So if it’s cool, I wanna rock with you…

by OriginalCeenote

Summary


Steve never promised Sam five-star accommodations when they went on the hunt for Bucky, but Sam Wilson spent two tours in the desert, with hot sand in uncomfortable places and sleeping out in the open like a cave man. He can handle this.

...until the desk clerk regretfully informed them that all they had left was a single.

Notes

Short fic for claraxbarton, who prompted me with this on Tumblr, as though I needed another excuse to write more Sam/Steve ridiculousness. I know I left a road trip drabble around here somewhere too, but in the meantime, here you go.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Sam woke up with a crick in his neck and the clammy, crusty chill of drool on the side of his chin. The air conditioning continued to blast him while he slept, even though the sun had sank below the trees since he last closed his eyes. Sam didn’t know what even woke him, but his mouth tasted like paste, and his stomach had some very loud ideas on the subject.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Hey.” Steve looked and sounded annoyingly fresh, as though he hadn’t spent the last seven hours behind the wheel of the cramped Volkswagen Beetle. Even with the seats all the way pushed back, Sam’s legs screamed at him to get out and walk around, so that he could coax some circulation back into his feet; it would feel like tapdancing on a cactus once he climbed out of the car, and he wasn’t looking forward to that, or the next hotel. At least this one was a Best Western, a half a star’s improvement over the Motel 6 they’d checked out of two days ago. Sam scrubbed his face with his palm and caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview.

Puffy, slightly bloodshot eyes. Chapped lips. Hair flat on one side. Sam expected no less than these after seven hours. By contrast, the last of the evening sunlight shone in flickering beams atop Steve’s wheat blond hair, turning it a soft gold. Sam noticed the empty water and Gatorade bottles chucked into the back seat, since the battered Beetle lacked decent cup holders. If Sam’s guess was correct, Steve would smile brightly, check them in at the desk, and make a beeline for the toilets. That kept him awake behind the wheel as readily as the serum. Sam could relate.

Sam wondered about the choice of car. Steve sheepishly admitted that they made him nostalgic. “These were reliable in my day. Didn’t take much gas to get up and go, and they were easy to fix when they broke down.”

“It’s the size of a clown car, Steve. And the clown car’s actually roomier.”

Steve tsked under his breath, but he grinned at Sam’s judgment before he turned his eyes back onto the road.

There were so many leads that yielded nothing. Steve and Sam watched news headlines, combing through them like grains of sand. Bucky covered his tracks like a man who didn’t want to be found, and who definitely wasn’t looking for anyone to come save him. Once in a while, the reports mentioned scuffles with a man who matched the description of one James Buchanan Barnes, former sergeant and Brooklyn native, but thankfully no casualties. Steve drew cold comfort from that, but he never made any attempt to contact him again. None of his associates in DC had any new leads. Natasha’s contacts at the Kremlin held him at the top of their most wanted list, but once again, the Winter Soldier came as he pleased, fleeting as a ghost.

Steve and Sam parked the bug and brought their burner phones and laptop with them, along with Steve’s SHIELD-issued duffel bag, even after Sam reminded him that it wasn’t very subtle when they were traveling *somewhat* incognito. The baseball caps and sunglasses went on before they entered the air conditioned front lobby. North Carolina held no mysteries for Sam, but it was fun to watch Steve’s reaction to the “South of the Border” signs in their varying levels of poor taste. (They stopped for refrigerator magnets, postcards, and snacks; Steve assured him that Natasha needed the figurine of a donkey in a sombrero and mariachi outfit playing guitar.)

Sam checked them in, deciding to give Steve a break from the gawkers as he pulled out his ID and credit card. Sam took full advantage of his veteran’s discount, and the girl at the desk thanked him
for his service before handing them the key cards in a small paper sleeve.

“Need any toiletries, sir? Toothbrush and toothpaste?”

“Please tell me the room has a coffee maker,” Sam pleaded.

“We even serve coffee in the lobby starting at six AM,” she told him cheerfully. “We hope you enjoy your stay, and let us know if there is anything else we can do to make it more comfortable.”

“Let us sleep in,” Sam said. “That’s all we’ll need.”

“Of course!” she chirped back, before she went back to her computer monitor and ceased giving a shit. Sam huffed. Steve clapped him on the back as they picked up their bags and headed outside. Sam felt annoyed by the two-flight walk up the metal steps. Everything annoyed him at this point.

Sam wondered about their next destination, and how long it would take for them to catch up to Bucky. How he would receive them. If it would end in a fight.

And how much would it hurt Steve if Bucky truly didn’t want to be found. That was the worst part. Watching his hopes soar with each new lead, and then watching him lapse back into stony melancholy when they ended up emptyhanded. Trains. Seven-forty-sevens. Rental cars. Double decker buses. Commuter ferries. Sam knew that he wanted to see the world back when he first enlisted, but this was excessive. He’d made it home to his condo in DC three times within the past two years; his neighbor checked his mail and watered his plants. He called his parents and his sister Sarah every other week to check in, only for them to complain about his horrible cell service and the constant static over the line.

Steve never suggested separate rooms. Neither of them was shy about doubling up, having lived in barracks for so long and dealt with communal meals and showers. Both of them were fastidious in their habits, living out of their suitcases and piling the damp towels on top of the vanity as they used them instead of the floor. Steve tipped generously, whether it was the room service staff or the housekeeper.

“I hope the mattresses aren’t too soft,” Sam remarked as Steve keyed them inside.

Steve stopped short in front of him with an abrupt, “Uh.”

“What?”

“What if there’s only one of them, Wilson?”

“Wait… what?”

Sam didn’t mean for his voice to come out like an indignant squawk. Convenience store Lunchables and hot Cheetos did that to a guy after a while. But Steve stepped aside, and sure enough, Sam saw the pristinely made, king-sized bed with the tacky paisley bedspread already turned down, with two Andes mints lying across the flap of the sheet.

Just.

One.

Bed.

“Yeah,” Steve murmured. “Think they screwed up our reservation a little.”
Sam gave Steve his Sunday-best *Are you fucking kidding me?* face complete with a neck swivel and a hand on his hip. “That’s understating things a little.”

“Wanna head back down...?”

And Sam heard the wheels turning in Steve’s head already. They were arriving late in the day. The parking lot was relatively full already, indicating that most of the rooms were probably booked. And it was a Friday night. Trying to change their room would likely be more trouble than it was worth, and Steven Grant “I don’t wanna be a burden” Rogers was perfectly ready to let it slide.

“It could be worse,” Steve offered, rubbing his nape. Sam sighed heavily. “Hey, Wilson, just to let you know, I don’t snore.”

“No. To your credit, you don’t.” Sam took off his baseball cap and shades, setting them down on the side table in a silent acceptance of the room and the hassle of bunking together in closer quarters than they’d planned. “Just don’t Dutch oven me, and we’ll get along fine.”

“I can’t make any promises. I don’t have ulcers ever since the serum, Sam. That doesn’t mean I don’t get gas.”

“Oh, Lawd...” Sam snickered despite himself. Steve bit his lip and unpacked their toiletry bags on the bathroom counter.

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The water pressure in the shower was weak; the hot water tank lasted about ten minutes, barely long enough to soothe Sam’s cramped, stiff muscles, but he’d take it. The water pounded against his flesh and ran through his hair in rivulets. Sam watched them spiral down the drain and sighed, listening to the sound bounce off the tiles. *How did I end up here?* Sam didn’t even know if he wanted the answer to that question anymore.

Steve was missing when Sam emerged wrapped in the fluffy towels, roughly drying his hair and letting the air conditioning kiss his damp skin. Sam sat on the edge of the bed and fiddled with the remote. Only ten local channels; the premiums cost extra to watch, and Sam knew he could watch half of his favorites on Netflix. But he shifted his focus to the task at hand and emailed his buddy at the VA, who went back to school after he discharged to become a private investigator. He traced a plane ticket that a Barney Jamison booked using funds from a foreign bank account. Brussels, this time. Sam’s passport acquired new stamps every other week. Sam sent the email, not wanting to get his hopes up yet.

He just needed to cool his heels. Just for a while. Yet Sam felt guilty about asking Steve to hit the pause button when they were so close.

*I do everything he does, except slower.* His words came back to haunt him. Sam told his veterans to work on their self care and well-being for a living, and here he was, following a man who jumped out of planes without a chute through burning buildings and gunfire. It was more dangerous than being enlisted, and not for the first time, Sam wondered how this was his life.

The answer was always, “Steve.”

Sam didn’t know when he’d eased himself back until he sat slumped against the headboard, face tipped forward and still only wearing his towel. He might have started snoring over the drone of Fox Sports. He thought he only, dimly heard the click and swish of the door and the soft thud of Steve’s
“Sammy? Buddy? Don’t do that.” Steve’s voice sounded soft and a little exasperated, but it was also fond. “You’re gonna mess up your neck even more. Settle down.” Sam felt Steve’s light touch, fingers skimming his shoulder.

“Wanna call for a cot?” Sam asked him on a yawn, distorting the words and catching them with the back of his hand. He watched Steve through tired slits, and his view was bleary, but Steve smiled down at him; the expression was sympathetic and in character.

