

## Untouchable

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/17695292) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/17695292>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Categories:	<a href="#">F/M</a> , <a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Captain America (Movies)</a> , <a href="#">Marvel Cinematic Universe</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">James "Bucky" Barnes</a> , <a href="#">Natasha Romanov (Marvel)</a> , <a href="#">Sam Wilson (Marvel)</a> , <a href="#">Peggy Carter</a> , <a href="#">Nick Fury</a> , <a href="#">Clint Barton</a> , <a href="#">Alexander Pierce</a> , <a href="#">Brock Rumlow</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Idiot in Love</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern Setting</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern: No Powers</a> , <a href="#">Punk Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">Russian Mafia</a> , <a href="#">Protective Bucky Barnes</a> , <a href="#">First Kiss</a> , <a href="#">Post-Break Up</a> , <a href="#">Friends to Lovers</a> , <a href="#">Enemies to Friends to Lovers</a> , <a href="#">Bartender Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">Pre-Serum Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">Winter Soldier Bucky Barnes</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Evil Alexander Pierce</a> , <a href="#">Humor</a> , <a href="#">Temporary Break Up</a> , <a href="#">Reunions</a> , <a href="#">Gay Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">Bisexual Bucky Barnes</a> , <a href="#">Pierce is an asshole in every universe</a> , <a href="#">Not Beta Read</a> , <a href="#">We Die Like Men</a> , <a href="#">First Time</a> , <a href="#">Smut</a> , <a href="#">Oral Sex</a> , <a href="#">Pining</a> , <a href="#">Mutual Pining</a> , <a href="#">Resolved Sexual Tension</a> , <a href="#">Modern Steve Rogers</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Temporary Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Kidnapping</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt/Comfort</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of <a href="#">Stucky AUs</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Stucky stuff</a>
Stats:	Published: 2019-02-07 Completed: 2019-05-26 Words: 43,590 Chapters: 10/10

# Untouchable

by [AvoidingAverage](#)

## Summary

It's been eight years since Bucky Barnes left Steve standing alone and heartbroken. Eight years since Steve confessed his feelings and shared a kiss that left him aching for the impossible. Eight years since Bucky Barnes abandoned him to take up the mantle of his step-father's mob, Hydra.

Now, Steve's carefully rebuilt world is threatening to collapse again when he finds himself on a list of 'Untouchable People' in their neighborhood. Anyone who harms Steve Rogers will find themselves the target of a new, vicious mafia leader--the Winter Soldier.

(Or, the AU where Bucky tries to protect Steve by threatening violence on anyone who hurts him and inadvertently leads him into a world of mob violence, Interpol raids, and an overthrow of Alexander Pierce. )

## Notes

Hello and thanks for clicking on my story! This is my first modern AU featuring my OTP Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes and I hope you enjoy it!

# Chapter 1

To say Steve Rogers was unlucky was an understatement.

His life was ruled by a series of cruel twists of fate. Awful lungs and a bad heart meant he was next to useless when it came to anything more strenuous besides pushing a pencil across a piece of paper. Little to no growth spurt even as a teenager ensured that he was always an easy target for those who enjoyed feeling powerful. No amount of stubbornness or will power would heal all the ways that his body had failed him.

When his mother slipped away after months of struggling against her own body, Steve had considered it the latest devastation in a life filled with disappointment. Without her, he was just another scrawny face in the endless crowds of New York, lost and lacking all motivation against the crushing tide.

But Sarah Rogers had never had much patience for Steve's bouts of morosity and the memory of her stubborn expression -- the mirror to his own -- was enough to ensure he continued to get out of bed each morning and moving forward. He decided long ago that spiting the world by continuing to survive its' attempts to destroy him was as good a reason to keep breathing as any.

His history of awful luck was enough to ensure that he was never truly surprised when some new obstacle appeared in his path.

Case in point: the masked gunman that was currently shouting at him to hand over his wallet while the other patrons of the convenience store cowered nearby.

Steve resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the way the man continued to jab him with the end of the gun. All he wanted was to eat the now-cold sandwich he still held in his hand and catch a few episodes of Forensic Files before collapsing under the weight of a long shift at work. He never had much patience with the thugs that roamed around Brooklyn ruining the city's good name and scaring the wits out of anyone unfortunate enough to attract their attention.

Instead, he gritted his teeth and took a breath so his voice would remain even. "Alright, there's no need to get violent," he said as he slowly fished out the cheap wallet he used to store his metrocard, rewards card to his favorite coffee shop (only two coffees away from a free drink!), and a couple crumpled ones. "I don't have much cash anyway."

The gunman snatched the wallet roughly from his hands and kept his gun against Steve's chest as he flipped it open. Steve's library card nearly fell out of the thin pouch with the motion, proudly displaying that Steve Rogers was one of their loyal members in faded green ink.

Abruptly the scowl on the gunman's face was replaced with a wide-eyed look towards Steve that made the smaller man frown in surprise. Like some unknown switch had been flipped, his assailant stared at Steve with what could only be described as fear in his light brown eyes.

“You’re Steve Rogers?”

Steve scowled with no small amount of petulance, “I certainly didn’t steal his wallet.”

“Shit,” the gunman said and practically threw the wallet back at Steve. “Shit -- sorry, man -- I didn’t... Just take it back.”

Without another word, the man scrambled out of the store, leaving Steve gaping at his retreating back with the rest of the shocked customers.

Strange.

---

It was common knowledge in the City that the streets were not always kind to people who decided to wander down dark alleys at night. Steve was no stranger to the dangers of his hometown -- the bizarre exchange with the gunman notwithstanding -- and he was usually careful to walk back with Clint or Sam so he didn’t run into one of the shadier residents of the area.

Unfortunately, Sam had called in sick that night and Clint was out of town for his sister’s wedding so Steve was forced to take the long walk back to his loft alone. With two of their servers gone for the night, Steve had been forced to pick up the slack and leave the relative safety of the bar for the crush of loud college students looking to drink off their midterms. Normally his boss, Nick, was careful to keep him out of the crowd in deference to his asthma, but not even Darcy’s indefatigable energy could keep up with the endless stream of drink and food orders.

His feet throbbed in protest with every step and it took all of his focus to keep from weaving like the drunks ambling near the bars nearby. His stomach grumbled out a weak protest and Steve sighed when he thought about needing to cook something when he got back. He’d been hoping the ramen in his pantry would last him until payday, but if he didn’t eat soon he’d get sick and be forced to lose more hours. At least the tips had been good that evening -- maybe he could splurge and buy something at the bodega on the corner.

He was so focused on his meal that he didn’t notice the men in the darkened alleyway to his left until he heard the pained yelp of a distinctly feminine voice and the muffled sounds of a struggle. Instantly all thoughts of food vanished with the heady rush of adrenaline that came with the knowledge that someone needed help, that someone was in trouble and no one else could help them. Steve glanced down the empty street once before he spun on his heel and raced into the dark.

A few feet away from the mouth of the alley way, huddled group of men and the struggling girl in their midst. Thinking quickly, Steve snatched up one of the trashcan lids nearby and slammed it into the largest man before they realized he was in their midst. He collapsed with a groan and Steve managed another glancing blow before two of the men grabbed him by his arms and threw him bodily against a brick wall.

Panting, Steve dragged himself back onto his aching feet and shook his head to ease some of the dizziness. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Cruel laughter echoed off the bricks in a familiar prelude to inevitable pain and frustration. They edged closer to him, herding him away from the mouth of alley so any passing pedestrian wouldn’t hear the exchange or be able to identify his attackers. Steve was careful not to let his eyes track the cornered girl’s path to freedom as she took advantage of the distraction and raced for the relative safety of the street.

“You ain’t even close to our size, kid,” the one he’d hit with the lid snarled, “especially when I’m done ripping you into tiny little pieces.”

A vicious punch seemed to come out of nowhere and sent his vision scattering in bright bursts of red and black spots. His glasses made an alarming crunching sound and he added broken frames to list of ways tonight sucked ass. The familiar taste of blood filled his mouth and he spat a glob of the liquid onto the ground. Strong, cruel hands latched themselves around his biceps and hauled him to his feet so they could knock him down again.

There had once been a time when such a situation would have made him search the shadows for dark hair and flashing eyes coming to his rescues. But that had been a long time ago. Steve knew better than to expect help from the boy who’d broken his heart.

Now, he settled for struggling when he could and spitting curses each time one of them paused in their attack. His mind fell into the familiar pattern of cold focus that came with inescapable pain. Pain was an old friend when your body tries to quit on you even without the kicks and jabs of others.

After what felt like years, he was left gasping on his hands and knees on the dirty concrete. He supposed that meant the thugs had gotten tired of beating up an already bloody and tired target, but couldn’t manage the energy to feel grateful that the hits were no longer raining down on him.

“Had enough yet?” he panted.

The man closest to him landed a kick to his ribs that sent the air in his lungs out with a *whoosh*.

“Hand over your wallet and phone,” the man on the left ordered.

What were the odds that he could go eight years without any sort of trouble only to get held up twice in one month? Grumbling through his swollen and bleeding lip, Steve reached into his pocket to pull his wallet out into the dim light and mentally said farewell to his tips.

This time Steve was able to watch the shock and horror spread like a sickness through his assailants.

They took a step away from him to whisper among themselves and Steve took the opportunity to drag air back into his abused chest. The alley was too dark to make out the

expressions of horror on their faces, but Steve could recognize the signs of panic in their too-sharp hand gestures and the way they kept looking around for any witnesses.

“There’s no way--”

“We didn’t know who he was!”

“He attacked us first! It’s not our fault!”

The man who’d held him down for the worst of the beating raked a bloody hand through his hair, “Holy shit! I thought the list was a myth.”

“What are you talking about? What list?” Steve cut in, trying to sound firm despite the way he could feel his face beginning to swell to truly epic proportions.

“Sorry, little man. Nothing personal,” the leader started to hand back the wallet and Steve felt his fragile hold on his temper snap.

“Tell me what the fuck you’re talking about or I will make a point of telling every person I see that you robbed me,” Steve snarled.

Wide eyes met over his head in a silent conversation. Before Steve could do more than tap an impatient beat on the dark pavement, the unofficial spokesperson of his would-be attackers spoke up.

“The thing is, kid,” Steve congratulated himself for keeping his mouth closed at the unwelcome moniker, “there are certain people that are untouchable for anyone who doesn’t want trouble to come their way.”

The idea of being noteworthy enough to garner someone powerful’s protection was laughable and unimaginable. The kind of story that would suit the dime store romances his ma used to read when she became bedridden.

“Why? Is there some kind of newsletter I don’t know about?”

“No, but we all know who to avoid. No one wants to piss off the Winter Soldier.”

Steve frowned. “Who the hell is the Winter Soldier?”

The man looked uneasy, his eyes flickering back to the alley entrance like he was contemplating running and Steve felt a new wave of exhaustion wash away his ire. “Look, I’m just trying to understand why I’m being targeted like this.”

“The Winter Soldier is just his call sign,” the leader finally said. “His real name is James Barnes--he runs Hydra in these parts.”

And just like that, Steve wasn’t tired anymore.

---

It was surprisingly easy to track down the headquarters of the local gang. All it took was a few questions for the shadier residents on his street and he had an address for the Italian restaurant where one James Barnes held court.

Despite the temper that had filled his veins like a familiar drug at the mention of the boy from his childhood, Steve was forced to wait for his next day off to make the trip. He didn't want to risk the confrontation when he was exhausted from a double shift or before he managed to identify all the reasons why he wanted to rip into the next person who asked him if he was okay. It definitely wasn't because he desperately needed to do laundry and get a haircut before he was ready to face Bucky Barnes.

It had been too long since he'd let himself think about Bucky.

Bucky Barnes, the boy who'd been the closest thing to a brother he'd ever known. Bucky Barnes, the boy he'd loved with all the strength in his tiny, broken body. The boy who'd grown into the teenager that made Steve's heart race and his mouth go dry. As far as Steve had been concerned, the sun rose and set around Bucky's crooked smile and slate grey eyes.

Until the day he'd broken Steve's heart and disappeared without a trace.

It was insulting and infuriating to realize that after all these years of wondering and wishing for some kind of explanation, Bucky had only been a few blocks away. That he'd known Steve was still in Brooklyn after all this time. How else could Steve explain his name on this infamous list?

So, he'd stewed in the quiet rage that shielded him from crueler, more vulnerable emotions and waited for Tuesday to come. He dressed in a worn pair of jeans that an ex-boyfriend once told him made his ass look great and a soft, tight shirt that made his eyes look large and intense. The perfect counterpoint to the dark lines of ink with bright splashes of color that scrolled down the lean muscles of his arms.

Though he'd never be a large or intimidating man, Steve was satisfied with the weight and muscle he'd managed to put in since he began working at SHIELD, the latest hipster bar in a city filled with them. He was grateful for the way his job had introduced him to people like Peggy and Sam, who liked to sneak him leftovers from the kitchen and kept him grounded in the years after he lost his mother. He'd earned his place there through dogged determination and the same gritty perseverance that tailored his life since his first visit to the hospital.

Not for the first time, Steve wished his reflection in the mirror didn't look so much like the scared, hurt boy he'd been the year he'd lost everything. He would always be thin, but where he was once starved looking, years of work and good food had finally shifted him from emaciated to lean. His features too had shifted away from the haunted, gaunt look of the perpetually sick to the strong jawline of his father and the expressive features of his mother.

A few months ago, Peggy had teased him into trading his usual high and tight hairstyle for a more modern undercut that emphasized his strong jawline and brought a few appreciative gazes his way at the bar. The mixture of tattoos and scattered silver-bright piercings through his ears and one nostril felt like an odd juxtaposition against his too-large eyes and the

smattering of freckles across the bridge of his slightly crooked nose from one too many fights in his youth.

But it would have to do if he wanted answers to the questions that circled endlessly in his mind. He grabbed the worn leather jacket he'd found left behind at the bar by some drunk patron to ward off the crisp autumn air and made his way to the street below. Brooklyn was all crisp winds and weak sunlight that promised a bitter winter to come. He scuffed his leather boot against the sidewalk to dislodge a piece of discarded newspaper that was the closest thing to autumn leaves he would find around here.

It only took him forty five minutes to find the address he'd carefully copied onto his phone. He told himself that he wasn't delaying the inevitable by choosing to walk instead of taking the subway or the bus. The walk had the added benefit of solidifying the cold fury that he used like a shield and the fuel he needed to keep his spine straight and expression stoic.

The address led him to a simple hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant that could pass for a million other mom and pop places in New York. Steve stared at the window advertisement that promised homemade pizza and forced himself to shove away the memory of nights spent eating pizza and talking for hours on the rusty fire escape outside his apartment. He clenched his fists once, twice, to steady their need to shake before he reached for the cool metal of the door handle.

Inside felt dark and gloomy compared to the mid-morning sunlight outside and Steve scanned the simple decorations curiously. It was quaint and well-maintained, if a little dusty in the corners. A young girl was perched behind the hostess' stand with her eyes fixed on the phone in her lap with the single minded focus that indicated she was texting someone important.

Behind her, he could see the edges of several empty tables and could hear the gentle sound of conversation somewhere beyond. His heart gave a painful lurch at the thought that Bucky was only a few feet away. He was here. Steve would have to face the person responsible for one of the most painful moments of his life and pretend like he wasn't agonized by it. Maybe even get a few answers to the questions that still haunted him.

"Can I help you?"

He blinked, startled at the unfamiliar voice and returned his attention to the hostess. She arched an eyebrow at his dazed expression and he felt himself flush. Damn, Irish genes. He cleared his throat. "Erm, yes. I'm looking for someone."

She opened her mouth to respond, but they both paused when a new man stepped inside the front lobby. His dark hair was cut in a military style that was complemented by the stiff set of his shoulders and the promise of violence lurking under his skin. He looked like the dictionary definition of a bully and Steve felt his hackles raise instinctively. The man gave him a slow once over that ended with a wicked, predatory smirk that made Steve's eyes narrow in warning.

"Who's this?" he asked, leaning against the hostess' stand and ignoring the way the teenager curled herself as far away from him as possible.



Steve drew himself up to his full height and let out a slow, steady breath. “I’m here to see the Winter Soldier.”

The man blinked, surprised enough to drop his cocky attitude for a moment as he stared at Steve again. He looked back at the hostess like he was checking to see if this was some sort of joke. Then he frowned back at Steve, trying to regain his control of the situation.

“You got an appointment?”

“I need to speak to him.”

The bouncer/soldier/bully sighed, back to looking bored. “No appointment means no meeting.”

“But I—”

“Rumlow, let him by.”

Steve’s heart—the traitor—pounded against his ribs like it was trying to reach Bucky through his chest at the sound of the familiar rumble. It was deeper than he remembered, beautiful and raspy as the old blues singers they’d listened to on Steve’s ma’s ancient record player. The sound made the muscles in his stomach clench in anticipation. He ignored it to bare his teeth in a fierce smile aimed at Bucky’s bouncer and shoved past him into the dining room beyond.

The room was as empty as his first glance had indicated aside from a large booth covered in paper and a few leftover pieces of pizza. Two figures hunched close to one another, pointing to something on the sheet between them and speaking in a low murmur. He took the time to note that the other person was a red-headed woman who looked slightly familiar before he followed the pull of gravity in the room to fix on the dark-haired man beside her.

Bucky.

Eight years had done wonders for the lanky, loose limbed boy who’d abandoned Steve. Broad brushstrokes of muscle filled in a powerful frame that strained against the thin grey Henley he wore like its presence offended them. If Steve wasn’t running on righteous indignation and adrenaline, he’d be offended too. Instead he allowed himself only two seconds (okay eight) to look over a body designed for sin and wicked fantasy before he marched himself in front to the main table.

His fingers trembled at his sides--to reach out or to strike he wasn’t sure. Steve took a breath and watched the boy he’d once loved slowly shift his focus away from his work to stare up at him. Bucky’s eyes were the same shade of slate grey he remembered, curious and wary in a way that clashed with the memories of a bright, smiling boy. Now they were clouded with confusion and curiosity that only grew with the thundering silence in the room.

He didn't even recognize him.

“Can we help you?”

The woman's voice was enough to make him startle out of his thoughts and jerk his eyes away to focus on her. She was striking in a way that made him surprised that he'd overlooked her in the first place, all soft curves and steely eyes.

She was also a regular at SHIELD.

More pieces of the puzzle that was Bucky's supposed list and what he was doing on it trickled into place. He narrowed his eyes at Natasha--if that was her real name--and watched her wince at his expression with satisfaction.

"Yes," Steve fumbled and clenched his hands into fists to keep from fidgeting. "You can take me off your damned list."

Bucky stared at Steve with a shocked expression, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly in a way that would have made Steve laugh in any other setting. Now, it just made him want to hide away in his tiny apartment and pretend he'd never found out that Bucky Barnes was still in town.

Natasha looked over at Bucky who was still gaping at Steve before she spoke, like she expected the brunette to respond to Steve's demand. "What list?"

"The list that has every criminal in Brooklyn scurrying away from me like I got some kinda disease!"

Natasha looked like she was about to laugh when Bucky finally spoke up after clearing his throat. "Shouldn't you be thanking me for keeping them away?" he asked and the familiar smirk on his lips made Steve want to punch him.

"I don't want your charity and I don't need your protection," Steve snarled, prowling forward to jab a finger into the stack of paper laying in front of Bucky. "You don't get to show up and pretend like you give a damn about me because we both know that's not true."

Bucky flinched like he'd been struck and made an aborted attempt to reach out to him. "Stevie..."

The familiar nickname and desperation in Bucky's voice had tears burning in Steve's eyes, but he shoved the pain away with the ease of long practice and glared at the other man. "Take me off the list and go back to pretending I don't exist," he bit out, "It's what you're good at."

Before Bucky could do more than wince away from the acid in his voice, Steve spun on his heel and walked out. He pretended he didn't feel the weight of Bucky's eyes on his back as he left.

"Well that went well," Natasha murmured as Steve stalked past Rumlow towards the door.

"Shut up, Nat."

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Steve told himself it was a good thing that Darcy called in sick that night so that he was forced to cover her shift at the bar. Anything was better than spending another sleepless night drawing and redrawing bright eyes and a crooked smile with the reality of a Bucky Barnes all grown up. He didn't want to fall into that trap again. He would protect himself this time.

"Steve!" Sam called out through the open door of the cellar, "Someone's asking for you!"

Steve blew out a breath to move his bangs out of his eyes and looked up from where he was busy shuffling a few cases of beer out to the floor. He frowned at his friend's cheerful expression, "For me?"

"Don't look so surprised--I've seen how many girls go for the punk look."

Steve gave a derisive snort. SHIELD's novelty nights had started as a joking suggestion to liven the place up and draw more customers and ended with weekly themes. Customers had voted for everything from superhero nights to gender reversals (Steve liked to think Clint had enjoyed that one a little *too* much). Easily the most popular of these themes had been the punk nights. Each member of the staff had dug into their closets for ripped band t-shirts and skinny jeans and enjoyed the break from classy background music in favor of throbbing guitar solos and heavy drums.

For his part, Steve pulled out a long sleeve dark mesh shirt he'd worn during a brief goth phase in high school that showed off the hard-won muscles of his chest and the flat bar that bisected his left nipple. Low slung leather pants completed the ensemble and ensured that punk nights were when he brought home enough tips to pad his wallet after bills. Sometimes it paid to look like the sensitive artist type. Even if it meant Sam and the others teased him for his secret dark side, he was willing to deal with the discomfort if it meant paying off his medical bills a little sooner.

Sam was still waiting for a response, so Steve pasted on a smirk, "Too bad I don't go for girls."

"More for me then."

Steve chuckled and passed over a case for Sam to carry back before he made his way back into the bright lights and pounding music of the main bar. It was a point of pride that he no longer had to rely on the rest of the staff to maintain the bar or help him carry the drinks. He scanned the bar's countertop automatically, mentally checking which customers would need refills or their bills soon before he saw who was waiting for him at the end.

One of the waitstaff, Clint was leaned against the counter next to her. His slightly dazed smile told Steve that he'd already started his ritual of flirting outrageously with Natasha in return for a few sly smiles. Just as he had for the last several weeks.

Something must have shown on Steve's face because Clint took one look at him, frowned, and moved back into the crowd as he approached.

He ignored Natasha's raised eyebrow at his silence and reached for the tumblers stowed beneath the counter. The familiar rhythm of making and blending a drink calmed him enough that when he set the thin glass with the smallest, ugliest olive he could find in front of her he felt like he could avoid the urge to scream.

Natasha eyed the drink with interest. "I didn't order a martini."

"Isn't that the preferred drink of spies?" he asked as he methodically tucked away each of the ingredients and refilled a nearby patron's beer. Steve focused on keeping his face carefully blank, skating the edge of outright rudeness in favor of the face he used with obnoxious customers.

One perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched and she sighed, tilting the glass so the liquid moved in a slow circle. "You think I'm a spy?"

"I'm not stupid, Natasha, although I guess I can see why you'd think so," he said, "If I'm on the Winter Soldier's list, it's not a hard leap to think you're here to make sure I'm not about to tell the world who he really is. Or that you've been here every night keeping an eye on me for the past month."

"Maybe I just really like this bar."

They both looked toward the bright lights and special DJ booth that disguised the normally tasteful decorations from view and winced.

"You could at least *pretend* like you're not working for Pierce's little mob when you come in here," he grumbled, eyeing the dark splatter across her otherwise immaculate shirt. It glowed faintly in the black lights. Natasha followed his eyes and grinned playfully.

"You'd be shocked at how hard it is for most people to tell the difference between blood and marinara sauce."

"Is that blood?" Steve asked.

"No?"

He frowned, "That's not a question you're supposed to answer with another question."

Natasha only smiled at him, reminding him of the jungle cats that stalked their prey on late nights documentaries. Some of the humor faded with the light in her eyes as she cleared her throat and took a sip of her martini, wincing at the taste of the cheap alcohol he used. "I don't work for Pierce."

“I heard he’s moved on to bigger and better things now—pretending to be on the straight and narrow..” And good riddance. Steve had more reasons than most to hate the old bastard, “So I guess that means Bucky took up the mantle.”

“Bucky isn’t like Pierce, Steve. You would know that better than anyone else.”

The words strung and he looked down at the scarred wood of the countertop. Alexander Pierce, with his band of thugs and ties to shady business dealings in Russia, had been a familiar foe from his childhood. At first, Pierce and his gang were little more than scary stories told to keep young children in line. “Get home before dark or Hydra will get you!” or “Hydra takes away naughty kids who don’t listen to their parents” were all familiar threats in their neighborhood. If the stories edged a little too close to the truth, no one mentioned it.

Hydra had been a lurking presence in everyone’s mind when he was growing up. They were little more than glorified gangsters given the dubious honor of assisting larger players with the money laundering and disappearing anyone stupid enough to attract their attention. It became a rallying cry for the worst kinds of bullies and violently minded thugs looking for a cause to rally behind.

Alexander Pierce had been the worst of them all.

He covered up his vicious sweeps of his enemies and naysayers under the guise of ‘community purification projects’. The newspapers (quietly funded by interested parties) lauded him as a hero of the working man who promised new jobs and safer streets for all. The sincerity that he cultivated in each carefully planned speech divided his audience long enough for him to wipe away any protests before they could truly organize against him.

