waist.

Bucky began to walk towards the building, the knife pressing into his side as if any wrong movement would sink it into his flesh.

They easily got past the doorman and on the elevator without anyone the wiser. At the thirtieth floor, Brock guided Bucky to Steve’s apartment and opened the door. He pushed Bucky in, the knife tearing his shirt. Brock slammed and locked the door, grinning. “Okay, now we get to work.” He spread his arms indicating the messy apartment, dirty clothes and dishes everywhere, fast food containers mixed with other trash. The beige and ivory carpets and walls bore many stains, and a rotten stench wafted down the hall from the walk-in closet Steve used to call his bedroom. Brock sighed. “Needs a bit of cleaning.” Steve would have been mortified at the sight of his home.

Bucky stumbled into the apartment, looking around with wide eyes, “You’re fucking insane!”

“Insane?” Brock frowned and slapped Bucky across the face, hard. “Because I got better things to do than clean? You fucking whore!” He thrust Bucky against the wall and pressed the knife against his throat. “You wanna repeat that?”

Bucky felt blood drip from his now split lip; he narrowed his eyes at Brock and spat a mouthful of blood at the stockier man’s face.

Brock balled a fist and slammed Bucky in the stomach, doubling him over. “Yeah, gotta teach you manners.” He stepped back. “You are gonna clean this up, Bucky,” his tone dropped back to a reasonable tone.

Wheezing, Bucky had his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. “You clean this dump up . . . you’re more than capable.”

“Now, that’s not nice, Bucky. We already agreed that you come do Steve’s work for him since you took him away. Then we swap back. You give me Steve and I leave your kid alone.” Brock
smacked the lean brunet across the face. “This back talk is not part of our agreement.”

Bucky stumbled to the side, falling to his knees, he coughed and blood splattered on the carpet below him.

“Ready to obey, Bucky?” Brock looked down at him.

Swallowing, Bucky nodded and looked up at Brock.

“Good,” he almost purred. “Come on, Babe, let me help you up.” Brock gently helped Bucky to his feet and smiled, wiping away the blood from his lip. “Okay, so, since there aren’t any guests since Jack got locked up, you can wear Steve’s normal uniform.”

“Uniform?” Bucky asked, his voice still raspy from the punch to the stomach.

Brock flicked the knife up so the light traced down the edge. “Yup.” And the man slit the shirt off Bucky’s torso with a series of quick movements. “You earn clothes by staying clean.” He reached over and slit the waistband of Bucky’s trousers. “Strip, drawers, too, or I’ll finish with the knife.” The dark-haired man sounded so reasonably calm, it wasn’t certain if he were angry or pleased.

Bucky immediately moved to wrap his arms around his torso, trying to cover as much skin as possible. He shook his head wildly and tried to back away from Brock.

Lifting an eyebrow, Brock let out a sigh of what sounded like disappointment. “Still rebelling?” He brandished the knife. “I said strip, you ugly freak.”

“No,” Bucky muttered, still shaking his head.

“Why? Your ass can’t be as ugly as that arm.” Brock said and flicked the knife, slicing again at the waistband of Bucky’s trousers. “Shame about that face. You were so pretty last week.”

Bucky flushed, but he pushed away from Brock, he was not about to walk around naked in front of Brock Rumlow.

Reaching out with a quick fist, Brock grabbed Bucky’s hair and yanked the man to his knees in the filth. “I said you need to earn the right to cover your scarred, ugly ass! You will obey!”

Bucky yelped as Brock yanked on his hair but he didn’t make any movements to remove his pants.

“Fine.” Brock dragged Bucky down the hall to Steve’s closet and pushed him inside, right into a puddle of rotting feces. “You can wear the pants, but they’re gonna be so messed up, you’ll beg me to let you take them off! Now, there are cleaning supplies behind that back curtain. Start cleaning your room!” As the door had been broken down a week before, Brock couldn’t lock Bucky in, but he did stand back, arms loose and ready, knife held firmly.

Gagging at the smell, Bucky coughed loudly to keep himself from throwing up. “What the hell? Couldn’t use a fucking toilet?”

“Yeah,” Brock sighed as if he agreed with Bucky. “That was Jack. He said Steve would need to come back to something to do, since he was bored enough to leave.” Brock shrugged. “But I’ll let you clean it up for him.”

Bucky looked at Brock warily before turning his attention back towards the curtain in front of him. With a shaky hand, he pushed it aside and looked at the cleaning supplies.
“Oh! Nearly forgot. A good boyfriend deserves jewelry, doesn’t he?” Brock smiled and reached into his pocket. “Let me give you some, Bucky.”

Turning to look over his shoulder, Bucky shook his head, “I don’t want anything from you.” He snapped.

“Aw, now you’re just being modest and sweet,” Brock smiled as if proud of Bucky. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and snapped one around Bucky’s ankle, quickly getting the other one around a link on the floor. “There you go, Bucky. Now you know you belong.”

Eyes wide, Bucky began to pull harshly at the chain, ignoring how the metal rubbed against his skin.

“You’ll hurt yourself,” Brock warned. “Steve had to learn, too, but you’ll catch on. I should tell you the rules, shouldn’t I? You should repeat them so you can memorize them, Bucky. Wouldn’t want to forget.” Brock nodded, as if Bucky were content.

Bucky didn’t say anything, instead he continued to try and break the handcuff around his ankle.

“That’s titanium. Same as the locks on your doors, Bucky. Won’t break.” Brock smiled. “First rule, Brock takes care of you because he loves you. Second rule, you clean and cook for Brock, because you don’t have anything better to do. Third rule,” Brock eyed Bucky. “Are you listening?”

“Fuck you,” Bucky snarled, looking up at the other man.

“Well, that’s one of the rules, but not number three. You are a randy sonofabitch aren’t you, little whore?” Brock laughed. “You know, Steve told me you weren’t fucking, and I didn’t believe him.” The man strode around Bucky and nodded, grimacing, “but seeing that ugly body, that horrible, nauseating arm, I can understand.”

Bucky flushed and ducked his head, his right arm moving to cover his left.

“So, you let Steve be in charge? That’s nice of you, Bucky. He’s not real big on taking charge, you know. But, I can see how a twisted piece of horny shit like you would want such a pretty piece of ass in the lead.” Brock strode out the door into the hall and looked back. “You should be able to reach the supplies, so get cleaning, Bucky. Maybe later I can fuck you good, despite that disgusting arm. Show you just what Steve needs from a man.”

Paling, Bucky nearly threw up just from the thought of Brock . . . raping him. He hadn’t slept with anyone before but he knew Brock would not be gentle . . . Brock would ruin him.

Looking back at the supplies, Bucky shakily reached out and grabbed what he needed to clean the room around him. The only thing he could hope for now was that he’d be here long enough to get Steve worried. That Steve would call Sam and then Sam would be able to tell him that Bucky never made it to the station. Suddenly, his boyfriend’s passive attitude came to the forefront of Bucky’s memory. Steve wouldn’t be well enough to notice anything for a while.

Holding back a helpless sob, Bucky began to clean.

A television faintly sounded from the man cave down the hall and it became very evident that Brock would only come back if he felt like degrading or checking on Bucky. And there wasn’t even a bucket for a toilet close by.

The sound of his phone ringing in his pocket brought Brock running full pelt. “What the fuck?”
Bucky quickly reached into his back pocket and tried to answer the call from Natasha.

Brock launched himself on top of the chained man and wrestled the phone from him. “No! Bad Bucky!” Brock held the phone out of reach and checked to see who called. “Oh, the wife?” He turned a glare on Bucky, flicked the phone on then back off. “Phones are against the rules. You have to earn phone time. And you have to keep a complete record of all calls, so I can make sure no one’s trying to harass you or hurt you. I’m doing this to help you, Bucky.”

“You’re deranged,” Bucky snarled trying to reach his phone.

Brock pulled back the hand with the phone and slammed Bucky across the cheek with it. “Watch your fucking mouth, whore!” The man walked over to the bathroom across the hall, opened the door, and looked back at Bucky. “You don’t need this shit,” he said.

“No!” Bucky, despite being slightly dazed from the harsh hit, scrambled forward only to have the chain pull tight, breaking the skin on his ankle. “No! Please!”

“Ah, that’s it. Polite.” Brock smiled and shut the bathroom door. “I’ll just put this phone somewhere safe for you, so when you earn your phone back I can give it to you.”

“If I don’t call Natasha back . . . she’ll get worried! She’ll call the cops!” Bucky said. If he could get a message to Nat, then maybe he could stand a chance to make it out of this. His voice took a pleading tone as he tried to pull on the chain restricting his movements.

“Are you done cleaning your room, Bucky?” Brock asked, much as a patient parent might ask a child.

Bucky looked back at the small room, which was cleaner than when he’d started but not anywhere near spotless. “Yes, sir?” He winced as the words came out of his mouth, as if they’d physically hurt him to speak.

Brock nodded and stepped inside, looking around. Frowning, he shook his head. “Not clean enough, but it’s a start. At least you tried, didn’t you?” Brock stepped back out and disappeared down the hall and into the kitchen. After a moment, he came back with a broom handle . . . not a complete broom, just the handle. “So, Bucky, is this room clean?”

Bucky eyed the broomstick cautiously, his lip had begun to bleed again from Brock’s latest hit. “No?” He hazarded.

