**Touch Me, Freeze Me, Lose Me**

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1078.

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| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category: | Slash (M/M) |
| Fandoms: | The Falcon and the Winter Solder (TV), Marvel Cinematic Universe |
| Relationship: | James "Bucky" Barnes/Sam Wilson |
| Characters: | Sam Wilson (Marvel), James "Bucky" Barnes |
| Additional Tags: | Hurt/Comfort, Whump, Non-Consensual Drug Use |
| Language: | English |
| Stats: | Published: 2025-12-12 Words: 4,816 Chapters: 1/1 |

# Touch Me, Freeze Me, Lose Me

by LifeOfMystery


Summary

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>
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>
> Sam leant forward.
>
> Bucky flattened himself against the wall, bared his teeth and snarled.

Sam and Bucky find themselves with the unenjoyable task of clearing out old bunkers left to rot after the blip, and Bucky gets hit with a substance awfully familiar to him.


Notes

This was initially posted as part of Fic In A Box 2025. I love Sam's pov to write from as it feels a bit freer in the fact he's not a man from the 40s, I can be a bit more looser and modern in the language. And he's funny!

The first clue Sam had that something had gone wrong was the smashing sound from the next room over.

It was a fairly regular mission, going through old bunkers and trying to catalogue their contents before the military could find it and disappear them. After the accords, after Ross, Sam had a well-deserved suspicion of their motives, and with the name of Captain America, he was able to step in. There wasn't much they missed, not with Bucky's skills as a boost.

It did sometimes mean they got in there maybe a bit too fast. They couldn't sit around and wait while dangerous weapons could be changing hands under their noses.

It looked like today was the day that expedience had come back to bite them.

"Bucky?" Sam called. He unclipped the shield, gripping it tightly. This place was supposedly empty of people, but you never knew. They'd scanned the place for signs of life, but there was so much weirdness in the world you couldn't trust that a clear radar was entirely accurate.

There was a weird, choked coughing sound. Sam was familiar with the sounds of fighting - more than familiar with the specific sounds of Bucky choking someone out. This wasn't that.

He edged around the corner.

And nearly dropped the shield.

Bucky lay curled up on the floor, metal fist curled into the grate below him. His other hand was pressed against his throat as he gagged.

"Redwing, scan," Sam ordered the drone by his side as he pulled his air ventillator over his face. If this was strong enough to down Bucky, it would be enough to kill Sam. There would be no point running in to try and help Bucky if Sam would keel over right next to him.

Redwing flew over and scanned Bucky, red light filtering over his erratically moving form.

Bucky's eyes flicked up, and he looked aware enough to recognise Sam. That was a good sign. There were no sounds of oxygen deprivation, no blue tint to the skin. He wasn't choking.

No, rather he was… trying to gag something back up?

Redwing's readings scanned across Sam's faceplate. "Unknown substance fully ingested by James Barnes. All other contaminants are contained. Safe to enter."

Jesus. Ingested? That could *not* be good.

Nothing keeping him back anymore, Sam raced over to Bucky. Bucky dug a knee into the floor and pried himself up, breathing haggardly, knocking away Sam's outstretched hand. He wasn't trying to gag anymore. Perhaps he'd realised it was too late.

"What happened?" Sam asked.

"Accident. They hadn't enclosed their equipment properly," Bucky rasped, massaging his sore throat. "I got a mouthful."

"Redwing doesn't know what it is," Sam told Bucky.

"There are documents on the bench." Bucky motioned over to a file that lay astrew. Redwing moved over and scanned through the pages.

Half a second later, the readings came through to Sam.

"Substance TB-364. Meant to release inhibition and enforce dopamine through close contact with administrators," Sam read out loud for Bucky's sake. He frowned. "What, so it's some kind of artificial way of inducing familiarity with people? What would a lab like this need with something like that?"

Bucky froze. Sam leaned back as Bucky's eyes widened, fixating on a spot in the far distance.

"Hey, buddy, you with me?" Sam asked carefully.

All of a sudden, Bucky broke into a blur of motion.

Sam's first instinct was to raise his shield, but he had no reason for it. Bucky had slammed himself into the corner of the room, as far away from Sam as he could get.