You could pretend the police and government was in control of the city, but everyone in Brooklyn knew where the real power rested.

When Pierce married Bucky’s mom, Steve and Bucky had seen firsthand what kind of blood stained the older man’s hands. Pierce had been convinced that Bucky would make the perfect successor to his ill-gotten empire--if he could only get him to cooperate. Even at sixteen, Bucky had been handsome and clever; possessing the kind of charisma that meant when he spoke, people listened. A direct contrast to the sickly, mulish blonde who was permanently at his side. Bucky had been stubborn, refusing to betray Steve’s faith in him even when it meant countless nights hiding in Steve’s tiny apartment nursing the injuries from his latest beating.

Now, Steve grieved for the idealistic boy who must have finally bowed to the will of his step-father.

He forced his voice to remain flat when he looked back at her. “I don’t know him anymore.”

“There’s more to this story than you know,” she said, expression abruptly earnest, and reached out in a quick movement to catch his hand before he could turn away. “Give him a chance to explain.”

Steve stared at her for a long moment. “If he wanted to talk, he wouldn’t have sent you here in his place.”

“Steve--”

“I have to get back to work, Natasha. Find someone else to be mysterious with.”

---

Six hours later, Steve finally clocked out and stumbled into the chilly night air on aching feet. His arms were trembling under the weight of the two full trash bags he needed to carry out to the dumpster and his head was pounding with a phantom beat left behind by hours of loud music. All he could think about was his bed waiting for him in his empty apartment.

He clipped the edge of an abandoned pallet with the edge of his boot and cursed, nearly falling onto the disgusting concrete were it not for the strong arm that wrapped around his bicep.

“Oh!” he said in surprise and turned to face his impromptu rescuer, “Thanks, I--”

His tongue stumbled over the words as his brain scrambled to a halt at the sight of the man in front of him.

“Bucky...”

Bucky gave him an awkward smile and stepped back once he was sure Steve wouldn’t fall over. His hand ran through the dark strands of hair in a nervous gesture that seemed at odds with the confident way his body moved. “Heya, Steve.”

“What--what are you doing here?”

“I, uh,” he fumbled, looking at Steve like he wasn’t sure how to read him anymore. “I just wanted to talk.”

Suddenly, the weight of everything that had happened that day felt like it was dragging him into the earth. Natasha was spying on him. Bucky was back. Bucky was alive and well and living only a few blocks away. Bucky had known where Steve was this whole time and never said a word.

Steve turned away and busied himself with tossing the bags into the nearly full trash can to give himself time to get his racing heart under control. A cool wind cut through the thin fabric of his jacket to bite into the skin exposed by his shirt and he shivered. He should’ve brought his winter coat instead of the leather one he’d worn earlier. Even if it didn’t look very punk rock, it would’ve at least kept him warmer.

Abruptly his thoughts were derailed by the weight of a skin warm scarf being wrapped around his neck methodically. He pivoted on his heel to frown at Bucky and found the other man staring fixedly at the bright red wool with a small smile.

Something shifted between them then, a new tension shivered to life and lingered in the chilly night air. Steve watched the slate grey of Bucky’s eyes trail over the sharp angles of his face down to the exposed skin of his chest peeking out between the folds of his jacket.

Instinctively, he sucked in a breath and told himself he wasn't preening when the brunette's eyes went dark and he bit down on his lower lip.

*"What the fuck are you wearing?"*

The words were breathless, little more than a growl and Steve made a point of shifting his weight in a way that showed off each hard-won muscle on the planes of his chest. He was rewarded by another jagged breath and watched Bucky's hands clench and unclench at his sides.

"It's my uniform," Steve said with a hint of a smug smirk, "Gotta make tips somehow."

Bucky jerked his eyes away from the glint of metal on his chest to meet his eyes. Abruptly, he reached forward and pressed the lapels of the jacket together, zipping it closed briskly. "You're gonna get sick if you don't keep yourself warm, punk," he murmured.

Steve flushed at the gentle affection in those words, grateful for the dim light of the alleyway. It wasn't fair to have him just show up out of the blue and remind Steve of all the things he'd once wanted so desperately. The reminder of what they were now chased away the confidence he'd felt in Bucky's reaction. He looked away. "I can take care of myself."

Bucky's smile faded as he nodded and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his wool peacoat. "Course you can, Steve. Just trying to make sure your ma doesn't rip you a new one for coming home with a cold."

Steve flinched violently and looked at the ground, trying and failing to find the words to explain just how much he wished that would happen. Of course, Bucky wouldn't know the truth of Steve's life after he'd left. Part of him was grateful that Bucky hadn't known about Sarah's death--that would have made his continued disappearance hurt even worse. Instead, he was face with the reality that the moment Bucky walked away, he hadn't looked back.

Some of his thoughts must have been visible on his face because Bucky took a step closer and frowned, "Stevie, what's wrong?"

"She's dead," he said hoarsely, "Three months after you left."

Bucky stared at him, horror and agony warring for control over his features. His eyes were wide and panicked as he tried to process the idea that the woman who'd cared for him like a son, who'd let him hide away in their tiny apartment when Pierce was on a rampage was gone. The grief was familiar to Steve now, an unwelcome companion that had dogged his steps since the day he'd watched Sarah Rogers take her last breath, but it flared to life at the raw sound that seemed to rip its way free of Bucky's throat.

"How?"

Steve shoved his numb fingers into the pockets of his jacket and tried to look unaffected by the topic. "Got sick," he whispered, "couldn't shake it."

It was laughable the way he could summarize one of the worst months of his life. Stage four cancer swept her away before they even had a chance to fight it. Not that Sarah had agreed to the expensive treatments—she wanted all of her meager savings to go to the grief stricken boy at her bedside.

Watching his ma's cold body get lowered into the hard earth had been devastating. Doing it alone--*knowing* that there was no one else to grieve for her--had nearly destroyed him.

"God, Steve..." Steve tried not to let Bucky's horrified expression comfort him and failed when Bucky reached out in an all-too-familiar gesture. Strong arms pulled him against a muscular chest and Steve shivered when Bucky pressed his face into the crook of his neck. His warm breath tickled at the sensitive skin there and he shivered. "I'm so sorry. I know how much you loved her."

Struck dumb by the weight of his grief and the way his body seemed to sag against Bucky, Steve remained silent. His eyes burned and he sucked in a shaky breath to chase away the sudden urge to cry. Bucky tightened his hold around him in response.

Scrabbling for the anger that kept him unbent and unbroken for so long, Steve took a step away from the comforting warmth. For a moment, Bucky's hands tightened around him like he wouldn't let him go, but after a beat they slid away to hang limply at his sides. They stared at each other.

"What are you doing here?" Steve asked.

"I—" Bucky cursed under his breath and the sound was so familiar that Steve had to look away. "I just wanted to explain...things."

"There's nothing to explain that eight years of silence didn't cover."

Nervous energy bubbled under his skin and he shoved his hands into his pockets to keep from doing something stupid. Like smoothing away the frown lines marring the dark slash of his brows or clinging to the strong, familiar shape of the boy he'd loved.

Nope. Not going to do this again.

He turned to the mouth of the alley, his feet following the familiar path back to his tiny studio apartment. After a beat, Bucky fell into step beside him.

Irritated, he glared at the pavement, "I don't need you to walk me home. Your stupid little list scared off all the idiots who'd normally bother me."

"Christ, Stevie, maybe I just wanted to walk with you."

Around them, the streets were mostly empty aside from the stumbling figures of drunks making their way home. Their loud voices and cackling laughter created a strange background to their silent march. It felt strange to be so angry with Bucky. He couldn't remember them ever having an argument lasting longer than a few hours before everything fell apart.



The thought made him nearly stumble on the uneven sidewalk, but he brushed away Bucky's helping hand this time.

A little desperately, he clung to his anger like it was the mortar keeping his broken heart together and made his voice carefully flat. "I can't do this, Bucky," he whispered, "I can't just pretend like the last eight years never happened. I can't pretend like I was ever okay with you leaving."

Bucky abruptly stopped walking and Steve halted a few steps away, hands still in his pockets and face like stone. The brunette looked down and pursed his lips, "I know, Steve...I swore to myself I wouldn't do this to you until everything was over, but I--"

"Soldier!"

Both of them jumped at the sharp voice and all of the emotion layered in Bucky's expression drained away, replaced a cold look that made something in Steve's gut lurch. Slowly, Bucky pivoted to face the man stalking their way. The movement placed his body directly in front of Steve's smaller frame and he scowled at the broad back in silent rebellion.

"What do you want, Rumlow?"

What little warmth his jacket had provided seemed to leach away at the violence in Bucky's voice. Steve shifted nervously behind him and watched Bucky's shoulders go impossibly tighter. He looked like he was expecting a fight.

The swarthy man from the restaurant seemed oblivious to Bucky's fury as he moved closer. He walked with the easy confidence of a man ready to injure anyone and anything that got in his mind. Behind him, a dark SUV waited with its engine still running and Steve could see the outline of another man waiting for the signal to move. Rumlow stared at Steve for a long moment until Bucky snarled impatiently.

"Well, if it isn't the little blonde from this afternoon," he grinned. Steve tried not to think about how the gesture didn't quite reach his eyes. "He must really be something if he can keep your attention, Soldier."

"Keep your eyes off of him and tell me what the fuck you want," Bucky snapped.

Rumlow arched a single eyebrow and dragged his attention away from Steve. Some of Bucky's mood must have struck him because he held his hands out in a placating gesture. "You're needed back at the house," he said, "Pierce is on a warpath."

The mention of the man was enough to chase away the lingering sentiment that kept Steve in place behind Bucky. Mentally, he berated himself for the lapse. Of course, Pierce wanted Bucky. Bucky was a part of Hydra now and just as bad as the bullies he used to fight for Steve's sake. The smaller man shook his head in an attempt to ignore the part of him that rejected any belief that Bucky would ever be capable of that.

"I'll be there in a minute," Bucky said, the dismissal clear in his voice. Rumlow hesitated, eyes flicking back to Steve, before he gave an indolent shrug and strolled back to the waiting

car.

As soon as he was out of earshot, some of the tension eased out of Bucky's stance and, when he turned back around, exhaustion seemed to cling to him. He scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed, "I..."

Steve shook his head, taking a step back and letting the cold center him. "Looks like you have somewhere to be."

"Stevie, please," Bucky's voice edged towards begging and he reached out like he was going to hold on to Steve's arm. The blonde took another step away and watched Bucky's arm fall limply back to his side.

"You'd better go, Bucky," Steve said as he turned away, "Pierce is waiting for you."

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! The next chapter will feature a flashback of the final scene between Bucky and Steve before everything went wrong. So prepare yourselves my angsty comrades!

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Y'all ready for some angst (tempered with some fluff)?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Then*  
*[Eight Years Ago]*

Summer in Brooklyn was something close to hell on earth.

The bright sun seemed to reflect up off the stained concrete and the glass of each building until stepping outside was like being forced into an oven. Indoors was its own kind of torture that was only eased if you were one of the lucky few who could afford a working air conditioner in the low income tenement buildings. Even the soft breeze that rifled through sweat sticky hair if you lingered on the rickety fire escape felt like a mockery of any kind of true comfort.

If it weren't for Bucky's refusal to waste their summer indoors reading, Steve would have happily hidden away in some cool nook in the basement of the library. Instead, he was sweating through his thin cotton shirt and wishing he'd put on a pair of shorts instead of his faded pair of jeans. The breeze might be worth all the jokes about his pale, 'chicken legs' from his classmates.

He told himself that the only reason he'd agreed to venture out into the sun was because Bucky heard a few of the kids down the block had managed to wrench off the cap of a fire hydrant to create a makeshift splash pad.

It definitely wasn't because Bucky in a thin t-shirt and shorts was one of Steve's most closely guarded fantasy images in his mental collection of Bucky's best looks.

They made their way down with the gathered crowd of laughing children and excited teens. The cold water gushing out of the hydrant felt heavenly on overheated skin and Steve caught sight of more than one adult easing close enough to feel the mist. Bucky tugged Steve into the spray, laughing at his half hearted protests and splashing in the growing pool of collected water.

They reveled in the unexpected relief from the heat until Steve's muscles were trembling with fatigue and even Bucky was beginning to breathe heavily. The sound of a fire engine's warning siren created a groan of displeasure from the crowd, signalling the end of their impromptu block party. The teenagers responsible for the fire hydrant quickly dispersed into familiar alleys.

Bucky offered his hand and tugged Steve to his feet. "Come on, Stevie. Let's get back to the apartment."

Steve followed, as he always would and took advantage of the view.

Where Steve looked like a drowned rat in the heat and water, Bucky was all glorious muscle and flashing teeth. His shirt clung to each lean muscle like its only purpose was to drive Steve a little insane, nearly translucent with lingering dampness. The track shorts he wore showed off the long line of the thighs that graced more than one page of Steve's sketchbooks and clung to the curve of his ass. Two years of baseball had fleshed out the lanky form of his friend into something that had driven more than one girl to her knees.

God, he was beautiful.

Those same girls had never spared a glance for the pale, bone-thin waif that followed in Bucky's footsteps like a washed out shadow. Unlike Bucky, puberty had only left its mark in a too-deep voice and a sex drive that left him far too fixated on strong thighs and the line of a stubbled chin. No girl had ever fascinated and intrigued him the way Bucky could with a word or a quick smile.

The crush that had developed synonymously with Steve's realization that men could love another man with the same depth and earnestness of any great romance was a thread of constant strain for the smaller boy. Even if his body was sickly and weak, it certainly made up for its failings with its' near-compulsive reaction to everything Bucky did. Each smile, each touch or familiar hug was enough to make his skin feel too tight for his body. It seemed like every molecule in his body was attuned to every breath, every movement Bucky produced.

Now they were sprawled out on the steps outside of Steve's apartment, laughing and letting the humid air slowly dry them. Bucky's hair curled wildly around his face in dark waves that Steve's fingers ached to touch. He could feel his own drying in short spikes that probably made him look even younger that he already did if his mother's teasing ruffle was any consolation.

Sarah Rogers was gone for the night already, nurse's uniform carefully pressed and the lines of strain around her eyes hidden with a familiar smile. She'd been pulling double shifts for the last few weeks and Steve knew without asking that she was preparing for the yearly sickness that would leave him bedridden. The guilt for the exhaustion was a familiar sensation and he renewed his promise with himself that he would find a way to repay her for everything.

Steve could guess from the way Bucky was carefully avoiding any mention of his own home that his friend was in the midst of yet another fight with Pierce. His fists clenched at his sides at the reminder of the man responsible for the bruises Steve glimpsed any time Bucky's shirt exposed the skin of his chest or the ginger way he sometimes moved the morning after one of Pierce's visits.

"You staying the night?" he asked, trying and failing not to sound hopeful. At least then he could be sure Bucky was safe for the night.

Bucky scowled and kicked at a rock. "Can't. Mom wants me back for 'family time.'"

"Is Pierce gonna be there?"

"Dunno," Bucky grunted and Steve didn't try to fight the urge to lean closer until they were pressed together in a warm line from shoulder to hip. "Probably. He never misses a chance to give me one of his stupid lectures."

The thought of what Pierce did to Bucky made the last of the happiness from the day disappear under the weight of his helpless fury. Mulishly he glared in the direction of Bucky's house like he could make the man burst into flames with a thought. "We should go to the police. Tell them what he's really doing behind closed doors."

Bucky leaned more of his weight against Steve like it never occurred to him to think that Steve wouldn't accept the burden. He shook his head slowly, "You know he has too many officers on his payroll for us to get away with that."

Steve growled and focused on resisting the urge to wrap his arms around Bucky's strong body and never let go.

"It's not right. He can't just get away with what he does to you. I won't let him."

Bucky swallowed hard and met Steve's eyes for the first time since they'd mentioned Pierce. A strange mixture of fear and longing marred the familiar slate grey of his eyes and Steve felt the air in his lungs go tight. He watched those eyes trace over his face until his fair skin was flushed a deep shade of red and it was all he could do not to lean forward and press his lips to Bucky's.

"Run away with me, Stevie," Bucky breathed.

Steve blinked, falling out of his fantasy into the colder truths of reality.

"Wh--what are you talking about?"

Bucky's teeth flashed as he chewed his lip in a familiar nervous gesture. His long fingers toyed with the edge of his damp shorts and he sucked in a deep breath before he reached out and took Steve's hand in his. "I'm not sure how long Pierce will let me keep telling him no," he said and the bleakness of his tone made Steve's hands tighten around his instinctively, "And I can't let him hurt my mom to get to me. I've been looking at jobs in D.C. and I know we've talked about getting our own apartment for years. Maybe I can find a garage somewhere that'll let me work until I get my certificates. You could sell your art to those fancy housewives and become famous. We could get our GEDs online and just...start over."

"Bucky, I--"

"I know it's a lot to ask you. But I...", Bucky swallowed hard and he looked down at the concrete, "I don't think I can do it without you."

The thought of running away with Bucky--living with Bucky-- was so much like his fantasies that Steve shivered. If they left, Bucky wouldn't be hurt anymore and Steve could make him

happy. They could make a new home together far away from Pierce and Hydra. He could wake up every morning to Bucky smiling at him over the coffee he hoarded like a dragon with gold. Go to sleep listening to the calming rhythm of Bucky's breath.

It was everything he'd never hoped to achieve.

He opened his mouth to say that of course he would go, but what came out was--

"I'm in love with you."

The words tumbled free before he could yank them back. For a moment it was all he could do to breathe in the air tainted by the words tumbling out of his mouth. Breathe in the horror and panic that this, *this* would be the moment Bucky finally realized that he was better off without him, that he'd ruined the only friendship that ever mattered with unrequited feelings.

Around them, the world went still and Steve could feel his blood rushing to his cheeks with his pounding heart. Bucky froze, shifting to stare at Steve with his mouth gaping wide in an expression that Steve would've teased him for in any other situation. Now, it was all he could do to fight the nausea threatening to choke him.

"I'm sorry--I didn't mean to say that," Steve babbled, trying and failing to salvage this nightmare. "Please, *please* don't be mad. I know you don't feel the same way, but I...I couldn't--"

Whatever Steve could or couldn't do became meaningless as Bucky's lips pressed against his for the first time.

Steve made a startled noise, but then Bucky's hand was cupping his cheek and tilting his chin just so and their lips slotted together like this was what they were made for. Surprise gave way to a rush of pleasure so intense that he felt himself sway forward helplessly and Bucky brace him like he anticipated each movement. He groaned when the lips he'd dreamed of for years gave way to teasing nips whose sting was soothed away by a warm sweep of a tongue.

Gentle fingers teased at the soft hairs at the base of his skull and Steve gave into the temptation of letting his own fingers thread through the raw silk of Bucky's hair. It pulled a rough sound from the other boy that sent a streak of fire through Steve and he boldly pressed his tongue to the seam of Bucky's lips, mimicking the movements that made his head spin. Where he was awkward from inexperience, he more than made up for it with eagerness and, if the sounds Bucky was making were any indication, he was a quick learner.

A car honked somewhere nearby and they both jumped, backing up instinctively at the sound.

Bucky's eyes were dark and half hooded with desire and Steve was pleased to see he wasn't the only one breathing heavily. They stared at each other, hands still tangled in the damp cotton of their shirts.

"Steve," Bucky breathed, "I--"

"James!"

Both boys turned to look as a vaguely familiar man stepped away from the black Lincoln parked on the curve and stalked toward them. Steve recognized him a moment before Bucky's stiff posture gave away his identity. Like air sucked out of a vacuum, all of the heat and tension that had lingered in the air disappeared in the face of a new threat.

Jasper Sitwell. One of Pierce's favorite henchmen and accountant for Hydra.

Immediately, Bucky's hands pulled away from Steve and he stood, angling his body so Steve was partially hidden behind him. "What do you want, Sitwell?" he growled. Steve didn't bother to wait for the response before he came to his meager height at Bucky's side. He wasn't about to let his friend take the blame for what Sitwell witnessed.

Sitwell glared at the two of them, lip curled in disgust, "Get in the car, James. You're late for supper."

"I don't need a ride."

"I wasn't asking," Sitwell snapped and the two men glared at each other before Bucky finally turned back to face Steve.

Bucky scanned Steve's face hungrily, regret and frustration evident in every line of his tense body. He started to reach for Steve again, but hesitated to glance back at Sitwell. Instead, he leaned forward until their foreheads were pressed together and their breath mingled. He closed his eyes, breathing deep.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Stevie," he whispered. Steve felt a bolt of worry lance through him at the hesitation in the other boy's voice.

"Be careful, Buck."

Bucky smiled once at him--soft, private--before he turned back to Sitwell and stepped into the car. Seconds later, the car rumbled to life and moved down the street in the direction of the large townhouse where Bucky's family now lived. If he squinted, he could just make out the outline of Bucky's profile in the backseat as his friend watched him on the steps.

Steve raised his hand in a small wave and told himself that this wasn't a goodbye.

---

Despite the grim ending, the kiss was enough to ensure Steve spent his night tossing and turning in his bed until the sheets were twisted around him like a rope. He pressed his fingers against his lips to try to memorize the sensation of Bucky's kissing him--*kissing him!*--over and over again.

It would change everything. Everything.

Eventually he gave up his feeble attempts to sleep to switch on the desk lamp and pulled out his worn sketchbook. His pencil moved quickly over the empty page in familiar strokes. Within minutes, Bucky face--dazed and flushed with passion--stared back at him the way he

had only hours before. Fingers outstretched like he wanted to drag Steve back to him again and Steve felt his body stir eagerly at the memory.

His chest felt lighter than it had in years, lungs eager to fill with air that was full of promise. He wanted to climb down the fire escape outside his window. Run down the street until he could stand outside Bucky's house and wait for the first rays of morning. He wanted to scream from the rooftops that he was in love, that everything he'd dreamed off was finally coming true.

In the end, he didn't do either of those things. He waited until the red numbers on his alarm clock read 8:00 am and got dressed as slowly as possible. Staying in bed wasn't an option with the looming potential of finally getting to talk to Bucky about how he truly felt. So he pulled on his favorite blue shirt and a pair of dark wash jeans and made his way out of the apartment. His ma's door was closed so he jotted down a quick note explaining where he went and headed out the door.

Despite the kiss, his nerves jangled wildly at the memory of finally admitting that he wanted more than just friendship with Bucky. He tried to console himself with the reminder that Bucky had kissed him first. Sure, he hadn't said how felt about Steve, but maybe he would've if Sitwell hadn't shown up.

Mostly he just wanted to kiss Bucky again.

Outside, the streets of Brooklyn were already bustling with life. Ignoring the unspoken rule of anonymity in the city, Steve smiled at several other pedestrians and whistled cheerfully. He stopped at a coffee cart near Bucky's place and ordered a hot tea and large coffee with a few mostly-warm donuts. It might make up for waking him up at what Bucky considered an ungodly hour.

He tried to take his time, but it was only a few minutes before he was standing outside the imposing brick townhome that Pierce had forced the Barnes to move into. It was nice enough, as mob headquarters went, but Steve would give anything to make sure Bucky never had to step foot in there again.

The urge reminded him of their conversation yesterday, brightening his mood. He'd have to talk to his ma, of course, but she wouldn't truly try to keep him here. She knew how much Bucky meant to him. It might even help her avoid a few long shifts without the burden of Steve's never ending medical emergencies. The thought eased some of the tension pooling in his gut.

They could do this. They could start a new life together.

Eager now, Steve went up the concrete steps and knocked on the door. Within a few minutes, the door opened to reveal the kind-faced but near-silent maid that Pierce had brought with him in the move.

"Hey, Renata," he said, "Is Bucky up?"



He started to move past her into the house as he usually did, but Renata moved to block him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rogers, but James is out with his mother right now."

Steve frowned, "Oh...he said he wanted to talk today. Do you know when they'll be back?"

"Late. You should go home."

With that, she shut the door with a sharp click and left Steve standing alone on the steps with nothing but his anxiety to keep him company.

---

The next day, Steve forced himself to wait until ten in the morning before he went down the familiar path to Bucky's house. He didn't bother with a coffee--his hands were fidgeting too much to manage it.

This time Renata claimed Bucky wasn't feeling well and was at the doctors.

---

The day after, he skipped the guard keeper entirely and called the house directly. In the past, they'd kept their phone calls to a minimum because Bucky didn't like for Pierce to know how close they were. He hated the idea of Pierce focusing even a fraction of his interest on Steve or his ma.

But this situation was worth the risk. *Bucky* was worth the risk.

Since they'd become friends, Steve could barely remember a time when they didn't speak or interact at all. Even when Steve was quarantined or hospitalized, Bucky called everyday to chatter about what he'd missed in school or recount the plot for whatever science fiction story he'd read. That Bucky wouldn't do that much had every alarm bell in Steve's body going off.

Had Pierce hurt Bucky? Was he housebound until the bruises faded and nothing could be traced back to his stepfather?

He couldn't decide if the option that Pierce had beaten Bucky was worse than the thought that Bucky had changed his mind and wanted nothing to do with Steve after the kiss. Steve resolved to finally get the answers to his questions even if it meant he got hurt in the process. His feelings would always come second to Bucky's wellbeing.