Nodding, Brock smiled. “Good boy. You must always tell the truth. Lying earns punishment.” He put the broom handle outside the door, leaning against the wall. “Okay, well, I’ll let you get a change of scenery, Bucky. You can finish in here later. Grab some supplies and you can clean the kitchen now.” The unexpectedly nice behavior was enough to throw Bucky off balance.

Kitchen. The kitchen had plenty of things he could grab as a weapon to use against Brock. Bucky nodded and grabbed some more supplies, “Thank you, sir?”

“Good boy,” Brock reached over and actually petted Bucky’s hair, smiling proudly. He unhooked the one handcuff from Bucky’s ankle, leaving it chained to the floor. Brock gently helped Bucky to stand and, holding his left arm in a very strong grip, he guided Bucky into the kitchen and to the sink of dirty dishes, the chicken Steve had burnt still lying about on the floor, decaying in the heat of the apartment. Brock grinned at Bucky and reached under the table then clamped a collar swiftly around Bucky’s neck! It was attached to a long chain fastened to the underside of the table. The entire place was rigged to hold someone prisoner.

Bucky tugged on the collar, eyes wide again. He couldn’t attack Brock while he was chained up,
if he didn’t manage to knock the stocky man out with one blow he’d be as good as dead.

“Now, clean the dishes and floor and then clean out the fridge, Bucky, and then you can cook something to eat.” Brock smiled and headed back to the living room. The man wiped his hand against his jeans-clad leg, though, muttering, “damn disgusting scars. Can’t believe I have to touch that. I’ll need to fuck him in the dark!”

Bucky’s cheeks flamed in embarrassment, he hugged his arm to his chest. His eyes burned with mortified tears but he quickly blinked them away; he would not give Brock the satisfaction of seeing him cry.

Changing channels in the other room, Brock continued to talk to himself. “As damned disgusting as Steve was when I first found him. All bones and ribs. No muscles at all!”

The collar tugged harshly against his skin as Bucky knelt down to pick up the metal pan off the floor. He turned on the hot water and poured some soap into the pan so that he could try to soak the grime off.

“But those scars . . . only thing I can do for that is a plastic surgeon. Inconvenient.”

Bucky wished he was with Steve . . . that he’d never left the clinic and that they could be sitting on the couch in their apartment watching a TV show. He didn’t know if he’d ever see Steve again, Rumlow didn’t seem like the type of guy to keep his word. If Brock let Bucky go, Bucky could press charges of kidnapping and assault . . . there was no way Rumlow would let that happen.

A faint pounding started up, like a deep bass to some music down the hall. Rumlow merely turned up the TV to block it out. He stood and came back into the kitchen and slapped Bucky’s ass then squeezed a butt cheek. “How’s it going, babe?”

Bucky jumped, and he couldn’t stop the terrified whimper that broke past his lips. Rumlow was going to rape him.

Rubbing a soothing hand down the same butt cheek, Brock cooed, “now, now, you’re safe with me, Bucky baby. I’ll take care of you.”

Pulling away from Brock’s grasp, Bucky backed as far away as the collar and leash would allow him. “Stay the fuck away from me!” Bucky screamed.

“No, no, Bucky, wrong answer.” Brock frowned, eyes narrowing in a flash of anger. “You were doing so well.” Brock slammed Bucky in the stomach with a fist again.

Chain pulling tight, Bucky doubled over and whimpered again. “Don’t touch me!”

“No, no, Bucky, wrong answer.” Brock grabbed Bucky’s ripped pants and tore them from him, leaving him in his underpants. “Better. Clothes make you snappy. You need to learn humility.” He reached for the underpants.

Brock slapped a hand over Bucky’s and growled. “You got a nice body, if it weren’t for that ugly scar on your face and that disgusting arm. But your body ain’t enough to get you a pass on being a shit to me. You’re too use to fucking being in charge, whore, taking any guy you want, fucking them up the ass? Well, you need a good ass full of dick to teach you to respect me!” He reached for the underpants.
“No! Get off me!” Bucky screamed.

The door broke open and someone grabbed Brock and flung him to the floor, ignoring the fact that Brock’s head hit the marble on the way down. Then Steve, dressed in his bloody sweatpants and no shirt or shoes, straddled his abuser and began pummelling him, not even looking up, fear and anger sending tears coursing down his flushed cheeks. “Keep your hands off Bucky!”

Bucky watched in horror as Steve’s fists met with Brock’s face over and over and over again. Blood splattered all over the metal appliances and Steve’s face. Trying to run over to pull Steve off, Bucky’s collar caught him, holding him a few feet away.

Sirens could be heard past the sound-proofed apartment now that the door had been broken in.

Brock lifted his arms at last to defend himself the knife glinting in his fist. He jabbed at Steve, getting him across the arm, but the blond seemed lost in his own mind, wrestling the knife out of Brock’s grasp, the snap of a bone under his fingers causing Brock’s hand to fall limp. “Never touch Bucky!”

“Steve!” Bucky screamed, fighting against the collar, “Steve! Stop! You’re gonna kill him! Stop!” Tears fell down his bruised and bloody face. Finally after a harsh tug, the chain broke from the bottom on the table, sending Bucky falling to the floor. Scrambling back to his feet, Bucky ran over to where Steve straddled a now unconscious Brock.

Pulling on Steve’s shoulder, Bucky cried, “Steve! Stop! Stop it!” At Bucky’s touch, Steve instantly stopped, letting his bloodied, bruised hands fall limp. He looked desperately at Bucky, eyes haunted and horrified. “Bucky? He took you. I saw him in the car when I went to say goodbye but you didn’t see me.”

Bucky didn’t say anything, he continued to let his tears fall and his whole body trembled violently. The collar had tightened to an almost choking hold.

Slipping his leg over so he could get off his former boyfriend, Steve knelt in front of Bucky. He frowned at the collar and reached over to unhook it . . . a simple hook and latch, nothing expected from an imprisonment! “Bucky?” Steve’s voice sounded worried.

“Ava . . . he - - he knew where she was,” Bucky mumbled, “Ava can’t see me, Steve.” His eyes unfocused and his knees buckled under him.

Standing, Steve literally scooped Bucky up in his arms and carried him from the room, just as Sam and several other cops got there, answering the calls of neighbors. Ignoring them, the blond sank onto a bench in the hallway and cuddled Bucky against his strong, broad chest. “Bucky, you’re safe now. I’ll keep you safe. I promise to keep you safe.” He let his tears continue.

“Ava? Ava’s safe? He didn’t hurt her, right?” Bucky whimpered, his abdomen ached from the several blows Rumlow had dealt and he could feel his face covered in sticky, thick crimson.

“Ava’s at the bookstore, Bucky. She’s safe.” he frowned. “Natasha is watching her.” He stroked the other man’s cheek carefully, using his thumb to gently wipe away the blood from his lip.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky cried and curled up, despite his throbbing middle, in Steve’s arms.

“What? Bucky you didn’t do anything wrong. You’re safe now,” he leaned over and tenderly kissed Bucky’s forehead, his voice and hands so gentle after that brutal display, so much like his anger back in school.
“Your - - your leg? Is - - is it - - okay?” Bucky stammered, his pale-blue eyes completely unfocused now. The brunet hardly seemed to register what had happened to him.

“I don’t know?” Steve flushed finally. “I didn’t get seen yet because I had to follow you. I couldn’t let Brock keep you.” He stroked Bucky’s hair from his face and frowned softly. “I need to wash you up. A warm bath and a nice soft bed,” he said firmly.

“He - - he was gonna - - Stevie . . .” Bucky whimpered again and clutched at Steve’s shirt.

“Well, he’s not gonna any more,” Steve said firmly, eyes sparking. “Because I’ve got you again, and I’m never gonna let him get you again.” He hugged Bucky carefully against his chest.

Bucky finally let out a loud sob and clutched Steve’s shirt tightly. “I wanna go . . . Stevie . . . I wanna go home.”

The voice of Sam broke over the couple, gentle and sure. “Do you want to go to the clinic to get photographed and examined, Bucky? We can use it on the charges of kidnapping, assault, false imprisonment, and a slew of other charges we’re looking at from this night alone.”

“I wanna go home,” Bucky whimpered, not acknowledging he’d heard Sam.

Steve frowned and said, “Bucky, you need to be seen by Doctor Banner first, then I’ll take you home, okay?”

“Doctor Banner?” Bucky echoed, voice trailing off.

“Yes,” Steve answered, his voice certain. “You’re going to see Doctor Banner so we have the evidence to get Brock locked away forever. Kidnapping is a federal crime.” He stood, wincing, lifting Bucky as he did so. “Then I’ll take you home and clean you up and put you to bed and sit with you.”

“You’ll stay with me? Even if I’m ugly? You’ll stay with me?” Bucky just grabbed Steve tighter.

With a surprised look, Steve asked, “ugly? Bucky, you’re not ugly.” He frowned. “But even if you were covered with scars and sores and . . . anything . . . I’d stay with you. I love you. You are the most beautiful man I’ve ever known, and I love you, Bucky.”

“Love . . . you . . . too,” Bucky breathed.

Sam just sighed and turned to another cop, a tall man with an eye patch. “Nick, can you bring them to the clinic? Make sure they get home afterwards. We’ve gotta impound his car and phone for evidence.”

Steve looked down at the man in his arms then followed Nick from the apartment building.

**********

Carefully, Steve balanced Bucky against his chest as he keyed in the security code to the townhouse. It had been several hours since they’d gone to the clinic for Bucky’s exams and Steve’s wound and the sun had long since set.