Sam lowered his shield, feeling guilty. He couldn't help it, even though he knew Bucky wouldn't blame him. Bucky didn't need more reasons to feel like a danger.

But right now, Bucky really did look feral. His chest rose and fell too rapidly, even for a supersoldier. His hands had stabbed into the floor and were curling the metal grating around his fingers. He didn't even look aware of the act of strength. He didn't look like he was mentally in the same room as Sam at all.

"Bucky," Sam called firmly. He'd seen veterans dissociate before, helped them through it before, but every time it was equally as terrifying. Terrifying for their own safety, of knowing what they saw trapped in their heads wasn't anything anyone deserved.

His voice didn't seem to reach him.

Sam moved forward, getting down onto his knees to not tower over Bucky.

Bucky's eyes flicked towards him. All of a sudden far too intense and too here, when a second ago they'd been anything but.

"Get back," Bucky snarled. "Get *back*."

Sam stopped. Raised his hands.

"Okay, I'm just going to stay right here. Is that okay?"

Bucky stared at him. There wasn't an inch of comprehension on his face.

Sam backed up, falling onto his heels. He couldn't help but think of scared dogs, how you would have to move slowly and carefully to not spook them. And then he felt bad for comparing Bucky to an animal. And then he felt bad for spending so much time ridiculing himself for all of this, when Bucky was in front of him, clearly in some kind of pain, the definite higher priority.

"Redwing." Sam didn't raise his voice, but didn't whisper either, trying to keep his voice to an even level. "Can you explain exactly what the substance does to whoever would get hit with it?"

Redwing's lights flashed, the question processing. The tiny red lights blinked over Bucky's forehead. He didn't even blink, eyes focused scarily intense.

"They would feel an intense need for physical contact from whoever is nearby. If those specifications were not met, the substance will trigger a pain response."

Pain response?

*Shit.*

Bucky began to shake. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and the sound of his metal fingers jittering against the grate scratched the air.

Need for physical contact? Fine. This wasn't great, but Sam wasn't stupid, he could figure out what to do.

Sam leant forward.

Bucky flattened himself against the wall, bared his teeth and *snarled*.

Sam jerked backwards.

"I'm trying to help you, asshole!" he yelled, catching his racing heart.

"I don't want you to," Bucky hissed. He pressed his knees tight flat to his body, arms outstretched to either side of him, still clinging to the grate. He was bristling, tight with tension, still shaking all over.

"What are we going to do then, huh? I don't exactly like watching you be in this much pain."

"Ask Redwing how long this will last for."

"You're kidding, you're not thinking of just sitting this through - "

"Sam. Ask."

Sam jerked his head over to Redwing. It got the picture and began processing.

"From the amount ingested, it should pass through his body in one hour."

"One hour?" Sam asked in disbelief.

"I can do an hour," Bucky gritted out.

"But you don't *have* to."

Bucky pressed his eyes shut. His mouth twisted and he panted, hard. Sam shifted, wanting to lean forward and help him, but knowing exactly what Bucky would do if he did.

“Don’t, don’t, don’t…” Bucky’s words dissolved into unintelligible mumbles. Sam swallowed, his throat feeling tight. It didn’t feel right to just be sitting here, watching. Watching Bucky in pain. They’d been injured before, but that was different. There had been something Sam could *do*, something visibly obvious in front of him that he could fix. Not a chemical concoction that they just had to wait until it flushed out of his system.

“Bucky, this is insane,” Sam said, close to pleading. “All I’m going to do is hold your arm, nothing more than that - “

“No,” Bucky snarled. His eyes snapped open, dilated so far they were tiny pinpricks in a white sea. It was terrifying to watch. And even worse, was that Bucky’s gaze wasn’t even on Sam. It was somewhere to the left. Sam knew there was nothing there, and Redwing would have alerted him if there was.

Sam had seen this before. A flashback. He just hadn’t seen Bucky have one. The man was so carefully on guard, never allowing himself to slip into vulnerability. The fact that it was only *now* that Sam was seeing this from Bucky, a perfectly ordinary symptom of trauma as massive as the many HYDRA had imposed on him, just showed how effective that drug was at breaking down his control.

Sam shifted back, an ache growing in his thighs.

Bucky planted his feet flat on the floor. His muscles tensed as though he were about to leap away.