With that in mind, he wandered a few blocks south of his apartment until he found one of the banged up phone booths with a working phone. Fingers trembling, he carefully inserted his coins and punched in the number for the townhouse.

A few minutes later, someone picked up with a clipped, "Yes?"

Steve slammed the receiver down and lurched away from the phone booth. Alexander Pierce's voice on the phone had only heightened his concern for his friend. If Pierce was staying in the same house as Bucky instead of traveling as he usually did, it would only increase the chances of Bucky falling prey to his fickle temper.

He had to get Bucky out of there.

---

After a week of failed attempts to contact his friend, Steve was near frantic with the need to speak to Bucky. His memories of their kiss had become tainted with worry and a growing panic that he couldn't seem to shake. Dark circles marred the pale skin of his face from too many nights pacing his room and tossing and turning in his bed. He divided his day between trips to Bucky's house and waiting by the phone on the off-chance that he might call with some sort of explanation.

His mother had even agreed to ask around the local hospitals and clinics for any cases of a teenage boy being treated for major injuries. He could tell Sarah was equally worried about the way the disappearance was affecting Steve. It had to end somehow or Steve would end hospitalized himself.

On Saturday, Steve dragged himself out of his bed and into the same rumpled clothes he wore the day before. There was no eagerness in his movements--he knew what was waiting for him.

A closed door and more questions than answers.

The last few days, Renata hadn't even bothered with excuses. She just shook her head at his hopeful face and closed the door as quickly as possible. Pleading, cajoling, and even bribery didn't even make her hesitate to send him on his way, alone and aching.

He trudged down the sidewalks with his hands jammed deep in his pockets. It was a jarring contrast to the eager boy who'd nearly raced down the same path to Bucky's home. Stupid, naive boy to think that somehow Bucky Barnes would ever want a future with him.

His knuckles were already tender from knocking against the hard wood of the door over and over again. This time, however, the door was yanked open practically before his fist hit the wood and he was left standing with his arm awkwardly extended. He gasped in surprise.

Bucky stood in the open doorway, face carefully blank although his lips were flattened with annoyance. He stared at Steve, but didn't speak.

Relief was so sudden and violent that Steve felt lightheaded. There were no signs of bruises or cuts on the skin exposed by his shirt and jeans, but he knew first hand that there could be deeper hurts hidden beneath the fabric. New lines of strain bracketed Bucky's eyes and he looked bleaker than Steve had ever witnessed.

"Oh, thank Christ, Bucky," Steve breathed, "I thought something happened to you."

Bucky pursed his lips and glanced back into the darkness of the hallway behind him. "What are you doing here, Steve?"

"Wh--what do you mean? I've been worried sick!" Now that he could see Bucky was okay, he could feel his temper taking over for all the sleepless nights he'd spent waiting for some

sign of life. “Where have you *been*? I came here everyday trying to find you and I--”

“I didn’t want to see you.”

Steve blinked, suddenly winded. “What?”

“I said, I didn’t want to see you,” Bucky repeated. He stared at Steve for a beat and sighed, “Stop bothering Renata and stop showing up to my house.”

The earth tilted oddly beneath his feet, like the earth’s axis shifted with each expressionless word. Steve looked down, trying and failing to understand this strange new reality he’d found himself in.

“I thought you...”

Bucky sighed, raking a hand through his hair in an anxious gesture. “I’m leaving Brooklyn, Steve.”

“You’re going to D.C.?” His head felt like it was spinning, jumping from thought to thought in an attempt to understand how everything could go so wrong so quickly.

“No,” he replied lazily, “I’m going to some boarding school in Russia. Mom is moving with Pierce into Manhattan so we won’t be back in Brooklyn even after I graduate.”

Steve sucked in a shaky breath. “But I thought...” He swallowed hard and shook his head roughly to distract himself from the way his eyes were burning. “When do you leave?”

“Tonight. Renata asked me to make sure you didn’t keep bothering her.”

Steve tried and failed to think of a time when he’d heard Bucky sound so cold. He’d never been the target of the cold fury that made Bucky infamous among the other boys their age. It was something reserved for the bullies who’d attacked Steve or the kind of guys who’d catcall girls on their way home.

“Is--is it because of what I said?” Steve asked in a small voice. He stared down at his feet in an effort to hide the devastation he could feel on his face.

Bucky sighed again. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore, Steve. It’s over between us. This is goodbye.”

Steve flinched and finally looked up at Bucky with eyes gone blurry with tears. He reached for the same stubborn courage that kept him fighting back against countless assholes in his lifetime, but all he felt was an aching emptiness.

“Please, don’t do this...” he whispered. “Don’t go.”

There was a pause before Bucky slowly shook his head and stepped back into his house. “Go home, Steve. You don’t belong here.”

The door shut with all the finality of a tomb, leaving Steve standing alone and clutching at the broken pieces of the dream he'd so carefully created.

---

Three months later, Sarah Rogers was dead and Steve began to understand what it meant to be truly alone.

## Chapter End Notes

So this chapter became way longer than what I anticipated, but I just couldn't help but indulge my love for Bucky and Steve's early friendship.

Just a taste of happiness before I destroyed it. >:)

Thank you to everyone who took the time to leave kudos and comments! I love each and every one of them!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

Pierce finally makes his appearance and Steve has some thinking to do.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was three days before Steve saw any sign of Bucky.

Not that he was counting. Or worrying.

Eventually, he told himself his concern was purely related to the violence he knew Pierce was capable of when he was angry to appease the spiteful part of him that was still furious for everything Bucky had done. So what if that manifested with him changing his running route to pass by the Italian restaurant just in case he ran into his old flame? He was an adult, dammit, not a schoolboy with a big gay crush.

And he found himself falling into the same patterns he'd created the first time Bucky disappeared.

He went to work--perhaps more than he should in an attempt to keep himself busy. He pretended he wasn't looking for a familiar redhead and sphinx-like smile waiting for him at the bar for another half-baiting, half-confusing conversation with a spy. He hid the sinking disappointment he felt each time she wasn't there (Clint wasn't nearly as subtle). He took a petty sort of pleasure in knocking over ever brightly colored sign promoting "Pierce for City Council!" on his way back and forth to work.

Most of all, he avoided the sketchbooks and pencils laying eagerly at his desk because he already knew the shape they would create if he picked them up again.

Every morning, when his anxious mind drove him out of his bed, he dragged on his battered pair of sneakers and took to the streets. Running was a strange sort of torture and freedom all at once. Even after years of jogging with Sam, and occasionally Clint, his lungs always burned in a mockery of the asthma attacks that used to keep him confined to the safety of indoors. Now he reveled in the rush of adrenaline and the familiar rhythm of his feet striking against the pavement.

He jogged down his usual route to head toward Prospect Park where Sam would be waiting even though they hadn't planned anything. The man seemed to have knack for detecting when Steve was struggling with something.

Sure enough, a familiar figure was leaning against the benches set close to the entrance of the park stretching out his hamstrings idly. Sam smiled at Steve and waved as he made his way over, "You look like you're in need of a good run."

Steve nodded and tried to smile back, but, judging from the worry in Sam's brown eyes, he didn't manage to make it look genuine.

"Come on then, white boy. Let's see if we can sweat some of your worries away."

They set off at a brutal pace--one that would have sent him scrambling for his inhaler a year before. Now, he took a savage sort of pleasure at the aching burn and the way his mind seemed to empty in order to focus on more important things. Like breathing and avoid tripping over the uneven path. By the end of the run even Sam looked flushed and breathless.

He slowed to stop beside a stand and grabbed a couple waters, tossing one to Steve. "So you gonna tell me what's got you hot and bothered?"

Steve took a long swallow and pretended to focus on stretching to avoid Sam's eyes. "Nothing's bothering me."

"Bullshit," Sam grunted and frowned at him thoughtfully. "This wouldn't have something to do with that redhead that was asking after you at the bar, would it?"

Steve scowled at the reminder of Natasha--and her recent disappearance from the bar. "You know I'm not interested in Natasha. I don't even know if I can technically call her a friend."

What do you call the person you thought was nice enough until you found out they were spying on you for your ex? It was a complicated scenario certainly.

"What about the tall drink of water Clint saw you talking with outside the bar after your shift the other night?" Steve's head jerked up in surprise and Sam smirked. "Yeah, I thought that might be it...so who is he?"

He stared down at his muddy shoes and felt his mouth twist into a grimace. It had only been a week since he'd first seen Bucky and already he felt like his world was turning inside out. His brain had dutifully returned to the Bucky-infused haze that had infused most of his high school and middle school years. It didn't seem to matter that Bucky had broken his heart into tiny pieces when he left--each piece still belonged to him.

"Steve?" Sam's voice was gentle and Steve rubbed a hand through his damp hair when he realized how long he must have been lost in thought.

"It's Bucky."

Sam gaped at him. "Bucky? Bucky *Barnes*? The guy who pulled a disappearing act on you eight years ago? *That* Bucky?"

He nodded miserably, glad that he didn't have to explain his complicated history while he was feeling so confused and raw. The truth about his feelings for Bucky had been one of the first things to cement the growing friendship between Sam and Steve. Sam had been fresh

from his discharge after losing Riley and knew what kind of aching hurt came from losing the person you'd anchored yourself to when they'd met.

It was Sam and his gentle friendship and unflappable personality that kept Steve from spiraling after the loss of Bucky and his mother. He didn't like to think about what he would have done if Sam hadn't stepped in to help him in the latest unwinnable fight he'd picked after the funeral. Smiling through a bloodied nose and swollen jaw, Sam had taken one look at Steve and claimed him as a new member of the Wilson clan. With Sam had come the rest of Steve's strange family and the support system he'd so desperately needed.

Now, Sam flopped down on the bench next to Steve and nudged him with his shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?"

For a long moment, Steve considered falling back into the habit of keeping his inner thoughts secret. He wasn't ready to admit that Bucky had left to become the kind of monster they'd spent their childhood running from. He didn't want to acknowledge that Bucky was alive and well and still didn't want to be with Steve. That the kiss that had meant everything to Steve meant nothing to Bucky.

Instead, he opened his mouth and blurted out everything. The list. The restaurant and seeing Bucky again. Natasha. Their conversation in the alley.

Everything.

When he finally went silent, Sam was wide-eyed and slack jawed beside him. He took a breath, frowned like he wanted to say something, but snapped his mouth shut. A few seconds later, he repeated the gesture and scrubbed his fingers over his tightly cropped hair. Somewhere nearby a police siren began its familiar wail and children shrieked with laughter as they raced around the slides. Steve stayed silent, lost in thought.

"So he wants to talk to you?"

"Yep."

"Well..." Sam said slowly, "what did he have to say for himself?"

Steve picked at the weathered paint flaking off the bench. "I don't know--I left as soon as Brock showed up."

Sam sighed and Steve knew without looking up what his friend was going to say. "Steve... this may be your chance to get some closure for what happened."

"I know. I just--being around him is so *hard*. I don't know how to deal with how mad I was--*am*--or how much he hurt me. We never fought before...everything. I don't know how to act around him anymore."

"Are you willing to let him go without knowing the truth?"

---

Sam's question seemed to take root in his mind until it was all he could think about and left him silent and introspective. His friend pulled him into a brief hug before heading back to his own apartment to get ready for his shift that night. He didn't comment on Steve's indecision, just told him to call if he needed anything and offered his couch if he didn't want to be alone tonight.

Instead of walking back home immediately, Steve stayed where he was, watching the kids play and cradling his long-empty water bottle.

For the first time in eight years, he could finally have the answers to the questions that haunted him. He could find out if Bucky thought their kiss was a mistake. If he'd left to avoid Steve or if there was something else going on. Despite his rejection, Steve still couldn't convince him that the boy he'd known had become one of Pierce's strongest allies.

The Winter Soldier was a stranger to him. How could he compare the cold-eyed man responsible for all kinds of violence to the boy who'd once hidden a litter of abandoned kittens under his bed so they wouldn't starve? Bucky Barnes wasn't the type of man to send thugs and gangsters scurrying with just the threat of his temper.

But the truth was, he didn't know Bucky anymore.

Eight years was enough to change anyone. In that amount of time, Steve had become an orphan, abandoned his dreams of becoming an artist, and finally begun to accept who he really was beneath the prickly temper and health problems. Who had Bucky become? A violent assassin bent on ensuring Hydra's dominance or was the boy he'd loved still lurking beneath the surface?

One thing was certain: he'd never know the truth without sitting down and talking to Bucky.

He stood on stiff legs. The weak late autumn sunlight had dried the sweat from his run to a clammy shroud and he shivered when he stepped away from the body-warm bench. He bemoaned the loss of the warmth of the long workout mentally and hoped the walk would help the cramps left behind by his stay on the bench.

The decision to talk to Bucky filled him with the kind of single-minded purpose that always made Sam and Peggy roll their eyes affectionately. It filled him with a new confidence even as he realized he didn't have very many choices for how to find Bucky in the first place. It wasn't like they'd exchanged numbers in their brief interactions. He could try to ask Natasha, but he had a feeling that she couldn't be found unless she wanted to be. Even if Bucky worked for Pierce, he couldn't see him moving back into the townhouse where his mother was hidden away from prying eyes. That left the restaurant.

Steve didn't bother to head back to his own apartment to change or shower--he knew that if he stepped into the quiet safety of his home, he'd come up with a reason to wait. Nervous energy buoyed the strength that was drained by his run and he used it to set a quick pace down the block. All around him, the familiar faces of other New Yorkers continued with their days, utterly uninterested in his inner turmoil. Oddly, their apathy was a comforting reminder of how small his problems must seem to other people.



As he walked, he worked out the basics of a plan to keep the panicked shrieks at the back of his mind at bay.

The plan went:

Go to the restaurant.

Talk about feelings.

Try not to vomit.

It wasn't exactly a military marvel of strategy, but he figured it was the best he could do for now. It would be enough to get him some of the answers he needed. For better or for worse.

Steve tapped his foot idly as he waited at the crosswalk for the signal to move, mind fixed on the task before him. He was so focused that he didn't notice the dark, unmarked car in front of him until it moved to block his way forward. Driven by a deep-seated righteous anger born into every New Yorker, he let out a curse that would have earned him a slap from his ma and hit the hood of the car, throwing up his arms in dramatic protest.

Instead of moving along or honking a protest, the rear window of the luxury vehicle rolled down to reveal the calm, charismatic smile of one Alexander Pierce.

Steve felt the anger leave him in a dizzying whoosh, replaced instantly with a numb fear. This was the face of his childhood nightmares. This was the man who'd taken Bucky from him just as he'd taken countless other sons and daughters from problematic families.

Pierce's eyes narrowed in a gesture orchestrated to look concerned instead of revealing the cold cruelty lurking beneath. "Steven," he called, looking for all the world like he was greeting a long-lost friend, "It's so good to see you! Get in, I'll give you a lift."

Steve glanced at the driver and tried not to wince when he recognized Rumlow. The other man winked at him and he scowled in response--clearly he didn't have the option to refuse this 'offer.' Like hell, he'd turn and run from that asshole. He was intimately aware of what bullies did when they discovered a weakness.

So he smiled and slid into the dark confines of the car, shutting the door with a click, sending up a hopeful prayer that Pierce wouldn't just kidnap him in the middle of the city. Subtly, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and kept it out of sight with Sam's number on the screen. He settled back into the leather seats and let the anger simmering in his blood center him. He refused to let his fear of facing Hydra's wrath force him into hiding. Pierce had already taken everything that mattered from him, he wouldn't add his pride to that list.

"It's so good to finally meet you in person, Steven," Pierce said, "I've heard all about you from James."

Steve resisted the urge to snort his disbelief. Bucky had been exceedingly careful to keep Steve off Pierce's radar when they were kids--he saw no reason to believe that had changed when they became adults.

"I'm surprised that you found the time to learn more about a boy from Brooklyn with the elections coming up," he replied mildly, "I heard you've been lagging in the polls."

The good natured humor slid away from Pierce's expression like water over a stone and Steve could feel the tension in the vehicle mount almost tangibly. Steve watched Rumlow's scarred knuckles tighten around the steering wheel as he directed the car through traffic, coasting around the block until given the signal to stop.

Abruptly Pierce chuckled, a genuine sound that felt jarring against the underlying ripples of violence. "I like you, Steven. There aren't many people who speak their mind to me anymore."

"I can't imagine why not."

"Indeed," Pierce said carefully, before he leaned forward so he could face Steve directly, "We don't have to be enemies, you know. Even James has seen the good that me and my organization can do for the people of this city--if you'd only look past your own prejudice."

Steve made a derisive sound. "I know what your 'organization' does for the people of this city and anyone who stands in their way. You don't care about anything but promoting your agenda."

"My *agenda*, as you put it, is to transform Brooklyn and the rest of New York to a shining beacon of peace and prosperity." Pierce's voice took on the cajoling, fervent tone Steve recognized from his televised speeches and felt his stomach twist. "What you see as unnecessary violence is just a means to an end and something I take no pleasure in. Order, unfortunately, doesn't come without cost. We must be united in our efforts to make the world better and willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve that."

"It's easy to discuss sacrifices when they aren't your own."

Pierce sighed, looking for all the world like a disappointed father. "I take no pleasure in harming others, but we are all aware that no amount of handshaking and diplomatic rhetoric will ever create the change we truly need. Brooklyn is falling apart--crime is on the rise, people have lost their livelihood, and it's only going to get worse. Sometimes to build a new world, you have to tear the old one down."

"Why are you telling me this?" Steve said, voice flat and eyes fixed on the familiar buildings passing outside the windows.

"Because despite how incredibly unimpressive you are--Steven Grant Rogers, orphan and bartender--you have the unique ability to distract one of my most important tools. This is something that I cannot continue to overlook." The dismissive way Pierce listed the bare facts of Steve's life like it was meaningless. Maybe he was meaningless in the scheme of things, but he wasn't willing to leave Pierce alone with his true target.

"Bucky."

Some of the tightness in his chest eased at the truth Pierce had unwillingly shared. If Pierce was scared enough to risk admitting that he couldn't ensure Bucky's loyalty to Hydra, it meant that there was still a chance to save his friend. Bucky was still fighting him. He wasn't

working for Hydra willingly. The thought was enough to make a slow smile curl across his lips and laughter threaten to bubble free from his chest.

The car came to a slow stop outside of his building and Steve reached for the door handle. Pierce's hand wrapped around his wrist with a surprisingly strong grip that contrasted with the eerily calm expression on his face. The movement left them uncomfortably close and Steve felt his heart lurch with alarm. Despite his justified anger toward the man, he wasn't dumb enough to believe he was beyond his reach--literally or metaphorically. His eyes flicked to where the dark-haired bodyguard was watching their exchange with narrowed eyes. Rumlow could just as easily lock the doors, take him to the coast, and leave his body somewhere not even the birds would find. No one would ever know the truth of his end.

Pierce let the gravity of the situation sink in for a long moment before he spoke.

"Don't misunderstand me, Steven," he said, "James is a valuable asset, but not an irreplaceable one." Steve's eyes widened in alarm and he felt his heart give a painful lurch. "If it becomes clear that your...influence prevents him from doing what must be done, you'll live long enough to understand the true cost of your actions."

Numbly, Steve fumbled with the latch of the car and tumbled into the streets. He wished he could say his hands weren't shaking and that his skin hadn't gone clammy with shock. He wished that he was the type of hero that could face down insurmountable odds and threats without going cold and shaking like a leaf. But he was just a kid from Brooklyn, forced into a world where a man could pull him off the street and threaten everyone he loved.

Pierce gave him another smile, all easygoing charm and television-grade attractiveness. The model politician. "I hope you'll give some thought to what we discussed."

Wordlessly, Steve watched him close the door and signal to Rumlow to drive away.

When they were out of sight, he let out a long breath that did little to relieve him of the tension bracketing his body. His mind felt sluggish and edgy from leftover panic. Mostly he was just exhausted in a way that he hadn't felt since the day his mother died.

The sound of a shoe scuffing against concrete made him turn slowly and freeze in surprise. Standing on the steps of Steve's rundown apartment building was Bucky, looking pale and more terrified than he'd ever seen him.

## Chapter End Notes

I honestly think Pierce is one of the most interesting and terrifying MCU villains because he's so...realistic. He's definitely an 'ends justifies the means' sort of character and that's what makes him so scary.

On the plus side, I think you guys will really enjoy what I have planned for the next chapter. ;)

As always, your comments give me life and I love getting to chat with you guys! Thanks for reading!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Well, this is the chapter you were waiting for. You'll notice there are new tags for the story as well as a brand new rating (explicit).

In other words, read on my lusty friends!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bucky's eyes were wild and frantic as he stared at Steve, chest heaving with near-gasping breaths. They moved past Steve to stare at the path Pierce's car had taken and he released a shuddering breath the sounded like it was ripped from him.

Torn between an eight year old hurt and the protective urges left behind by Pierce's threats, Steve slowly walked forward until Bucky's eyes returned to him. The terror there chased away whatever stubborn walls were still in place and Steve found himself reaching forward without conscious choice. His hand found Bucky's with the same strange familiarity that continued despite the years and anger between them.

He didn't speak, just pulled Bucky along behind him up the steps of his old apartment building. Bucky came willingly, hovering close when he stopped to fish out his keys from his pants.

Steve didn't let go of Bucky's hand until they were safely within the cool, quiet of his apartment--only then realizing just how tightly he'd been clinging to the other man. He rubbed his palm against his pants like it would help chase away the lingering ache that seeped into his skin. Touching Bucky felt like the worst kind of drug, addicting from the first contact and rooting itself in his systems for weeks afterward.

Now that he was inside, some of the adrenaline left behind by Pierce's sudden appearance and veiled threats finally eased. Without it, he could feel himself drooping with exhaustion left behind by the run and the emotion roller coaster that seemed linked to being close to Bucky again. His mind was still turning over the implication of Pierce's words in the car like a riddle he couldn't quite understand.

Was Bucky truly loyal to Hydra? Or was he being manipulating into working for them like so many others?

Had he truly wanted to leave Steve behind all those years ago?

"I can practically see the smoke coming from your ears, Stevie," Bucky said and Steve startled, looking back at him. Whatever levity he'd been trying for faded as soon as they met

each other's eyes. Bucky pursed his lips, looking pained. "What were you doing with Pierce?"

To give himself time and space to think without the crush of emotions that seemed to drown him anytime he looked at the man he'd loved. Still loved...maybe. He stepped into his tiny kitchen and reached for a bottle of water from his fridge, hoping the distraction would keep him from saying or doing something stupid. Like commenting that he and Bucky were alone and within sight of his unmade bed.

It didn't help his focus that Bucky seemed to be wearing clothes that were painted on his muscular frame. Dark wash jeans hugged thick thighs and the tight maroon henley beneath a worn leather jacket made the golden tones of his skin gleam even in the low light. Storm grey eyes followed each of his movements with a hunger that called an answer heat in his core.

He couldn't break his heart again by seeing something in Bucky that wasn't there. Eight years was more than enough time for Bucky to move on, even if he had loved Steve once. For all he knew, Bucky and Natasha were more than just partners in crime.

So Steve shrugged. "I didn't have much of a choice. Rumlow and Pierce showed up when I was out on my run and told me they would take me back to my house."

Faster than Steve could track, Bucky moved toward him. His hands latched around his biceps and he scanned Steve's body like he was searching for blood. "*Did he touch you?*" he growled, "I'll kill them if they--"

"Bucky! Bucky, I'm fine! I swear," Steve soothed, startled by the panic in the other man's face. He reached out to cup his hand over Bucky's. "They just wanted to talk."

Bucky stared at him for a long moment, searching his face for any signs of dishonesty. Then he sighed, leaning forward until their foreheads were pressed together and their breath mingled in the space between them. Steve closed his eyes, savoring the sensation for what it was--fleeting.

"You scare the shit out of me, you punk," Bucky whispered. Steve shivered at the sensation of his breath brushing against the sensitive skin of his face. Then the taller man leaned back to glare at him, "You have to stay away from him--you--you don't know what they're capable of."

"Or what? They'll send the Winter Soldier after me?"

Bucky flinched and looked down. The muscles in his jaw feathered as he gritted his teeth and took a step back like he needed the space. "I mean it, Steve. Stay away. This isn't your fight."

"I don't have a choice, Buck. People are gonna get hurt if someone doesn't do something."

"It doesn't have to be you that fights. You aren't a part of this." Bucky's voice was pleading, eyes bright and tormented. "There are more things at stake here than you realize."

“What like how Pierce is threatening you with me?” Steve blustered and was rewarded with Bucky going pale. “He told me that if I kept meeting with you he would get rid of you--that I was a ‘distraction’ you didn’t need.” The last words stung with the truth of what Steve was to Bucky--nothing more than a childhood crush turned into an adult responsibility.

“*Fuck*,” Bucky hissed, raking his hands through his hair to tousle the longer strands. Steve’s fingers twitched to follow their path before Bucky spun on his heel and paced away. When he turned back, his expression was near manic with anxiety. “You need to get out of town. Do you think Sam might take you back to D.C. to stay with his family?”

“How did you--” Steve started but then shook his head roughly, “I’m not running away, Bucky. This will never get solved if one of us runs away.”