“What? Sam, no. There’s no need for that. I could even sleep on the floor, or I could fold out the couch.”

“Uh-uh. That’s taking it too far.”

“I brought back pizza.” Sam noticed the Pizza Hut box as Steve set it on the round table that had one janky leg; it rocked under the scant weight.

“Steve. You didn’t have to do that.” Then, he recanted. “What am I talking about? You and your metabolism. Go ahead and eat.”

“Have a quick slice, Wilson, so I don’t hafta eat alone.”

And he meant it. Steve was too polite to just simply eat in front of Sam, and Sam knew he had to be famished. Sam also realized the pizza was a peace offering for the sleeping arrangements, and he decided it would be more gracious of him to just accept it. And Steve, unlike Barton, was quick to share food. It was an automatic impulse, having grown up in the Depression and fought overseas during a time where the government rationed everything.

It would be a sacrilege to turn it down.

“If we end up heading north again, we can stop at a Papa Gino’s on the way. They make a decent steak sub for a chain.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad idea.”

Sam opened it up. Pepperoni, sausage and olives. At least he didn’t subject Sam to a Hawaiian pizza, because Sam didn’t know if he could cope with pineapple chunks right now. (Natasha and Clint cried blasphemy when Sam admitted he hated them on his pizza. Movie nights in the common room became more cantankerous with that revelation. Sam drove home his preferences by dropping a chunk of it down the back of Clint’s collar in passing when Clint called him a heathen.)

Sam took two slices and automatically laid them out on a paper plate for Steve. Steve took it and gave Sam’s arm a fond pat of thanks before he folded one slice in half and crammed it into his mouth.

“Any hot water left?” he asked, voice garbled.

“Give it about ten minutes. Sorry.”

“No. No, it’s okay. I don’t blame you for showering first. I was sticking to the seats in the car.” Steve sank into one of the uncomfortable vinyl-upholstered chairs and continued to devour his food. He toed off his sneakers, multitasking.

“I wasn’t gonna say anything about that…”
Steve’s lips twisted. “Jerk.”

“Stankin’ Steven Rogers,” Sam tossed back, giving him a huffy look.

Steve chuckled, almost choking on his pizza. “You ain’t right, Wilson.”

Sam was hungrier than he thought. They ended up splitting the pie down the middle. Steve dug out a pair of flip-flops from his bag and shoved his feet into them and shoveled the dirty plates and crumpled napkins into the pizza box. “I’m gonna throw this out. Want anything? Drink? Ice?”

“Ice and some water wouldn’t be bad.” If Sam woke up in the middle of the night, he knew his throat would be burning from inhaling the air conditioned climate of the room all night. And Sam always woke up in the middle of the night.

Steve grinned at him and grabbed a room key card. “Back in a flash.”

Sam waited for the door to click shut after him before he dug into his bag for a pair of boxers and an undershirt. He folded down the coverlet and top sheet and took the pillow from the opposite side of the bed, stacking it double with his own to prop himself up, and then Sam fiddled with the remote control. He pondered the night they had ahead of them.

Steve would want to boot up the laptop and get in touch with Nat. Read the headlines. Skim the international news and criminal databases, including SHIELD’s, even though they’d been compromised. Sam knew that this wasn’t just a rest stop. They were still working. Still searching.

Sometimes, reconnaissance took the form of bad hotel rooms and food that was bad enough to make Sam crave his own kitchen and stony silences and watching Steve’s face fall when they chased down another dead lead and the sense of futility of chasing down a soldier who never had the dignity of being discharged on his own terms. James Barnes was the comrade Steve Rogers couldn’t bring home from war, and he pushed himself every day to make it right.

And it was hard, to watch Steve mourn for his friend even as he lived. A stranger wore Bucky’s face now, superhumanly strong and a perfect shot, dead-eyed and unstoppable. Sam still felt the bruises in his shoulder (slamming his way out of his crumpled car and using the door as a sled), lower back (where he was kicked), shoulder blade (having his wing ripped off and landing badly) and random places on his body where the shrapnel and rubble showered him before he leapt out the window from forty-one stories up, even though they were months old. Some memories were indelible. Explosions, in particular, lingered with Sam.

He was just so tired.

Sam managed to find the Food Network and decided to watch a rerun of Chopped. “Not marshmallows again,” he murmured. “Why do they always throw ‘em that curveball?”

Steve keyed his way back inside, arms laden with a six-pack of water bottles and a small bucket of ice. “Find anything good?”

“Reruns. They have Pay-Per-View, but I don’t feel like paying for it.”

Steve shrugged. “It’s SHIELD’s money. I’m still collecting seventy years of back pay, Wilson. We can live a little higher on the hog. I haven’t even touched my pension yet.”

Sam laughed mirthlessly, shaking his head. “Nah. M’good. I’m about to collapse.” He glanced around the room and contemplated Steve’s original idea about folding out the couch. “I can take the floor if you want.”
“I don’t want that, though.” Steve sighed and gave Sam a look that wondered *Are ya stupid right now, pal?* “C’mon, Sam. You’re worn out. I’m not shy about this kind of thing.”

“I just figured you might want to spread out. I didn’t know if you needed your boundaries.”

“Boundaries.” Steve’s laugh was just as rusty as Sam’s. His eyes twinkled in a way that was a little self-deprecating. “Trust me, buddy. If I ever had any secrets to keep before SHIELD found me and defrosted me, they’re history by now. Nothing’s sacred. I woke up in different clothes than what I had when I went down in that plane.”

That sobered Sam in an instant. “God…” Sam scrubbed his face with his palm. “M’sorry. Steve-"

“It’s all right. I’m just not… bashful anymore. And you know how it is, livin’ in barracks. Group shower stalls. Sleeping piled together out in the open.” The corner of his mouth quirked, and his eyes flicked over Sam’s state of undress. “Unless you’re shy about me seein’ you in your skivvies, Wilson?”

Sam snickered, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll mind my manners.”

“I know you will.”

Even though it was on the tip of Sam’s tongue to tell him he didn’t have to.

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Steve soon joined Sam on the other side of the bed, shirtless and wearing a pair of gray sweats that he’d cut into shorts, skin ruddy from his shower and his hair a damp, dark gold.

“I charged the laptop, if you want it,” Sam told him.

“No, no. It’s too late for that.” But Steve gave him a grateful smile that warmed the pit of Sam’s stomach. “Thanks for thinking of it, though, Sam.”

“Sure.”

“I just.” Steve’s eyes dropped down to his hands where they were curled in his lap. “I need to decompress. I just need to take a little break from this and recharge.” He nodded to the screen, where one of the chef’s was overexplaining a sauce that she planned to thicken with marshmallows, a concept that made Sam cringe. “Ever just realize that every now and again, you just need to take a minute to waste some time?”

“Yeah,” Sam admitted.

“Back when I was a kid, my ma was always fretting about whether I’d make it another day. And I guess I just got used to her telling me to make every minute count. Ma was a nurse. She lost my dad while he was deployed, so she knew what she was talking about.” Sam felt like Steve was inviting Sam over the wall, and he was glad for the opportunity, even though he was exhausted. “But after the serum, all of the sudden, I had all the time in the world, Sam. But I still had a hard time when it came to doing *nothing*. That was Ma that I was hearing in my head, not wanting me to waste so much as a minute.”
“You’re allowed to spend that time however you want, you know. We had this talk before. I told you, you should try ultimate fighting. I’ll be your coach.”

Steve’s nose scrunched in amusement, and he gave Sam a little shove. Sam pretended he didn’t crave more of that contact. Being in close quarters with Steve Rogers was making him want things that weren’t sensible and that threatened their easy friendship and all of those carefully erected boundaries.

“Nah.”

“C’mon. No more uncomfortable uniforms. Just shorts and a pair of gloves.”

“If I change careers, Sam, I’ll let you know. You can coach me, anyway, but I plan on doing something where I don’t have to punch anybody for a while.”

Sam answered that with a lopsided grin and hearty nod. “You and me both.”

“You’re all right with this, right?” Steve folded his arms loosely around his middle. “Helping me find him? And with Avenging?”

“I could sit here and lie and tell you that I blame you for my mama being mad at me that I’m back in the line of fire. Except my mama finds plenty of other reasons to be mad at me, like living in DC instead of moving back near her and Pop in Tallahassee, or how I haven’t chatted up the daughter of one of her church friends who she passed my name along to a month ago.”

“Is she cute?”

“Cute, sure. But we’ve got nothing in common.”

“No shared life experiences?”

“That’s not an immediate requirement, considering some of the experiences I’ve had,” Sam deadpanned. “But even liking some of the same movies would be nice. Or the same music.”

Steve nodded. “I love your music! Hey, I added some of that one guy to my Pandora the other day.”

“What one?”

“Maxwell? The tenor? He’s pretty smooth.”

“Oh, Steve! Urban Hang Suite. Add it to the list. It’s a revelation. You need to hear the whole thing.” Because “The List” was a thing between them, now, and Sam cheerfully added things to it for Steve all the time, these days.