“I can walk, Stevie,” Bucky muttered, he had come down from his panic attack. Blood had dried on the brunet’s face and he wanted nothing more than a bath to wash away all the grime from the day.

Nodding, Steve slid Bucky to stand on his feet, keeping an arm around him. He turned the knob
and opened the door. “Want to use the master bath or the shower?” He asked softly, as if he was once again uncertain of overstepping his bounds.

“Bath . . . my whole body aches,” Bucky admitted, swaying slightly on his feet.

Keeping an arm around the other man, Steve led him in, turned to shut and secure the door, then guided him up the stairs towards Bucky’s bathroom. He got the door open and the light on and turned to his boyfriend, dressed in loose scrubs from the clinic. “Want me to bathe you still?” He asked.

Bucky nodded, looking down, “I don’t wanna be alone right now.”

Steve nodded and sat his boyfriend on the toilet. He ran warm water into the tub and soaped up two cloths. Then he turned and began carefully slipping the shirt off Bucky’s body. “I won’t do anything you don’t want, Buck. Just tell me if you want me to stop.”

As Steve removed the shirt, two large, deep purple bruises could be seen on Bucky’s abdomen. The brunet wrapped his arms around himself, wincing as he accidently bumped the new wounds.

“Bucky, I can’t wash you if you hug yourself,” Steve said with a small, worried frown. He stood his boyfriend up and began to remove the pants.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut, imaging Rumlow’s hands pulling on the waistband of his underwear. Had Steve taken ten more minutes . . . Bucky shuddered at the thought.

As Bucky began to shake, Steve stopped, kneeling at the brunet’s feet, and looking up at him. “Bucky? You okay?”

Snapping his eyes open, Bucky nodded and whimpered, “I’m sorry - -

“Sorry? Bucky, remember, I’ve been through what he must’ve done to you. And you’re right. He’s a monster. You have nothing to be sorry for . . . right? That’s what you’ve told me.” Steve lifted one of Bucky’s feet out of the scrub pants then the other, still looking up at his beautiful boyfriend.

“I was so scared, Stevie - - I haven’t . . . I thought that - - he was gonna rape me. I tried to get away . . . he just kept hitting me.”

Steve nodded and sat back on his feet, careful of his own injury. He lifted his bandaged arm, the slice from Brock’s knife only superficial this time. “Yeah, he’s good at hitting if he doesn’t get what he wants. He uses his hands and sticks and anything he can reach, too.” Steve put his hands on Bucky’s waist and caressed softly along the waistband. “Want me to bathe you in your drawers or nude, Buck?”

Bucky looked down at Steve and swallowed. He stepped back slightly and slipped out of his boxers, flushing brightly and avoided looking in Steve’s direction.

“Beautiful,” Steve said on a reverent whisper. “God, Bucky, you are so beautiful.” He rose to his feet and waited, not wanting to spook his boyfriend by grabbing him while he was so vulnerable. “Wanna get in the water?”

Stepping into the tub, Bucky smiled softly at the perfect temperature of the water. Sliding down to fully immerse himself, Bucky looked up at Steve. “Don’t leave?”

“Only if you want me to,” Steve confirmed and he sat on the edge of the tub, lifting one of the soaped cloths. Gently, he took Bucky’s left hand and lifted the arm, pausing, studying the scarred
limb. Slowly, he leaned down and placed a kiss on the wrist, then gently began kissing the scars and the pink patches across the damaged arm. “So beautiful, my Bucky,” he whispered yet again, eyes closing.

Ducking his head, a blush running down the back of his neck, “You love me?” Bucky asked quietly, Rumlow’s demeaning words echoing in his mind.

Steve opened his eyes, which shone with his love. He smiled and nodded. “I love you so much, Bucky. So very much.” He kissed the scarred arm again then leaned over more so he could place a careful kiss on Bucky’s lips. “You are beautiful and kind and loving and a great father. And I love you more each day.” He smiled for his boyfriend.

Eyes shining with happy tears, Bucky nodded, “I love you too, Steve.”

Steve let out a breath, sounding relieved. He, too, had been at the end of Brock’s demeaning behavior and knew what it felt like. Pleased he’d brought some comfort to his lovely boyfriend, Steve began to carefully bathe him, tender with the injuries, but certain and sure on the parts that weren’t hurt. After a long time, still murmuring his admiration for Bucky’s looks and his love, Steve stopped bathing Bucky.

He took a slow breath and asked, “do you want me to wash your genitals, too?” He flushed a bit but met Bucky’s eyes.

Cracking a small smile, Bucky shook his head, “No - - I’m okay. Thank you.”

Nodding, looking actually relieved, Steve handed the second, unused, soapy cloth to Bucky. “I can wash your hair when you wish?”

Grabbing the cloth, Bucky looked over at Steve, “Now? The water’s getting a little cold.”

“When you want,” Steve assured him and stood. He reached down and stood Bucky up then let the water from the tub. “Give me a moment,” he said. Watching the water drain, he asked “did you wanna wash yourself while we wait for the drain so I can refill?” Steve looked up from where he bent over, his face coming level with Bucky’s member. Steve flushed and dropped his eyes.

Bucky knelt down and cupped Steve’s face, pulling the blond into a kiss. His lip throbbed where Rumlow had split it but he didn’t care, he needed Steve.

Steve kissed back, opening his mouth slightly, encouragingly. He balanced himself by gripping the edge of the tub. “Bucky,” he moaned softly into the other man’s mouth.

Deepening the kiss, Bucky keened and pushed himself closer to Steve. He wanted to forget about what happened . . . the words Rumlow had said . . . he needed to forget. “Steve . . . Steve . . . I love you.” He gently nipped at Steve’s bottom lip.

Steve smiled against Bucky’s mouth, whimpering in need at the nip. He broke the kiss. “I love you, Bucky,” he responded then started running fresh warm water into the tub. “Gotta rinse the soap off,” he murmured, still smiling, ignoring his filling manhood. He refused to make demands on Bucky of any kind. He wanted to take care of Bucky, not overwhelm him. He could tend himself later that night, once Bucky was sleeping.

Slightly disappointed, Bucky nodded and sat back into the tub. The blood had been washed off his face, and he wondered how bad it looked . . . if he’d be able to see Ava. He didn’t want to scare his niece if his face was too swollen or bruised.

Steve reached for the shampoo and poured some in his cupped hand. He began washing Bucky’s
long brown tresses, careful of the bruises that had formed from being drug by his hair. “You tired, Bucky? Want me to tuck you in after your bath?” He shifted, ignoring his aching member. Bucky was so damn beautiful.

Groaning softly as Steve’s fingers worked through his hair, Bucky nodded with a slight blush, “Yeah.” God, he sounded more needy than Ava.

Ducking Bucky’s head carefully backwards under the still running faucet, Steve rinsed the shampoo out thoroughly. Finally, he sat Bucky back up and grabbed a towel to begin squeezing out the water from the brunet’s hair. He smiled. “Better?” he asked softly, eyes roving Bucky’s bruised, scratched, beloved face.

“Yeah, it feels so much better without all the blood. Thank you, Steve. You didn’t have to.”

“Any time, Buck,” Steve said. “I like taking care of you.” He paused then added “you let me choose, and I choose taking care of you.” Steve helped Bucky to stand, turning off the water. He began toweling the other man dry, careful to stay away from his crotch and butt. Finally, he wrapped the towel around Bucky’s bruised, scratched, beloved face.

Bucky shot his boyfriend a grateful smile and then padded into his room, stopping at the closet. He pulled out a pair of ratty, old black sweats and pulled them on, wincing as he bent over to pick up the towel that had dropped to the floor.

Steve, still in the bathroom, stripped out of his wet clothes and quickly cleaned up, willing his body to obey him. He sighed, aching. Finally, he gave in and began to try to bring himself off quickly so he could go back out and tend Bucky. He braced himself against the wall with one strong hand as he worked himself, eyes closed.

Walking back into the bathroom to throw the wet towel in the hamper, Bucky froze when he saw Steve jacking off. The brunet should’ve turned around and let Steve finish in private but Steve’s face looked so beautiful: cheeks slightly flushed, lips parted, eyes closed.

Imagining that it was Bucky’s hands, his beautiful mouth, around him, Steve came to completion quickly, moaning out his boyfriend’s name in a low groan, “Bucky . . .” He let his head bow, trying to catch his breath.

Bucky gasped and looked down, groaning as his own member had taken an extreme interest in the sight of his boyfriend touching himself.

Hearing the groan, Steve’s eyes flew open and met Bucky’s. He blushed brightly. “Buck?” He couldn’t hide what he’d been doing. Instead, he licked his lips. “I’m . . . uh . . . done and can come out to tuck you in now?”

“I - - uh . . . I’m sorry . . . I was gonna throw the towel in the hamper - - I didn’t - -” Bucky snapped his jaw shut, looking down at his own erection; he narrowed his eyes and willed it to go away . . . no such luck.

Steve continued to flush bright red. “I . . . I didn’t mean to take time away from you, but . . . I was aching? I . . . I promise I . . .” he fell silent, not sure what he could promise. “I . . . didn’t want you to think I’d hurt you like . . . him.” He bowed his head and sighed, one hand still on his shaft, his seed having been expelled into the toilet for easy clean up. Steve remained half-erect despite having just cum.