Cursing viciously, Bucky leaned heavily over the counter and avoided Steve’s eyes. The tension left behind by years of loneliness, confusion, and anger seemed to settle into the room like a shroud. Instead of being bolstered by it, Steve just ached. He set his water onto the counter and gathered his courage like a shield.

Through a voice thick with years of unspoken grief, Steve whispered the only question that seemed to matter. “Bucky...why did you leave?” Bucky finally looked up at him with eyes dark with his own pain and Steve sucked in a slow breath. “Why did you leave me like that?”

For a long moment there was only silence broken by their uneven breath.

Bucky kept his eyes trained resolutely on the scarred linoleum counter when he finally spoke, “I told you why. I had to go--I didn’t want to stay here.”

“I don’t believe you.” He stepped forward, crowding Bucky against the counter and forcing the larger man to shift to accommodate him. The sting of rejection was familiar so he ignored it in favor of finally hearing the truth from Bucky. He told himself that he would survive it if Bucky turned him away again. That he had already lost him once, he could do it again.

But he had to know the truth.

Slate grey eyes slipped over his face like they couldn’t settle on a single, safe feature. They traced over the studs in his ear and the last bit of bright blue dye left behind by the last theme night at the bar. His tongue flicked out to wet suddenly dry lips and he watched Bucky’s eyes drop like a stone to follow the movement. It made his heart thud dully against his ribs and a hot flush spread over his skin.

“Tell me you want me to leave,” he whispered, leaning forward until he could feel the heat of Bucky’s skin and the shaky way he was breathing, “and I’ll let you go.”

Between one heartbeat and the next, something seemed to splinter in Bucky’s expression. Before Steve could do more than suck in a surprised breath, Bucky surged forward and pressed his lips against his.

It was nothing like the awkward meeting of lips on the front steps of his mother’s apartment. They were older now and he could taste the regret and loneliness on the soft curve on his lips,

the quicksilver brush of teeth against his. Hands found their anchors on the smooth curve of his hip, digging in in a silent plea to stay in this moment a little longer.

Steve went eagerly, pressing forward on tiptoes to mold the lean planes of his body against the other man. They fit together easily, despite the changes of time--like two magnets anchored together. He could feel the muscles of his chest moving sinuously against him beneath his clothes and he impatiently ran his fingers beneath the soft fabric to touch bare skin. Bucky made a helpless, pleading sound and Steve swallowed it down eagerly, using the opportunity to explore the slick heat of his mouth.

His head felt like it was spinning, chest moving like the air was its own kind of drug. Bucky's hands pulled him impossibly closer as though he was able to erase the pain of eight years alone with the stamp of their bodies moving together. He broke away from Bucky's lips with a teasing nip to the swollen curve of his lower lip to trail biting kisses along a jawline that could cut glass. This close, he could hear every hitch in his breath and stuttering heart beat as he searched for every hidden spot that chased him beyond the edge of his control.

Every reaction sent a thrill of want through his body until he was shifted restlessly against him.

"Oh god," Bucky groaned, sucking in a surprised breath when Steve's teeth sank into his thundering pulse. "Please don't stop. Please, Stevie."

In answer, Steve tugged impatiently at the lapels of his leather jacket until he yanked it off his shoulders and tossed it somewhere on the floor, followed by the tight red henley beneath. He ran his fingers over the newly exposed skin and leaned back to run appreciative eyes over him. Whatever work he'd done for Pierce had left Bucky with a body built for sin and coiled power. His abs tightened and flexed as Steve took his time looking him over like he could feel the weight of his gaze dropping down to appreciate the pronounced adonis lines and light dusting of hair that drew his attention lower.

"Beautiful...you're so damn beautiful, Buck," Steve murmured approvingly and watched a hot flush darken the other man's sharp cheekbones. Bucky's hands reached for him again, but he stepped out of reach so he could watch him struggle to control his lust. Steve's voice went molten and dark as he trailed a slow hand down Bucky's chest and watched the goosebumps spread across his flesh. "You aren't going to leave me again, are you?" he purred, "Not going to regret this the moment you go back home?"

Bucky looked down at him, eyes dark and turbulent. "I never regretting anything except leaving you like that."

"I can't do this again. I can't watch you walk away--not again." His voice went rough with the same emotions that had lingered like a poison in his veins. "I want you to stay. I need you to want to stay with me."

"Pierce will--"

"Fuck Pierce," Steve snapped, temper flaring. "He's already taken too much time from us. This is between us."



Bucky's shoulders went tight and he rubbed a hand over his face. "He'll use you to hurt me. He knows that I'd do anything to keep you out of this."

The statement jogged loose the memory of Sitwell interrupting them on the stairs to drag Bucky back to Pierce. It didn't take a genius to realize he must have told Pierce what he'd seen. The realization that the answer for why Bucky left was so simple stung a bit. He'd been so wrapped up in the sting of rejection and the grief of his mother's death, he'd put the blame on himself instead of seeing the moment for what it truly was. Ammunition for Pierce's control of Bucky.

"Is that why you left?" he asked, "To keep Pierce away from me?"

Bucky pursed his lips, looking small despite his size. "He told me that he'd make sure your mom lost her job," he breathed, "That you'd end up on the street for as long as it took the next sickness to kill you. The only way to keep you safe was to leave--so I told him I'd work for him if he stayed away from both of you and kept you on the list of people who couldn't be touched by any of his men." His regret was palpable and Steve stepped forward to wrap his arms around him, anchoring him to the present. After a moment, Bucky sagged against him with a shuddering sigh.

The thought of all Bucky had sacrificed to keep him safe was a bitter, twisting knife in his gut. Steve had been so *angry* once he'd recovered from the shock of their last meeting. He'd blamed his friend for giving in to Pierce's scheming and abandoning Steve when he desperately needed him. That anger and bitterness had kept him upright and moving through the failed hospital treatments, the lonely funeral, and the silent apartment waiting for him to clear out all the memories left behind from his childhood. He'd been so convinced that Bucky had been disgusted by the depth of Steve's emotions for him when all along Bucky had felt the same way.

"If I'd known about your mom...I would've come back. I wouldn't have left you alone without her."

Steve nodded, mollified by the memory of Bucky's horror when he'd told him about Sarah. "But will you stay now? Are you back for good or are you going to disappear again?"

Bucky shook his head, looking torn. "There is more at stake here than you know, Steve. I'm--I'm trying to do something good, to make up for all the things I did in Pierce's name."

"You're going against Pierce?" Even the thought was enough to send a bolt of fear through him and he tightened his hold.

"I've got to make things right," Bucky said, eyes shuttered, "We can never be together as long as Hydra is in power. Pierce can't be allowed to get a foothold in government."

"You're going to try to keep him from the elections?"

"If everything goes well, he'll be gone before he ever makes a speech."

Steve paced away, nerves making it impossible to stay still even in the comfort of Bucky's embrace. He raked his fingers through his hair, mussing it into a mass of jagged spikes. "How are you going to manage that?" he demanded, "If Pierce finds out that you are working against him, he'll kill you!"

"I knew the risks when I agreed to take him down."

The evenness of Bucky's tone set Steve's temper alight and he whirled on Bucky as he stepped into the living room. "It's not worth the risk if it means you get hurt! I'm not going to just sit back and let you get killed because you think you've got to make up for the crimes you were forced to commit! It's not your fault!"

"I know...but I still did it."

Just as quickly as his fury had risen, it faded, leaving Steve feeling drained and exhausted beyond his years. He forced himself to straighten his spine and stare resolutely at Bucky, "I want in."

"What?" Bucky stared at him, already shaking his head before Steve began to speak again.

"If you're going to risk your life then I'm coming too."

"No. No way, Steve," Bucky said, "The whole point of this is to keep you *away* from Pierce."

Steve shrugged. "Pierce already knows I'm involved--and it's only going to get worse when he finds out that I have no intention of letting you out of my sight again."

Bucky's lips twisted in a smile despite his attempts to smother it. "Oh yeah? Do I get a say in this?"

Eyes hooded, Steve stalked forward. Bucky moved backward until his knees hit the edge of the bed behind him and he tumbled backward with a huff. With a sly smile, Steve crawled forward to bracket his hips with his own and looked down at him.

"You lost your chance to get away the moment you came back to Brooklyn," he murmured and leaned down for a slow, thorough kiss that left Bucky whimpering against his lips.

"You're mine now, Bucky Barnes, and I intend to keep you."

Bucky's hands flexed on his hips, digging in hard enough to that he knew he'd have bruises the next day. The thought made his skin go tight and hot and he ground his hips down against the hard line of Bucky's erection. They groaned in unison at the sensation. Bucky's hands tugged at the hem of Steve's thin t-shirt and he begrudgingly leaned back to pull it over his head and toss it aside.

Calloused fingers traced over the intricate tattoo that trailed over his right arm to curl around the base of his collarbone in dark lines and hidden burst of colors. Bucky's examination continued as he brushed over the lean muscle developed after he'd left and paused on the silver bar still bisecting his nipple. Steve hissed out a breath, hips stuttering instinctively, when those long fingers lightly teased the cold metal.

“Fuck,” he breathed and Bucky’s lips quirked.

“Good?”

Steve groaned in response and was rewarded with a gentle twist that left him breathless and leaning down to press a heated kiss against his lips. The sensation of skin on skin was heady and the thin level of control he had over his body seemed to disappear with each touch. Bucky’s hand fisted in his hair, drawing him closer to lick and tease at his mouth. In return, Steve let his fingers map the changes in Bucky’s body like he was trying to draw him through touch.

When his fingers brushed against the line of denim that kept him from exploring further, he leaned back to look at Bucky’s flushed face. “Can I?”

Bucky nodded eagerly, rocking his hips upward like he was chasing the promise of touch. Grinning now, Steve bit his lips and scooted himself backward until he was eye level with the impressive bulge straining against the fabric of Bucky’s pants. He trailed his fingers teasingly over it and listened to Bucky hiss out a string of Russian before throwing his arm up over his mouth.

All Steve could think about was all the noises he wanted to hear spill out of those sinful lips.

His fingers fumbled slightly with the adrenaline of finally seeing--touching--Bucky after so many years of dreaming. The weight of the moment made his heart thunder and his blood race south until he had to rock against the mattress to ease the strain. As soon as the zipper was lowered, Bucky lifted his hips eagerly and helped Steve ease the fabric slowly down his legs to fall to the floor.

He trailed gentle kisses down the length of one thigh, hovering over the moisture collecting at the tip of Bucky’s straining cock against the fabric of his boxers, before continuing the treatment on his other leg. Bucky’s hand fisted the sheets next to his hips and a low whine ripped free from his throat.

“Stevie...please.”

Steve didn’t pause in his slow exploration, “Please what?”

“*Touch me.*”

The helpless need in Bucky’s voice made him helpless to resist. Quickly, he stripped off the boxers and felt his mouth go dry as he stared at Bucky Barnes naked for the first time. When Bucky reached for him, he wordlessly pressed his hands down on the mattress with a silent order not to move. New scars were scattered across thick muscle like a time stamp of each time he’d been hurt without Steve there to soothe the ache. He pressed a sweet kiss to a puckered line stretching across the inside of Bucky’s thigh and imagined that he could taste the war on his skin.

Bucky moved restlessly, pleading without words for Steve to have mercy. It drew his eyes to the thick length of Bucky’s cock, curving proudly over his taut stomach. Steve ghosted his

fingers down the hard flesh and watched liquid dribble free from the slit. Without warning, he leaned forward to follow the path of his fingers with his tongue.

Bracing his hands on Bucky's tense thighs, Steve ran his mouth over the head of his cock until Bucky was trembling beneath him. The litany of Russian spilling from his lips was broken up by the occasional gasp or moan. Steve paused in his assault, waiting until Bucky noticed and looked down at him before giving him a wicked smile and sinking his mouth down the length of his cock.

*"Shit!"* Bucky shouted, hips thrusting against Steve's firm grip as his dick disappeared into the wet heat of Steve's mouth.

The blonde looked up at him through his lashes and continued to press down until his nose was pressed against the skin of his groin. Years of sickness had taken away any gag reflex the smaller man might have possessed and a dedication to the art of making his partner lose their mind made him determined to watch Bucky fall apart. Bucky seemed torn between watching Steve move up and down, stopping only to suck hard or run his teeth lightly over the sensitive spot beneath the head and smothering the sounds coming from his mouth.

One hand carded through the soft blonde hair at the nape of his neck and Steve gave an approving moan that made Bucky gasp when he tightened his hold. "Look so good like this..." Bucky babbled, pupils blown with lust. "Better--ah!--than I could've imagined. Better than anything..."

He kept his rhythm erratic, bringing him to the edge only to slow down and tease him with gentle licks. As he worked Bucky over, Steve let one of his hands press against his own aching erection and free it from his suddenly constricting pants. Bucky continued to croon meaningless encouragement, turning Steve's ears red with the praise and his own arousal.

When Bucky was practically sobbing for release, Steve finally decided to have mercy. Instead of easing off, he opened his throat and swallowed down all of him. Above him, he could hear Bucky gasping, but it seemed to fade with the singular focus on making Bucky orgasm harder than he ever had before. He moaned around the heavy flesh in his mouth and watched Bucky give a full body shudder at the sensation.

"Steve! Stevie, sweetheart--" he whined high in his throat when Steve pulled back to tongue at the head of his cock, "--I'm close."

Steve smiled and took Bucky deep into his throat, letting him thrust hard and fast into his mouth. He waited until he was seated fully before he looked up at Bucky and swallowed around his cock.

The reaction was instantaneous. Bucky's head moved back against the pillows as his mouth opened in a silent sob and Steve felt the hot rush of his orgasm fill his mouth. He swallowed down the salty liquid, continuing to toy with his cock through the aftershock until Bucky groaned and tugged at his hair in silent demand.

Steve followed the pull eagerly, his own cock aching against his stomach. Still gasping and shivering through the last of his orgasm, Bucky pulled Steve into a deep kiss, tasting the

lingering evidence of his pleasure on Steve's tongue. He brushed his lips over the angle of his cheekbones and down to his jaw, sucking a bruise at the place between his jaw and ear that made Steve's breath stutter in his chest.

One broad hand smoothed over the skin of his chest to coax his nipples into hard nubs. When he raked a fingernail over the tip, Steve made a rough sound and ground his cock against the skin of Bucky's hip. Bucky laughed breathlessly, "Like that, doll?"

Steve nodded helplessly, leaning closer and was rewarded with another jolt of pleasure. Bucky waited until Steve was moving restlessly against him before he let his hand move down his stomach to his aching cock. Steve mewled in relief at the first firm touch of Bucky's fist around him.

"So good to me," Bucky purred as he sucked a stinging line of kisses down Steve's neck. "Perfect."

He arched up into Bucky's hand as the other man worked him over quickly, feeding on the impatient need that was bleeding through Steve's skin. It felt like his whole body began and ended where their skin met and he pulled Bucky forward in a kiss that anchored him in that strange place between reality and fiction. Each touch was ecstasy and it wasn't long before he felt heat begin to coil in the pit of his stomach.

Bucky seemed to notice the pressure building because he leaned forward to tease the soft skin behind his ear. His hands continued their assault on Steve's body until he felt like he was drowning in pleasure. "Come on, doll. Let go for me--I wanna see you come for me."

Helplessly, Steve stared into the eyes that haunted his dreams and felt his body obey. He shouted Bucky's name and came hard enough that his vision went white and he collapsed back against the mattress. His lungs gasped for air and he could feel his muscles trembling with the aftershocks that left him floating in sated bliss.

Bucky murmured praise against his sweat slick skin until he came down in a lazy spiral. The other man leaned over the bed to fish out some tissues from the box on the nightstand and quickly cleaned them up. Then he pulled the comforter free from where it was tangled somewhere at the base of the bed and curled around Steve like a living space heater, urging him to sprawl across his chest so he could run his fingers over the knobs of his spine in a soothing sweep.

Sleep tugged at him, but Steve forced it away so he could whisper into the sated quiet that fell through the room, "You'll stay?"

Bucky's arms tightened around him and he felt him press his lips against Steve's forehead. "I'll stay for as long as you want me."

Steve nodded, pleased. "Forever then."

There was a pause before Bucky tucked him more firmly into his side and buried his nose in the crook of Steve's neck with a helpless sigh. "Forever then," he agreed.

## Chapter End Notes

So this is my first time writing smut for a male pairing--hopefully it wasn't too noticeable. Also, yay for some conflict resolution!

I hope you enjoyed this rare moment without angst!

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

Let me begin this chapter by saying I am SO SORRY it took so long to post. The last month has been insane--I moved across the country, got a new job, found out the gender of my new baby...just a lot of distractions. Fingers crossed that the next chapter comes much faster!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Morning came bright and disorienting.

Steve's mind felt sluggish with the kind of bone deep laziness that followed a night filled with physical and emotional change. He shifted slowly and was rewarded with the familiar twinge of muscles that were still syrupy with the hazy pleasure from the night before. Warm skin at his back and the brush of breath against his neck made him smile dopily into the pillow he was currently curled around.

Only one person had ever made him feel this way. Like he was whole. Like he was home again.

Bucky.

Slowly, carefully, Steve twisted so he could watch Bucky continue to sleep with the same dead-to-the-world grace he remembered from their childhood. There were pillow creases imprinted on his cheeks, a thin line of drool trailing from his mouth, and his hair looked like a bird's nest in the aftermath of Steve's fingers. One muscular arm remained thrown across Steve's waist and he got lost for several minutes tracing over lines of dark ink that scrolled Cyrillic messages over his ribs and collar bones. Bright pops of color peeked out of the intricate scrollwork surrounding an old fashioned compass and hinted at the sharp edge of a male jaw in the outer cover over his heart.

He was beautiful.

There was a part of him that was surprised by how easy it was to roll over and see Bucky beside him. Eight years had come and gone but his body never seemed to forget the warmth of his best friend's body and the comforting rhythm of his steady breaths. Steve could feel that presence like a lodestone in his chest, like every piece of his body recentered around the press of bare skin and the knowledge that Bucky was really here. That this wasn't some fantasy.

That he could finally have his happy ending.

The broken, damaged part of him wanted to cling to him and hide him away from the threats that lurked outside of the relative safety of his apartment. The thought of Pierce getting his claws into Bucky against was enough to make him burrow deeper into Bucky's side. Not for the first time, he wished for the power and body that would allow him to protect those he loved. If Bucky was really going to attempt to collapse Pierce's underground empire, Steve wasn't going to let him go into this alone. Not without him.

He probably could have happily stayed in the warm bed with Bucky's arm tight around his waist for the rest of the day without getting tired of watching Bucky sleep, but his stomach apparently disagreed. It gave an angry yowl that reminded him that he'd skipped dinner the night before in order to fool around with Bucky. He doubted Bucky had eaten before their impromptu meeting either. Sighing, he gently brushed a strand of hair out of Bucky's face before beginning the slow process of disentangling himself from Bucky's hold.

Immediately, he was reminded of what it must be like to be caught by a giant snake or some sort of multi-limbed constrictor. Bucky had somehow managed to wrap every one of his limbs around Steve's arms and legs and, even in sleep, had no intention of releasing him. He'd finally managed to get his legs freed enough to slide off the mattress when a hand wrapped around his wrist and tugged him to a stop.

Sleepy slate grey eyes blinked up at him from the pillow and went soft and vulnerable. "You aren't planning on taking off on me, are you?"

The quiet pain in Bucky's expression made something in Steve's chest melt and he was helpless against the urge to lean forward and press a kiss to the rough stubble of his cheek. Like a flower opening up to the sun, the brunette relaxed against him with a soft sigh. Steve rewarded him with several gentle kisses trailing across his high cheekbones and over dark lashes. By the time he leaned back, the fragility in Bucky's face had been replaced with sleepy interest.

"I figured you'd be hungry," Steve explained, "so I was going to run down to the coffee shop on the corner for breakfast."

"And coffee."

He grinned at the fervent request. "What do you take me for, Barnes? Some kind of monster? Of course I'm getting coffee."

Bucky smiled at him and reached up to brush Steve's bangs away from his face. He cupped his cheek and brushed a calloused thumb across the skin of his cheek with a slight frown, "You want me to go with you?"

Steve snorted playfully, "Bucky Barnes offering to leave the house before 8 am? You really have changed."

"Punk." But he was smiling again.

"That's no way to talk to the man who is about to bring you fresh bagels and coffee."



“You’re right, doll” Bucky purred, fluttering his sinfully long eyelashes and teasing his lower lip with his teeth. “I’ll have to think of something especially good to show how much I appreciate you when you get back.”

The bolt of heat that curled through Steve’s gut made him breathless and he could feel a hot flush crawling up his neck. Judging from Bucky’s smug expression, he knew what kind of effect he had on the other man. Steve grabbed his abandoned pillow and threw it at Bucky’s head with a weak scowl. “Just for that you’re getting decaf.”

Bucky’s plaintive cry was muffled as Steve tugged on a pair of jeans and tshirt from the floor. It wasn’t until he pulled the shirt over his head and was surrounded by the scent of leather and gun oil that he realized it was Bucky’s. It felt like it was nearly swallowing his lean shoulders, but, when he went to grab another shirt, he caught sight of the other man sprawled across his bed. Bucky’s eyes were blown black with desire and Steve felt his breath stutter in his chest when he ran a hand down the tight planes of his chest to where the sheet was pooling around his hips.

The grin he shot Steve was pure sin. “Hurry back, Stevie.”

Steve blamed the early hour for the way he stumbled on his way out the door.

---

Outside, the cool air was enough to calm his racing heart and make him wish he’d grabbed a jacket before his hasty retreat. The sun was covered by a thick layer of grey clouds and the streets were full of scowling people hurrying towards their destination. The part of him that wanted to pretend the last eight years hadn’t happened, that this was what should have happened the morning after their first kiss, noted each of these differences with clinical distaste.

For Steve, this only cemented the idea that the last night had actually happened. This was no day dream or fantasy full of what ifs and could have beens. There was no rose tint overlaying the smell of smoke and garbage that was undercurrent of life in Brooklyn. This was real life in all its smelly, crowded glory.

He loved it.

Everything in the world seemed to reiterate the delicious truth of last night. That things were finally going his and Bucky’s way. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he curled his shoulders into Bucky’s oversized shirt and followed the scent of overpriced coffee. He was nearly a block away from his apartment when he noticed that the streets were oddly empty the closer he came to the coffee shop.

It was enough to make him slow his stride and scan the street for whatever had caused this oddity. Ahead of him, he could make out the familiar black and white of a police car, but the usual flow of traffic seemed to stall for some unknown reason. People too, seemed to be avoiding this street in particular in favor of going up to the next block.

Carefully, Steve tried to keep his expression neutral as he reached into his pockets for his cell phone--only to realize he'd left it in the apartment. A nervous sort of energy parallel to any creature approaching a trap bloomed wild and dangerous in his gut. Despite his history of brawling, he was not oblivious to the health conditions that made him weaker than most of his opponents or his relatively low chances of making it out of a fight without any injuries. He thought of Bucky and the fear that burst to life each time Pierce's name was mentioned. Whatever Bucky was trying to do against Hydra's wishes was sure to set his enemies in motion and Pierce had as good as promised that Steve would be targeted if he stayed with Bucky.

So he turned abruptly down one of the narrow alleyways he remembered from his childhood and watched a dark, unmarked vehicle cruise slowly past the mouth of the alley before he pulling to a stop. He didn't wait to listen for the doors to open or the sound of footsteps on the pavement before he took off at a jog for the other end.

Adrenaline burned hot in his veins when he heard a shout from somewhere behind him and the sound of running footsteps. Years of long runs with Sam at his side meant he was capable of keeping a speedy pace as he threaded through the same alleyways he'd fought bullies and bigger kids in during his childhood. This was his home and he used every secret route and hidden pitfall to his advantage. He couldn't maintain this speed forever, but it could keep them out of reach until he could figure out what to do next.

His breath rattled dangerously in his chest, but he ignored it in favor of taking a sharp left that led him back to where he'd seen the cop car parked. Whoever was following him would have to relent in the face of the police, he had no doubt. Maybe he could even get the cop to let him call Bucky to come pick him up until they could figure out who exactly was after him and why. An official witness and an investigation could be enough to trigger the end of Pierce's reign over Brooklyn before his political campaign gained traction.

Shouts behind him provided the soundtrack and motivation for his mad scramble down another choked off alleyway and back into the street. He glanced to his left and right quickly and saw one man leaning against the black car that had been tailing him. At the sight of Steve, the man stood quickly, raising his hand like he was going to signal for Steve to stop but the blonde ignored it. He ran down the block with as much speed as he could muster. The cop car was like a beacon now and his eyes fixed on it almost desperately.

Like a godsend, a tall, uniformed man stepped out of one of the stores nearby with a steaming mug of coffee in his hands. Steve shifted the direction of his headlong sprint and held his hands up in a supplicating gesture when the officer looked up sharply at his approach. His hand dropped to the gun holstered on his belt and Steve forced himself to speak.

"Please," he wheezed. "There are men following me and I--"

The cop frowned, brown eyes shifting to watch the group of men coming out of the alley toward them. "Why are they following you?"

"I don't know. I don't know them."

“And you’re sure they’re chasing you?” The skepticism in his voice was enough to make Steve bristle.