And it was just nice, curating Steve’s efforts at getting caught up. Seeing the things that Sam took for granted through new eyes. Tasting things again and savoring them a little more when it turned out that Steve enjoyed them. And just… having Steve treat him to that pleased little smile. Like he was flattered that Sam took the time out of his day to share things with him, without expecting anything out of him except his company. Sheryl, the girl at the VA’s front desk, now asked Sam at least three times a week when Captain Rogers was planning to stop by for another group therapy session. That was the perfect example of what Steve wanted to avoid.

“Can I have my pillow back at some point?”

“Oh… shit. Here.” Sam tugged it out from under himself and handed it over. Steve slid it under
himself and gave it an experimental punch.

“‘It’s all warm, now,’” he mock-complained.

“Well, turn it over, and you’ll get the cool side,” Sam offered unapologetically.

“Jerk,” Steve muttered, but he settled down with a sigh. “It’s just nice to lie down. My whole body just thanked me for getting out of the car, and we’ve been out of it for a while.”

“Right?” Sam was already easing himself down onto the mattress, no longer content with being half-reclined. His eyes were burning with fatigue and the room looked hazy and too bright. “I’m turning out the lights. You can keep watching this if you want, if you turn the volume down.”

“I don’t need to watch it that badly, Sam.”

“Did you hang the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign?”

“Yup. Did that as soon as I brought dinner back.”

“Smart man. Knew I liked you for some reason.”

“That’s one more reason than most people who know me have…”

“Stop that.”

Steve’s yawn was cavernous, and he settled into the pillow, still facing Sam, which… gave Sam some Feelings On the Subject.

His skin was perfect, almost poreless. His body was a road map of smooth muscles and flat planes. Sam’s eyes traced the faint, bluish veins in his arms and counted a few freckles sprayed over the tops of his shoulders and across his nose. And this wasn’t the first time he noticed his long sweep of dark lashes or the deep, soft rose of his lips. Those were the details that Sam’s inner voice reminded him that they would not ponder at the risk of… difficulties.

Sam had been alone for a long time. Once in a while, a date. Or a coffee with a coworker. But it had been a long time since he’d shared the real estate of his mattress with another warm body. Steve’s male scent, mingling with hotel shampoo and toothpaste, teased Sam’s senses, emphasizing his awareness of him, only a foot and a half away and looking good enough to eat.

That much was a daily struggle as it was.

“I don’t regret this,” Sam told him. He tucked his hand under his cheek and pulled the sheet up over his ribs. “Okay? Just so you know, I’m here because I want to be.”

“I offered you an out back when you told me you were coming with me.”

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Yeah. About that…”

“It’s fine.”

“Are you fine?”

“Still all in one piece.”
“But are you feeling fine, Sam?” Steve’s brow furrowed, and his fingers clutched at the edge of the pillow. “You’d tell me if you need to get out, right?”

“I swear.”

Steve exhaled slowly, face resigned. “Don’t be a hero for me if it becomes too much.”

“Says the guy who’s always being the hero for everybody else.”

Steve had the decency to look sheepish. “Okay. I deserved that.”

“Good pep talk. Time to go night-night. Where’s the remote?”

“I’ll get it.” Steve leaned across Sam, chest bumping up against Sam’s shoulder, bringing more of that coveted contact and his tempting scent, and he grabbed the remote, clicking off the set. Darkness bloomed around them, and Sam heard the mattress springs greeting Steve as he lay back down, shifting against the pillow.

“Night, Sammy.”

“Night, Cap’n.”

It took a few minutes after Sam evened out his breathing to feel sleep claim him, but before he drifted off, he felt one of Steve’s feet drift over toward his side of the bed; the ball of his foot grazed Sam’s ankle.

Sam didn’t pull his foot away.

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A standard PJ op.

Fly in the night mission.

Nothing Sam and Riley hadn’t done before.

Sam remembered how the air felt when they leapt from the plane. He was still jittery from a cup of coffee and the knowledge that anything could still go wrong, even though this is what they trained for. He remembered Riley’s brief grin when they jumped, and the snap of his wings when he deployed the EXO kit.

They were cruising at an altitude of about a thousand feet in dark tac gear; the camo paint felt thick and clammy against Sam’s skin. They had a man on the ground being held in a compound, and the longer they waited, the less likely their soldier was to make it home.

Sam half-expected to be shot at, but an RPG in the middle of the night was excessive. They knew they were coming. It was his last panicked thought when he heard it being fired. The shrill, staccato blast as it soared through the air and lit up the sky still invaded Sam’s dreams, before Sam’s screams joined the din.
Sam was flailing and crying out. Something was tangled around him and he couldn’t break himself loose. Someone was holding onto him… they wanted him to calm down, but there was so much blood… the stench of burning, charred flesh filled Sam’s lungs…

“Sam! Sam! It’s all right! Sam, you’re having a nightmare! Come on, buddy, wake up! It’s a dream, okay? Sam?”

“N…no… no, no, don’t, Riley, Riley, don’t - get out of the way, Riley, PULL UP! RILEY!”

“SAM!”

Sam jerked awake. He was lying in a pool of sweat, and Steve was leaning over him, one hand gently wrapped around Sam’s upper arm and the other trying to extract Sam from the tangled sheet. “Sam,” Steve rasped, “It’s all right. You were dreaming. You cried out.”

“Steve.”

“It’s okay. You’re okay.” And the light was too bright, but Sam was grateful for it. Steve’s hair was tousled, and his face was still slightly slack from interrupted sleep. He had a pillow crease in his cheek, and his eyes were flooded with worry.

“It happened again,” Sam whispered hoarsely. “I watched him get hit again…”

“I know.”

“I just. I’m sorry. Steve, God, I’m so damned sorry…” Sam covered his face with his hand and exhaled a shaky breath. His eyes sparkled and he shook his head, trying to clear the impulse to release the emotions he didn’t want Steve to see.

Steve let go of him and got up from the bed. Sam heard him moving around, and he rolled over, face still covered. Tears dripped from his eyes and he felt prickles of shame and embarrassment. Pull yourself together, Samuel Thomas. Sam heard water running from the bathroom tap and the clatter of ice cubes filling a cup. He tried to master his breathing, but his throat felt thick with the urge to sob.

“Sit up for a minute, Sam, okay?”

“I’m okay, Steve.”

“I’d still like it if you could drink some water for me right now, Sam. I’m also turning up the air a little. You’re running a little too warm.” Sam heard Steve plunk down the cup on the side table, and he gave Sam’s shoulder a little shake. “C’mon, Sam.”

“Steve, please, don’t… I don’t need anything-”

“Yeah? Sure didn’t sound like it a minute ago.”

Sam huffed in exasperation, and Steve urged him again. “Please? Drink some water?”

“Don’t look at me.”

Sam’s voice was small.

“I don’t see anything,” Steve assured him easily. “Just this cup of ice water that sure wants somebody to take a sip of.”
Sam huffed again, and he hastily scrubbed at the damp tracks down his cheeks before he rolled himself upright. Steve backed up a step and gave Sam enough room to swing his feet to the floor. Wordlessly, he handed Sam the water, and Sam gratefully drank half of it, realizing how parched and sore his throat was. He fanned his undershirt in and out a few times to cool his heated skin.

“Wanna take that off?” Steve offered. “You don’t really need it, and its damp. Can’t be comfortable.”

“I guess.”

Sam fumbled with it, and Steve reached for the hem of the garment, curling his fingers under it and tugging it up and over Sam’s head. He backed away with it, smoothing it in his hands and folding it before dropping it on top of Sam’s open duffel bag. Sam bowed his face into his hands, leaning his elbows against his knees.

Something cool and wet descended onto his nape. Sam recognized the sensation of fingers smoothing a cool compress - one of the hotels slightly threadbare washcloths - over his neck, and Sam shuddered with relief. The coolness of the cloth grounded him, giving himself something else to focus on. Sam silently took visual inventory of the room and the objects surrounding him. Lamp. Duffel. Steve’s flip-flops. The laptop on the table across from the bed, still untouched.

Steve’s fair, bare calves and feet.

“M’okay. You can go back to bed. I might stay up a little while-”

“Don’t. Sam, you’re tired.”

“I’m afraid to fall back to sleep right now.”

Steve lifted up the compress and gently swabbed Sam’s scalp, the tops of his ears and his shoulders with it, making Sam sigh with how good it felt. “It’s okay.”

“Did I hit you?”

“Kicked me. My own fault, though… think I drifted out of my lane while I was sleeping.”

“I’ll sleep on the floor, then.”

“Like hell you will.” Steve’s tone was gruff and brooked no nonsense. “You’re stayin’ put, Sam.”

Sam’s expression was indignant. “I’m not subjecting you to a full-scale assault if this happens again after I doze off.”

“I can handle it.”

“I don’t want you to have to ‘handle it.’” Sam’s expression was mulish, and he felt his eyes pricking again. Right now, he was having a staring contest with Steve’s kneecaps. He heard Steve’s sigh above him, long-suffering and resigned.

“Is this how we’re doing this?”

“Rogers. I’ll be fine, I just-”

Sam watched Steve fold himself before him, dropping to his knees. And then those big, beefy hands were reaching for Sam, tugging him so that his hips tilted forward a little on the edge of the bed, and Steve knocked Sam’s knees apart and shoved himself between them. “What…?”
And then Steve’s arms enveloped him. The air rushed out of Sam’s lungs, and he sat, stunned at the enormity of it, of the instant effect of that warm, supple skin pressed against his from shoulder to waist. Sam’s throat tried to close itself up, and his eyes were burning again, and his nose began to run, and Steve was tightening his arms around him, lending Sam his strength.