“I know you’d never hurt me like that, Steve.” Now he was aching. And the sight of Steve still half-erect did nothing but cause his member to twitch in anticipation. Bucky groaned softly and
tried to cover his own erection with his hands,

Looking over, Steve swallowed at the tenting in Bucky’s pants, despite his trying to hide it. Softly, hesitantly, Steve asked, “Do you want me to... help? I... uh... I think I’m pretty good?” He flushed at his own boldness. Steve’s member began to fill again and he flushed even more, embarrassed horribly, burying his face in his free hand. Rumlow had always criticized his stamina, saying it proved he was a whore.

Bucky eyes fell to Steve’s growing erection, tongue darting out to lick his lips, he murmured softly, “I - - I haven’t... I haven’t done anything before.”

Steve lowered his hand and nodded. “Yeah, I remember. You said that before.” He swallowed. “I can do whatever you want, Buck. Hand, mouth... I can let you in me... if you wanna. I...” he flushed. Might as well go all the way, since he’d already revealed his base nature, “I like, uh, sex... most of the time... if I use lube?”

“I need you, Stevie. Please?” Bucky pleaded, his erection nearly throbbing by now.

Steve nodded and let go of his shaft. He turned fully to Bucky. “Anyway you want me, Buck,” he offered.

“I don’t know? I - - I don’t know what feels good.” Bucky ducked his head, mortified by his own admission.

“Have you ever jacked yourself off?” Steve moved away from the toilet, his manhood stiff and hitting up against his own abdomen with every step.

“Yeah... of course. I am still male, ya know?” Bucky said with a slight snort.

“Do you like that?” Steve stopped in front of Bucky, reaching out to begin easing his sweatpants from his hips, careful not to catch on the man’s erection. He caught his breath at the beautiful sight he revealed. “Touching yourself? You like it?” he asked breathlessly.

Bucky’s hips jutted forward slightly, “Y - - yeah,” he breathed.

“Ever,” Steve slipped his hands to Bucky’s hips and encouraged him with a touch to step out of the pants, “use your own spit and imagine it was someone’s mouth, Buck?” he asked, leaning over to kiss Bucky’s neck.

Groaning, eyes slipping shut, Bucky said, “Fuck... Stevie - - please?” He bucked his hips again.

“I’m gonna put my mouth on you,” Steve whispered between kisses to Bucky’s neck, “and suck you down my throat,” he promised, licking and nipping, “and let you cum hard in my mouth.” Steve caressed his hands along Bucky’s hips.

“Jesus!” Bucky groaned low, the thought of Steve’s mouth on him caused pre-cum to leak from his tip. “Please, Stevie - - I need you... please?”

Smiling, lifting his mouth, Steve carefully guided Bucky to walk backwards into the bedroom. He eased Bucky to a sitting position on the bed and scooted the brunet backwards across the clean bedding. Steve followed, completely nude, his body caressing up and over Bucky’s when they reached a full lying down position. Finally, Steve kissed Bucky long and deep then broke the kiss to trail his mouth down his boyfriend’s neck, chest, and abdomen, aiming steadily for that gorgeous member.

“Stevie...” Bucky whined, hips lifting up off the bed. His body didn’t ache; it was like the events
of the day hadn’t happened. He needed Steve . . . that was all Bucky needed.

“Right here, Buck. I got ya,” the blond said and finally brought his mouth down to kiss Bucky’s beautiful shaft. He skipped the leaking head to lick down his member to his heavy sack, bringing up a hand to roll Bucky’s balls gently together, licking and kissing back up his boyfriend’s member.

“Fuck . . . Stevie - - fuck . . .” Bucky moaned, head tossing back as his hands scrambled to clutch tightly at the comforter.

Lifting his mouth, Steve breathed against Bucky’s skin, “tell me if you don’t like it.” He then moved up to engulf Bucky’s spongy head in his mouth, sucking lightly, still rolling and caressing his sack.

Moaning loud, Bucky lifted his hips again, never having felt anything like this before. His senses were completely overwhelmed by the pleasure he felt.

Slowly, opening his throat as he went, Steve lowered his mouth so he took Bucky in inch by inch, until Steve had swallowed his entire length. He made a low humming in his throat, sending a deep vibration through Bucky’s shaft, before Steve pulled back off a bit to breathe, lifting his eyes to judge Bucky’s reaction.

“Fuck! What - - Stevie . . .” Bucky whined and his hand found Steve’s hair, tangling his fingers through the short blond hair.

“Cum for me, Buck,” Steve encouraged and started engulfing his lover once more. He kept massaging Bucky’s balls and brought his other hand up to stroke the exposed part of his manhood.

As if on cue, Bucky came hard down Steve’s throat. “Fuck . . . Stevie - - love you . . . Steve.”

The blond pulled back again, this time breathing through his nose between swallows of hot jets of seed. He lapped any stray rivulets off Bucky, cleaning him completely before gently lowering the spent member. Lifting his head, Steve licked his lips and smiled at Bucky, love shining in his eyes. “I love you,” he said simply. “Always will, Buck.”

Eyes half lidded, Bucky smiled and looked down at his boyfriend lovingly. The brunet ran his fingers through Steve’s hair, “I love you, Stevie . . . love you so much.”

“I love you so much, too, Bucky,” Steve breathed, his hand dropping to begin servicing himself while he watched his beautiful lover. “That felt okay?” he asked softly.

“Fuck yeah . . . I don’t know what you did with - - that humming? Jesus.” Bucky smiled and leaned up on his forearms, wincing slightly as he involuntarily flexed the muscles that were sore from the bruising on his stomach.

Chuckling softly, Steve said, “it’s called a hummer. It’s supposed to vibrate you.” He flushed a bit. Steve continued stroking himself, smiling at his lover, happiness in his eyes.

“You - - uh . . . want me to help? I don’t think I’ll be as good as you but . . .” Bucky shrugged softly.

“If you want to, Buck,” Steve nodded. “Don’t think you have to, but I wouldn’t say no.” He stroked a hand through Bucky’s still damp hair. “And you aren’t supposed to be good yet. I haven’t taught you how to do any of this.” He paused. “I’ll be a gentle teacher, Bucky . . . I promise.”
“I know you will,” Bucky smiled and scrambled, slowly due to his sore abdomen, to get better access to Steve.

Steve turned and shifted so he lay under Bucky. He smiled at the other man. “You won’t be able to get a lot in your mouth at first, Buck. That takes years.” He flushed. “But you can lick and stroke. Just be careful of your teeth?” He held himself now, not stroking any longer, watching Bucky intently. “And if you find you don’t like the taste or anything, just stop and tell me. Some people don’t like it I hear.”

Bucky nodded, flushing as he licked his lips.

“When you’re ready, wrap your hand around me, okay?” Steve instructed softly.

With long, nimble fingers Bucky reached out and wrapped his hand around Steve’s member.

A soft groan of appreciation escaped the larger man. “Yeah, like that. Just like you would yourself, Buck,” Steve breathed, his eyes closing briefly. Finally, gaining control again, Steve opened blue eyes to smile down at Bucky. “Explore. Do what comes to mind. I don’t mind.”

Slowly, Bucky began to move his hands up and down Steve’s shaft. Moving his other hand to fondle the blond’s balls. “This okay?” Bucky asked, unsure of himself.

“Great,” Steve moaned. He let his head fall back as he enjoyed the wonderful sensations of Bucky exploring him.

While Steve wasn’t looking, Bucky bent down and experimentally licked the tip, salty with precum, still massaging the other man’s sack.

At the sensation of Bucky’s tongue on his slit, Steve moaned again and fought to keep his hips still, not wanting to thrust up in Bucky’s face while he still wasn’t ready for that. He nodded, opening his eyes. “That’s . . . that’s good, Buck. You okay?”

Bucky nodded and then moved down to take Steve’s tip into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the head. Using his other hand to wrap around the remaining length. Bucky look up at Steve from under his eyelashes.

The decadent sight caused a throb to pulse right through Steve’s shaft, and his member seemed to enlarge slightly. “God, Buck, you are so damn pretty!” He let his hand tangle carefully in those damp, brunet tresses. “So, sexy.”

Humming at the praise, Bucky continued to look up at Steve as he sucked his tip. Bucky’s fingers squeezed the blond’s sack gently.

“God, Buck, I feel like . . . I’m new as you . . . I’m gonna cum,” he moaned deep. “You’re a . . . natural . . . Buck.”

Bucky hummed again, hand moving against Steve’s shaft, determined to bring the man to completion.


Not pulling away, Bucky sucked harder on the head.

With a loud cry of ecstasy, Steve came hard, hot jets of cum shooting into Bucky’s mouth and over his face. Steve’s hand fist in the blanket below them, the other laying flat, trembling, on
Bucky’s hair as Steve tried his best not to hurt his lover. “God, Bucky! Oh, my beautiful Bucky!” he moaned as he collapsed into the mattress.

Pulling away with an obscene pop, Bucky wiped at the trail of cum that trailed down his face. “Did I do good?”

Steve opened blown eyes, looking down at his lover, panting for breath. “Yeah, Buck, you did amazing.” He pulled Bucky up to mesh their mouths together in a desperate kiss.

Breaking the kiss for air, Bucky beamed at his boyfriend, “Thank you, Stevie.”

“For loving you?” He smiled back, stroking a hand over Bucky’s chest and abdomen, careful of the bruises.

“For everything,” Bucky sighed and curled up into Steve’s side, laying his head on Steve’s firm chest.

“Thank you for letting me back into your life, Bucky.” Steve settled happily next to his lover. “Now I’m back, I’m staying . . . as long as you want me.” He smiled down at Bucky.