“Listen, officer, these men have chased me for two blocks when all I did was walk down the street,” he said hotly, shifting so he could keep an eye on the four muscular men still approaching them. “All I want is to call my ride and get out of here. I don’t want any trouble.”

The police officer lifted his hand to shade his eyes as he looked over the Hydra members. Steve’s glanced down at the pewter nameplate emblazoned with ‘R. HENDRICKS’ in large font and the radio cuffed to his shoulder. He looked thoughtful and patted Steve on the shoulder, “I’ll go see what this is all about.”

Some of the tension knotting Steve’s shoulders eased at the acknowledgement and he shifted to stand closer to the police car, eyes wary on the group. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides as the cop raised his arm in a comfortable greeting and began to speak. Between his bad ear and the noise of the city, Steve couldn’t make out the low murmur of their voices, but he watched one of the men gesture towards Steve and the car waiting behind them.

None of them looked particularly alarmed to be speaking to the officer.

That alone was enough to have Steve scanning the streets again for any potential witnesses or an escape route. He needed to get word to Bucky if Pierce was making a move against him. The appearance of Hydra this morning meant that Pierce was either making good on his threats against Steve or that Pierce knew that Bucky’s loyalty no longer belonged to him.

The sound of gruff laughter distracted him from thoughts of his friend and he looked up in time for the cop to walk back to him with his assailants following behind. Sweat dripped cold and bleak down his back. Some deep instinct whispered at him to run again, but before he could do more than take a step away from the car, the group of men surrounded him.

Hendricks gave Steve a lazy little smile and gestured to the others, “Looks like this was all just a misunderstanding, kid. These nice men are gonna give you a lift home.”

The thugs chuckled and Steve eyed the black octopus tattoo peeking out of the sleeve of the man closest to him.

“I’m not going with these men,” he said lowly, widening his stance to prepare himself for the fight that was brewing in the air like a summer storm. His eyes flashed blue fire at the police officer sipping his coffee a few feet away. “If you stand by while they drag me out of here, you’re just as complicit as they are.”

The officer shrugged. Steve didn’t bother to wait for them to make the first move. He rushed to the left with a vicious right hook aimed at the nearest man’s gut and tried to use the surprise attack to give him the space he needed to run. Rough hands grabbed and tore at his shirt and he twisted, sharp elbows flying out in a ragged sweep.

He had to warn Bucky.

A blow clipped his shoulder and sent him spinning into the police vehicle. He hit the side hard and tried to use the momentum to fuel a wild swing at the man closest to him. It barely slowed him before another Hydra member grabbed his arm and forced Steve back against the warm metal. He cursed viciously and bucked against their hold, but they only pinned him more firmly against the car.

“Hey, careful!” Hendricks grunted, eyeing the quiet street behind him. “I don’t need anybody asking questions.”

Steve managed to throw an elbow and was rewarded with a grunt and a curse behind him. Someone shoved his head down hard against the hood and he saw stars darting around his vision as they struggled to keep him still.

“Let me borrow your cuffs, Ronny,” one of the men said, “then we’ll get out of your hair.”

Briefly, Steve considered screaming for help on the off chance a bystander might report it. Before he could do more than give a furious grunt, a meaty hand clapped over his mouth and he felt the cold metal of the handcuffs snap shut around his thin wrists. They didn’t so much as march him back to their car so much as they dragged him bodily through the street. He bucked and twisted, but the four men were brawny enough to ride out his attempts to break free without difficulty. Not for the first time, he cursed the fact that he was still small and sickly despite his efforts to grow stronger.

Within seconds, he was bodily shoved into the back seat between two of the broad shouldered Hydra members with his hands painfully pinned behind his back. The one to his left reached into the floorboards and unceremoniously produced a sweaty black shirt. Steve had enough time to spit out an anatomically impossible curse before his world went black.

---

The drive to whatever cliché hideout they planned to hold him at gave Steve the time to consider the implications of what his kidnapping meant. It was clear that Pierce’s men must have watched the apartment for a chance to snag him when he was alone. The thought sent a bolt of fear through his body--did they know Bucky was at his house? Would they try to take him too or was this about blackmail again?

Any attempt to guess where they were headed was foiled by the shirt still wrapped around his head and the frankly, ridiculous route they took. Steve counted four left turns in a row before he stopped trying to guess where they were headed. He reasoned that the effort they were taking to keep him from knowing where they were headed was a good sign--you don’t cover your tracks for a murder victim.

Still, he was man enough to admit that now that the adrenaline from the fight was wearing off all he had left to keep him company was his racing thoughts and a prickling wave of anxiety. Pierce was more than capable of murder if it suited him. There were enough missing people flyers waving around Brooklyn to imply that he was good at covering his tracks too. Hydra had been around for so long, they probably had plenty of safe houses and torture cells to hide Steve away until they decided what to do with them.

He wished he'd just stayed with Bucky. That he'd had time to tell Bucky his true feelings. That he could explain his disappearance before Bucky thought the worst of him.

The car slowly eased to a stop and Steve was hauled roughly from the car by his two seatmates (who he mentally named Frick and Frack just to keep the panic at bay). Frick didn't bother to remove the makeshift blindfold, just grabbed one of Steve's arms and dragged him stumbling over rough concrete and into a building. He tried to listen for any sounds or smells that might give him a hint of where he was, but all he caught was the scent of oil and exhaust and the far off sounds of a police siren.

They slammed him down onto a wooden chair and his cuffs were roughly transferred over to sturdy leather straps across his chest, forearms, and shins. Steve gave a few experimental tugs to the bindings, but they barely shifted. He mentally assessed the injuries he'd gotten from the short fight and deemed them to be moderately annoying at best--bruised ribs and few scrapes wouldn't slow him down if he got a chance to run.

A few seconds later, the blindfold was briskly ripped off his head and he was staring into the smiling face of Brock Rumlow.

Steve bared his teeth in a snarl and reached for the anger that had been his constant companion through so many back alley brawls. "Rumlow, I should have known you'd be the type to use a bunch of thugs to do your dirty work."

"You're hardly important enough to warrant me going out of my way to bring you here," Rumlow replied easily, making a show of leaning back against a table full of gleaming metal instruments. Steve guessed that was meant to intimidate him.

"And yet here you are."

Rumlow's grin widened like he enjoyed Steve's continued disdain for the proceedings. "I guess I can see why Bucky is so interested in you. He always did enjoy a challenge."

"I'm sure your challenge is finding someone who is willing to overlook the fact that you're a dim-witted lacky for an wannabe mobster," he spat back.

The blow to his jaw was hard enough that his head snapped to the side and blood filled his mouth almost instantly. Steve could hear the rest of the lackeys laughing nearby, but he only rolled his neck leisurely and returned his gaze to Rumlow's. He probed the teeth on the side of his mouth for any looseness before he spat a stream of blood at the other man's feet.

"I take it we're done talking," he mused. "Is there any point to asking what you want with me?"

Rumlow sighed and sat on a matching chair facing Steve, resting his forearms on his knees like they were about to have a friendly chat. "Mr. Pierce was clear what would happen if you continued to distract the Winter Soldier."

"How do you know I even talked to Bucky?" He refused to use the title Pierce had given Bucky in his attempt to destroy the warm-hearted, kind boy of Steve's childhood.

Rumlow leaned forward to run one finger down Steve's neck--ignoring the way the smaller man growled and twisted away--to tug down the collar of his too-big shirt. He smirked faintly, "I'm not sure how much talking was involved, but you were obviously together last night."

Steve's skin burned with the need to cover the sick taint left behind by the lewd gazes of the collected men. He tried to remember the heat in Bucky's eyes as he'd dragged his lips and teeth over the pulsepoint at Steve's neck, marking him with bright purple and red to match the colors of his tattoos. He wanted to hide away the evidence of their night together, to keep it safe and protected from the vicious glee lingering in Rumlow's expression.

"So that's what this is about? You're trying to control who Bucky cares about?"

Rumlow shook his head with a sympathetic sigh like he was baffled by Steve's naivety. "The Winter Soldier belongs to Hydra. He does not love. He does not care about anyone but the task he is given. He is a weapon and weapons do not feel."

"You're wrong," Steve spat with a cold fury that felt more intense than any anger he'd ever experienced. "Bucky will never belong to Hydra or Pierce. Not anymore." He curled his lip and met Rumlow's gaze. "It doesn't matter what you do to me--Bucky won't be your monster anymore."

There was a pause where Rumlow seemed to consider his words.

Then he stood and gestured to Frick and Frack who stepped toward the tools set out on the table. "It's a shame you didn't listen to Pierce's warning Steve. He could use men of your convictions in Hydra."

"Go fuck yourself, Rumlow."

He smirked and picked up a stained wooden bat from the table. "Let's begin."

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, your comments and kudos are the weapons I use in my ever-constant battle to keep my muse under control. :)

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Another chapter in just a few short days! It's almost like I'm trying to make up for leaving you hanging for a month...

A few trigger warnings for canon typical violence/torture if that isn't your thing.

Onwards, my angsty tribesmen!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A rush of icy water brought Steve gasping and coughing into consciousness.

The movement turned the dull agony that was his face into a twisting knifeblade of raw hurt. He winced, blinking away the liquid from his swollen eyes so he could roll his head back and meet Rumlow's eyes. The effort was barely noticeable among the bruising and swelling left behind by several 'sessions' under Rumlow and the other's tender ministrations.

His fingers twitched feebly against the straps that still pinned him to the bloodied metal chair.

Steve took stock of the worst of the injuries that plagued him. At least two of his fingers were broken he guessed from the sick pop that followed the brutal twist of Frick's hand. The rattle in his chest was familiar enough that he was almost relieved to recognize the onset of another bout with pneumonia or an infection. At least he knew what to expect there.

The rest of his body was mottled mass of blues, purples, and greens left behind by the fists and cudgels of Hydra. They'd cut Bucky's oversized shirt from his chest and tossed it to the ground, leaving Steve bare and aching for the familiar scent of home and safety to ground him against this reality. Within minutes, he was left shivering in the chill of the warehouse with nothing but the sounds of fists meeting flesh to breakup the silence.

It was eery how stoic and controlled each of the thugs were as they worked him over. Their faces were relaxed enough that he could almost pretend that they were bored--if it weren't for the sick excitement that glimmered in their eyes.

Only Rumlow ever spoke. He seemed to enjoy watching the way Steve helplessly tried to twist away from their attacks or the gasping sounds of pain that escaped from behind clenched teeth. His fingers would brush through the sweaty strands of blonde hair in a mockery of a caress that sent cruel shivers down Steve's spine.

This time Steve opened his eyes to find himself alone in the warehouse with only Rumlow standing a few inches away from his knees.

“I just want you to know, Stevie,” he purred as Steve’s head lolled weakly over his chest, “this isn’t personal.”

It took several ragged moments for Steve to swallow down his rage and pain enough to speak. “It kinda feels personal,” he grunted, spitting a wad of blood onto the floor courtesy of his bitten tongue.

“You’ll understand one day. This pain is only temporary,” Rumlow murmured, coming to stand in front of Steve with a moue of sympathy on his rugged features. “There are no prisoners in Hydra, just order...and order only comes through pain.”

Steve swallowed hard and clenched his hands into fists, struggling to hold fast to his will power. “Fuck. You.” he growled weakly, “I’m not going to tell you anything.”

“That’s the thing, Stevie,” Rumlow replied easily, “The only reason you’re being allowed to continue breathing the same air as me is because Pierce thinks that you may be useful to twist the Soldier back into his position.”

“Bucky doesn’t want anything to do with Hydra. He never did.”

Rumlow shrugged. “His opinion is meaningless. He’ll do what Pierce orders--he always does.”

Steve snorted derisively, “You don’t know Bucky like I do. He’s a better man than Pierce could ever be. He won’t fall into his trap again.”

The other man walked to the table to fidget and toy with the bloodied instruments there. Steve tried not to think about the bolt of terror that seemed to be viscerally connected to the gesture. He didn’t want to give these men the satisfaction of seeing him scared. If he died here, he wanted to go in a way that would make Bucky proud.

“Did you know I was there when they brought him in for training at the compound?” Rumlow asked and Steve jerked his head up to look up in surprise. The other man smiled faintly, “He was so different then...so weak. He’d cry and cry after every training, every punishment--it was exhausting. All he ever talked about was getting back to Brooklyn.”

Steve stared at him in sick understanding. The thought of what Bucky had agreed to do to protect him made him want to scream his fury.

“Now I know he must have been hoping he could come back to his precious Stevie again,” Rumlow mused. His calloused fingers gripped the edge of Steve’s sore jaw to jerk his head up so he could look over his broken features. “You must be a hell of a lay.”

Steve hissed furiously and tried to yank his head away, but Rumlow tightened his grip until tears burned in his eyes.

“It’s amazing how quickly all that training went to shit once he was back in his precious hometown. Pierce was sure that he’d stripped all the humanity out of the Soldier back in Russia...but weakness always shines through.”



“Bucky isn’t weak.”

“Do you know what your lover did for Hydra?” Rumlow asked casually.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me, Steve, would it surprise you to know that it isn’t Pierce who strikes fear into the heart of everyone in his territory? Oh no...it’s not Pierce who makes all the good little children hide in their rooms at night. It’s your pal, your buddy, your *Bucky*.”

Steve shook his head. “Pierce used him. It wasn’t his choice.”

“But he still did it,” Rumlow said, “and did it well. There are more than a few bodies rotting in landfills and dumps thanks to your little friend. Didn’t even take long for him to stop feeling sorry about it.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know him.”

“Neither do you, Stevie.” Hearing Bucky’s nickname for him on Rumlow’s lips made Steve want to scream, but he was too tired to manage more than a derisive grunt. A hand gripped his hair roughly and forced him to stare up into Rumlow’s craggy face. Rumlow sneered as he looked him over, taking in the damage he and his minions had done with satisfaction before he spoke, “James Barnes has been dead for years, kid. You’re just the last one to figure it out.”

---

If you asked Bucky Barnes what hell was like a day ago, he would have plenty of ways to describe that sort of evil.

Hell was watching the life fade from an innocent man's eyes and knowing that you were the reason his family no longer had a father.

Hell was standing in a room full of people who were the worst kind of monster and having them welcome you as one of their own.

Hell was listening to Steve Roger’s hopeful voice from the other side of the door asking where you were and why you didn’t want to see him again. Or the memory of the devastation in his eyes when you told him that kissing him had been a mistake.

It wasn’t until an hour after Steve left to bring back breakfast that Bucky was forced to accept that hell was so much worse than anything he’d ever experienced before.

Because that was when he got the phone call.

It was Coulson of course. As an FBI agent, there were always certain expectations for cleverness and cunning, but Bucky liked to think Coulson was in a class all his own. Only

Phil Coulson would have ever dated to approach Hydra's most prized asset with a plan that would topple the very organization he was trained to protect.

Add in Natasha Romanov as a partner and double agent and Bucky was certain that even Alexander Pierce wouldn't be able to stop the justice they set in motion.

Bucky believed so much that he was willing to risk the very person who'd driven him into his stepfather's clutches. Steve. They'd come to him with plans to finally pin a laundry list of crimes to Pierce's name and bring down Hydra with him. And Bucky...Bucky had just been so tired of all the death and destruction that he'd been stupid enough to take the chance to go back to Brooklyn. Back to Steve.

He'd told himself that he wouldn't go to Steve until after the FBI made their bust and Pierce was safely put away. The plea bargain they'd given him was better than he deserved and he would happily work with a probation officer for the rest of his life if it meant he could be a free man again. But he'd made a mistake in thinking that Steve wouldn't come to rip him a new asshole after he found out about the stupid list.

Seeing Steve with his cheeks flushed in temper, looking lean and fierce and so damned alive had shredded every ounce of self-control he had.

There was no way to resist the visceral urge to see for himself what kind of life Steve had made for himself here. He sent Natasha down to the club to scout out his closest friends and make sure that Steve was surrounded by good people. People who could take care of him the way Bucky hadn't been able to. He made sure that Coulson kept an agent nearby just in case Pierce decided to redress his earliest threats. No matter what, Steve had to be protected.

And yet...

"He's gone, Bucky," Coulson said in that simple way of his. No apologies. No excuses. Bucky could barely hear the undercurrent of frustration and worry lacing through it even with all his training. Not that it mattered.

His back hit the smooth wall of Steve's bedroom wall and he slid limply to the floor. His heartbeat sounded too loud in his ears; his lungs laboring too hard to drag air inside his shivering frame.

But Coulson was still talking.

"....of the cameras a few blocks away caught sight of a dark colored sedan traveling quickly from the spot where we think they picked him up. The agent that was tailing him lost sight of him for roughly three minutes when he had to check in with his superior officer," he said briskly. "I've got my people running the plates now to see if we can tie it back to Pierce."

"It won't matter," Bucky cut in as his brain finally began to process something beyond the need to scream and scream and scream and--" Pierce isn't stupid enough to drive one of his own vehicles for something like this. They'll dump the vehicle as soon as they drop him off in a second location."

Coulson sighed. "We've been looking into the properties he owns, but there are so many...it'll take time to narrow it down."

Time Steve didn't have.

Bucky glanced over to the nightstand where Steve's cell phone sat next to its charger. No cell signal to trace either. He should have tagged Steve while he had the chance and dealt with the smaller man's fury when he found out about it. But last night had been so unexpected, so beyond anything he could have ever hoped for, that he'd put it off for another day.

The only good thing Bucky Barnes had ever done in his miserable life was to keep his promise to Sarah Rogers to keep Steve safe.

And he'd failed.

"Bucky-" The sound of his voice was enough to drag him back from his spiraling thoughts and to focus on the information Coulson could give him. There was a sigh and Bucky could imagine the way the other agent must be pinching the brow of his nose in an attempt to stave off his own reaction to the news. "--I've got the whole task force working on tracking Steve down now. We won't make a move on Pierce until we at least know where they're holding him."

"Is that something you can prove?" Bucky asked jaggedly. "Your bosses want results--they won't care about who gets hurt."

"As long as I'm in charge, we care about who gets hurt." There was a pause. "The problem is, the only way we're getting Steve out of there alive is if Pierce makes a move...and we both know he won't risk his position or his political future without cause."

Bucky stared down at his hands as a wild idea took root. He knew better than anyone what Pierce cared about--and it wasn't anything human or wholesome. His phone buzzed in his hand, the pattern as familiar as a funeral march or the pulse of a rifle in his hands. He glanced down at the text message out of habit.

*Report, Soldier.*

"I'm being called in," Bucky grunted, jaw tight. He had little doubts as to what Pierce intended to do with him when he did.

"This could be good news," Coulson said after a moment. "If Pierce is willing to trade information on Steve, we can get him for kidnapping charges to start. You know what to do."

Don't fuck up their precious plan.

He hung up the phone without bothering with goodbyes and levered himself up onto his feet. His shirt was gone with Steve so he grabbed the jacket he'd worn in and zipped it up as a makeshift covering. Being fashionable or even being warm wasn't his concern anymore.

Instead, he mentally calculated how many weapons he thought he could get away with carrying when he reported to his handler.

Each movement was mechanical, a pattern he had been trained to follow year after year, blow after blow. Hydra had taught him the value of motion, of action. Structure and control were the cornerstone of their organization--without them, you couldn't have the order that they sought so viciously. Freedom and mercy had no place in their new world order. Only pain and strength.

He didn't look back at the bed or its messy sheets, just closed the door tightly behind him after he tucked Steve's phone safely in his back pocket. Bucky tried not to look at all the little pieces of Steve that were scattered around the apartment, sitting like the greatest temptations ever crafted to drag Bucky back to this place. Home, it whispered, this could be your home. But home was always where Steve Rogers remained.

Bucky carefully locked the door behind him and made his way down the sidewalk.

---

When he was in Russia, he'd been assigned his first true handler, a man by the name of Alexander Lukin. Lukin had taught him the value of silence in the face of all manner of horror and pain. Silence gave you the opportunity to shape your response. To gather the information needed to properly destroy or devastate your opponent.

Pain was temporary and fickle--it only took a moment's weakness to turn a knife against its owner.

Bucky let Lukin's lessons settle into his skin like a familiar coat and tucked away the human side of his mind for another time. He could not fall into grief or rage now. That could come later, when his enemies were dead and buried in a trap of their own making.

The taxi let him off a block away from the home where he'd grown up under Pierce's watchful eyes. It remained a constant source of miserable longing and furious helplessness. The only peace he found there now was in the knowledge that his mother was long dead and was no longer in danger of Pierce's fists or those of his followers.

Renata opened the door before Bucky could knock, her eyes carefully blank as always. He wondered if she even noticed how often blood stained the carpet or suspicious packages were hauled away in the night. But he knew better than to question her or expect her to be tempted by the FBI's offer to bring Hydra to its knees--Renata was as dead inside as the Asset.

Once inside, he made his way into the opulent study that waited just out of sight of the den. He didn't bother to glance at the carefully staged photos of Winifred Barnes and her darling boy that lined the walls. It was all just an act. A set staged to make Pierce look human enough for whatever police chief or mayoral candidate who wanted a little help securing their power. Even the house itself had been carefully chosen to support Pierce's claim to be a 'Brooklyn boy, through and through.'

The study itself gave little hints to the true nature of its owner. Tiny, meaningless things that wouldn't matter without context. The fact that this was the only room on the floor that didn't have carpet or the original hardwood flooring, just slate tiles. Easy to clean and maintain. The windows that remained covered at all times behind heavy drapes that kept the light and curious eyes at bay. A soft buzzing that signalled the presence of a device hidden under the desk that scrambled cell service and ensured that nothing would be recorded in this place.

Pierce sat behind the large mahogany desk, focused on the paperwork in front of him. He didn't look up at Bucky's approach so Bucky came to a stop at parade rest in the middle of the room. He was used to being ignored by Pierce and his followers. To them, he was little more than a tool, a weapon, waiting for a target to be aimed at.

The only allowance he gave to the festering need for action that was boiling under his skin was a tapping of his right toe within his boot.

Finally, Pierce capped his pen and leaned back in his chair to survey Bucky. His face was a careful mixture of disappointed fatherly affection. It made him sick to his stomach.

"James," Pierce said with a sad shake of his head. "It's been too long since we've talked. How have you been enjoying Brooklyn so far?"

Bucky resisted the urge to reach across the desk and strangle him. "It's good to be home," he said instead.

"Yes, I'm sure it is," Pierce agreed reasonably enough. He tapped the end of the pen against the desk thoughtfully as he considered his stepson. "I wonder though, if the change has been too much for you."

"I remain in the service of Hydra."

"Is that so?" The older man asked, some of the humor fading from his face to be replaced with a steely eyed calculation that made Bucky's stomach twist instinctively. "Somehow I don't believe you."

Bucky remained silent, swallowing down the words that would get him punished. Or worse, hurt Steve.

Alexander Pierce stood and walked around the desk to stand in front of Bucky. He sighed, ever the disappointed father. "You've gotten distracted, Soldier. Distractions are not to be tolerated."

"What have you done with him?" The question slipped out before Bucky could rein in the urge, unleashing a turrent of pent up frustration. "He isn't a part of this."

"Steven Grant Rogers has been a part of this from the moment you chose to make him a part of your life," Pierce said heavily as though he wasn't the one responsible for all this pain and misery. "I kept my word--Mr. Rogers was never harmed the entire time you were in Russia and remained loyal to our cause. I warned you about what would happen if you let him distract you from your true purpose."

“If you hurt him, I won’t help you. I’ll die first.”

“Really James... just when I thought you couldn’t get more foolish. That boy is nothing, meaningless in a way that is too insignificant to even bother with explaining.” Pierce shook his head slowly and paced around behind Bucky, forcing him to remain with his back to him. “Your work has been a gift to mankind, James. You have helped me shape this century into something that promises to bring a new world order. And I need you to keep your focus on what is truly at stake here.”

Bucky swallowed hard, hands clenching at his sides helplessly. “I’ll do whatever you want, just...just let him go. Let him live.”

Pierce sighed heavily and walked back to his desk. “You’ve become weak, Soldier, and weakness cannot be allowed to fester in our order. Mr. Rogers will be disposed of properly once his usefulness has run out.”

Terror sprang hot and wild in his veins and he felt like his bones were vibrating with the need to do something. He imagined reaching across the desk and wrapping his hands around Pierce’s smug throat. Imagined watching that smug disdain slowly fade away into a true panic that would forever mark his face in death. He could practically feel the old man’s bones beneath his hands as he stared, trying to force his breathing to remain steady.

The only thing that kept him in place was the knowledge that killing Pierce would be killing Steve.

So he licked his lips and prepared himself to lie so well even Natasha would be impressed. “If you’re hoping for information from him, it’s already too late. Steve Rogers wouldn’t give away my secrets even if it meant saving his own life.”

Surprised, Pierce looked up from his books and frowned at Bucky. “Oh? And what kind of secrets could someone like you possibly have?”

Bucky just gave him a slow, vicious smile and spun on his heel. He didn’t dare to look back and see if Pierce took the bait or if he would just call Rumlow to do his dirty work for him. A cold sweat dripped down his back into the waistband of his jeans as he let himself out of the brownstone. For the first time in eight years, Bucky began to pray.

---

Time was a strange thing.