The flood gates burst.

Sam’s arms wrapped themselves around Steve’s broad back, and he clung to him while Steve stroked his, letting his short nails scratch through Sam’s hair. Sobs broke loose from Sam’s chest, and he was angry at himself for the tears slipping loose and dripping onto Steve’s neck, but Steve just held him.

“I’ve got you. I’m here, Sam.”

Sam’s words wouldn’t come. Only tears and low, strained keening that he’d bottled up for so long.

“I’m here for you, okay?”

Sam nodded, gulping back sobs and sniffling, hating the mess he’d made of himself. His head throbbed because crying always gave him a headache, but Steve was kneading his neck, urging those muscles to relax and behave. Sam’s breath came out in a shudder. His touch felt so good. Sam craved it so much, and how he didn’t want to back away.

"Fuck boundaries, his mutinous brain supplied. This is Steve. Don’t let go of him.

Steve wasn’t letting go of him yet, either. He caressed his bare back soothingly in long, slow strokes.

“Is it always like this for you?”

“Yeah.”

“It is for me, too. Guess I was just hoping you didn’t have to deal with what I deal with, myself.”

“Goes with the territory,” Sam told him. He swiped the back of his wrist across his nose to wipe it; he was not going to get snot on Rogers if could help it. “Ain’t my first rodeo.”

Sam heard the crack of Steve’s smile, felt him nod over his shoulder.

And he held him.

Sam basked in his heat and comforting, solid bulk. Stroking, soothing hands. The scent of his hair, with soft wisps of it tickling Sam’s cheek. Somehow, Sam’s ankles hooked themselves behind Steve’s knees, as though no part of his body could bear to separate from him. Sam felt guilty, clinging to him like that, but he needed this. He needed this so much, he was so starved for the contact once it happened. He needed to feel like Steve cared for him. Like he mattered to Steve, even in the face of the fact that they were out in the middle of nowhere, chasing down his best friend who might mean more to him than he’d previously admitted to Sam. Maybe more than Steve had even admitted to himself. Boy was down with the self-denial.

Sam yawned. The lamp threw a homely yellow glow over the furnishings and burned into Sam’s eyes. His cheeks burrowed more deeply into the side of Steve’s neck. “God, it’s late,” he murmured through a second yawn.

“Think you can try to sleep now? Drink a little more water.”
“Okay, Mama,” Sam joked. He disengaged his ankles from their perch, freeing Steve’s legs, and he eased back from his embrace. Steve’s arms dropped, and he patted Sam’s knee before handing him the rest of the water.

“You okay?”

“I will be. Somewhat.” Sam dutifully finished the water and Steve took the cup from him, placing it back on the nightstand. He reached up and gently swiped at the tear tracks on Sam’s cheek with his thumb. Unable to stop himself, Sam leaned into the touch. He caught the back of Steve’s hand, cradling it against his own cheek, and Sam softly brushed his lips over Steve’s palm. Fleeting. Barely perceptible.

But he heard Steve’s sharp intake of breath. Saw those pale blue eyes dilate. Steve’s other hand rested on Sam’s knee. Casually, with no intent behind it.

Sam felt his heart pound. Felt the pulse in Steve’s wrist leap when he grazed his palm with his lips again, dark eyes boring into Steve’s, asking the silent question of whether Steve wanted him to stop.

Steve’s palm slid back, gently cupped Sam’s nape, and pull him forward into a kiss that curled his toes. Oh, God…

Sam came home with that kiss. It was firm and insistent, and it quickly grew liquid and hot. Sam realized he was clinging to him again, and Steve’s hands gripped his hips, fingers curled around them so hard they nearly bruised. By the time they came up for air, Sam’s heart was pounding, and Steve’s eyes were dazed with passion. Steve stared down at Sam’s lips and licked his own, a reflex that made smug pleasure flicker in Sam’s chest.

“Neither one of us is sleeping on the couch, Wilson.”

“That’s a bold assumption you just made. That we’ll be sleeping,”

“I didn’t say when.”
Chapter Summary

Steve’s either the luckiest man alive, or the world’s worst travel planner.

Either way, though.

Sam. Freshly showered. In nothing but boxers. Steve wondered if the universe was getting back at him for all the times that he took the second to last gulp of milk out of the bottle every time, so that Bucky would end up having to buy them more.

Chapter Notes

I stopped this just shy of the smut. I regret that. So, in the meantime, here is Steve’s point of view of what happened on that car trip, and after that nightmare.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve regretted the rental almost immediately, but he didn’t want to admit that to Sam, so he feigned that he chose the Beetle for nostalgia. There was little trunk space and even less leg room, but Sam climbed inside with his usual humor and uncanny knack for reminding Steve how much worse it could actually be.

That didn’t mean that Sam was above bickering.

“Can we not with the top forty?”

“What? It’s music.”

“This is not music.”

“Sure sounds like it to me.” This morning was no different from most of the others. Ever since they climbed back into the cramped VW bug at the crack of dawn, with a fresh lead on their missing person, Steve drove them down endless stretches of autumn-brown grass, corn fields and cow pastures with the windows rolled up against the road noise, but with the two of them locked in - held captive - with the saccharine, pitchy strains of Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber. Sam was just about ready to rip his ears off of his head.

Sam swiveled his head around from the passenger seat and gave him a jaundiced look. “Steve.”

Steve faced him, giving Sam the full power of that little divot between his brows. “You’re forgetting ‘The List.’”

Steve huffed. “No, I’m not. Natasha put ‘Trouble Man’ on my Spotify list. I’ve got it covered.”

“You do realize that you can pull up your Spotify on his car’s stereo, right?”
Steve gave Sam a rusty chuckle. “Not on this clunker. Back in my day, you were lucky if you got the baseball game, the weather report, and the commercial for Powdered Milk Biscuits tuned in on the radio while you were on the road. These babies were made for reliability, not for frills.”

“Maybe back in your day.” Sam pushed one of the preselected station buttons on the antiquated radio console. “But this ain’t your daddy’s Volkswagen, Rogers. Get a load of this.”

The console clicked, and the entire face of the stereo projected out from the dash, illuminating the interior and replacing the controls with a set of levers and controls that Steve knew didn’t come standard the last time he drove a Beetle.

Sam grinned at Steve’s incredulous look and plugged the cable into the port of his smartphone, and the adapter into the stereo. He swiped through a few screens on his phone, and seconds later, Stevie Wonder’s “Superstitious” flooded the cramped interior. Sam drummed out the bass line with his fingers against his denim-clad knees.

“Right up there with the polio vaccine, isn’t it?”

“Shaddup, Wilson.”

“… writing’s on the wall,” Sam crooned as they took the off-ramp for the service station. Another three-quarters of a mile, and they climbed out at a questionable looking AM/PM whose windows were splashed with faded sports posters and Marlboro ads. Sam took the cooler out of the hatch and dumped out the fetid water that had been ice the night before, along with a half a bottle of Brisk iced tea that Steve had lost interest in and forgotten about. They took turns with the neglected mens’ room and restocked; Sam didn’t have the benefit of Steve’s enhanced metabolism, and he stuck with a box of granola bars and a couple of bags of pretzels. Steve took a chance on one of the foot-long hot dogs, unconcerned with their likely freshness, or his arteries. He picked up a bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos out of curiosity; minutes later, he stopped, rolled down the window, and threw the almost full bag into an open trash can at the end of the intersection. Sam gave him a smug look and offered him the pretzels, and they continued down the route given to them by Sam’s contact at Fort Belvoir.

They were on schedule to meet Sam’s brother Gideon at his modest apartment and cool their heels. Sam needed to run a diagnostic on his wing pack and make sure the fittings weren’t damaged during the fire fight at their last checkpoint, which turned out to be a HYDRA compound. Steve was about the happiest Sam had seen him since they started their trip after the scuffle, once they broke into the mainframe and wiped the old files. Using Sitwell’s old passcodes, they found what they were looking for:

Bucky’s tracking signal, still moving and visible from HYDRA’s satellite feed.

Sam grew accustomed to the hard, uncomfortable hotel beds - no worse than sleeping on the ground, or in a sand flea-infested tent, all things considered - and the cheap gas station coffee. Once in a while, they pretended to sightsee like a couple of vacationing tourists. Steve sent Natasha a postcard from the Grand Canyon the month before, just to give her tangible proof that they were still above the ground. And, maybe, just maybe, to give her a laugh.

And he grew all too used to Steve’s silences, teeming with all of the things he didn’t say, that Sam could already guess.

Sam changed the station to a playlist that he created with Steve in mind. Bing Crosby would never be his favorite, not by any stretch. But it was worth it to see that soft, fond smile blossom on Rogers’ face for a moment. Sam lied to himself that it was exclusively for him.
Steve’s enhanced stamina meant that he was on point to drive more often than Sam, for longer periods before needing Sam to spell him behind the wheel. The benefit was getting to watch Sam while he slept. Not that he failed to give Sam shit about it, because he had to; it was a prerequisite to their friendship. Sam’s head kept jerking up like a Funko Pop bobblehead as he slept, and he occasionally murmured things that Steve often threatened to use as blackmail.