“Till the end of the line.” Bucky murmured softly, letting his eyes close, finally letting his exhaustion win over.

“And even further,” Steve murmured, kissing Bucky’s lips gently before letting his own eyes close in sleep.
Lucky barked happily as Ava chased him around the house, laughing and smiling. She wore her new purple dress that Bucky and Steve had gotten for her last week. Bucky watched the pair from the kitchen, a smile on his own face.

Steve sat on one of the tall stools, carefully tracing icing over the top of the frozen cake with a steady hand. He looked up and smiled at his boyfriend. “How’s she doing?” he asked, his voice steady and at a normal tone. He had been doing well in his daily counseling, and had even graduated to weekly instead of every day.

“I’m sure she’ll be begging to open presents in a few minutes,” Bucky said fondly, turning to look over at his boyfriend. His bruises having long since faded, only the faint lines of the scratches could be seen.

“Well, the cake’s almost finished, so maybe she should be called in to catch her breath and wash up?” Steve hinted gently. He always guided Bucky gently, more and more comfortable with making decisions or at least letting his opinions be heard.

Nodding, Bucky turned his head and called, “Hey, Squirt! Go wash up . . . cake’s almost done!”

Running into the room, Ava crossed her arms, “It’s my birthday, Uncle Bucky! I don’t need to wash my hands.”

Without comment, Steve stood up and picked up the cake. He opened the freezer and put the cake inside, unfinished. “Okay. But no one touches my art with dirty, doggie hands. So, ready for presents instead?” he asked congenially, making Ava choose.

Ava pouted and looked up at Steve, “I want cake!”

Steve smiled down at the girl, apparently not angry in the least. He waited patiently. “So, that means?”

“That I have to wash my hands,” Ava grumbled and turned to go to the sink. Using the stepping stool she turned on the water and began the process of lathering her tiny hands in soap.

“Clever girl,” Steve smiled widely and pulled the cake back out so he could finish working on it. “There’s strawberry scented soap in the downstairs bathroom if you want to use it.” He began working in gold-colored icing once more, his big body blocking the sight of the design from the little girl.

Stopping, soap covering her hands and arms, she scrambled off the stool.

Steve looked up, eyes dancing. “Buck, why don’t you help her wash up?” He offered with a chuckle. “I think she’s overwhelmed by choices.”
Bucky chuckled and turned off the kitchen faucet, “C’mon, Squirt. Let’s go use that strawberry soap.” The brunet offered his boyfriend a quick wink before leaving the room, Ava in tow.

Just as the pair came back from washing up, Steve stepped back and turned to rinse his cake decorating tools. He threw a smile over at the little girl. “All ready to see your cake, Sweetie?”

“Yes, please!” Ava bounced up and down excitedly.

With a nod, Steve walked over and picked her up, carrying her over to see the cake. There, in bright pink across the top, the fancy writing said ‘Happy 6th Ava Proctor’ And below it was an almost exact replica of Lucky playing with Ava. Steve’s hands had obviously shaken several times, but he’d done well.

Steve drew in a breath. “Well? What do you think?”

“Oh! Steve! I love it! Look, Uncle Bucky! There’s Lucky!” Ava squealed pointing at the cake with a huge smile on her face.

Bucky stepped closer and nodded, smiling as well, “Looks just like him, too. Steve did a real good job . . . what do you say to Steve?”

“Thank you, Steve!” Ava said and wrapped her arms around Steve’s neck.

Steve looked directly into the girl’s eyes, since she could meet them being in his arms. He smiled at her. “Glad you washed up?”

“Yes!” Ava beamed.

“Good, let’s cut this cake and get some ice cream headaches!” Steve lowered her to the high stool. He turned and reached for a large, sharp knife he’d had transported from his luxurious kitchen supplies back in the other apartment, which was still listed on the market but had three bidders already. Carefully, Steve positioned the knife to cut the cake. “We’ll do candles and stuff tonight, right? Candles on ice cream don’t work well.”

“Shame to cut that up,” Clint said from the doorway, smiling at Ava. “Did you get a picture?”

“No!” Bucky exclaimed as he fished out his phone from his jeans, “Ava and Steve . . . get together . . . I wanna get a picture.”

Steve put the knife down carefully then smiled and leaned in. “I want Clint to take it. Bucky needs to be in this shot, too,” he said playfully, eyes dancing.

With a shrug, Clint took the camera and waited for the trio to get in position around the beautiful cake. Finally, he took a few shots and handed the phone back. “You know, Steve, if you want, that mural still needs doing. You can take your time, too, so you can rest once in awhile.” The man turned, “right Tasha?”

“Only once in awhile. Can’t have him slacking, now can we?” Natasha called out playfully as she stepped into the kitchen.

Steve, after weeks of counseling, nodded, comfortable with the teasing. He said, “I think I’m free this month. Buck? How’s my schedule? Can I fit in painting between shifts at the bookstore?”

Bucky lifted an eyebrow; he slid his phone back into his pocket and smirked at Steve, “You do realize they’re the owners right? They make the schedule.”
“So . . . I should refuse to work two different jobs for them?” He smiled at Bucky. “And you’re my supervisor, so I turn to you as the authority of when I’m free.”

Tossing his head back and laughing, Bucky shook his head, “I’ve been the twins’ supervisor for nearly two and a half years and they still don’t listen to me. But, I’m sure we can find time for you to work on the mural.”

“If you want me to teach the twins to listen, give me the nod,” Steve winked, glancing at Ava. “I seem to have a way with willful children.” Finally, Steve cut the cake and began handing out pieces. “I’m thinking on letting the apartment go to the building owner rather than those other people. What do you think?” he asked casually.

Grabbing a plate from Steve, Bucky looked thoughtful for a moment, “I thought we didn’t like the owner . . . wasn’t he a friend of Brock’s?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I like the idea of those poor people in that place.” He shuddered, still having trouble separating his nightmares from his former home.

“I’ll just be happy when the things sells . . . that way we don’t hafta think about it anymore.” Bucky said before taking a bite of cake. Bucky had agreed to also go to counseling after Rumlow had kidnapped him, and it was honestly working wonders on his anxiety. With the pills prescribed to him from Doctor Banner and the regular therapy, Bucky hardly ever felt the need to claw up his left arm.

Steve nodded and sighed. “The building owner offered five million,” he said casually again, listing an amount twice what it was worth. “Do you think he really has it?”

“Hard to say . . . probably? That building is worth a pretty penny.” Bucky shrugged, taking another bite of the cake.

Lifting his face, smiling wide, Steve changed the subject slightly. “I signed the papers this morning. The Maria Stark Free Clinic now has seven million in the bank for future treatment and help of patients.”

“That’s great, Steve.” Natasha smiled and cut into her piece, “Did he mention anything about putting you on the board of directors . . . that’s a pretty big donation.”

“Yeah, actually, I agreed to be a sort of silent partner?” Steve shrugged, glancing at Bucky since he hadn’t shared that news yet. “Tony thinks that as a former patient, I have valuable input on how things are run.”

“What’s a board of directors?” Ava asked, her face covered in the bright pink frosting, some even in her hair.

“A Board of Directors,” Steve answered automatically, “helps make the rules for a business. Tony Stark wants me to help make the rules for the hospital your uncle and I go to to talk about our nightmares.”

“I like Doctor Banner . . . he always gives me a sucker,” Ava said with a firm nod.

Steve chuckled. “Yeah, and I’m sure your dentist loves it,” he shot back happily, not denying his boyfriend’s kid her pleasure in sugary treats. “I’m putting the rest of this cake away so it doesn’t melt.” Steve covered the cake carefully then slid it on it’s shelf in the freezer.

“Can we open presents now?” Ava asked, her voice a neat shout.
Turning, eyeing the messy girl, Steve sighed and looked at Bucky. “A quick dunk in the sink or a full bath?” He asked.

“She’s got it in her hair,” Bucky groaned, “Took me forever to braid that.”

“Sinks work on hair, too,” Steve offered.

Bucky walked over and picked Ava up, “C’mon, Squirt . . . gotta getcha cleaned up and then we can open presents, okay?” He began to walk out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“Don’t want cake all over whatever you got,” Steve called after them.

Striding over to stand next to Steve, Natasha said, “How are you doing? Enjoying family life?”

Steve turned his smile on Natasha and nodded. “Yeah. We’ve got our house rules,” he gestured to the list on the fridge, now neatly printed out, “to cover the basics and we talk out anything new that comes up.”

“How are you taking being the second father figure?” Natasha asked, leaning against the island.

“Second father figure?” Steve looked mildly surprised then smiled softly. “You mean for Ava? I love her.” He sighed and began putting away the dishes from the drainboard. “I adore kids. When I was younger, I wanted a whole lot of them. Brock told me . . . that it wasn’t appropriate.” He turned to look at Nat. “But I’m learning more and more just how stupid Brock was.”

“I never did thank you for saving Bucky,” Nat said softly, “If it hadn’t been for you . . .” she visibly shuddered.

He sighed and ran a hand through his slightly longer blond hair. “If it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have been taken in the first place. Natasha, I’m learning to just forget the ‘if it wasn’t’ that happened and accept the ‘what do we do from now on’.” Steve finished with the dishes and began collecting the empty cake plates and the used forks.

Natasha nodded, content with the answer, and helped Steve collect the rest of the dishes. “I’ve never seen him so happy.”