Each time he heard the slow scrape of metal over concrete or the shift of heavy boots stepping closer, Steve was sure the world went still for a seemingly endless pause. It allowed him to hear the stubborn pump of his heart in his chest--racing with exhausted adrenaline--and his thoughts to spin between that awful anticipation and the knowledge that pain would come regardless of what he did or said to stop it.

Sometimes his concept of time would go wonky and nonlinear in a way that made it difficult to gauge just how long he’d been tied to this chair at the mercy of others. Day and night were

meaningless in the dark interior of what must have been an abandoned building. So was the brief respites between each new attack when his body shut down to conserve the last bits of strength and will he had left in him.

At first, he tried to use those breaks to his advantage. He would tilt his head up despite its painful throbbing to scan the space for some clue to his whereabouts. Or, when that proved useless, a weapon or tool he could use to aid in his escape. That plan, too, felt more and more foolish with the realization that even if Steve did manage to free himself from the chair, he doubted very seriously that he would be able to outrun or even walk anywhere.

He knew that time was passing in the same way he knew the sun was still rising and falling outside. He just couldn't seem to apply that knowledge in anyway that didn't highlight the fact that he was well and truly fucked.

Beyond the pain of his injuries--now numerous and blending together into one unending ache--was the absolute insanity that came with the way Rumlow's men continued to force him to stay awake. Any time his head would begin to lull or he went quiet and still, they took perverse pleasure in slinging icy water onto his skin or jerking the chair hard enough that he came awake again. It made his mind feel fractured and slower than any drunkard could ever claim.

Despite all this, Steve had come to a few hard conclusions about his captivity.

The first was that Rumlow was still waiting for a final order to be given about Steve. He was always careful to keep him and his men from doing enough damage that Steve would require emergency aid or would speed up the process of his death. They continued to feed and water him occasionally and monitored the ragged, watery pace of his breathing almost clinically.

Which led him to his second conclusion: Pierce still thought that Steve was a useful bargaining chip to Bucky. It was possible that Steve was being held here until the moment that Bucky performed whatever awful act would prove his loyalty to Hydra once more. He wasn't sure what that would mean for whatever plan Bucky had in place to bring down Pierce, but he couldn't help the fact that the thought was comforting. It meant there would be an end to this torture.

The thought of Bucky and what he must be going through was a familiar sort of anguish now. At first, he'd been heartbroken over the idea that Bucky might think Steve had left him in some sort of revenge act or second guessed their night together. As the hours dragged on, he worried about Bucky blaming himself for Steve's disappearance and doing something stupid to try to save him. When he was at his weakest, he imagined what it would be like to wake up to Bucky at his side, warm and safe in his bed with this as some awful nightmare to forget with the morning light.

The way his mind seemed to drift fitfully between these thoughts brought him to his final conclusion about his captivity: that he was running out of time.

Steve and his body had always been at odds with each other. He was intimately aware of the frustration that came with always being small and sickly and weak, but now he was forced to acknowledge that his poor health was more than a simple inconvenience. The beatings they'd

delivered with near-mechanical precision combined with the cold air and constant drenchings courtesy of the briney sea water they doused him with meant that he could practically taste his mortality lingering weakly. The rattle in his lungs had turned into a harsh cough and he was certain that the broken ribs on his left side were only making his situation worse. If he was going to survive this, something needed to change and fast.

“Water...” he whispered hoarsely, his voice muffled by the way he couldn’t seem to find the strength to pull his head upright anymore. “Please...I need water.”

“Quiet, you,” Frick snapped with a quick cuff to his shoulder that set off another round of wheezing coughs. “You don’t get to make demands here.”

Somewhere in the distance the sound of a metal door scraping open cut through the relative silence of the interior and he heard Frick’s footsteps hurrying towards it. Steve tried to steady his breath enough so that he could make out the soft sound of voices, but with little results. Instead, he was forced to wait as three sets of footsteps made their way across the room to come to a stop beside him.

A soft, well manicured hand carefully reached under his chin to force him to look up into a face he barely recognized thanks to the swelling around his eyes. It wasn’t until the man spoke that Steve felt a new terror bloom.

“Oh, Steven. I thought I told you to stay away from my things,” Alexander Pierce said and smiled slowly. “It looks like we have a few things we need to discuss.”

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter got a lot darker than I expected--and much longer. I guess that's good news for you because I finally let Bucky have his own perspective here so you know that he didn't leave Steve high and dry.

I anticipate one, maybe two more chapters, in this story so stay tuned for the next update! Let me know what you think in the comments!



# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When he was a kid, Bucky had loved to read spy novels. They were full of badass heroes and wily women who were just as likely to stab you as they were to kiss you. He'd drag Steve around the neighborhood to find 'secret bases' and hidden treasure troves with grandiose stories about what each piece of junk really meant. A long-forgotten letter became a hidden clue to a lost city. An empty, unmarked van became the secret mobile base of operations for a German spy network.

In all that time and all those fantasies, he never imagined meeting with a group of spies would be as simple as walking into a local hotel and making his way over to their conference room.

Instead of walls full of pictures and documents connected by a web of yarn, there was an aging coffee pot and a couple beat-up laptops manned by tired looking people not even in uniform. A dark haired man with a goatee snored into his keyboard next to a cold cup of coffee, unaffected by the activity around him. It was hard not to be disappointed in yet another way the real world had proven his childhood dreams false. If they were true, Steve would never have been taken by Pierce and Bucky wouldn't be covered in the sins of his stepfather.

He caught sight of Natasha lingering by Phil Coulson and another blonde haired man and made his way over. A few of the other agents shot him curious glances as he moved through them, but he ignored them. Years of working with Hydra had taught him to look and act like a threat at all times and he was in no mood to try to downplay the vicious anger that was riding him hard. His fingers brushed over the hilt of the knife at his side, tempted to toy with the blade like the security blanket it was while he was forced to wait for answers.

Coulson looked up at his approach and cast a calculating eye over him. "Bucky. You spoke with Pierce?"

"Yes," he said shortly. "He didn't give me anything useful."

Natasha nodded and leaned one hip against the table, ignoring the way the blonde's eyes lingered on her figure like a worshipper in church. "He's too smart for that. The best we can hope for is if he takes the bait and makes a move. We need something infallible to give the DA before they'll be willing to make the case public."

"What about the video footage of Steve with Pierce before he was kidnapped?" the blonde asked.

Coulson made a dismissive wave. "That's all circumstantial...Pierce was just giving a ride to his stepson's old friend."

“And the actual kidnapping was shot in an area where two security cameras were down for scheduled maintenance,” Natasha concluded.

Bucky gritted his teeth so hard his jaw ached. “We can’t just wait for Pierce to change up his MO--Steve doesn’t have that kind of time.”

Every second they stood around waiting for Pierce to make a mistake was another second where Steve could be hurt or dying. Bucky refused to let himself imagine the possibility that Steve might already be dead. He was certain that Pierce or Rumlow would have already used that knowledge to torment him. He tried to think about how strong Steve had been all his life--Steve would never have broken the way Bucky had in Russia. Steve was better than that. He had to be.

A world without Steve was impossible to imagine.

“What about Rumlow?” he asked, after taking a centering breath. He couldn’t afford to fall apart until he found Steve. “He’d be the one taking care of Pierce’s dirty work.”

Now that Bucky couldn’t be trusted.

“He’s been seen in and out of Brooklyn, but we don’t have enough to bring him in for interrogation,” Coulson said, gesturing to the printed reports scattered across the table. “Even if we picked him, he won’t talk and we don’t have enough evidence to hold him. It might even spook them into doing something violent.”

Like killing Steve.

“So we focus on Steve,” Natasha agreed and Bucky felt a surge of gratitude that she was on his side. “Pierce knows we’re closing in on him. Taking Steve means he was desperate enough to risk drawing attention to himself this close to the election in order to secure his Asset.” Everyone was very careful not to look at Bucky at the reminder of what he was to Hydra. He ignored them. He already knew he was a monster. “Bucky,” she said, jerking his attention back to her. “Did you do what I asked?”

He nodded. “I don’t know if he took the bait, but he at least confirmed that he had Steve.”

“That’s the best we can do for now.” She sounded grim and he could see in her eyes the truth he’d been trying to avoid--that there was nothing they could do but wait and hope that Pierce or Rumlow made a mistake. “We’ve got 72 hours before the powers-that-be expect results. Let’s make them count.”

---

Forty six hours later, Bucky was ready to murder someone.

He had firsthand knowledge of everything that could be happening to Steve right now and it was enough to keep him from being able to sleep or ingest anything but the off brand coffee constantly being made by the agents. Natasha had disappeared after a few hours to check in

with her local sources for any useful information and Coulson was in and out of the conference room fielding phone calls from higher ups.

That left Bucky to pace alone with the blonde--"Clint, but call me Hawkeye"--and think of all the ways he should have known this would happen.

It had been stupid to think that working with the Feds was the answer to the problem of Hydra and Alexander Pierce. He thought that if he could bring the law down on Pierce it would prevent the next head of Hydra from respawning. He knew from experience that it would only be a matter of time before one of Pierce's cronies took up the mantle. The only practical goal they could have would be to expose Hydra and its dealings so completely that they couldn't return to the shadows once more.

Then he could hunt them down one by one on his own time.

"You're looking a little murderous there, Terminator," one of the techs said from a few feet away. Bucky glanced over at him, trying to remember a name when all he could focus on was the mental countdown of how long they had before time ran out for Steve. "Could it be you have a heart after all?"

It was no secret that most of the agents here saw the long list of sins written on every inch of Bucky's skin. He didn't blame them for their censure or their hate. He knew he deserved all that and more for all the things he did under Hydra's banner--but Steve didn't. For Steve, he was willing to face down any firing squad or ill-tempered computer whiz they sent after him.

"Shut up, Tony," Clint grunted. "Don't start lashing out just because you haven't found shit."

"That's because there's nothing *to* find. I've got programs scouting the entire city for any sign of ol' blue eyes and there's nothing. Zilch. Nada." The man--Tony--paused to dramatically gesture to his computer screen, "That means that your boy is either out of the city or sleeping in the harbor already."

The thought that Steve was already dead made him want to scream. He refused to accept that all he got was one night with Steve. He should have held him tighter, told him how much he missed him. How many nights he'd spent picturing Steve happy and healthy just so he could survive another day of torture. He'd gotten a taste of forever just to lose it only a few hours later.

The world tilted oddly beneath his feet and he could feel the near-frantic pulse of his heart in his ears. It was a constant reminder that he was alive and unhurt and Steve was in the hands of his worst nightmares. He couldn't afford to wait any longer.

Clint started to say something else, but Bucky spun on his heel and stalked to the door. There was a startled squawk from one of the two, but he ignored them. His hands went to the gun tucked into the waistband of his pants and checked the clip before sliding it back out of sight. He'd have to stop by one of his caches to get some higher caliber arms before he began burning the world to the ground.

"Bucky! Shit--" There was a crash. "-Aw, coffee no--Bucky, wait!"

Outside, the world looked painfully normal. It should be full of darkness and fire and screams, but it was still the same cold steel and sunlight as always. He took a breath, mentally preparing himself for what would come next.

Before he took his next step, a hand gripped his bicep, hard enough to force him to stop or engage. Bright red hair flashed into his vision fast enough that he was able to stop the momentum of his next attack and he was left glaring down at Hydra's greatest mole.

"Don't, James," she said quietly, eyes flinty as she looked him over. No doubt making every weapon he had on him and cataloguing them for later. "If you do this, everything you worked for will be for nothing. Hydra will keep destroying lives like they did yours."

"It doesn't matter!" he snarled, shoving her hard enough that he saw the way she had to fight not to react. "*None* of this matters if Steve has to die for it."

"Everything you've ever told me about Steve tells me that he wouldn't agree."

The reminder of how stubborn, how noble Steve could be set his teeth on edge. "You don't get to talk about him like you know him. You never gave a damn about him--all you cared about was ending Hydra. You *promised* me he'd be safe!"

He wanted her to fight back, to use every bit of lethal ability against him so he could focus on something besides the gaping hole in his chest. But Natasha Romanoff was not a woman who would settle for an easy out. She grabbed the front of his shirt and glared up at him, somehow appearing taller than the petite woman had any right to be.

"Steve is not Pierce's first victim and he won't be the last if you walk out on us now, James," she growled. "He'll keep taking and taking until there's no one left to stop him. It's the only thing he knows how to do. If you walk now, everything he did to Steve will be for nothing."

Bucky clenched his jaw, looking away from the Black Widow to the busy street. "I can still kill him."

"Killing Pierce now won't--" Whatever she might have said next was cut off by Clint and Tony stumbling out of the building and rushing toward them.

"We've got movement!" Clint said in a rush.

Tony put a hand up to shield his face from the sun, looking like it was his first time outside in days. It probably was. "What blondie here means is that my tracker on Pierce is finally picking up movement outside of his normal patterns."

"What does that mean?" Bucky demanded.

"It means that something must have changed for Pierce to be deviating this close to the elections," Tony said quickly, eyes lit up with excitement. "Three guesses as to what that might be--and the first three don't count."

Bucky and Natasha were moving before Tony could finish his self-congratulatory speech towards the black sedan she must have driven there. She paused long enough to let Tony and

Clint scurry into the back seats before they were pulling into traffic. “Tony, keep me up to date on Pierce’s location. Clint, call Coulson and tell him to meet us there. This will need to move fast,” she ordered briskly, moving seamlessly through traffic. “Bucky, there’s a case under the seat with some goodies just for you.”

And for the first time since Steve disappeared, Bucky smiled.

---

Seeing Alexander Pierce standing amidst the heavy steel beams and bloodied ‘equipment’ left by the others was a surreal experience. The tired, warped part of Steve’s brain wanted to laugh hysterically at the way Pierce was being so careful to avoid the muddy puddles around Steve’s chair. Mostly he wished his legs were free enough that he could splash that blood-streaked water onto his perfectly pressed pants.

“Well, Steven, I see you have settled into your new accommodations without losing that temper,” Pierce said and Steve wanted to snarl at the patronizing tone. “Such a shame there’s not...more to you. We’re always looking for that sort of mettle in a man.”

“Is this supposed to be a recruitment speech?”

Pierce chuckled, Rumlow and the others joining in. “We’re long past bothering with trying to get you to see the light. Perhaps it was foolish of me to think you’d be smart enough to heed my warning.”

“I’m not going to let you stand between us again,” Steve growled. “He doesn’t belong to you.”

A trickle of blood drying on his forehead and cheek began to itch fiercely and he resisted the urge to look away to try to alleviate it. Despite his continued stubbornness with Rumlow and the others, even the act of raising his head up to look at the man took all of his concentration and it was a relief to let his head loll forward again. His body was throbbing with pain in a way that told him that any attempt to struggle or try to free himself would be a waste of time. He wouldn’t be able to run anywhere in this state even if he managed to somehow fight off the rest of the goon squad.

Abruptly, Pierce changed the subject. “Tell me, Steve. Do you know why James would suddenly decided to return to Brooklyn? Did you have contact with him in Russia?”

“You know we didn’t,” Steve sneered, the anger of all that Pierce had done returning like a familiar ache. “And I have no idea why Bucky came back--even if I did I wouldn’t tell you.”

“You get no bonus points for bravery here, Steven. This will all end faster once you start telling the truth. Now...tell me what you know about what James’ has been up to here.”

Steve’s mind scrambled to piece together this new information. It was obvious that Pierce had begun to suspect that Bucky’s loyalty was no longer guaranteed and was doing damage control. This was about more than using Steve as a bargaining piece. He thought back to the conversation they’d had in his kitchen just before the world had gone wrong. Bucky had told him that he was trying to find a way to bring Pierce down. If Pierce had risked showing up

here in person, that meant that Bucky must be doing something right or that Pierce had gotten wind of the plot against him. Either way, all Steve needed to do was give him the time he needed to bring Pierce to his knees.

So he shrugged, painfully, stiffly, “Seeing the sights, I’d imagine. Maybe getting some decent pizza.”

Rumlow’s blow wasn’t entirely unexpected, but it still made his vision swim nauseatingly and the world tilt dangerously. The pain was familiar now and Steve welcomed the way it made the world seem simpler. He told himself that’d he’d faced worse odds when he was younger, but the truth was no amount of coughing in hospitals could compare to the cold that was seeping into his bones with every ragged breath. All that mattered now was giving Bucky something to use against Pierce when he finally made his move.

Oblivious to Steve’s rambling inner monologue, Pierce pursed his lips and considered Steve for a long moment before he slapped a hand against his thigh and straightened. “Brock,” he said politely, “he’s looking a little pale--maybe we should try a change of venue.”

That was all the warning he got before two of Rumlow’s men grabbed the wooden frame of the chair he was still bound to and began to drag it backwards. Instinctively, he flinched at the sudden movement and the way it caused his injuries to jerk to painful life, but he was still tied too tightly to do more than twitch helplessly. Each scrape of the legs against the concrete brought a fresh wave of agony and he made a choked off sound of pain before he forced his jaw closed once more.

They made no real effort to hurry him along toward whatever destination they had in mind with Pierce ambling along behind them. Frick muttered some kind of joke to Frack and the sound of their laughter was enough to make his teeth grind together. Then they shoved open the heavy garage door at the back of the warehouse and Steve was staring out at the blazing blue sky for the first time in days.

He took in a gasping breath, eager to taste fresh air after so long with nothing but the heavy scent of blood and pain. It helped clear his mind enough that he took stock of his location, filing away the information like they might mean something someday. The heavy salt in the air meant they were close to one of the rivers or the coast. No sounds of traffic nearby told him there wasn’t any hope for witnesses to hear him if he called out for help. He could hear the creak of a fishing boat of some kind moments before their path brought it into view.

Nothing that even his feverish imagination could construct into an escape plan.

Rumlow’s men pulled him along until they reached the edge of the pier and there was only a few feet of old wood keeping him from falling into the water below. It stretched out in a dark line several hundred yards from the dock and left them exposed to the sharp, autumn winds. Steve tilted his head up to look up at the sun peeking through the low lying clouds and let it chase away some of the ache.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” Pierce said, tucking his hands into the pockets of his slacks. He was casual enough that one could almost pretend that Steve’s life wasn’t hanging in the balance. Then those pale eyes turned back to him and Steve knew that there was no way he was

walking away from this pier. “This doesn’t have to end with anymore pain, Steven. All you need to do is tell me what James is planning.”

Steve looked out at the steel grey of the waters and felt something in him go still. The color wasn’t quite right, but it was enough to conjure up images of a crooked smile and soft sheets tangled around lean hips. He should have just stayed in bed. Maybe he’d brought this kind of end on himself by begging God for just one night with Bucky after all those years of wanting and hoping for just a hint of life.

He felt the rake of regret against the bones in his chest at the thought that Bucky would never know what really happened to him. The thought made him tug harder against the fraying edge of the leather that still bound him in place. It still wasn’t enough to set him free, but it was enough to make him feel like he was still fighting until the end. If he was going to die, he’d go down fighting.

He and death had danced around each other since his birth, in hospitals and specialist’s offices. He’d always imagined his life ending in some quiet room, surrounded by the few friends gathered to see him off. The knowledge of his impending doom felt like the weight of a blanket pressing against his skin, urging him towards acceptance, towards peace.

Steve looked up at the sky and the water that mirrored it. At least, he thought with a grim smile, it was a beautiful day.

There was a jerk and he felt the chair being tilted back to lean precariously over the dark water. Drowning was an awful way to go, he thought, but at least it was faster than whatever Rumlow might do to him given the time and the permission. Maybe if he sucked in water immediately, it would be over faster. He swallowed hard and brought his eyes up to Pierce once again.

Rumlow leaned in close, breath hot against his ear in a mockery of a caress. His fingers brushed over the mottled bruises that marred the skin of his cheeks. “Come on, Stevie. It doesn’t have to be this way. Just tell us what we need to know and everything will be over.”

Despite the need to keep them from the satisfaction of seeing his fear, Steve felt his overburdened heart thud painfully against his ribs. He licked his lips and smirked at Pierce, “You’ve already lost--you just don’t know it yet.”

Pierce opened his mouth to respond when the sharp sound of gunfire cut through the quiet of the dock. The men around Steve turned to stare in surprise as a squadron of black clad officers spilled out of the warehouse, shouting muffled orders over the sound of the wind and waves. They swept out of the building in a controlled burst, trying to angle their movements to keep their targets from making it to one of their vehicles or onto one of the ships docked along the pier. Two of Rumlow’s men ducked down behind a few crate scattered on the dock for cover and returned fire in quick bursts to slow their approach.

With a curse, Pierce glared at Rumlow, “I thought this location was secure.”

“It was!” Rumlow grunted and jerked his head toward Frick, “Get the car--we need to get him out of here.”

Steve's leaned forward against the tilt of the chair, eyes fixed on a familiar figure cutting through the chaos. Even without the dark hair flying loose around a face set in concentration, Steve would know that body anywhere. Just the sight of Bucky charging forward was enough to make the pain fade until it felt like his nerves were singing their pleasure. At his side, he could make out the brief flash of red hair as Natasha followed in his wake like a shadow.

"Bucky..." he whispered, softly, incredulously. Then he grinned, wide and unabashed, raising his voice like a song, "*Bucky!*"

He saw the moment Bucky heard him like a shot going off. Instantly, those eyes snapped toward him with a laser focus that made his heart thud giddily. Bucky shifted gracefully, his feet picking up speed as he zeroed in on where Pierce, Rumlow, and Steve were silhouetted at the end of the dock. The bite of the leather cuffs against his skin and the taste of blood in his mouth felt like a faraway memory as joy rushed through him. Bucky was here. Bucky had found him.

Then he felt the chair beneath him lurch and icy panic chased away the warmth of Bucky's arrival. Pierce's eyes were more manic than he'd ever seen as he looked down at Steve. His hand came down hard on the frame beside Steve's head and Steve felt the chair tilt dangerously over the water.

"I won't let you have him," he hissed. "The only way to escape Hydra is through death."

Distantly, Steve heard the thud of boots on the wooden planks of the pier and the sound of his name being called over the sound of gunfire. He saw Rumlow spin toward the threat and fire wildly at the agents rushing in. Like a flower to the sun, Steve's eyes went helplessly to meet Bucky's. He opened his mouth--to speak or to scream he wasn't sure.

Then he was falling back into space and watching the icy water close over his head as the weight of the chair and his broken body pulled him deeper.

## Chapter End Notes

Welp, that happened.

Let me know what you think in the comments :)



# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

Alright so I planned for this to be the last chapter, but it just kept getting longer and longer while I was writing. So I decided to divide it into two chapters instead of one incredibly long one--that way you got an update faster.

Hope you enjoy it!

By the time Tony directed them past the last line of empty buildings, Bucky was tense enough that even Clint had stopped his rambling conversation with Natasha in favor of running his fingers over the bow he'd produced from the backseat. They all knew that there was nothing good waiting for them behind the rusted metal walls of these warehouses. And Bucky...well, Bucky focused on keeping himself from falling into the icy numbness of the Winter Soldier.

Natasha pulled the SUV to a stop a block away from the location Tony's tracker indicated. Wordlessly they all climbed out of the vehicle and moved to the back to pull on the equipment set aside for them. Clearly, Natasha had been planning an assault on Pierce's base for sometime because even Bucky was satisfied with the selection. Bullet proof vests--enough for all of them to have sufficient cover--as well as two ARs and a few handguns were passed between the two double agents without comment.

Clint kept his bow and tucked a spare Glock into the shoulder holster with an extra clip while Tony typed away at his computer. At Bucky's accessing glance, the other man shrugged, "Trust me, you're better off with me here."

Tony reached into the backpack he'd hauled with him and produced a lightweight drone with a flourish. The machine was painted in some sort of matte grey that Bucky guessed would help it blend in with the sky. A small camera was suspended carefully beneath the blades and Bucky could already see the video feed loading on Tony's screen. The tech grunted with approval at the machine and grabbed a controller waiting nearby to send it into flight.

"Will they be able to see or hear this?" Bucky asked.

"Do I look like a noob?" Tony murmured, eyes on the screen as he angled the drone higher. "It shoots video from several hundred feet so it'll look like a very small speck even if they knew where to look."

Bucky grunted and kept his eyes fixed on the screen as it flew over several rooftops before hovering about a small, seemingly abandoned storage building attached to port storage. It blended in easily with the rest of the buildings on the pier aside from three SUV's parked

neatly under the loading dock. He knew without checking that that must be where the tracker would be signalling which meant Pierce must be nearby.

“Rumlow is there,” Tony said under his breath, “I recognize the plate.”

“Good. That will save us a trip to bring him in after everything is finished here,” Clint replied.

Another sweep to the east confirmed Pierce’s presence when Tony’s drone caught four heavily armed security guards lingering near the entrance. Bucky’s hold on the AR tightened at the sight of the first hint of hope in days. Beside him, Natasha was quickly relaying details from the feed to Coulson and whatever unit of soldiers he was rallying.

She hung up with a satisfied noise and gestured to the building just out of sight. “SWAT and Coulson’s team will be here within five minutes. There’s a chopper scrambling now to give us air support if we need it.”

Bucky grunted, looking down the sights of his weapon with deadly intent. “We won’t.”