But Sam was cute when he slept. Steve itched to get his pencils and a pad of newsprint to sketch that face as shadows caressed his skin. In his sleep, Sam clutched the bar on the door, as though he didn’t trust Steve’s driving while his eyes were closed.

He was relaxed, and all of the tensions of their work bled out of his countenance when he was like this. His skin was smooth and luminous. Steve took in and appreciated small details like the cords of muscle in his throat. The long, curling dark lashes. The way his teeth caught his lower lip between them. Well-muscled biceps exposed by his rolled-up sleeves. Tiny flat moles under his eyes, not quite freckles. Enviably high cheekbones and a high, intelligent forehead. Sam’s looks were a distraction as it was; it was even harder when Steve heard him talking in that voice, laughing that chuckle. Watching that body move, even with mundane tasks.

The sun was disappearing behind the trees, and the GPS told them that their destination was five hundred feet ahead on the right. Steve tossed the empty Gatorade bottle into the back seat, wishing he had another one for Sam. His mouth was going to taste like paste after riding with the A/C blowing on him for so long.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Hey.” Steve felt his lips curl into a smile as Sam glanced up at him, dazed and groggy, but he gave him that smile that he loved in return, the one that made his gut clench and warmth fizz in his chest. Sam’s lips were chapped, but that didn’t stop them from tempting Steve or from imagining how they felt.

Gideon’s apartment had been comfortable, but the visit itself was tense. Gideon had strong opinions about Captain America leading his brother back into armed conflict when he had a perfectly reasonable, worthwhile job at the VA. But he still pulled out a rollaway mattress and blankets and fed them a tasty pot of jambalaya. Gideon regaled them of his vacation in Bermuda and showed them his photos from his Instagram account, right before he showed them some news links online reporting the leaked data from the SHIELD security dump. Gideon reminded Sam sternly, “When do you get to just be a private citizen? When do you get to enjoy the peace you’ve fought so hard for?”

Sam turned to Steve in that instance and deadpanned, “When pigs fly.” Gideon also reminded Sam that he was due to call their mother, since she’d asked him no fewer than three times that week if he’d spoken to Sam, or mentioned her church sister’s daughter who just so happened to be single. Sam avoided the subject skillfully for the duration of the drive after hugging his brother goodbye.

“Didn’t have a more subtle suitcase, huh?” Sam nodded to Steve’s SHIELD duffel as he pulled their bags out of the trunk.
“What? I’m not gonna throw it away and let it go to waste!” That earned Steve a smirk and a brief roll of Sam’s eyes. Steve let him walk stiffly ahead of him while he carried in the burner phones and laptop. The parking lot was almost filled to capacity. Sam hoped that didn’t guarantee them a night of loud neighbors. Sam scrubbed his fingers through his short, coarse curls before he put on his cap and shades. Steve almost wished they had stayed at the “South of the Border” park and hotel where they picked up a few tchotchkes. Sam didn’t stop Steve from buying Nat the figurine of a donkey in a sombrero and mariachi outfit playing guitar, but he did question his taste.

Even in his shades and cap, Steve noticed a few teens, and even a few moms checking him out, and he ducked out of the lobby to use the bathroom. As he retreated, he heard Sam blandly asking if his veteran’s discount applied and if there was a continental breakfast included with the room. Her voice was cheerful as she thanked Sam for his service.

By the time Steve came back, Sam was already tucking his credit cards and ID back into his wallet, and he looked relieved to see Steve again, more than ready to get himself behind a locked door and enjoy his freedom from the confines of the Beetle. Steve clapped him on the back as they picked up their bags and headed outside. He felt the tension in Sam’s body with that brief gesture, and Sam shoulder-checked him, taking umbrage. Steve and Sam lumbered up the metal steps, legs heavy as lead.

After two years of working with Sam and sharing his pursuit of Bucky with him, an offer Steve often regretted, Steve knew Samuel Thomas Wilson intimately in a way that made the label of “friendship” laughable and woefully understated. They shared each other’s space easily, magnets from opposite poles. Steve fell into the constant habit of keeping Sam in his sights on missions, whether they were in transit or performing reconnaissance. Sam’s voice reached Steve from just over his shoulder or through an earwig, smooth, deep and comfortably familiar, laced with a hint of irony every time. It grounded Steve, breaking through his dark thoughts. They often traveled shoulder to shoulder, leaning over the rails of a ferry boat or crammed into packed metro cars, sharing the pages of whatever local newspaper they found at the stands downtown. It never failed to impress Sam how many languages Steve could read and understand when they would get caught up with the news, and Steve blushed like a beet when Sam asked him if that scored him more action with the showgirls on his USO tours before Phillips actually allowed him to punch someone.

Sam smelled good. Steve picked up the faded remnant of his aftershave and whatever product he used in his hair.

“I hope the mattresses aren’t too soft,” Sam remarked as Steve keyed them inside. Steve grumbled his agreement and walked in first, letting his eyes adjust to the darkened suite before he set down the laptop and his duffel. He flicked on the light and stopped short, taking in the sight before him. He felt Sam run up against his back, obviously expecting him to journey further into the room.

“Uh.” It was all he could manage at the moment.

“What?” Sam’s voice sounded like he was ready for disappointment, but Steve wasn’t ready to give it to him.

“What if there’s only one of them, Wilson?”

“Wait… what?”

Sam’s voice sounded hoarse and disbelieving as they both eyed the king-sized bed dressed in a homely paisley comforter and stark, crisp white sheets. The edge was folded over, and two Andes mints winked up at them. Mocking them.
“Yeah,” Steve murmured. “Think they screwed up our reservation a little.” Because what else could he say? His palms felt clammy and embarrassment washed over him. His mind went in so many inconvenient directions as he stared at the bed.

Sam gave Steve his Sunday-best Are you fucking kidding me? face complete with a neck swivel and a hand on his hip. “That’s understating things a little.”

Steve expected that. His sigh was gusty, anyway.

“Wanna head back down…?”

Steve knew Sam was weighing the possibilities and mentally throwing most of them out. They were arriving late in the day. The parking lot was relatively full already, indicating that most of the rooms were probably booked. And it was a Friday night. Trying to change their room would likely be more trouble than it was worth, and Steven was mulling over how it would look if he headed down to the desk clerk to suggest changing the room. How would she react?

*Oh, wow! I’m afraid we gave you the honeymoon suite! Just figured you two were lovebirds!*

Sam looked exhausted. Changing rooms would be one more obstacle in the way of getting Sam the rest and peace he deserved. He had slight bags under his eyes and his posture was sagging a little.

“It could be worse,” Steve offered, rubbing his nape. Sam sighed heavily. “Hey, Wilson, just to let you know, I don’t snore.”

“No. To your credit, you don’t.” Sam took off his baseball cap and shades, setting them down on the side table in a silent acceptance of the room and the hassle of bunking together in closer quarters than they’d planned. “Just don’t Dutch oven me, and we’ll get along fine.”

Steve felt his face twisting into a smirk again. “I can’t make any promises. I don’t have ulcers ever since the serum, Sam. That doesn’t mean I don’t get gas.”

“Oh, Lawd…” Sam snickered despite himself. Steve bit his lip and unpacked their toiletry bags on the bathroom counter. Sam sank down onto one side of the bed and kicked off his shoes, laid his glasses and cap on the side table, and flopped onto his back for emphasis with a long, loud groan of relief. That settled it.

*Steve listened to Sam inside the shower, catching his low moan of gratitude at the feel of the hot spray. The sound shot straight into Steve’s loins, and he realized he needed a minute to himself. The water pressure sounded low; the water was a thin, tinkling sound as it hit the fiberglass walls. Steve doubted there was that much hot water left in the tank, but a tepid shower certainly wouldn’t kill him. After living in the old tenement in Brooklyn, with no heat and a communal bath tub down the hall that he and Bucky only managed to each use about once a week, the hotel shower still felt like a luxury to him.*

Steve headed out, first visiting the lobby again. The same clerk was there, chipper as before, and it took her about three seconds to recognize him this time. Steve chided himself for not putting his hat
“Good evening, Captain Rogers! How can I help you?”

“Hey. Uh. Good evening… Stacey.” He glanced quickly at her name badge and swung his eyes immediately back to her eyes, a gesture that made them crinkle with amusement. “I was wondering… I think we had a bit of a mix-up with our booking. We… ended up with a single.” He knew he’d booked a double. “Maybe I made a mistake, or maybe we just accidentally ended up with it. I know you have a full house this weekend, if the parking lot’s any clue…”

“Oh, I know! Wow. Okay.” She was already typing and mouse-clicking on her terminal, eyes scanning the listings. “Wow. Okay.”

Steve tried not to look anxious, and he offered her a casual smile.

“So. Looks like we had a couple of bookings about a half an hour ago. We’re full up. That room that we gave you is all that we’ve got. I’m so sorry, Captain.”

“Oh. Okay. That’s… it’s okay. Really, it is. I just wanted to check and make sure, just in case there was a double.”