“I have,” Steve remarked, quietly. “Back in school. He was always like this.” Lifting his head, the blond smiled. “I’m glad to put that smile back where I took it from. He deserves to be happy.”

“And so do you,” Natasha said as she began rinsing the leftover frosting and crumbs off the plates.

Not denying the help the guest provided, Steve smiled softly and reached to dry the dishes Natasha finished washing. “Yeah, I’m learning that. And Bucky makes me happy.”

“Steve! We’re gonna open presents now!” Ava shouted from the living room.

“Coming, Pumpkin!” Steve called and immediately put his towel down, willingly leaving the rest of the dirty dishes for later. He walked into the living room and smiled. “Here we are.” The big blond sank onto the couch and relaxed.

Ava grabbed a present wrapped in paw-print paper and giggled, “It’s from Lucky!”

“Yes, but he kept ripping the paper so I wrapped it for him,” Clint admitted, sinking onto the other couch next to his wife.

Bucky sat on the floor by Steve’s legs so he could help pass Ava’s presents over. “Why don’t you
open it? See what Lucky got for you?” Bucky smiled at his niece, leaning his head back so that it fell against Steve’s knees.

Steve let one hand fall comfortably on his lover’s head, stroking the soft hair. “Is it a tennis ball? Lucky loves those.”

Lucky, at the mention of his favorite toy, perked up from where he had settled down near Clint. He barked once.

“Really?” Steve asked the dog, as if he understood the barking. “It isn’t a ball? Then whatever could you have given her?”

Giggling, Ava ripped open the present and squealed when she saw a veterinarian Barbie doll. She showed it to Bucky, “Look, Uncle Bucky! It has a little dog that looks just like Lucky!”

Steve smiled and watched Bucky and Ava interacting as the little girl opened and exclaimed over each present she got. Before she delved into the presents Bucky got her, Steve handed over his gift, which felt pretty heavy. “Wanna open mine?”

Ava grabbed the gift with a smile, sagging a little under the weight, making Bucky lurch forward to help support the weight. Ripping the brightly colored paper from the gift, Ava beamed at the present in her hands.

Steve watched, suddenly looking nervous, wondering if he’s chosen the right gift for the active little girl. It was a plastic case containing pencils, crayons, finger paints, brushes, paper, and other art supplies for ages eight and older. Steve had included art lesson books for Ava’s age group, Disney among the drawing and painting books.

“Oh, Stevie,” Bucky breathed, leaning forward slightly to look at the present.

“Look! There’s Snow White and Cinderella!” Ava looked down at the present in awe.

“Well,” Steve cleared his throat nervously. “She does so well with her drawings from the book store. I thought if she wanted, she might learn to draw what she sees in her mind?” He flushed.

Ava dropped the present, making Bucky reach out to keep it from hitting the floor, and jumped on the couch, wrapping her arms around Steve’s neck. “Thank you, Steve! It’s perfect! I can be an artist just like you!”

A bright flush crept over Steve’s neck and face. “Well, it takes years of practice, Ava. I drew for years and years in school before I could do what I can now.” He cleared his throat. “But I’m sure if you want it, you can do it. You’ve got natural talent, like your mother.”

“Uncle Bucky says I will be able to see Momma next week! He says that the medicine is making her better!” Ava exclaimed pulling away slightly.

Steve nodded. “She’s getting better now that she’s in Maria Stark’s hospital, Sweetie. She has less nightmares now.” He smiled over the girl at his boyfriend, please that the change in hospitals had helped. Now that neither of them were being stalked, and therefore Becca was no longer in danger, Steve had arranged with Tony to keep Becca in the clinic but to pay the same as what Bucky had paid for the last hospital. Thus, Bucky didn’t have to feel like he was accepting charity for his sister’s care.

Ava opened the rest of her presents: a new dress from Natasha, the complete set of the Harry Potter novels from Clint which both Steve and Bucky promised to read to her, a new tea set listed as being from her mother, and a necklace that had been Becca’s when she was little from Bucky.
Finally, surrounded by paper and presents and happy smiles, Steve relaxed on the couch with Ava sprawled along the cushions, her feet against Steve’s muscular thigh. He continued to stroke Bucky’s hair absentely as the adults talked around him, Steve still not used to jumping into every conversation yet. Glancing down at Ava, Steve reached down and picked up her foot by the ankle. He brought the small foot to his ear and said “hello? Oh, well, she’s here. I’ll tell her.” Seriously, he turned to Ava and said “the foot phone’s for you.”

Ava giggled loudly and shook her head, “You’re silly, Steve!”

He smiled back, chuckling. “Yeah,” and he talked back into her foot. “She’s busy at her party. I guess you’ll have to call later.” Steve put her foot back down with a pat.

“No one’s talking in my foot, Steve! You’re being funny,” she laughed, although her eyes did fall to look at the foot Steve had grabbed.

“That I am,” Steve agreed again. “So if I hear it ring again, I should ignore it?” he asked playfully.

“Tell them to call Uncle Bucky’s phone! Uncle Bucky always answers his phone.” Ava giggled.

“Okay,” Steve nodded then leaned over pretty far to pick up Bucky’s foot and start to put it to his ear, causing the lean brunet to start laughing, watching Ava with a smile.

“No that phone, Steve!” Ava was nearly in hysterics now.

“Oh,” Steve let his hand caress up the back of Bucky’s leg and thigh as he settled back on the couch. He let go of his boyfriend before he got too close to anything that Ava shouldn’t see. “His electronic phone.”

Nat leaned in close to Clint and asked with a smile as she watched the family in front of her, “What is happening?”

He raised an eyebrow and offered just as quietly, “Bucky found his love and is enjoying it? Or Steve has? Not sure. Should we offer to take Ava for the night?”

“Bucky hasn’t shown Steve the surprise yet . . . I’m sure they’ll want some privacy for that.” Natasha nodded, not taking her eyes off the trio.

Clint nodded and stood, stretching. “Okay, Squirt. Time for my last birthday gift for you.” He grinned and tugged Lucky’s lease gently, making the dog stand up. “You’re coming to our place for a sleepover so you can see the twins tomorrow and get your last gifts from them.” He looked over at Bucky with a long wink.

“Oh!” Ava scrambled off the couch and ran up the stairs, presuming to grab things for the sleepover.

Bucky gave Clint a grateful smile and then pushed himself off the floor to help Ava pack for the night.

Steve looked puzzled and stood slowly. “I didn’t know Ava was going to be spending the night at Nat’s?” he said softly, troubled apparently. The blond headed for the kitchen.

Natasha followed Steve into the kitchen, Clint following close behind.

The man was checking the list of places people would be going, a slight frown on his face. He looked puzzled and opened the fridge to pull out the birthday cupcakes he had made for after
dinner but forgotten. “Do you want to take the cupcakes?” he asked, still frowning softly.

“I’m sure Bucky just forgot to write down that she was coming over to our’s, Steve,” Natasha lied smoothly, “I wouldn’t worry too much. And we can take a few? We don’t have to take all of them.”

Nodding, Steve carefully packed up half of the mini-cakes then passed them to Natasha. He turned and wrote on the list ‘Ava spending the night at Nat and Clint.’ Finally, he erased his frown, though his eyes remained troubled. “Did you want to bring Chester with her? She sleeps with him all the time now.” It was the first time Ava would spend the night away from Bucky since she’d moved back in.

“I’m sure Bucky will grab Chester from the room.” Natasha offered Steve a kind smile.

He nodded and turned to finish cleaning up the dishes, his manner intense.

Frowning a bit, Clint looked at Nat, clearly puzzled by Steve’s behavior when the blond had been so relaxed and playful just minutes ago.

Natasha shrugged; she really hoped they hadn’t ruined the rest of the day for Steve and Bucky. Bucky had been planning the surprise for a few weeks. “You okay, Steve?” She asked cautiously.

Looking over, Steve frowned slightly then nodded. “Yeah. I . . . I just didn’t remember that Ava was going away on her birthday. I thought I’d have remembered something that important.”

Ava’s feet pounded down the stairs, Bucky’s footsteps sounding softly behind her, and she ran into the kitchen, holding Chester. “Okay! I’m ready!” She smiled brightly.

“Good,” Clint said, smiling once again. “You get to sit in back and make sure Lucky stays in the child seat, right?” He lead the dog towards the front door.

Bucky walked into the kitchen, Ava’s overnight bag in his hand, and immediately noticed Steve’s tense behavior; he flashed Nat a concerned look. The redhead shrugged softly and took the bag from Bucky’s hand.

“Bye, Steve! I’ll see you at the shop tomorrow!” Ava grinned as Natasha grabbed her hand.

“Have fun, Ava!” Steve called, smiling for the little girl, not wanting to spoil her birthday with his mood.

Bucky kissed his niece goodbye, walking the girls out the front door, shutting it softly behind him.

Clint turned to Bucky. “Steve says he’s upset because he forgot Ava was coming over. He’s worried he forgot something so important. Not sure how you wanted to handle that.” The man shrugged.

“Great,” Bucky grumbled and ran his fingers through his hair, “I hope this doesn’t ruin the surprise.”

“Tell him you forgot to tell him,” Nat instructed. “Tell him in the confusion of the cake and presents it slipped your mind that we offered.”

“Alright, yeah . . . hopefully he’s not too upset.” Bucky nodded, trying to convince himself.

She sighed. “Upset enough to start washing dishes again,” she reported then led Ava to the car, buckling her into her seat carefully.
Bucky waved from the front steps as they drove off. With a small sigh, Bucky turned back into the house.