He said something, loud and sharp. Loud and sharp, and very much not in English.

*Not good*.

“Hey buddy, I don’t know that one,” Sam said lightly. He raised his hands and resettled himself, trying to find a position where he wouldn’t have to move. He didn’t want to startle Bucky again. Bucky wasn’t the type to slip, but Sam had never seen him like this. Bucky was so careful all the time. Careful not to fall into flashbacks, careful not to hurt people with his superhuman strength. Sam hadn’t realised how careful Bucky had to be, not until he’d gotten close to the man.

Only someone who cared so much would try to be that careful all the time. It was inspiring and also frustrating. Sam had yearned to help Bucky before this, to get close enough to let

him know there were times he didn't have to hold himself together so tightly, but Bucky was closed down harder than Alcatraz.

If this drug was enough to break that winning streak, Sam wouldn’t begrudge him that. Bucky had held on long enough. It was Sam’s time to be careful, to do what he had to do to keep Bucky going until this hour would pass.

Bucky said what had to be the same word, harsh consonants with a rigid snap to the end of it, like an order. Or a question?

Sam didn’t understand it, but he could guess at its meaning.

“I am not going to move. I am not going to touch you,” Sam said. He overenunciated his words, just in case Bucky was in such a state that he couldn’t properly recognise English. He kept his hands raised, palms flat.

Bucky’s eyes twitched from empty palm to empty palm, a staccato rhythm. He muttered a word under his breath. Still not English, but definitely a different word from the one before.

They settled into an uneasy peace. Redwing had put a timer up against his visor, and the minutes were passing agonisingly slowly.

Sam considered leaving. He didn’t *want* to leave Bucky like this, but every time he shifted, every time he moved even a muscle, Bucky would tense up and stare at the offending appendage with a gaze that could pierce metal. Bucky wasn’t seeing him, Sam knew that, but perhaps even having a person in the room while Bucky was feeling this vulnerable was hindering him rather than helping.

Maybe, if he were left alone, he would be able to untense, even if just a little.

If this were anybody else, Sam would have asked Bucky for advice. But right now, the only one he could ask was the very person in trouble, unable to give it. Sam was Captain America. He had to be the one making the decisions now.

“I’m going to leave the room and come back when the hour is up. Is that good with you?”

Bucky said nothing. Sam shifted backwards, keeping his hands up while he stood up. It was awkward to move like this, but he didn’t want to risk Bucky thinking he was going for a weapon.

Sam stepped towards the door, still facing Bucky. He didn’t look away from him, and that’s why he didn’t miss Bucky’s eyebrows creasing.

Bucky’s mouth opened haltingly. He didn’t say anything, but his throat bobbed up and down like he was trying.

Sam stopped midway. He had to wait and see what was happening. If his partner was trying to get through to him, communicate to him, and Sam just left now, he wouldn’t be able to forgive himself.

“Don’t go,” Bucky finally whispered.

Sam’s heart pounded. The vulnerability in that soft voice, the shaking of his hands against the grate, nothing was hidden. He couldn’t leave now. He didn’t understand what Bucky wanted - why Bucky wanted him here when every movement terrified him, but Sam knew what he had to do. He knew full well that trauma didn’t make sense, it didn’t work easily and nicely, and sometimes you just had to listen to what people told you they needed and follow accordingly.

Sam sat himself back down on the floor.

“Okay, Buck, guess I’m staying here.” He chanced a look back at the timer. “Forty minutes to go, huh? We can make it.”

Bucky said nothing in reply. He said nothing, and didn’t move, apart from the minute shaking scrapes against the metal floor torn to pieces in his hands.

That was how they sat for the rest of the hour.

Finally, the timer pinged down to nothing.

Bucky ducked his head, pressing into his knees. His fingers loosened, dropping bits of discarded metal everywhere.

“Burn this place,” Bucky rasped.

“Got it,” Sam replied. Bucky didn’t need to say it twice. No one would miss this.

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As much as Sam wanted to check up on Bucky, Bucky didn’t make it easy to find him. As soon as they left the building and Sam got in contact with Joaquin to organise a burying of this entire base, Bucky had disappeared. They were supposed to meet back up to fly back to New York together, but somehow, Bucky had commandeered a plane all on his own.