“Did you want to try anything else? I could bring up a cot, or maybe have maintenance swap out the sofa for a sleeper?”

Steve could hear the argument already in his head, along with Sam’s reassurances that he could either A) take the floor like a caveman, or B) that he’d dodged Steve’s “long-ass toenails all night before, what’s one more night gonna matter, anyway?” (Steve clipped his toenails before they left.)

“Y’know, I think we’ll be fine. I just… I just wanted to make sure. I think we’ll settle in fine for the night.”

“Hey, that’s nice of you to be so understanding. And y’know what?” She reached into her drawer and pulled out a coupon printed on shiny card stock. “Here. I’ll comp you for the pizza place down the road. Good for a free pie for hotel guests paying the weekend rate.”

“Oh, wow! That’s sweet of you! Thank you so much!”

“Thank you for your service. Hope you and Mr. Wilson enjoy your stay.”

“This will help. Have a nice evening, ma’am.”

Her nose scrunched a little with her smile at the title before Steve took his leave. He called the number on the pizza coupon and ordered one with lots of meat, deciding it was a worthy consolation offering.

Steve just wanted to do something nice for Sam, somehow, beyond a “thank you” that wouldn’t begin to encompass the hell Sam had followed him through, time and again. Sam uprooted his life for Steve, trading in the stability of group therapy sessions and helping re-stationed servicemen find resources and set down roots for recon and pursuit again. Sam put the wings back on again for Steve. Sam picked up a gun again for Steve. Sam put himself in the line of fire again for Steve. Trading intake interviews for interrogations and heading right back into the field? Sam didn’t do that without prompting. And he deserved better accommodations while they were on the road. Steve hated that he’d failed in that. Sam certainly gave him shit when something like this happened, but he never made Steve feel like shit.
And there were days… so many days, when that reminded Steve so much of Bucky that it hurt. The easy laughter. The intelligence and intensity gleaming in those eyes. The shared belief that Steve liked getting punched. And like Bucky, Sam covered Steve’s six. Every time.

Steve knew what awaited him on the other side of the door. Poor selection of cable channels. Humid-feeling air conditioning that would leave him feeling sticky when he inevitably woke up in the middle of the night. More searches for Bucky’s signal on the laptop and possible headlines about his handiwork that Steve didn’t relish reading. He still wasn’t ready to accept that reality. He hadn’t been from the moment that the mask hit the ground.

Yet, he hadn’t expected this, when he keyed his way inside. Not quite.

Sam. Dozing, with his breathing pushing out from his chest in low hums. The remote was loosely clutched in his hand. Bare, skin slightly damp with a few droplets of water glazing its dark, smooth perfection. He smelled like hotel room soap and his Old Spice deodorant, and Steve watched the rise and fall of his chest.

God, look at him.

He was slumped against the headboard. That couldn’t be comfortable.

“Sammy? Buddy? Don’t do that.” Steve’s voice sounded soft and a little exasperated, but it was also fond. “You’re gonna mess up your neck even more. Settle down.” He couldn’t resist the urge to touch him, giving the mound of his shoulder a slight shake. Warmth bloomed in Steve’s chest as Sam opened his long-lashed, pretty eyes, drowsy from interrupted sleep.

“Wanna call for a cot?” Sam’s yawn vibrated through to Steve’s core, even though he tried to stifle it with his hand.

“What? Sam, no. There’s no need for that. I could even sleep on the floor, or I could fold out the couch.”

“Uh-uh. That’s taking it too far.”

“I brought back pizza.” Steve set down the pizza box on the table, which had an unfortunate tendency to rock.

“Steve. You didn’t have to do that.” Then, he recanted. “What am I talking about? You and your metabolism. Go ahead and eat.” Sam’s eyes flicked over him accusingly and with humor.

“Have a quick slice, Wilson, so I don’t hafta eat alone.” Which, roughly translated, meant Don’t give me one more reason to feel guilty.

Sam yawned again and rolled upright, drawing Steve’s attention to the skimpy white towel wrapped around his waist. Sam’s chest expanded with the motion. He got up and peered under the lid of the box, making a sound of approval. Steve knew Sam was grateful that there was no pineapple.

“If we end up heading north again, we can stop at a Papa Gino’s on the way. They make a decent steak sub for a chain.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” Steve wasn’t picky, but Sam was his own personal Yelp pages, sometimes, when it came to picking out places to eat. Steve trusted Sam’s opinion on pretty much everything.
Sam took two slices and automatically laid them out on a paper plate for Steve, a very Sam-like gesture. Steve took it and gave Sam’s arm a fond pat of thanks before he folded one slice in half and crammed it into his mouth. His skin felt smooth and cool, and it made him so tempted to touch him again.

“Any hot water left?” he asked through a mouthful.

“Give it about ten minutes. Sorry.” Sam looked apologetic, but Steve wouldn’t begrudge him the hot water. The ride had been cramped and uncomfortable, and he deserved to rest, fresh.

“No. No, it’s okay. I don’t blame you for showering first. I was sticking to the seats in the car.” Steve sank into one of the uncomfortable vinyl-upholstered chairs and continued to devour his food. He toed off his sneakers, multitasking.

“I wasn’t gonna say anything about that…”

Steve felt the smirk pulling at his lips. “Jerk.”

“Stankin’ Steven Rogers,” Sam tossed back, giving him a huffy look.

Steve chuckled, almost choking on his pizza. “You ain’t right, Wilson.” What else has be expected? Steve earned that one. Both of them were pretty fragrant, coming in from the field, retiring to the tower in gear worn for several days in a row.

Steve didn’t mind it when Sam ended up eating half the pie. Steve dug out a pair of flip-flops from his bag and shoved his feet into them and shoved the dirty plates and crumpled napkins into the pizza box. “I’m gonna throw this out. Want anything? Drink? Ice?”

“Ice and some water wouldn’t be bad.” Sam’s eyes were drowsy, and he was still in that flimsy towel. Steve needed a cold shower. Badly. He felt a flush creep into his cheeks, but he grinned at Sam like everything was fine.

“Back in a flash.” Steve grabbed the key card and skedaddled.

Steve paid through the nose for the waters at the front desk, not realizing that they marked up the cost of everything they sold to about four times what it was worth; he’d learned his lesson on the last trip when he’d sampled the mini-bar, and Sam gave him hell for eating a thirteen-dollar Snickers. He managed to get a bucket of ice, having to wait his turn behind a pack of children still damp from the pool, listening to their rubber shoes slap the carpet as they scuttled back to their hotel rooms. Steve wondered if Sam had dozed off again. He notice that Sam had charged the laptop. Steve appreciated it, but there was no way he planned to continue his searching in the middle of the night and keep Sam up with the glow from the screen in the dark.

Steve returned to the room, and he was tired of his clothes, hating the chafe of the denim waistband and the thick seams of his shirt against his tired flesh. Sam was still awake. Barely. This time, instead of Fox Sports, he was watching an episode of *Chopped*.

“Not marshmallows again,” he murmured. “Why do they always throw ‘em that curveball?” Sam motioned to the show and shook his head. Steve enjoyed his relaxed, easy smile of amusement.

Steve set down the ice and waters, on the same janky table. “Find anything good?”

“Reruns. They have Pay-Per-View, but I don’t feel like paying for it.”
Steve shrugged. “It’s SHIELD’s money. I’m still collecting seventy years of back pay, Wilson. We can live a little higher on the hog. I haven’t even touched my pension yet.”

Sam laughed mirthlessly, shaking his head. “Nah. M’good. I’m about to collapse.” He saw Sam glancing around the room, taking in the sleeping options for the night. “I can take the floor if you want.” Steve knew he would suggest that, and he cheerfully shot it down. Sam was decent at the moment, wearing boxers and a thin, cool undershirt. Its plain white cotton was a stark contrast against his skin. Sam Wilson was built like an underwear model.

“I don’t want that, though. C’mon, Sam. You’re worn out. I’m not shy about this kind of thing.” Maybe not super shy. That didn’t mean he didn’t notice. That didn’t mean thoughts didn’t creep into his head.

That didn’t mean Sam didn’t tempt him in so many ways that he couldn’t describe.

“I just figured you might want to spread out. I didn’t know if you needed your boundaries.”

“Boundaries.” Steve’s laugh was just as rusty as Sam’s. That word meant so little to him at this point. “Trust me, buddy. If I ever had any secrets to keep before SHIELD found me and defrosted me, they’re history by now. Nothing’s sacred. I woke up in different clothes than what I had when I went down in that plane.”

That sobered Sam in an instant. “God…” Sam scrubbed his face with his palm. “M’sorry. Steve-”

“It’s all right. I’m just not… bashful anymore. And you know how it is, livin’ in barracks. Group shower stalls. Sleeping piled together out in the open.” The corner of his mouth quirked, and his eyes flicked over Sam’s state of undress. “Unless you’re shy about me seein’ you in your skivvies, Wilson?”

Because Steve was seriously enjoying the view.

Sam snickered, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll mind my manners.”

“I know you will.”

Damn it. Now that the promise was out in the open, Steve regretted it.