Steve could be heard in the living room, cleaning up the paper and straightening the presents on the coffee table. The dishes were completely clean, dried, and put away.

“I’m sorry I forgot to tell you about Ava leaving for the night. Nat and I talked about it yesterday at work and with all the confusion of getting ready for the party it must’ve slipped my mind,” Bucky apologized, cautiously stepping into the living room.

Steve looked up, eyes puzzled. Finally, he asked, softly, “I didn’t forget then?” Relief filled his blue eyes. “I thought maybe I had.” He ran a hand through his hair, the other clutching the tea set box. “I haven’t had trouble with forgetting since they fixed my meds, but . . . I wasn’t sure.”

“You didn’t forget, baby,” Bucky reassured softly.

Steve offered Bucky a smile. “That’s good. Glad someone remembered or I’d have sent her up to bed in an hour and she’d have missed her sleepover.” Steve put the box down and reached to pull Bucky flush against his front. He kissed his boyfriend lightly on the lips. “Hey, Bucky.”

“Heya, Stevie,” Bucky muttered against Steve’s lips.

“So, alone tonight. Whatcha wanna do?” He nuzzled Bucky’s neck, his hand slipping to caress his lover’s buttocks lightly. They had been giving each other hand jobs and blow jobs since that night Steve had first shown Bucky what sex could be like, but neither had dared move beyond the simple pleasures . . . despite Steve’s craving for the regular sex he used to get. Sure, he’s been roughed up at Rumlow’s hands, but Steve found he really missed being filled by a man.

“I want you to close your eyes,” Bucky groaned softly, willing himself not to give into temptation and get on his knees to suck his boyfriend off.

“Okay, Buck.” Steve willingly closed his eyes, still smiling, trusting his boyfriend.

Grabbing Steve’s hands, Bucky carefully guided the other man across the living room and up the stairs. “No peeking, okay?” He called out.

“Okay, Buck,” Steve answered after a brief pause, fighting the urge, as always, to answer in the military fashion that had been drilled into him. Steve much prefered this more casual back and forth. His smile widened at the knowledge that Bucky did, too.

Bucky stopped at the door to the guest bedroom. Steve had been sleeping in Bucky’s room since the night they got back from the clinic. Opening the door, Bucky smiled and pulled the blond into the middle of the room. “Okay . . . you can open them now.” He sounded nervous.

Steve opened his eyes with a smile but then blinked, his smile falling away. Looking around, shock turned to fear then uncertainty. He took a hesitant step towards an easel set for maximum morning light. “Buck?” He breathed, looking at his lover. “Is . . . is this for me?” Hope warred with fear in his tones.

Bucky smiled hesitantly, “I - - uh . . . yeah. Clint helped me set it up while you were working on Tuesday. I - - I wasn’t sure what stuff you needed . . . so I kinda got a little of everything. I know it don’t have as much light as that other room in your apartment . . . but the window looks over the front yard . . .” his voice trailed off and he looked suddenly unsure.

Steve looked back around and slowly turned to face Bucky. Taking a deep breath, reminding himself to discuss these things with Bucky so he’d understand, the blond slowly said, “Bucky, I
love you and want to trust you completely. So, please? You're not going to take these away if I make you angry, right?"

“No!” Bucky said suddenly, “No . . . this room is yours, Stevie. All yours. You can do whatever you want. I'll never take it away.”

Hope rose in his eyes and he smiled slightly before looking back over the supplies, the window, everything. Finally, he took a breath. “And . . . if I do use this stuff? You won’t . . . make me give you the interest from whatever I can sell?” He looked at Bucky, eyes serious, hopeful, expressing the fears Rumlow had drummed into him over the years.

“What?” Bucky shook his head, “No . . . it’s a gift . . . all these things are yours. Any money you make using it will be yours and yours alone.”

“No, I don’t want it like that,” Steve shook his head, but he was smiling fully. “I want to share my money with you always, Bucky. I . . . you told me you wanted me to tell you when something bothered me, and I have. And I believe you. So . . . thank you!” He stepped to his boyfriend’s side and reached a hand to touch his shoulder. “I love this and I love you.”

Smiling brightly, Bucky looked over at Steve, “really? I got all the right stuff? Like I said -- I wasn’t really sure.”

Without even glancing again, Steve nodded. “If I’m missing anything, I’ll take you shopping so you know what I need in the future, okay?” He pulled Bucky against him and dropped a kiss on his neck. “I love that you love me, Bucky,” he breathed. “Me, not my art or my money or my looks, but all of me.”

“Always.” Bucky whispered, wrapping his arms tightly around his boyfriend.

“You,” Steve flushed at his rising excitement, “you wanna go fool around since we’ve got the place to ourselves?”

Bucky moved his hand down to palm Steve through the fabric of his trousers. Leaning close to whisper in Steve’s ear Bucky said, “I thought you’d never ask.”

Jumping up to wrap his legs around Steve’s waist, Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and began to kiss the blond passionately.

Laughing softly, Steve slid his arms securely around the brunet’s neck lightly. Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and began to kiss the blond passionately.

Laughing softly, Steve slid his arms securely around the brunet, cupping his ass, then carried him in the awkward position to the master bedroom they shared. Carefully, he leaned over to lay Bucky backwards on the bed, much as he had that first time together. “Want a blowjob, Buck?” He asked breathlessly, his erection straining against his dress pants.

“I want you,” Bucky moaned.

“I’m here, Buck,” Steve assured him and began stripping his boyfriend with quick, sure hands, confident after their many weeks together.

Bucky made quick work of Steve’s shirt and began working at his belt buckle. “I’m ready, Steve.” The brunet whispered as he unbuttoned the slacks.

“Okay, Buck,” Steve said, cupping his hand over Bucky’s erection, rubbing gently. “I’ll just slide down,” he began shimmying down Bucky’s body, kissing his way down.

Steve froze instantly at Bucky’s protest, eyes lifting, confused.

“I want you - - I want you in me,” Bucky stated meeting Steve’s eyes.

Swallowing, Steve flushed. “Are you sure?” he whispered, his erection throbbing. True, he missed being filled, but he longed for those really rare times he’d been allowed to enter Brock.

“I wanna make love, Stevie. I’m ready.” Bucky nodded, flushing slightly.

With a nod, Steve positioned himself back up against Bucky’s body, mouth against his lover’s mouth. After a long kiss, he asked, “you wanna try filling me first . . . or you . . . I’m not the smallest guy down there, Buck, and you’ve never done this.” He bit his lip. “I don’t wanna hurt you.”

Looking up at Steve, Bucky licked his lips and shook his head, “You won’t . . . I trust you, Stevie.” Bucky lifted his hips to grind his member against Steve’s.

A groan escaped the muscular blond and he nodded. “Okay, I need lube and I’ll need to open you up, Buck,” he instructed. “I’ll use my fingers on you, it’ll take time . . . “ He slid his hand around to Bucky’s rear passage, caressing lightly over the puckered entrance.

“I bought some . . . top drawer of the nightstand,” Bucky muttered, showing Steve that he’d been thinking about this moment for some time . . . it hadn’t just been a whirl of the moment thing.

Leaning up on his forearms, Steve looked at the nightstand. He shifted his weight to one arm, opening the drawer and pulling out the bottle with his other hand. Steve glanced at the ingredients quickly and nodded. “This is the good stuff,” he said softly. Lifting his eyes he offered Bucky a smile. “You did your homework, Bucky love.”

“Yeah, well, I got a pretty good teacher.” Bucky smiled back.

Laughing softly, Steve opened the lube and poured a generous amount over his fingers and palm. Carefully setting the open bottle aside, Steve slid his slippery fingers across Bucky’s anus again, letting his forefinger dip ever so slightly into the start of the ring. “If you wanna stop at any time, just tell me.”

Bucky shivered at the unusual feeling of Steve’s finger entering him, “I’ll tell you, Stevie.”

Caressing again, Steve dipped his finger inside Bucky’s heat a little further. He waited, breathing against Bucky’s neck. Slowly, he eased his finger in further, to the first knuckle. “Okay, Buck?”

Passage burning slightly from the digit, Bucky released a deep breath and nodded, “I’m good, Steve.”

“That’s right, Baby, breathe for me,” Steve encouraged. He slowly slid the finger in, to his second digit, wriggling it slightly to stroke over Bucky’s prostate.

Burning giving away to pleasure as Steve stroked his prostate, Bucky gasped and lifted his hips off the bed. He looked up at Steve.

“Like that?” Steve smiled and kissed his boyfriend slowly, deeply, as he began to move his finger around to stretch the nether passage. Steve caressed in and out a bit, making sure to hit that bundle of nerves that drew a shaky breath from his lover. “Like this?”
“Yes . . . please, Stevie,” The brunet moaned bucking his hips again, his erection throbbing and leaking precum against his stomach.

Slowly, Steve worked the tight passage, occasionally hitting Bucky’s prostate before finally drawing his finger out. He pressed two fingers against Bucky’s entrance, “Breath love, slow and sure,” he coaxed.

Taking in a deep breath, Bucky released it and looked up at Steve. His body shivered in anticipation, wanting to feel his lover inside him again. Bucking his hips, the brunet showed that he was ready to take more.

Kissing Bucky, Steve slid the two fingers further in, slowly, gently. He worked the fingers inside and stopped at his first knuckles. “Keep breathing, Buck,” he kissed Bucky’s neck and shoulder.