There was nothing Sam could do about it but begrudgingly make his own way back. They were adults, and if Bucky’s way of dealing was to go dark, fine. Sam wouldn’t go bugging him about it. Even if it was really annoying. Sam wasn't going to blame him for anything that happened in there, wasn't going to shame him. He just wanted to know if Bucky was alright. He couldn't stop his thoughts from wandering. He'd been so useless in there, he felt like he had to do something now. Except Bucky was never going to let him.

Bucky didn’t respond to Sam’s check-up message, and Sam mentally gave him a week before he would head over to Bucky’s apartment in person. He knew that the chances were that Bucky wouldn’t even be there. If Bucky didn’t want to be found, he wouldn’t be. Sam had learnt that well enough back in 2014.

Sam wasn’t expecting to see Bucky again for a while.

That made the sight of Bucky loitering next to the door of his spare apartment in New York even more surprising.

Sam stopped dead, groceries hanging off his fingers.

“Don’t drop that,” Bucky said.

“Oh, Mr Mysterious goes scorched earth, and the first thing he says is ‘don’t drop that’?” Sam huffed. He did readjust his grip on the bag. It would be embarrassing to drop it after that.

“Would you rather I have said ‘get inside’?” Bucky moved aside to let Sam unlock the door and followed him into the apartment.

“And those were the only two options? Not ‘hey, sorry I went off the grid after that whole drug ingestion thing, thank you for dealing with cleaning up that base after’?”

“I knew you would have had it handled.” Bucky shrugged. The movement crinkled his leather jacket, bending the fabric around his arms. He looked fairly uncomfortable now that the front door had closed, standing in the middle of the room like he didn’t know where to go.

“You are allowed to sit down.” Sam motioned to the spare chair next to the dining table. Bucky wandered over to it, leaning against the back of the chair, knuckles tight against the leather gloves. He didn’t move to sit.

Sam put away his groceries and wondered how long it would take for Bucky to actually take the chair, or if he ever would.

“Look, you know I really don’t blame you for what happened in there, okay? That was an accident, and we got through it, and that’s all that needs to be.” Sam took his own chair, crossing his legs and staring up at Bucky like a challenge. “This doesn’t need to make things different.”

Bucky shifted, fingers flexing against the chair.

“I wanted to explain,” he said, and pressed his mouth so tight his lips went white.

Sam considered what explaining meant, and came to the conclusion that whatever was happening, this was up to Bucky. “Fine, but you can do it sitting down. Unless you’re trying to be purposefully intimidating?”

“No,” Bucky muttered silently, and finally sat down.

He clasped his hands together, leather creaking as his fingers intertwined. It was clear that he was nervous, but Sam didn't interrupt, letting Bucky settle. This wasn't an interrogation, and Sam was in no rush.

"Thank you," Bucky said, "For what you did, back there, with me."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "I didn't do anything. I strictly remember you telling me not to."

"Yeah, but you listened," Bucky's voice strained out. His eyes flicked down to his hands, back up to Sam. "I… you could probably tell I was having a flashback."

"The whole speaking-not-English thing gave me a hint, yeah," Sam said. They didn't normally talk about this stuff, not so openly, and it made Sam feel… not wary, but slightly unsettled. That day had been a lot for both of them, and Sam had assumed that with Bucky disappearing like that, they would never bring it up again. That Bucky would just return when he chose to, and they would pretend it hadn't happened. That was how things worked.

Until now, it seemed.

"That drug… HYDRA didn't have it, but they had stuff that was similar. And it felt the same way. Was meant to do the same thing." Bucky shut his mouth and swallowed. Sam watched his throat tremble, unsure what to say. This was heavy shit, and as much as Sam was experienced in dealing with veterans, that was on a professional level. It was different with a friend. With someone you cared for, opening up about the absolute depravities of their past.

"Without memories, I didn't know any better to fight it, so I always just - did what they wanted." Bucky broke his gaze, eyes drifting to the floor.

"That was never your fault," Sam said. He was unsure if he was stepping in, but damn it, he wasn't letting Bucky sit with that. The self-blame was heavy in his tone, and Sam didn't like it. Never liked it, but damn if Bucky clung to it like a mollusc.

Bucky's jaw tightened.