Steve wandered - escaped - into the bathroom and made do with the water that was slightly warmer than a municipal pool in June. It cooled his overheated, aching flesh, calming him back to flaccid within thirty seconds. Steve used the rest of the tiny bottle of shampoo, scrubbing his scalp with his blunt fingernails until itsmarted as he tried to think calm thoughts. Chaste. Thoughts. Baseball. Sunday service. Pomeranians. Golf. Chess moves.

Anything to distract him from the man in his underwear, laid out on the bed like a feast.

*Why did it have to be so hard?*

The short answer: Because Steve was a creature of habit. Steve Rogers had a *type.*


He’d been a goner for Bucky since he was old enough to drive. Peggy took his breath away from the
moment he saw her right hook. And Sam had him wrapped around his finger from the moment Sam
told him “I assume you just took it” before Steve pulled him to his feet, immediately appreciating the
strength in that grip. Samuel Thomas Wilson. Fit and hard-bodied without any help from science.
Tall enough that Steve wouldn’t have to bend down to kiss him, if the opportunity ever arose.
Handsome enough to break hearts all down the block.

Steve would never shake the belief that Sam Wilson was worth so much more than the life he ended
up with after throwing his lot in with him to find Bucky. It wasn’t fair to ask him to be a soldier
again. Steve felt by equal turns touched - floored - that Sam trusted him enough to follow him, and
frustrated that he didn’t tell Steve to fuck right off for even suggesting it.

Bucky followed Steve, once. He never came home. Not the Bucky he knew. Flashes of memory
came to him. Bucky’s voice, low and smoky in the dark, floating to Steve’s ears from the cot across
the room after a late night out, or from inside a tent moments after lights out. Sitting huddled together
at the Dodgers game in the cheap seats, munching on peanuts and screaming themselves hoarse.
Hovering at the sink shaving while Bucky lounged in the bathtub behind him, peeking out from
behind the curtain and grinning as he nagged Steve to wash behind his ears.

When he lost Bucky, Steve had never truly come home, either. Not until he found himself caught in
Sam’s brilliant smile.

The shower spray beating against the walls had no answers for him. After a few short minutes, the
shower curtain felt like it was suffocating him, and Steve slapped off the dial, using the remaining
towel to scrub his hair and skin dry. He tugged on a pair of gray cut-off sweats, knowing Sam would
tease him for his knobby knees. Steve chucked the towel onto the edge of the sink, hating to leave it
on the floor, even though that would signal to the housekeeper that it was dirty. Time to face the
music. And Sam’s soft, drowsy brown eyes.

His dick jumped to life again when Sam looked at him and Steve cursed the loose pants, as well as
his lack of briefs. “I charged the laptop, if you want it,” Sam told him.

“No, no. It’s too late for that.” Why was his mouth so dry. “Thanks for thinking of it, though, Sam.”

“Sure.”

Steve sat hesitantly on the bed, drawn to his relaxed sprawl and grace. He curled his hands in his lap,
suddenly not knowing what to do with them.

“I just… I need to decompress. I just need to take a little break from this and recharge.” He nodded to
the screen, where one of the chef’s was overexplaining a sauce that she planned to thicken with
marshmallows, a concept that made Sam cringe. “Ever just realize that every now and again, you just
need to take a minute to waste some time?”

“Yeah,” Sam admitted.

An old memory found its way to Steve’s lips. “Back when I was a kid, my ma was always fretting
about whether I’d make it another day. And I guess I just got used to her telling me to make every
minute count. Ma was a nurse. She lost my dad while he was deployed, so she knew what she was
talking about.” Steve accepted Sam’s small nod and kept going. “But after the serum, all of the
sudden, I had all the time in the world, Sam. But I still had a hard time when it came to doing
nothing. That was Ma that I was hearing in my head, not wanting me to waste so much as a minute.”
And Sarah was no doubt shaking her head at him now. This wasn’t the life she’d planned for him,
certainly.
“You’re allowed to spend that time however you want, you know. We had this talk before. I told you, you should try ultimate fighting. I’ll be your coach.”

Steve’s nose scrunched in amusement, and he gave Sam a little shove. He wanted to touch him so badly, and it chafed him to hide those urges in a gesture so mundane, but that was common between them. Half the time, they fought like siblings in the back seat on a road trip.

“Nah,” he told Sam after some hesitation.

“C’mon. No more uncomfortable uniforms. Just shorts and a pair of gloves.”

“If I change careers, Sam, I’ll let you know. You can coach me, anyway, but I plan on doing something where I don’t have to punch anybody for a while.” Well, maybe not _often_.

Sam answered that with a lopsided grin and hearty nod. “You and me both.”

“You’re all right with this, right?” Steve hugged himself, suddenly insecure. “Helping me find him? And with Avenging?” A hot knot collected in his chest.

“I could sit here and lie and tell you that I blame you for my mama being mad at me that I’m back in the line of fire. Except my mama finds plenty of other reasons to be mad at me, like living in DC instead of moving back near her and Pop in Tallahassee, or how I haven’t chatted up the daughter of one of her church friends who she passed my name along to a month ago.” Sam was the picture of the indulgent son, but relief fluttered in Steve’s stomach.

“Is she cute?” he hazarded

“Cute, sure. But we’ve got nothing in common.”

“No shared life experiences?” Steve borrowed Natasha’s prod, feeling it applied here.

“That’s not an immediate requirement, considering some of the experiences I’ve had,” Sam deadpanned. “But even liking some of the same movies would be nice. Or the same music.”

Steve nodded. “I love your music! Hey, I added some of that one guy to my Pandora the other day.”

“Which one?”

“Maxwell? The tenor? He’s pretty smooth.”

“Oh, Steve! _Urban Hang Suite_. Add it to the list. It’s a revelation. You need to hear the whole thing.” Because “The List” was a thing between them, now, and Sam cheerfully added things to it for Steve all the time, these days.

Sam’s music always held wistfulness in it. Longing. Heartbreak chased away with watered down gin. Steve rarely listened to his own favorites anymore.

Steve felt the fatigue of the day catching up to him, and he wanted to lie back and relax, but...

“Can I have my pillow back at some point?”

“Oh… shit. Here.” Sam tugged it out from under himself and handed it over. Steve slid it under himself and gave it an experimental punch.

“It’s all warm, now,” he mock-complained. Because he had to give Sam shit.
“Well, turn it over, and you’ll get the cool side.”

“Jerk,” Steve muttered, but he settled down with a sigh. “It’s just nice to lie down. My whole body just thanked me for getting out of the car, and we’ve been out of it for a while.”

“Right?” Sam was already easing himself down onto the mattress, no longer content with being half-reclined. Steve’s gut clenched with the sound of Sam’s low groan. “I’m turning out the lights. You can keep watching this if you want, if you turn the volume down.”

“I don’t need to watch it that badly, Sam.”

“Did you hang the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign?”

“Yup. Did that as soon as I brought dinner back.”

“Smart man. Knew I liked you for some reason.”

“That’s one more reason than most people who know me have…”

“Stop that.” Steve didn’t mind the mild scold in his voice. Steve let out a gusty yawn that made his jaw crack.

Steve watched Sam ease himself into the cool sheets and shimmy around a little to find the most comfortable position. His body was a vision of lax, loose muscles. His voice came to Steve, scratchy and filled with impending sleep.

“I don’t regret this,” Sam told him. He tucked his hand under his cheek and pulled the sheet up over his ribs. “Okay? Just so you know, I’m here because I want to be.”

“I offered you an out back when you told me you were coming with me.”

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Yeah. About that…”

“It’s fine.”

“Are you fine?”

“Still all in one piece.”

“But are you feeling fine, Sam?” Steve’s brow furrowed, and his fingers clutched at the edge of the pillow. “You’d tell me if you need to get out, right?”

“I swear.”

Steve exhaled slowly, face resigned. “Don’t be a hero for me if it becomes too much.”

“Says the guy who’s always being the hero for everybody else.” No. That wasn’t right at all. Sam just just described himself to a ‘T.’

“Okay. I deserved that.”

“Good pep talk. Time to go night-night. Where’s the remote?”
“I’ll get it.” Steve leaned across Sam, chest bumping up against Sam’s shoulder, really testing his resolve, and he grabbed the remote, clicking off the set. Darkness bloomed around them, and the mattress springs reminded them both that the bed wasn’t new as Steve lay back down, shifting against the pillow.

“Night, Sammy.”

“Night, Cap’n.”

Steve felt himself drifting just on that blurry, warm edge of sleep. Sam’s scent surrounded him, and he counted the sound of his friend’s breaths as he dozed off. His foot began to drift across the bed. Sam’s felt hot beneath Steve’s toes.

*

Steve still remembered the strange, burning metallic odor that filled the train car, and the strange, staccato sounds of the blasts fired by Hydra’s point men. They wore masks, as though they didn’t want to show Steve, Bucky and the rest of the Howlies the monsters they were underneath. Bracing, freezing air rushed through the car’s open door in loud gusts, tearing at their clothing. Phillips had them requisition him a more practical uniform, made of more durable fabric (Bucky had teased him about the tights often enough once they decommissioned Cap’s USO routine and the flimsy shield) and added tac gear and sturdy boots. Steve felt vaguely comforted by its weight and roughness. The showman was replaced by a soldier.