Groaning, Bucky nodded and he pushed up slightly to begin kissing Steve’s neck, nipping at the man’s earlobes.

Groaning softly, Steve eased his fingers to the second knuckle, paused, the stroked both digits across his lover’s prostate.

Bucky’s passaged throbbed dully from being stretched, but at soon as Steve stroked his prostate, he moaned loudly and bucked his hips again. “Stevie . . .” Bucky groaned, hands clutching at the blankets beneath him.

With a small nod, Steve began scissoring his fingers carefully, sliding the digits deeper then shallower, over and over, as he spread his lover wider. “Gonna be even more than this, Buck. You sure?” he gave him another chance to back out.

“I can handle it,” Bucky moaned, words much like Steve would tell Bucky after getting into a fight at school when they were kids.

“I know you can, Bucky,” Steve moaned back and nipped at one of his lover’s nipples, flicking his tongue out to soothe the flesh. Carefully, he stroked his lover’s prostate again then slid his fingers out of him. Rubbing around his hole again, Steve slid three fingers carefully inside, just to his first knuckles, stilling to let Bucky adjust.

The burning intensified, causing Bucky to hiss slightly, but he quickly added, “It’s okay . . . keep going.”

Steve nodded and licked Bucky’s nipple again. He slid his fingers free and lubed them up again before sliding them carefully back to his first knuckles. “Better, baby?”

The burning sensation dissipating slightly, Bucky nodded and moaned, “Yeah . . . lots better.”

Steve slid his fingers to the second knuckle and paused again, licking and nipping at Bucky’s nipples, switching between them often.

Bucky keened, pleasure ran down his spine as Steve nipped at his nipples. The brunet bucked his hips again, his senses were overwhelmed with the slight pain of Steve stretching him out and the pleasure.

“Want me to stroke your gland, baby?” Steve offered, keeping his fingers still.

“Yes,” Bucky whimpered, lifting his hips again.

“Like that, Buck?” Steve asked as he carefully curved his three fingers to stroke the prostate.
“Fuck - - Stevie . . . please,” Bucky keened again, desperate to have Steve inside him.

“Just a little longer, baby. Don’t wanna tear you up.” Steve stroked his fingers in and out of Bucky’s ass, slow and careful. He began opening the fingers inside, slowly stretching his lover once more. Now he made sure to stroke Bucky’s prostate every second or third stroke.

Bucky groaned and pushed down against Steve’s fingers, trying to push them deeper. “Stevie . . .” he breathed and looked up at his lover.

“God, Baby, so hot! So tight,” Steve breathed, kissing and nipping, his fingers working inside Bucky. “You want some more?”

“Please?” Bucky whimpered pushing down against Steve’s hand, “Please . . . I need to feel you.”

“Okay, love, let me readjust you so you can open wider.” Steve eased his hand from Bucky and moved his thighs, pushing Bucky’s legs wide apart so he could reach once more between the lean man’s legs. He rubbed against the opening, lubed comfortably once more, and pushed carefully. This time, he didn’t pause but eased into Bucky in one slow, smooth movement, caressing over the prostate as he slid inside. The feeling was so full; and Steve rested both hands on Bucky’s hips. “Breathe, baby.”

Bucky moaned loudly, his ass burned but the feeling of being full slowly pushed away the pain.

“This okay? I can . . .” Steve breathed carefully, staying as still as he could, his fingers caressing over Bucky’s hips in a soothing rhythm.

After a few moments, Bucky looked up at Steve and his eyes widened slightly, “You’re - - you’re . . .”

“Yeah, Buck. That’s me,” he assured him, kissing him gently on the lips. “Just breathe.”

“Fuck . . . Stevie - - feels . . .” Bucky groaned and pushed down, wanting more of Steve.

“Shit!” Steve moaned, his member throbbing at the sensation. “Buck,” he moaned. Unable to resist, Steve began to drag himself out of his lover, across his prostate, until he was only half embedded in that glorious, tight heat. The blond thrust inside again, keening softly at the squeezing sensation of the virgin ass.

Throwing his head back, Bucky tried to meet Steve’s thrusts. He felt so full . . . it felt so right. “Stevie . . . God, Steve.” The brunet pushed down again.

Slowly pulling out and pushing back in, remaining half embedded the entire time, Steve set a rhythm for his lover to meet. Every stroke Steve slid over Bucky’s prostate without even trying, the passage was so tight, his erection so full, there was no avoiding the stimulating, erotic strikes.

Bucky leaned forward to catch Steve’s lips in a desperate, passionate kiss; continuing to meet the blond’s gentle thrusts. He felt no more pain . . . just the nearly overwhelming pleasure.

“Buck, you ready? I’m gonna pull out more and that’ll mean pushing in longer . . .” Steve kissed Bucky’s neck.

“I’m ready.” Bucky nodded.

With a deep breath, Steve slid out far enough that only his head remained embedded past that ring of tight muscles. He whimpered at the sensation as he slid back inside, deep, his balls slapping against Bucky’s flesh.
Bucky’s back arched off the bed, chest flush against Steve’s. “Fuck! Stevie!”

“Stay with me, baby. Breathe with me,” Steve cooed softly, slipping almost all the way out then thrusting back inside with a smooth glide. He continued this deep thrusting, letting Bucky catch up and meet the rhythm. “I gotcha, Buck. I’m with you.”

Arms reaching up to wrap themselves around Steve’s neck, Bucky keened as he found Steve’s rhythm, matching it in time with his hips.

Panting, picking up the pace a bit as Bucky matched Steve’s strokes for thrust, Steve breathed, “can you think enough to make another choice, Buck? I can jack you off, or you can do me next? I’m gonna cum soon . . .” He kissed Bucky’s neck, his shaft sliding again over Bucky’s prostate.

“Touch . . .” Bucky gasped as Steve stroked over his prostate again, “Touch me, Stevie . . . please?”

With a groan, Steve wrapped a large, sure hand around his lover’s erection. He used the hand that had been so generously lubed, causing an easy glide over the pulsing fleshy rod. “I’ll hold on if I can, Buck . . . let you catch up. Tell me what you want?” He pulled out and thrust in, his own needy member throbbing in Bucky’s tight heat.

“I’m - - I’m almost there, Stevie,” Bucky moaned loudly.

Nodding, Steve increased his thrusts, matching the rhythm with his stroking hand, using his other hand to caress, fondle, and roll Bucky’s balls in his heavy sack. “Then cum for me, love. Let me feel your seed all over my hands.” He thrust and stroked, nipping Bucky’s neck and earlobe.

Keening, Buck saw white as he came hard, back arching off the bed again and his muscles clenched tighter around Steve.

At the intense squeezing, Steve tumbled over the edge, his orgasm slamming through him hard. He shot jet after hot, explosive jet deep into Bucky’s ass, coating his inner walls with hot seed. “Buck!” Steve yelled out, head falling back in his ecstasy.


Smiling softly, touching his sweaty forehead to Bucky’s, Steve breathed, “I love you so much, Bucky. God, I love you. I wanna hold you forever, baby doll.” He kissed and licked Bucky’s sweaty neck. Slowly, carefully, Steve pulled from Bucky’s ass, his member falling flaccid at last, dragging an overload of hot jism with him.

Bucky whimpered at the loss of the full feeling.

Running a careful hand down Bucky’s hip, Steve carefully turned so that Bucky was positioned on his back on their wide bed. With a soft kiss, Steve slid out of bed and into the bathroom. He returned quickly with a warm, damp washcloth which he used to clean up his lover. “I love you,” he repeated.

Bucky smiled, happiness evident in those steel blue eyes, “I love you too, Stevie.”

Cleaning himself up after finishing with Bucky, Steve put the dirtied cloth onto the nightstand next to the lube and cap. Ignoring the slight mess they’d made, Steve pulled his lover into his embrace and breathed in deep. “Buck, I’ve got a present for you.”
Cuddling close to Steve’s side, Bucky trailed his fingers along the definition of Steve’s abs, “A present?”

“Yeah,” Steve smiled, kissing Bucky’s lips. “You gave me my life, my love, and my art back. So, I wanna give you what you’ve long wanted.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’d like to enroll you in night and weekend and internet college classes so you can finally get your degree. . . if you still want it?”

Bucky froze, his fingers still on Steve’s stomach. “My degree?” he echoed, not looking up at Steve.

“Yeah, Bucky. I want to use some of Momma’s money to let you go back to school. If you do it on the internet and after hours or on weekends, it won’t interfere with your work. The studying might take some Ava time, but you can always study while she plays quietly or colors?” Steve bit his lip. “And I’ll be here to help out and keep things running smoothly.” He stroked again down Bucky’s abdomen. “If you want?”

Bucky shifted so that he could look up at his boyfriend. He never thought he’d be able to go to school and get his degree. Not when he had Ava to take care of and the busy hours at the shop. Steve was giving him the chance to take back a portion of his life he’d thought he lost forever. “I- - I . . . okay?” Bucky agreed.

Steve looked absolutely delighted. He stroked Bucky’s chest. “Promise, Bucky, that if you try and wanna drop out, you’ll tell me? Don’t be afraid to ever tell me if you don’t wanna do something, okay?”

“I promise, Stevie.” Bucky nodded and smiled softly, “Thank you.”

“Thank you for believing in me . . . for loving me, Bucky. You are my everything. Every part of me loves every part of you,” he kissed him passionately, deeply, desperately.

“I’ll always love you, Stevie. I never stopped loving you.” Bucky breathed against Steve’s lips.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!