"Back there, I kept thinking you were one of them, and this time I knew I could fight back," Bucky continued. Sam didn't miss the blatant passing over the whole 'at fault' thing, but he wasn't going to push it, not now. "That's why I didn't want you to touch me. But being left alone was always worse, they would do it on purpose to increase the potency. So thank you for not leaving either."

"You shouldn't be thanking me for the bare minimum of human decency - "

"You stayed!" Bucky snapped. "That's not just bare minimum."

"Of course I stayed," Sam snapped back, "You asked me to."

Bucky's gloves creaked violently, bending around his fingers. It was almost amazing that they stayed in one piece.

"I was a risk," Bucky insisted. "It would have been practical to leave when I was dangerous, and I wouldn't blame you now if you had. Just accept the thanks!"

Sam's mind whirled, adrift in the understanding of exactly how Bucky was interpreting this.

"When I was going to leave, it wasn't because I thought you were dangerous. You kept getting startled at everything I did. I was going to leave because I thought it would have been better for you," Sam explained. He had to get Bucky to understand that this hadn't been a burden for him, not at all.

Bucky fell quiet, the only motion the working of his jaw.

Sam crossed his arms.

"I know you, Bucky, and you weren't going to hurt me back there."

"How can you say that," Bucky said, without heat. "You've seen what I've done before - "

"Yeah, when you were brainwashed, and mind-controlled. You may have been out of it, sure, but it was still you. I can tell the goddamned difference."

Bucky looked away.

Sam pressed his fingers against the sleeve of his jacket, working out his feelings. It always sucked when Bucky spoke like this, so self-deprecatingly, with such little care for himself. At this point, Sam knew better than to push too hard, but at some point, it was just tiring. Tiring to listen to his partner treat himself worse than he would ever dare to treat anybody else.

"Thank you," Bucky said, "Still, I need you to know. Thank you."

Sam sighed. "Bucky, it's fine."

He stood up, Bucky matching his movements. Sam reached over and clapped his shoulder, the way he always did. The way Bucky never cared about, before.

Until now.

Bucky practically swayed towards him, the heavy weight of him suddenly pressed against Sam's palm. A soft breath escaped him and his eyelids dropped, far too vulnerable compared to Bucky's stoic nature.

Sam froze.

"Is the drug still affecting you? Jesus, Bucky, you should have told me, we need to get you to a chemical screening - " Sam yanked his hand back, memories of Bucky's avid desperation to get away playing in front of his eyes.

Bucky darted back, eyes flashing open. He seemed unaware of what he'd just done, of how strange he'd just appeared.

"It's not that," Bucky said hurriedly. "I don't need a chemical screening."

"Are you sure?" Sam asked sceptically. "Because you didn't see what I just saw."

"Sam, it's not that," Bucky tried.

"A chemical screen will confirm it." Sam moved to pick up his phone and ring Joaquin. He would be able to find a place for it that would be confidential enough for this. He couldn't believe Bucky hadn't said anything - but then, actually, he could. Of course, Bucky would have tried to keep it under wraps, of course, he wouldn't have told Sam. Even coming here and supposedly opening up, he was still keeping his secrets.

"Sam," Bucky said. His voice was resolute, and it stopped Sam in his tracks. "It's not the drug. Honestly, it's not affecting me anymore. It's just the… after effects."

"After effects," Sam echoed. Redwing hadn't informed him about those.

"It's not creating any chemical compulsion in me, but I…" Bucky faltered. He stepped back, drawing himself in close. Sam could see the walls going up. He only had a few seconds to get in, to fix this before Bucky would presumably disappear again.

"Wait," Sam said. He reached over, resting a hand on Bucky's arm. Bucky's eyes darted straight to it. He didn't move away, but he didn't lean forward either. Held painfully stiff, Sam could feel the tension like a live wire.

"I get it. It's not the chemical making you want to be touched." Sam didn't dare say the rest of what he was thinking out loud. Bucky was already about to bolt as it was.

He didn't need to say it.

Bucky nodded, in complete understanding.

"What you said, about how they would use touch against you, are you sure this is okay?" Sam pressed down with his fingers, feeling Bucky's flesh through his thick leather sleeve.

"There's nothing making me do this. It's not… for anything."