---

Despite the fact that the Winter Soldier had been trained to work as a solo operative, Bucky had no problem shifting his tactics to work around a team. Natasha had proven herself to be a crafty, skilled partner and he trusted her to watch his back. If she vouched for Clint’s abilities, he could extend that respect to him as well.

That trust still didn’t keep him from wanting to race into the building right away to rip apart Rumlow’s men with his bare hands.

By the time the signal came for them to make their move, it felt like Bucky’s bones were going to vibrate out of his skin with the need to do something. Steve was *right there*. Hurting. Alone. Injured and tormented all because he was the only man Bucky had ever loved. The only thing that kept him in place was the knowledge that he might set off an alarm that could mean the difference between Steve being recovered alive or dead.

They moved into position following the directions whispered through the small radios secured to their ears. Natasha and Bucky were sent to the far side of the building to cover the side exits while the SWAT team broke through the main entrance. Clint disappeared a few minutes after Coulson’s arrival to ‘find a good vantage point.’

Following orders with Natasha’s steady presence at his side helped steady the frantic energy that pumped through his veins. He found his footing in the familiar weight of a gun in his hands. His mind became a simple series of command prompts. Watch key lines of sight. Maintain perimeter. Move forward in two-man team position. Remain still until signal is given.

“Two guards stationed near the front door. Three clustered near west wall. No sign of Pierce or Rumlow in the building.”

“And the hostage?”

“Unconfirmed.”

Natasha was careful not to look at Bucky. “Roger that. Widow and Soldier are in position.”  
“Hold position.”

Don’t think about Steve. Don’t think about being too late.

“SWAT Team One is in position. Team Two in motion.”

Hold on, Stevie. Just a little longer.

Then the sharp command cut through the silence on the radio, “Breach!” And they were finally moving.

Bucky slammed his shoulder into the hard metal door roughly enough that he could hear the scream of protest from the rusted lock. It swung wide and he heard a grunt of pain from the guard he’d tagged nearby. He didn’t give them a chance to recover before he was ripping the gun from their hand and wrapping his arm around their neck in a sleeper hold. Natasha slid past him and leapt onto the second with a deadly grace that even he was a little impressed by.

They didn’t pause to do more than slip two sets of zip tie handcuffs onto the unconscious men before they were moving again. It was the one concession Bucky had agreed to make in order to be allowed to go on this op to recover Steve. They needed witnesses if they were going to sink Hydra for good and he could resist the urge to snap necks for now. The comms were full of the sound of struggle echoed by the empty warehouse and the occasional brisk order. Bucky didn’t do more than glance in the direction of where the SWAT team was securing the largest group of Hydra before sweeping the space.

His eyes latched onto the table full of bloodied instruments and he felt his stomach lurch painfully. Soundlessly, he stumbled forward and stared at the bloodstains that freckled and splattered across the concrete. Steve’s blood. Trying to block out the terrible knowledge of what each of the tools could do to a human body, Bucky swallowed back the bile rising in his throat. He could taste the pain from each blow like it was happening in front of him. His grip on his gun tightened and he felt the murderous rage that had been his only ally in Russia consume him like a wildfire.

Hydra would burn for this. They would all burn.

Thoughts of nonviolent arrests became figments of the reality that was life before he saw Steve Rogers’ lifeblood creating arcs and shadows on the ground below. Natasha said something beside him, voice unsteady as she took in the sight before them. As she realized what that meant. He couldn’t hear her over the sick thud of his heart in his ears.

“Pierce and Rumlow are outside of the building. Repeat, five targets spotted on the pier,” Tony’s voice crackled through the com in his ear.

The Winter Soldier moved forward like a bitter wind, flowing over the ground towards the outer doors. He barely waited for Natasha to move into position beside him before he raised his booted foot and kicked it open. The gun in his hands felt like an extension of his body and the rightness of lifting it to his shoulder and firing two shots that sank into the knees of the first guard on the other side of the door settled the sickness in his gut. Natasha tossed out a small disk that connected to the other with a crackle of blue electricity and sent him to the ground with a strangled scream.

A sound then. So faint and weak that he barely made it out over the sound of wind and gunfire, but sent every particle about his body into riotous life.

*Steve.* He was here. He was alive.

Bucky spun, eyes scanning the area around them while his heart attempted to crawl up his throat. At the edge of the pier, he could just make out the familiar broad shoulders of Rumlow standing protectively in front of Pierce's slimmer shape and holding tightly to...

Steve.

Even from this distance, Steve's face was a mass of bruising and discolored skin. His pale, thin chest was exposed to the chilly fall air and was covered in dried and caking blood. Leather straps covered his arms, legs, and the width of his chest, pinning him bodily to the chair.

"Steve..." he breathed.

Natasha cursed next to him, arm outstretched like she was going to caution him, but he was already moving. Two Hydra agents had stationed themselves in the meager cover provided by the shipping containers at the edge of the pier and were attempting to keep the FBI agents spilling out of the building at bay. The metal next to his head erupted in a shriek of sound and Bucky ducked instinctively. He rolled to avoid the next spray of gunfire and sent a quick pulse of bullets back, forcing them to duck behind the metal boxes. Idly, Bucky took a moment to grieve that he left his grenades at his apartment before he angled his way to the left of the guards.

All thoughts of using the rest of the FBI agents or even Natasha to root out the last of Pierce's men disappeared at the sight of Steve just a few yards away. Nothing mattered except getting to Steve in time. He leaned out of his cover and aimed his weapon at the boxes to the left of the guards and sent them scrambling for better cover.

It was clear that the Hydra agents were trying to buy enough time for Pierce and Rumlow to make their escape in one of the nearby buildings or vehicles they'd left behind. It was also clear that their chances of holding out that long was growing smaller with every moment. Overhead, Bucky could hear the heavy pulse of helicopter blades punching through the air in order to track anyone who managed to escape the ground forces below.

"Bucky!" The sound of Steve's voice made him turn away from firing on the pinned guards and focus on the pier. His stomach dropped.

Rumlow was leaning close to Steve, jaw working as he spoke. The chair Steve was tied to was tilting dangerously over the edge of the dock and he watched in horror as Rumlow let it lean further back until it was nearly parallel with the waters below. Steve's eyes were wide with helpless fury as he responded and Bucky saw Pierce step closer.

The wood beneath his feet thudded hollowly as he pounded up the dock. One of the men guarding it rose up on his knees to aim for the running Winter Soldier and went down in a spray of blood courtesy of Natasha's small handgun. The second had time to give shout of alarm before Bucky's bullet sank home in the space between his eyes.

He didn't have the time to worry about Coulson or the FBI's reaction to the quick executions. Not when all he could focus on was the loose grip Rumlow had on the edge of Steve's chair, the satisfied smile on Pierce's face as he leaned in closer to speak. Steve's eyes flashed past Pierce to where Bucky was racing towards him and Bucky was close enough to see the fragile hope bleeding over the ragged pain left behind by days of abuse. His mouth opened to shape Bucky's name once more.

Then Pierce shoved him off the deck.

Bucky gave a ragged shout of horror that was muffled by the sick panic that was filling his lungs with ragged regret and icy fear. His eyes were fixed on the place where he'd last seen Steve. Where he'd watched Steve's eyes fasten on his, begging, *pleading* for him to save him, to be fast enough to keep him safe.

Rumlow stepped forward, gun raised, but Bucky didn't slow his sprint. He brought the stock of his gun up in a vicious arc that sent blood spraying from his newly shattered nose. Without losing momentum, he brought his muzzle up to fire into the meat of Rumlow's shoulder. The scream of agony felt like the sweetest taste of justice. Before he could do more, Natasha was there, dragging Rumlow's arm behind him without any sympathy for the bleeding gunshot wound that had him white faced and sweating.

Then Bucky was left staring at the man who'd destroyed everything with nothing but the weight of the gun in his hand to anchor him. Slowly, with vicious intent, he raised the muzzle of his gun to point between the hate-filled eyes that had watched him be stripped apart and remade into a monster. Behind him, Natasha made a frantic sound behind him, but Bucky knew she would be too busy restraining Rumlow to be able to stop him now.

It was just between Pierce and the gun in Bucky's hand now.

Pierce smiled faintly, any sign of frustration or fear hidden behind a carefully maintained mask. His eyebrow quirked in a question. "Are you going to kill me now, James?"

Bucky's hands tightened around the barrel of the gun, fingers aching for the trigger. "You deserve it," he growled. "You deserve to die here."

There was a sound from the water below and Bucky's mind spun with the knowledge that Steve had fallen there. Steve was *dying* and all he could think about was making sure Pierce could never hurt someone again. Each second that passed was another second Steve was without oxygen.

"I always knew you'd be like me, you know," Pierce said and tucked his hands into his pockets, looking for all the world like they were having a casual chat--not standing at gunpoint in the midst of an FBI raid. "You'd rather kill me than try to save the boy you claimed to love."

Bucky shuddered, eyes darting back to where Steve had disappeared. "No...I'm not like you," he whispered.

Pierce opened his mouth to speak, but Bucky was already moving. He barely took the time to flick the safety on his weapon before he tossed it out of reach of Pierce or Rumlow. Natasha had one foot on Rumlow's back, pressing him into the planks of the dock, and her gun aimed at Pierce. He ripped off the heavy bullet proof vest and his boots and dove into the icy water.

The cold hit like a blow and he gritted his teeth to fight against the urge to scream out the breath in his lungs. It pushed back against him like a living creature, forcing him to fight against the urge to go back to the surface. But Steve had already been down here for far too long. He couldn't risk going back for another breath when Steve was dying.

If Steve slipped into the darkness here today, he wouldn't go alone--that much Bucky was sure of.

His arms and legs cut a steady path through the murky darkness and he ignored the way the water burned his eyes. He was lucky that the tide was out and there was only thirty feet of water between the pier and the ocean floor. It's the only thing in their favor. Using the rough wood overgrown with mussels and algae to pull him lower, he ignored the burn in his lungs to search for the only thing that mattered.

Steve.

The light was barely enough to make out the difference between the trash littering the seabed, painting the world in shadows of grey and green. Dark as a tomb. When he finally made out the blurry shape of the chair, it's all he could do to keep the precious air he had left in his lungs. It lay on its side amidst the rough rocks and seaweed like a relic of some lost ship. He kicked himself closer and wrapped his hands around the arms of the chair so he can get to work pulling Steve free.

Steve's head lolled limply against his chest and Bucky has to force himself not to think that he's already too late. He ran his fingers over the thick leather straps and yanked at the ties until he remembered the knife in his thigh holster. Then it was just a matter of angling the knife as best he can in the dim light to avoid cutting into Steve and free him quickly.

When his hand brushed over the bruised skin beneath the first strap on Steve's wrist, the blonde jerked hard enough that Bucky nearly dropped the knife. Bright blue eyes marked with darts of blood opened and stared up at him like he was an illusion. Steve's fingers twitched and he reached out like he would anchor himself to Bucky's floating body.

Bucky forced himself to continue cutting his way through the binding, even when Steve's hand cupped his jaw in a sweet caress that seemed so at odds with the setting. He looked back in time to see the small stream of bubbles trickling out of Steve's lips slowly disappear

into a narrow stream and Steve's head tip forward into unconsciousness. He stopped his frantic cutting to shake him fiercely and tried not to panic when there was no response.

He didn't so much cut the last strap as much as he ripped it free of its bindings and Steve's body was finally freed from its hold. Bucky clutched him to his chest, lungs screaming for relief, and kicked off the bottom of the seafloor to head toward the light gleaming faintly at the edges of his vision. The cold of the water felt like it was leeching away his strength and pulling every ounce of heat from his body. Even his thoughts felt like they were freezing over with the cold--he couldn't imagine what it was doing to Steve.

He didn't let himself think about how small, how fragile Steve felt in his arms. He didn't let himself think about the chill that was already seeping into his skin or the weakness that was trembling through his limbs.

His lungs were burning agony now and he released another stream of bubbles without meaning to. The weight of Steve kept him from moving quickly and it was awkward to try to swim with their legs tangling together and one arm holding his precious cargo in place. He was clawing, fighting his way forward with the same fierceness he applied in battle with barely any progress to show for it.

Blood thundered in his ears like a drum and the world seemed to narrow down to the simplest commands. Kick. Pull forward again. Don't let go. Get to the surface.

*Need air.*

When his head broke through the surface, it was all he could do to keep from sinking back into the icy darkness and let the numbness in his limbs drag him under. His lungs heaved painfully and he heard a shout above him through the water in his ears. He rolled onto his back, resting Steve's head so it stayed above the surface and cradled him gently against him. A rope slapped into the water near him and he gratefully let it tow them closer to the dock where strong hands were there to lift him out of the water's embrace and onto the rough wood of the dock.

Someone pulled Steve off his chest so Bucky could focus on sucking in as much oxygen to his lungs. He coughed raggedly, spitting out the seawater that threatened to flood his lungs. It took all his strength not to close his eyes and slip into a deep sleep. Beside him, he could hear Coulson shouting orders and directing the paramedics to the two men lying on the dock.

Natasha leaned over him, looking fierce and more relieved than he'd ever seen her. "That was the stupidest thing I've ever seen," she said flatly, reaching out to clap him on the back to help him clear out the last of the water.

When his throat could work again, he rasped, "Steve?"

Her eyes went dark and turbulent. Without a word, she reached down and hauled him into a sitting position so he could see three uniformed paramedics working over Steve's too-still body. They were speaking quickly to one another as one pressed his fingers to the long line of Steve's pale throat. There was a pause and he slowly shook his head, wordless, and began chest compressions.

No.

Natasha's grip tightened on his arm, forcing him to stay still and out of the way as the medics continued to work. If he had the air, he knew he would be screaming, pleading for Steve to move, to breath, to survive this. The world fell away, narrowed only to the consistent movement of the medic at Steve's chest and the horrible noise spilling out of his own throat. The image of Steve laying still and silent felt like it was searing its way into his brain, chasing away the taste of happiness he'd felt that night in Steve's apartment.

One of the other medics leaned forward to uncap a long needle filled with a yellowish liquid and the one performing CPR leaned back to give them space to jam the needle through Steve's chest and depress the plunger. There was a long pause as the world seemed to hold its breath, waiting for a sign of life. A second passed. Then another.

Nothing.

He could feel the acceptance beginning to creep through the others in the way Natasha's hand came down on his back in a soothing stroke and how Coulson turned away from him to speak quietly into his radio. The thought was enough to bring Bucky to his knees, crawling the short distance to where Steve still lay and drag his head into his lap. He pressed his hands to the cool skin there, wishing he could see the bright sky of his eyes again. Water dripped from his cheeks, splattering onto the pale slope of Steve's forehead and chin.

Heaving in a ragged sob, he snarled at the quiet EMT closest to him. "He's not dead. You have to keep going," he snarled weakly, the anger in his voice tempered by the grief that was choking him. "You don't understand...Steve's too stubborn to die. You'll see. He's survived worse than this."

There was a terrible sadness in the woman's eyes when she slowly nodded and leaned forward to begin the steady rhythm of compressions again. All around them, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Bucky ignored the expressions of the people around them or the way Natasha lingered with a terrible sort of knowledge in her eyes. He brushed his fingers through the salt streaked blonde hair and sucked in a shuddering breath, willing Steve to do the same.

"You gotta open your eyes, Stevie. *Please*," he whispered, rocking back and forth in a helpless rhythm. "You're gonna be okay. Just breathe for me, baby. Breathe. It's over now. Pierce can never touch you again, I promise. You're okay. You're gonna be okay."

Steve's head lolled limply in his hands and he felt a sob rip free from his chest. The sound of his grief seemed loud amid the silent against standing like a wall around them. His shoulders shook violently as he tried to keep speaking, tried to call Steve back from the only place he couldn't follow him to.

"Please, Steve. Please wake up," he begged. "Don't do this. Don't do this to me. Don't leave me here alone. I--I love you so fucking much. I should never have left you. It should have been me, not you. Never you. *Please...please don't go.*"



“Bucky...” Natasha whispered and her voice sounded raw and wounded.

“No! No, he can’t--” His voice broke and he curled his body over Steve’s like he could protect him from the truth of his mortality. Steve’s lips were so blue. So different without the smirking curve or the fierce jut of his chin when he was about to do something that would drive Bucky crazy.

He stared up at Natasha when her hands gripped his shoulders in a silent plea for him to let go. She looked broken and more tired than someone her age had any right to. “I’m so sorry, Bucky,” she breathed.

The paramedic was still pressing down on Steve’s chest, trying to remind his fierce little heart how to pump blood. Bucky stared at her hands moving like it held some secret to eternal life. His fingers tightened in Steve’s hair desperately and he leaned down until his lips were pressed against the cool skin of his forehead.

“I can’t do this without you...”

There was a shift, a tiny whisper of sound that made Bucky shudder over Steve’s still body. He pressed closer like he could force his own life into Steve through sheer will power. No one spoke and he knew without looking that the agents were trying to gauge how to deal with a broken assassin and a dead hostage. He tried to imagine a world where he could watch them lower Steve’s body into the cold earth, but his mind shied away from the thought like it burned.

Then Steve’s body began to heave violently.

At first, Bucky felt a murderous rage at the thought that the EMTs must have done something to cause it, but one look at their suddenly hopeful facing had him staring back at the blonde in his lap. Brackish seawater gushed out of his mouth in alarming amounts and it was all Bucky could do to help tilt him to the side so the water didn’t choke him a second time. He watched it with the same veneration of a sinner presented with a miracle. Steve’s eyes fluttered weakly, but his body was so worn down from the waters and the torture that it was all he could do to drag a weak lungful of air into his battered body.

All around them the dock bustled with near-feverish activity as everyone seemed to move as one to help Steve. The third paramedic appeared in seconds with a bright orange body board and within seconds Bucky had been firmly pushed to the side so they could strap Steve to the brace and pull an oxygen mask over his face. Radios burst to life and he could make out the sound of Coulson telling the helicopter to land in the parking lot so they could airlift Steve to the nearest hospital.

He stood there like a ghost, uncaring of the way his clothes were beginning to freeze in stiff folds thanks to the icy wind. All he could focus on was the weak but steady rise and fall of a thin chest looking bruised and broken in front of him. Adrenaline mixed with the aftermath of despair made him shiver violently and Natasha pressed her petite body along his side in a line of warmth. He didn’t realize he was clutching her hand until she stepped away to wrap a thick blanket around his shoulders.

When they began to carry Steve down the dock towards the waiting helicopter, he forced his stubborn feet to stumble after him and nearly fell to his knees again. Only a quick grab from Natasha and Clint coming in to brace him on his other side kept him from tumbling to the ground. She was saying something to him, but it wasn't until he heard the words 'surgery' and 'hospital' that he was able to pull himself out of his stupor.

"What?" he rasped. His throat burned with each syllable, reminding him that he'd been close to drowning with Steve.

"They're taking him to the closest hospital with a surgery bay ready," Natasha repeated patiently as they limped down the pier in the wake of the medics and FBI agents. "He's in bad shape, Bucky, but they're not going to give up on him."

Bucky swallowed past the razors in his throat and tried to focus past his panic. "I need to be with him. I don't want him waking up alone--he hates hospitals."

He wasn't sure why the thought of Steve's hatred of the many hospital wards he'd stayed in during childhood made him want to cry again, but he could feel the burn of tears mixing with the drying ocean water.

"We're going to follow them on the ground," she said with a nod. "You need to get checked out by the doc too."

Bucky waved off her concern with a dismissive hand and looked up in time to see Tony jogging toward them. The tech looked Bucky over curiously and with an unnaturally somber expression. "I heard the chatter on the radio--is Rogers gonna be okay?"

Natasha gave him a look that was just shy of being as icy as the water beneath the pier. "He's being airlifted now."

None of them mentioned the odds of Steve surviving Rumlow's abuse and nearly drowning in the bay.

"Pierce and Rumlow are both secured and headed back to lockup," Tony said after a beat. Bucky tried to remind himself that he should be excited about that, but he felt like his heart was left somewhere on the ocean floor with that awful chair. "Coulson is making sure the judge knows they're a flight risk so they won't be able to bail themselves out."

The words felt like static in his ears. All thoughts of revenge and justice felt like ghosts from a past life compared to the burning need to find Steve, to be there when he opened his eyes again. All he could think about was getting on his knees and begging for the forgiveness he didn't deserve.

"I was supposed to protect him," Bucky said flatly. "I told him no one would touch him without going through me first."

"You couldn't have stopped Pierce once he set his eyes on Steve, James," Natasha soothed. He wanted to point out the way she'd gone back to avoiding his preferred nickname in favor

of his first name, but he couldn't summon up the energy to protest. "You can't blame yourself for Pierce's evil. He's the one behind all this, not you."

Then why was he the one facing down every nightmare he'd ever imagined?

They shuffled him into the same SUV they'd arrived in and Natasha let Clint take the wheel in favor of tucking herself up against Bucky's side. His tremors had mostly subsided at that point only to be replaced with a bone deep exhaustion that made every moment a fight to stay awake. The only thing that could keep him alert now was the persistent belief that if he did sleep, he might miss the last moments where Steve was still on this earth with him.

Natasha wrapped another blanket around his shoulders to replace the wet one and leaned forward to crank up the heat. His fingers and toes were prickling uncomfortably as they thawed and he clenched and unclenched the digits to try to hurry along. Tony was uncharacteristically quiet aside from occasionally giving Clint directions that would get them to the hospital faster.

There was a mechanical chirp next to him and Natasha glanced down at her phone. "Steve made it to the hospital. It looks like one of his lungs collapsed so they're moving him into the trauma ward."

Bucky's fingers tightened around his knees until the bones ached.

Of course, Natasha noticed his increasing tension and laid a consoling hand over his. "He's stable, Bucky. He's still fighting."

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Being looked over by strangers in the medical ward was like dragging himself over broken glass. His focus was still fixed on the door, knowing that Steve was only a few floors away. Tony and Clint disappeared almost immediately to check in with Coulson and track down where Steve was being held. Bucky had the strong suspicion that Natasha told them not to tell him until the doctors were finished checking him over.

When they began discussing setting up an IV drip, he decided he'd enough and stood. The nurses moved back a little nervously at his expression, but he only leveled his gaze at Natasha, "I'm done. Where is he?"

The Black Widow stared at him for a brief moment before nodding and gesturing for him to follow her. He was reminded all over again why he'd been so willing to trust the FBI based on Natasha's recommendation. She was fearless and understanding in a way that humbled him. He felt a brief pang of regret that now that Pierce was in jail, they would no longer be working together.

All his thoughts of the future felt vapid compared to the pulsing need to find Steve and feel the rise and fall of his chest beneath his fingertips. To listen to the stubborn pounding of his heart and press apologies into his skin.

Natasha took him into the ICU and flashed her badge at the nurse that stood to slow their progress. She paused to speak with her, but Bucky brushed past them both to scan the beds for the only thing that really mattered now.

He found him lying amidst a maze of tubes and wires set to keep him from slipping back into the dark.

It was always a shock to remember and realize just how small his Stevie was. With his sharp wit and quick temper, it was easy to think of Steve as invincible--no matter how many times he'd seen him limping home bloodied and bruised by the fists of some bully. Steve always managed to walk away, shoulders back and head held high. Unbroken even with blood streaking across his torn clothes and bruises blooming on his skin.

Now he barely recognized the painfully thin slope of his collar bones jutting out over the top of his hospital gown. Steve's skin was sickly pale except from where bruises bloomed in jarring purples, greens, and yellows from days of abuse. Dark circles marred the stubbled skin of his cheeks in between cuts and abrasions left behind by Rumlow and his men.

Breathlessly, Bucky sank into the chair placed next to the bed, careful not to disturb any of the equipment. There was a cast on Steve's right arm that was suspended on a metal brace beside him while the left had the IV drip pumping steadily into his veins. Bandages and compression wraps criss crossed his thin chest with the wires carefully attached to any

exposed skin. A respirator tube that Bucky remembered from a hellish hospital stay when they were eight was taped in position over his mouth and forced his chest to rise and fall steadily. Bucky winced sympathetically at the sight--Steve hated the respirator and how badly it hurt his throat when it was removed. His expression was almost painfully blank, but Bucky hoped that meant he wasn't feeling any pain from his injuries. Gently, he brushed his thumb across one sharp cheekbone before wrapping his fingers loosely around Steve's wrist so he could feel the steady beat of his heart.

A knock at the door had him looking up in time to see the sharp-eyed nurse from before and Natasha come into Steve's room. She looked irritated to have her wing suddenly filled with FBI agents along with a badly damaged new patient. The part of him that remembered the fierceness of Sarah Rogers in her prime made him want to shrink meekly out of her way, but he'd be damned if he left Steve's side without a fight.

"You're James Barnes?" she asked quickly.

He frowned at her use of his given name, glancing at Natasha who gave him a subtle nod that made him relax slightly. "Yes, that's me."

"I have you listed as Mr. Rogers' emergency contact which means that you're allowed to stay with him after visiting hours end. Is that correct?"

Outside, he watched Tony put aside his phone with a self-satisfied smirk. Whatever the techie had done to make sure Bucky would be able to stay with Steve, he would never be able to repay him for. He licked his lips and nodded to the nurse, "Yes, ma'am. Can you tell me if he's...is he going to get better?"

Some of her ire softened at the expression on his face and she took a step closer to run an eye over Steve's chart. "He's definitely had a rough go of it," she said after a moment and Bucky ran his thumb over the pulse on Steve's wrist to remind himself that he hadn't lost him yet. "Three of his ribs are broken--one of them managed to puncture his left lung which caused him to have trouble breathing. Nearly drowning didn't help. He's also got a low grade case of pneumonia thanks to his weakened immune system and the exposure which is going to slow down his healing. Because of this, Dr. Banner has opted to keep him in a medically induced coma until he can breathe without assistance."

Each word landed like a blow and Bucky felt his chest go tight. He told himself to remember every mark and blow and hurt so that he could return it tenfold. He would rain pain and hellfire on each and every member of Hydra until they were nothing more than a scorched memory of a forgotten time.

"Wh--what now?" he rasped, eyes on Steve's face.

Natasha stepped forward like she'd been waiting for him to speak. "Go get yourself a shower--Clint's bringing you some sweats and a shirt until we can go back to your house for something of yours. Coulson is sending someone to take your statement in an hour." She looked over at Steve and sighed softly, "Then we wait..."

---

*16 Hours Later:*

The sound of a shrill alarm jerked Bucky awake from a fitful sleep and brought him to his feet in a rush.

Steve was jerking wildly in the bed, his back bowed in a painful arch that threatened to rip out the IV and monitoring devices taped to his chest. His eyes opened sightlessly, bright blue and staring up at the ceiling like he was seeing beyond it. Bucky lurched forward, trying to find a way to keep him from hurting himself without jostling any of the injuries further.

“Help!” he shouted in the direction of rushing footsteps. “Something’s wrong!” He turned back to Steve, eyes wild and hands fluttering for a place to hold him that wouldn’t cause any more damage. Words and pleas tumbled out of his mouth in a helpless wave as he watched the heart rate monitor spike then flatline in the corner of the room. “Oh god, Steve. *Stevie, please don’t do this. Please--*”

Within moments, the room filled with the brisk confidence of nurses and doctors who’d been trained to deal with this sort of emergency. Bucky was quickly pushed to the side to make way for a frazzled looking doctor giving orders to the rest of the staff with a steady voice. Shaking with adrenaline and panic, Bucky was forced to watch them inject a series of liquids into Steve’s IV line and directly into the muscle of his chest.

His eyes fixed on the screeching machines like they held the secrets to the universe. He watched Steve’s heart rate slow to a rhythm that was irregular, but steady. The frantic energy of the room slowly ebbed until the crash team slowly trickled out with their cart and their sympathetic looks for the terrified looking man in the corner.

The doctor stayed, greying hair ruffled enough that Bucky anticipated that was his usual style more than the result of the last few minutes. He took off his glasses long enough to run his hand over his face and scrub at the whiskers growing on his cheeks. Then he gave Bucky a gentle smile that might have been comforting in a lifetime before he’d watched Steve nearly drown after being tortured.

“Mr. Barnes,” the doctor said, “I’m Bruce Banner, Mr. Rogers’ attending physician. How are you holding up?”

Bucky stared at him. Blink. “I’m...” he swallowed and shook his head, “Is he okay? What happened?”

“Unfortunately, seizures are a common side effect of the kind of trauma Mr. Rogers experienced,” Banner explained. “His records show he had a heart murmur from childhood which makes him more likely to experience heart complications.”

Something akin to horror must have shown on Bucky’s face because Banner put a gentle hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture. “We were prepared for something like this to happen and were able to keep him from injuring himself further. I know it’s an awful thing to see, but I promise we’re doing everything we can to make sure he recovers.”

“How long until he wakes up?”

Banner glanced down to where Steve continued to sleep. “We’ll start weaning him off the medicine tomorrow based on the blood tests we’ll run in the morning. Then it’s just a matter of when he’s strong enough to pull himself out of it...”

---

*28 Hours Later:*

“Bucky?” Clint’s voice was soft from the doorway. “Hey man, Tony and I are going to order some pizza. You need to eat something.”

Bucky didn’t move from where he sat watching the machine pump oxygen in and out of Steve’s lungs. The nurses had finally removed the respirator from Steve’s throat in favor of relying on the nasal canula, but his breath still rattled wetly in his chest. Bucky’s back and shoulders ached from remaining in the chair beside the bed, but he refused to look away. He didn’t bother answering Clint’s question, too busy trying to will Steve’s to open once more.

Too afraid of what might happen if he let his guard down again.

“Have you gotten any sleep? You’re looking pretty rough these days and Natasha will kill me if I let you collapse.”

Silence.

There was a sigh and he heard Clint step back in the hallway.

---

*36 Hours Later:*

Steve didn’t move again.

After 30 hours of waiting and careful monitoring in the ICU, Banner finally okay’d Steve to be moved into one of the hospital suites approved by the FBI. Coulson kept a few agents assigned to patrol the hallway, but, for the most part, Bucky was allowed to watch and wait alone. Before he returned to the office, the senior agent pressed a business card with his personal number and the words *‘When you’re ready, there’s a job waiting’* onto the small pile of magazines and books Tony had left for Bucky’s entertainment.

Natasha was pulled to help head the taskforce created to bring Hydra to justice. In their brief phone conversations, she told him about the fierce DA assigned to the case, Maria Hill, with hopeful optimism for their chances. Bucky listened to her chatter for what it was--an attempt to distract him from obsessing over every breath or shift from Steve. He wondered if she was responsible for the way the nurses hovered over him constantly, forcing him to eat regularly and even finding an extra cot to set up in the corner of the room. It kept him from falling completely apart whenever he was left alone with Steve’s comatose body again.

The world seemed to move on around him, parting around the too-quiet hospital room like a rock in a stream.

Bucky wondered if he would be able to survive watching the machines flatline again.

---

Steve dreamed of his mother.

The years since Sarah Rogers had been taken from him by a cruel twist of fate had made each image of his mother one he cherished. He tried not to think about her the way she'd looked on her deathbed with all the light and life stripped away by the poison in her veins. Instead, he focused on the way she used to smile down at him when he showed her his latest drawing or told her about the latest injustice he planned to stop. He preferred to remember her as the strong, loving woman she'd been.

So it was no surprise when Steve found himself leaning into the familiar scent and sensation of his mother cupping his cheek and leaning down to brush a kiss over his forehead. He felt her smile against his skin, "It's time to wake up sweetheart."

Stubbornly he frowned and kept his eyes firmly closed. Not quite ready to see for himself the reality that his mother would never be able to reach out and touch him again. "I don't wanna. I'm tired."

This was a muscle memory he associated with waking up in a hospital. Sarah would be lingering close by, eyes sharp on the machines keeping her life blood alive and hands soft where they soothed the ache left behind by illness. Even knowing she was gone didn't halt the instinctive way his body relaxed at the sound of her words.

"I know, love," she whispered and her grip on his shoulder tightened to the point of pain, "but do you really want to stay here?"

He frowned at the question--suddenly wary of his mother's presence. Something tugged at the edges of his mind, a warning not to relax so easily into this idyllic reality. If his ma was here then he should also be listening to Bucky's worried, teasing comments about him laying around all day. Or watching the worried lines around bright grey eyes crease into a happy smile. Bucky should be here. *So where was he?* He sucked in a breath and felt a spike of pain drive a nail of clarity through his brain. Memories flooded in like the tide.

Pierce's smug smile as he pushed Steve off the pier. Rumlow reaching for the cudgel he preferred for the longer periods of torture.

Bucky's eyes widening in horror just before he fell out of sight.

Faintly, he heard the sound of mechanical beeping in a steadily increasing rhythm and his hand reached out blindly, searching for the comfort he'd felt with his mother nearby. Instead his fingers only brushed across the familiar scrape of overwashed hospital blankets. He took in another breath, hoping, praying, that this wasn't just another dream and he would wake up in that freezing warehouse once more. All he got was the sharp smell of antiseptic and the sweat left behind by being stuck in a hospital bed long term.



The heart rate monitor was beeping persistently in his ear and, if he concentrated, he could just make out the sounds of quiet conversation somewhere nearby. The familiar discomfort of a needle in his hand soothed some of his worry that he was still with Pierce and Rumlow's goons. There was no way they would have given him medical help that would keep him alive. He shifted his hand again and froze when he met warm skin and calloused fingertips.

It was enough to bring his eyes fluttering open on a ragged gasp, eyes watering against the harsh fluorescent lights. He scanned the room, eyeing the myriad of machines surrounding him and a truly obnoxious balloon collection in the corner. Despite the bandages that covered nearly all of the skin in his line of sight, his mind and body felt dull and distant. He didn't need to see the button for a morphine drip to know he was dosed up with pain medicine.

Someone shifted next to him and he turned his head to find Bucky sprawling uncomfortably in the chair next to the bed, one hand resting against Steve's hip while the other acted as a pillow to prop his head up against the mattress. His long legs were sprawled awkwardly in the space between the bed and the chair in a faded pair of sweatpants with a bright yellow 'FBI' stamped over one lean hip. It matched the dark grey t-shirt that was stretched over his broad chest and helped pieced together the fragments of memory left behind by the moments before the water had swallowed him whole.

Bucky had found him. Bucky and a strange collection of FBI agents (and Natasha? That part felt like something he'd imagined) had broken through Pierce's defenses in enough time to save him. Someone must have managed to drag him out from under the pier before his oxygen ran out, but all he could remember was the icy crush of the water and the endless dark.

For a long moment, Steve just stared at him. There were dark circles painting bruises under his eyes and his hair looked like it hadn't had more than a flustered hand raked through it in days. His normally sharp features looked hollowed and pale in the hospital lights and it looked like he hadn't slept in days and Steve felt a burst of warmth grow in his chest at the thought that Bucky had been watching over him.

Gently, he raised his unbandaged hand and traced the curve of Bucky's cheekbone. Bucky sighed sleepily, his eyes fluttering and frowning his way out of unconsciousness. Then bright slate grey eyes met his and Steve felt his breath catch in his chest.

Bucky blinked, staring at Steve like he was the sun. Like he was something unattainable and beyond his reach.

The thought made him reach out once more to touch Bucky's cheek and anchor him into the present. Already he could feel the drain of each movement on his flagging body, but he forced himself to stay awake. To stay here with Bucky until he could chase some of the shadows from his eyes.

"Bucky..." he breathed.

Bucky flinched, blinking rapidly against eyes that were shining with an emotion that made Steve's heart pound. Battle roughened fingers reached out to wrap around where Steve's hand still rested against his skin and he sucked a shaky breath.

“Stevie,” he murmured and there was an ocean of grief and terror in each syllable, “you’re awake.”

Steve opened his mouth to reply, to soothe, but his lungs seized in a violent coughing fit that left him blinking away black spots and all the relief in Bucky’s face to be wiped away by panic. Quickly, Bucky grabbed a water glass nearby and carefully placed several ice chips under Steve’s tongue. He nodded gratefully and tried to focus on the icy relief of the water trickling down his throat instead of the burning agony in his chest.

Bucky’s hand returned to his wrist so his thumb could brush soothing lines over Steve’s thundering pulse. He brought it briefly up to his lips to press a gentle kiss over his bruised knuckles before pressing it against the stubble on his cheek. “I thought I’d lost you...” he whispered and Steve felt his heart clench. “I’m so sorry, Stevie. I shoulda never brought you into this.”

“--on’t be an idiot,” Steve rasped--irritable at the reminder of all that Pierce had done and all he’d let Bucky take the fall for. “Pierce...”

“He’s in custody,” Bucky cut in eagerly, trying to soothe some of Steve’s worries instinctively. “Rumlow too. Natasha is working on the case against him now. They aren’t getting out of jail for a long long time.”

“Na...tasha?” Every word felt like Steve was lifting some massive weight to force it out and he was beginning to feel the drain from whatever pain medicine he was on. But he refused to allow himself to fall back asleep until he could be sure that Bucky and the people he cared about were safe.

Bucky looked down and toyed with the blankets, tucking them more firmly around Steve. “Remember when I said I was working to bring down Pierce? Natasha’s the one who made it possible. She worked undercover in Hydra for the FBI for years before she realized I hated Pierce as much as she did and we started working together to bring him down.” He frowned miserably at the bruising visible on Steve’s arms and face, “They swore they would keep you safe and out of it if I helped bring him in.”

Steve’s fingers tightened around Bucky’s. He wanted to reassure Bucky that he didn’t blame him for Rumlow taking him or that Pierce would have come for Steve eventually just to hurt Bucky. He licked his dry, chapped lips and wished he didn’t feel so weak.

Bucky seemed to sense Steve’s strength was fading because he reached for the red nurse’s call button on the bed and resettled in his chair. “You should rest, Stevie,” he said and pressed another kiss to Steve’s unbroken arm. “I’ll make sure no one hurts you again. I promise...I’m never going to let them hurt you again.”

Again, Steve reached for the stubbornness that was his lifelong companion, but found nothing but an endless ocean of exhaustion. He blinked sleepily up at Bucky, trying to somehow tell him everything he’d realized in those last moments when he thought he was dying, but couldn’t seem to get his throat to cooperate.

Bucky made a soft soothing hum. “Go to sleep, Stevie. I’ll be here when you wake up, I promise.”

Slowly, Steve nodded, his eyes already fluttering shut. The last thing he saw was a single tear dripping down Bucky’s cheek.

---

Steve slept for ten hours.

Bucky told himself that this was to be expected, that there was too much damage for his body to repair to avoid it. But that didn’t keep him from pacing anxiously back and forth around the room until one of the nurses threatened to sedate him if he kept it up.

Dr. Banner, at least, seemed pleased by Steve’s progress and brief moment of lucidity. “He’s a strong one, your boy,” he said and smiled at the blush that swept over Bucky’s cheeks. “It’ll be a few days before he can stay awake for longer than a few minutes. Sleeping like this is the best thing for him right now.”

Once news got out about Steve’s recovery, it quickly became clear that Bucky wasn’t the only one terrified by how close to death Steve had come. The morning after Steve’s brief conversation, Bucky woke up to find a handsome black man entering the hospital room and escorting an older, stately looking woman to Steve’s bedside. It was a marker of how exhausted Bucky was that he didn’t immediately recognize Steve’s best friend and boss from the reconnaissance photos Natasha had given him.

Sam Wilson and Peggy Carter.

Both of them had the bearing of someone who’d spent some time in the military and he found himself straightening his spine instinctively. Carter pursed her lips at the sight of Steve, but refrained from any emotional outburst in favor of running a critical eye over Bucky sitting next to the bed. Suddenly, he could feel every speck of dirt and sweat left behind by the long hours spent at the hospital.

“You’re James Barnes?” she asked and he heard the crisp British accent that gave away her homeland despite the years spent in Brooklyn.

He glanced at Sam, who was watching him with a neutral expression, before he nodded and stood to extend his hand. “Yes ma’am. You must be Mrs. Carter.”

She shook his hand briefly and stared back at Steve. “I understand I have you to thank for taking care of our Steve.”

“I--I don’t think I can take credit for that,” he floundered, feeling the weight of his guilt pressing into his shoulders. “It was my fault that Pierce went after him.”

“We are not to blame for the evils of others, Mr. Barnes.”

“I--” he frowned, “How do you even know all of this?”

Carter smiled a shark's smile that made him want to place himself bodily between this new predator and Steve's sleeping body. "I've been working with Agent Coulson for some time. Though I retired from the FBI quite a while ago, I still enjoy playing the role of concerned citizen when I find there's a snake living in my neighborhood."

Something clicked in his mind and he stared a little harder at the handsome man at her side. "You're the one Agent Coulson had protecting Steve. That's why he got the job at the bar."

"I have little doubt that Steve Rogers wouldn't be able to survive on his own even after losing his mother so tragically, but I'll admit I wasn't sorry for the opportunity to give a good man the chance he needed to safe and well cared for. The fact that most of my staff were former military or special agents made SHIELD the perfect place for Steve to get his feet under him safely."

"Does he know about...?"

"I'm sure he'll pull the pieces together once the drugs are out of his system," she said with a faint smile, "And I'm sure I'll catch an earful for it."

"Thank you," Bucky murmured with a voice gone hoarse with emotion, "for watching over him when I did not."

Carter nodded, serious and understanding. The easy, confident strength in her reminded him of the same fire that kept Steve and Sarah Rogers burning long after their fuel ran dry. It helped to think that Steve hadn't been alone for the eight years where Bucky all but abandoned him--even if it burned to think that these people had gotten to witness everything he'd missed. It was his fault that Steve had been so alone in the first place.

Sam took a step closer to the bed and eyed the array of medical equipment with a practiced eye. "I never thought I'd be grateful to listen to another one of his lectures."

The open affection in both of these strangers face eased some of the tension in Bucky's body and he nodded wearily, smiling down at Steve. "He has a way of surprising you."

"Well then, Samuel," Carter said with the same brisk efficiency Bucky imagined she applied to all her tasks, "come help an old woman back to her office. Steve's in good hands here."

Sam grinned at her, "As if you couldn't kick my ass if you wanted to."

"A lady doesn't brag about such things, my dear. It harms fragile male egos." The primness in her voice startled a rusty laugh out of Bucky and drew her attention back to the former assassin. "You'll call us as soon as he is lucid and able to stay awake longer than a few minutes. I have a few things to say about our Steve's penchant for getting into trouble when he's alone."

Without bothering for him to agree, Carter turned and exited the room. Almost instantly both men slouched slightly like they were exhausted from their nearness to such an intimidating woman and Sam shook his head silently before he gave Bucky a heavy look.

“You’re staying this time, right?” he asked and there was little doubt in Bucky’s mind what he meant by that. “No more disappearing or running off on some solo mission?”

Bucky stared down at Steve, tracing over the bruises and abrasions that were visible outside of the heavy bandages. Even now, the thought of leaving Steve again was enough to make his muscles clench in revulsion. How could he leave Steve to face the scars and nightmares alone? But then, how could he stay knowing that each mark was because of Bucky’s failure to protect him?

He’d promised Steve would be untouchable and every shuddering, painful breath was a vivid reminder of how he’d failed.

Leaving Steve the first time had nearly killed him. Hell, sometimes he wished it had if meant an escape from Pierce’s cruel trainers and the memory of Steve standing alone and defeated on his doorstep, begging Bucky to come back. He’d used every resource at his disposal to make sure Pierce kept his bargain and Steve was safe, but sometimes it’d been months between reports. Months spent wondering if Steve had fallen ill for the final time or he’d started a fight he couldn’t finish without Bucky there beside him.

“No--” The word felt like salvation and damnation all at once. “--no, I won’t leave again.”

“Good,” Sam said with a slow, considering nod of approval. “He’s been waiting for you for too damn long.”

With that, the other man clapped Bucky on the shoulder and followed the path Carter had taken away from the room, leaving Bucky alone with his thoughts.

Bucky stared down at the scars that ran across nearly all of his hands and forearms. Reminders of each harsh lesson in survival and the only thing left to mark the passage of many of his victims. He remembered each of their faces still--twisted in rage, shrinking back in fear, or simply accepting the death that was coming for them. For too long he’d been the reaper forced to sow the sins of Hydra’s empire and leave only devastation in his wake. The thought that he might be able to create something here with Steve was almost laughable.

“Did you mean it?”

The words were little more than a whisper, but it was enough to have Bucky’s head snapping up and his eyes fixing on Steve like a lodestone. Relief and surprise tangled the words in his throat at the sight of Steve looking more alert and clearheaded than he’d been in days. Blue eyes still marred by the bright red of broken blood vessels were fixed on Bucky while his unbroken hand toyed idly with the fabric of the blanket.

Bucky licked his lips, trying to decide what Steve must have heard or if he was even lucid enough to hold a conversation. “I...what do you mean?”

“What you--” Steve broke off to cough jaggedly and Bucky nearly leapt out of his seat to bring over the cup of ice chips and water that he refilled religiously on the off chance Steve might need it when he woke up. It took several wheezing gulps before Steve pushed the cup away and cleared his throat. His bony hand shot out in surprising speed to catch Bucky by the

wrist and keep him still beside the bed so he could stare up at him. “What you said to Sam. Did you mean it?”

Heat curled up Bucky’s neck at the reminder of the promise he’d made and all it meant for him. He looked down at where Steve’s long, artist’s fingers were curled around his in a hold that should have been easy to break but felt like it was all that kept him anchored to the earth.

“If you’ll have me, Stevie,” he whispered finally, daring and dangerous with emotions that felt frail and delicate in way that Steve never would be. “If you want me to.”

Steve swallowed hard, peering up at him like he could see past skin and muscles into the very bones that seemed to always ache with the need to be closer to the pale blonde in his hospital bed. Part of Bucky wanted to flinch away from the truth that those eyes would uncover or pretend that he wasn’t waiting for the moment that Steve realized just how fucked up he truly was and sent him on his way. It was just as true that staying with Steve was the height of selfishness as it was fact that walking away would destroy what little humanity was left in Bucky.

So he told himself to leap where once he had run. To move into the light instead of hiding in the shadows. To heal something that should never have been broken.

Bucky leaned forward and pressed his lips to the bruised knuckles on Steve’s hand and whispered, “Our ‘almost’ has haunted me for eight years. I should never have left. I told myself that I could move on and you’d be happier without me, but I don’t know how not to miss you. I don’t know how to walk away from you and not look back. Torture was holding you in my dreams and waking up to an empty bed. Hell was watching you fall and not get back up again.”

Tears were dripping down the rough stubble on his cheeks to land on the scratchy blanket and Bucky shuddered when Steve’s thumb slowly rubbed away the salty line, eyes luminous with something close to wonder. It gave Bucky the strength to continue laying his heart at Steve’s feet.

“And even if you tell me to go, I will go to my deathbed knowing that the days I spent with you were the brightest of all my life. I’ll walk into hell knowing that waking up with you beside me was the closest thing to heaven I’ll ever know. I’ve loved you since before I knew what love was and...if you’ll let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to prove it to you.”

There was a long silence where Bucky felt like his heart was going to burst free from his chest with each passing second. He closed his eyes, wanting to hide from the growing realization that Pierce had finally destroyed the only thing that Bucky truly cared about. That Steve knew what Bucky had always been too afraid to truly admit--he was better off without him.

“Bucky...” The words were little more than a rasp, but Bucky’s body shuddered like a sinner receiving salvation. A finger swept under his chin and tilted it up until Bucky’s eyes fluttered open to stare into the eyes bluer than any sky he’d ever seen.

Then he felt Steve lean forward to close the distance between them and press his lips to Bucky's.

For a moment, time seemed to go still and perfect. Locked in a kind of quiet joy that flooded the veins with starlight and dreams of a new, brighter future. Bucky made a rough sound and leaned closer, pressing his lips to Steve's over and over again until he heard the heart monitor begin to race towards alerting the nurses to something too momentous for strangers to witness.

He pulled back and pressed his forehead to Steve's, marveling over the way their ragged breath slowly fell into a rhythm. Someone was shaking hard enough that he could feel the metal side of the bed vibrating and he huffed when he realized he was at fault. It felt like everything inside of him was shivering in a mixture of delight and painful desire.

"Come here," Steve ordered impatiently and Bucky raised his head enough to see Steve awkwardly gesture towards the narrow bed. Before Bucky could muster up a weak protest, he scowled, "I'm tired of sleeping here alone."

Helpless to oppose him, Bucky carefully eased himself into the thin space between the wall and Steve's lean body. It took some careful maneuvering to avoid upsetting the wires and IV still in place, but, within a few minutes, Bucky was laying back with an armful of sleepy, happy Steve. He stared up at the ceiling with a dumbfounded expression and tried to remember a time when the world had ever been so right.

"It's too late, you know," Steve murmured into Bucky's chest as the pain medication lulled him into another nap. "I'm not going to let you go now--no matter what you say."

Bucky's smile dimmed a little with old guilt. "You should hate me for what happened to you."

"You saved me. That's all that matters."

"You wouldn't have needed saving if I hadn't come back into your life," Bucky whispered miserably and pressed a kiss to the crown of Steve's head.

Steve grunted and snuggled impossibly closer, uncaring about the bruises and broken bones littering his body. "If surviving Rumlow and Pierce was what it takes to have you for the rest of my life, I'd do it again."

Throat tight with an emotion too painful and expansive for words, Bucky could only tuck his nose against the bright blonde hair and let the scent of Steve and home fill his lungs.

Steve's voice was going soft and slow with sleep, but he stubbornly forced himself to stay awake long enough to take Bucky's hand once more. "You're mine and I'm yours...until the end of the line."

Bucky looked down at the man in his arms and felt the broken and shattered pieces of his past slide into place with each beat of his heart. He smiled.

“Until the end of the line, Stevie.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading Untouchable! This story idea has been floating around in my head for a while now and I'm glad to finally get it all out on paper and uploaded for you to enjoy as well.

Special thanks to each and every one of you that took the time to stop and leave a comment with each new chapter! Your comments are the weapons I use to keep laziness and my fickle muse under control and I wouldn't have been able to do it without you!

If you've liked the story so far, stay tuned. I have two more ideas in the works and one will be used in the 2019 Stucky BB if everything goes according to plan. The story I've submitted should be a lot more fluffy and humorous than my previous Stucky stories, but I'm sure I'll sneak a little angst in there somewhere :).

Thanks again!



Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!