"Of course it isn't," Sam said. "You don't owe me anything for this, Bucky."

Bucky released a soft hissing breath.

"Hey, c'mon." Sam opened his arms. He'd never done touch therapy, but this was essentially what this was. And Sam could give this to Bucky. If that was what he needed.

Bucky's mouth twisted, eyes going dark with some desperate, dark need. He didn't step back. He didn't flinch away. He didn't say anything, but Sam could read him well enough to know what that meant.

Sam took the first step instead.

The moment Sam's arms wrapped around Bucky, Bucky melted into him. Sam dragged them over to the couch. He had to. Bucky weighed a shit-ton, and Sam felt like he was nearly about to collapse.

Sam manoeuvred themselves comfortably into place. He kept his arms tightly pressed against Bucky, the solid warmth of his body a furnace beside him.

He didn't notice it straight away, but when they'd settled properly, Sam realised Bucky was shaking.

"Hey man, are you okay?" Sam asked him. He couldn't see Bucky's expression, nestled away as it was into the crook of Sam's shoulder. He could just feel the tremors.

"Yeah," Bucky croaked wetly. "I'm good. I'm sorry."

"Don't do that. No apologising for this." Sam started rubbing at his back, smooth, stable motions. He wasn't sure why, mostly that he needed something to do with his hands.

Bucky's breathing deepened, moving slower and slower. They sat like that for a while. Sam continued his repetitive motions. Bucky's leather jacket moved slightly under his touch, circling and circling.

"Why are you helping me?" Bucky mumbled. "This whole thing, it's a lot. You didn't need to - "

"I wasn't going to leave you in pain," Sam said. "That's all, all right?"

Bucky shifted, not moving away, but adjusting himself so his head could twist to look up at Sam. Sam felt oddly self-conscious, such an intense gaze only inches away from his face.

"You said you don't want anything from me," Bucky said.

"Yeah, I did," Sam said cautiously.

"But… why?" Bucky's voice cracked.

Sam's heart felt like it was cracking with him.

He swallowed, gathering up the energy to say what must be said.

"I guess it's not entirely true. I do want something from you. I want you to be happy. Not having to walk around with all this weight on you. You never put it down, take a break. Shit, Bucky, I think you've tortured yourself enough about everything already."

"There are people out there, missing family members because of what I did - "

"I know that," Sam said. And sighed. "Of course I know that. I just don't think any of it is a balance that you need to repay. You're allowed to find some happiness in your life."

Bucky went quiet, the only sound his breathing.

Sam worried he'd pressed too far, said too much. He half expected Bucky to fly out of his arms and walk out of the room. If he held him tighter in response, well. Who would call him out on that?

"… You really care a lot about this, don't you?" Bucky said.

Sam tried to twist to see Bucky's expression. It was nearly impossible, with Bucky's weight holding him down and his face so far off to the side. He begrudgingly gave up, settling back down and giving his neck a break.

"Yeah, okay, you got me. I care about you," Sam admitted. "I'm your partner. If I'm not going to do it, then what's the point of me?"

Bucky laughed softly. "I think being Captain America is about a lot of things other than that."

"I know that, jerk, I was making a point."

Bucky hummed, a soft murmur that vibrated softly through Sam's neck. It felt nice, good even, and for a flash, Sam wondered what it would feel like if Bucky did that directly on his neck. He pushed the thought away.

That wasn't helpful right now.

"But that, about being partners, it applies to me too," Bucky said. "If you need anything like this, ever, well…"

Sam's heart swooped. "Oh?"

"You know." Bucky didn't shrug, didn't dislodge Sam's arms, but Sam could hear it in his voice. The way he was trying to hang onto a veneer of this still being casual. "I'm free."

Was Sam reading too much into this? Was he hearing what he wanted to hear in Bucky's voice just because it resonated so closely in his own heart?

He looked down and was startled to see Bucky's eyes staring up at him, focused and intent. Sam could feel his heartbeat in his ears. The world focused down on just the two of them.

Sam's eyes flicked down to Bucky's lips, but it was Bucky who kissed him first.

The kiss felt like beginning, it felt like something new, and it felt like the burning resolution of that *something* between them that had always been there, but locked down tightly.

And from now on, they had the key.

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