He felt Bucky as well as heard him behind him, covering his six. Instinctively, he angled himself lower, giving him clear shots by staying out of his range of fire. They moved in sync, picking off each hostile with unexpected - untrustworthy - ease.

Until the impact of the blast off of Steve’s shield, still clenched in Bucky’s unfamiliar grip, blew him backward through the doors. Steve’s world narrowed itself, reshaping to fit through a stark gray lens of terror. Bucky’s face contorted in fear and disbelief, eyes wide and glistening, the only thing Steve saw as he stumbled forward, clinging to the frame. His voice was torn from his lips by the winds, and the metal rail creaked, a testament to poor workmanship. How had those Nazi bastards expected to transport their physicist in that tin can without being compromised?

The serum occasionally gave Steve lucid dreams, but this one was recurring and fixed, one he couldn’t rewrite. His traitorous brain insisted that he deserved this punishment, rerunning the reel, frame by frame, of the night he lost the most important man in his life. The railing always gave way. He always heard Bucky’s unending cry echoing over the peaks and saw him gradually disappear into the storm. Dark blue eyes beseeching Steve to reach a little further, demanding that Steve remember with clarity that Bucky followed him, and his reward was that he would plunge into the void alone.

Sometimes, Steve woke crying out, cheeks cool and damp, but the tenor of Bucky’s screams changed. The hollow cries were pitched differently, but just as anguished and filled with denial.


“RILEY! GET DOWN! NO! NO, RILEY!”
Steve’s subconscious swam up to the surface of his dark memories, and for a moment, he saw a blinding flash of light as he left the vision of Bucky’s tumble behind him. He felt something… no, someone buffet him, limbs flailing with surprising strength. Steve jerked awake with a grunt, still surrounded by darkness. And this time, he heard the words, louder and sharper, sobbed out in heaving gasps.

“Shit…! Sam! Sammy, wake up!” Steve urged, voice hoarse with interrupted sleep. Sam was still fighting, and for a moment, his body jerked as though something had hit him. Sam was tangled in the covers, and he was still crying out. Steve hurried to slap on the lamp switch, filling the room with homely light. Steve saw Sam grimacing, features contorted by the savage visions in his dreams. His fists were balled and dangerous, hard as stone, and Steve knew this wasn’t the time to avoid them when he had to bring him out of that dream. Hearing him suffer carved a hole in his chest.

“Sam! Sam! It’s all right! Sam, you’re having a nightmare! Come on, buddy, wake up! It’s a dream, okay? Sam?” Steve tried to inject calm into his voice, but Sam was shaking his head, refusing it.

“N…no… no, no, don’t, Riley, Riley, don’t - get out of the way, Riley, PULL UP! RILEY!”

“SAM!” Jesus. Steve wasn’t the only one having a hard night. A chill ran down his spine as he realized with clarity what Sam saw. They’d talked about it over drinks in the dark corner of a bar that Sam liked, and it was a story that made his hand shake a little as he picked up his shot glass. Sam tolerated Steve’s grip on his shoulder on those nights and the way he would bump up against him in invitation, nodding for Sam to follow him to the pool table or the dart board.

Steve reached for him, trying to still his chest and arms. Sam’s voice changed in pitch, growing high with panic, until his eyes snapped open, and he saw Steve above him. He jerked, testing the strength of Steve’s grip. Steve felt his pulse hammering in his wrist and almost heard his heartbeat, felt his terror leaching out of him. He applied enough pressure in his grip, not making it so tight that Sam couldn’t shake him off. Steve fought and failed to keep the concern and panic out of his face as he leaned over him. He squeezed Sam’s upper arm, feeling the tensely coiled muscles. Sam’s breathing was uneven and hard. Steve tugged the sheet from around him where it had twisted around his torso. “Sam,” Steve rasped, “It’s all right. You were dreaming. You cried out.”

“Steve.” Was that relief? Steve hoped to God that it was. Steve nodded and cleared his own dry throat.

“It’s okay. You’re okay.” The reality of there they were asserted itself. Steve watched his dark eyes flit around the room, squinting at the bright light, but it was a welcome shield against the night terrors.

“It happened again,” Sam whispered hoarsely. “I watched him get hit again…”

Steve nodded again. “I know.”

“I just. I’m sorry. Steve, God, I’m so damned sorry…” Sam covered his face with his hand and exhaled a shaky breath. His eyes gleamed and he shook his head, as though he was trying to shake off the memory. Steve felt his walls go up immediately, and worry filled him. He wanted to protect him and give him shelter from the pain. Somehow carry the load for him for a while. Chase those shadows from his eyes. Steve wanted so badly to pick up Sam’s pieces and set him to rights.

Steve released him reluctantly and got up from the bed. He heard the mattress springs crunch as Sam rolled himself away from him, but he still heard the stifled sobs. Steve headed to the sink and dashed
some water into one of the too-small plastic cups, momentarily forgetting that he’d bought bottled water. When he returned to the bed, Sam looked smaller and curled in on himself.

“Sit up for a minute, Sam, okay?”

“I’m okay, Steve.”

“I’d still like it if you could drink some water for me right now, Sam. I’m also turning up the air a little. You’re running a little too warm.” Sam’s skin was shining and clammy with sweat. “C’mon, Sam,” he pleaded.

“Steve, please, don’t… I don’t need anything-” There was a slight scold in his voice, but Steve wasn’t buying it.

“Yeah? Sure didn’t sound like it a minute ago.”

Sam huffed at him, following it with an aggrieved sigh. “Please? Drink some water?”

“Don’t look at me.”

Sam’s voice was small. Steve’s insides twisted up. No. They weren’t gonna do this dance. Steve would never leave him like this, torn open and bleeding.

“I don’t see anything,” Steve insisted. “Just this cup of ice water that sure wants somebody to take a sip of it.” His voice was a soft, fond rasp.

Sam huffed again, and he hastily scrubbed at the damp tracks down his cheeks before he rolled himself upright. Steve backed up a step and gave Sam enough room to swing his feet to the floor. Wordlessly, he handed Sam the water, and Sam downed half of it, to Steve’s satisfaction. He fanned his undershirt in and out a few times to cool his heated skin.

“Wanna take that off?” Steve offered. “You don’t really need it, and its damp. Can’t be comfortable.” It had dark patches from where he’d sweated through it. Sam brushed his hand over it in disgust.

“I guess.”

Sam fumbled with it, and Steve reached for the hem of the garment in tandem, curling his fingers under it and tugging it up and over Sam’s head. He backed away with it, smoothing it in his hands and folding it before dropping it on top of Sam’s open duffel bag. Sam bowed his face into his hands, leaning his elbows against his knees, an unfamiliar gesture in Sam, but one he’d seen many of his veterans adopt in group sessions when they opened up. Steve hoped that Sam would allow himself the chance to release this, that he wouldn’t drown himself in it just to keep from pulling Steve in with him.

Fuck that.

Sam didn’t seem to notice when Steve got back up and returned to the bed with a cool, damp washcloth. He hesitated a moment, before he reached over and began to swab Sam’s heated flesh with it, starting with the nape of his neck. It was smooth and vulnerable, corded with muscles. Steve continued to run it over his shoulders, which had borne the burden of memory for too long. Sam shuddered beneath the gentle strokes, and his breath started to slow in response. Steve watched his eyes slowly move around the room, reacquainting himself with it. Steve felt a moment of self consciousness when Sam glanced down at his legs. On any other night, Steve would have hoped that Sam liked what he saw.
“M’okay. You can go back to bed. I might stay up a little while-”

Steve chafed. “Don’t. Sam, you’re tired.”

“I’m afraid to fall back to sleep right now.”

Steve lifted up the compress and gently swabbed Sam’s scalp, the tops of his ears and his shoulders with it, and Sam rewarded this with a sigh. It was the first time he’d touched his hair and felt its soft, wiry texture and springiness. Sam accepted his touch, despite his refusal of Steve’s concern. “It’s okay.”

“Did I hit you?”

“Kicked me. My own fault, though… think I drifted out of my lane while I was sleeping.”

“I’ll sleep on the floor, then.” Sam’s voice sounded flat and resolute. Frustration straightened Steve’s spine.

“Like hell you will.” Steve’s Bossy Captain voice left his mouth, one Natasha endlessly gave him shit for. “You’re stayin’ put, Sam.”

Sam’s expression was indignant. “I’m not subjecting you to a full-scale assault if this happens again after I doze off.”

“I can handle it.”

“I don’t want you to have to ‘handle it.’” Steve watched his expression shutter and felt him closing back off, but his eyes grew wet.

“Is this how we’re doing this?”

“Rogers. I’ll be fine, I just-”

Sam was trying to slip away from him and rebuild that invisible wall. Not Sam. Not while Steve was there and had ears to hear him out. Not while Sam was broken. Not while his arms itched to hold him. Ground him. Fight Sam’s demons and banish them and never let anything bad touch him again. He was vulnerable and had lost too much, hating himself for his own survival. Invisible strings pulled Steve toward him, and his knees sank to the floor before Sam. The expression on Sam’s face was incredulous, and he straightened up, at first wanting to maintain the boundary between them, blurred by Steve’s attempts to cool him down, but he didn’t pull back when Steve reached for him, easing him toward him with a gentle tug, letting his eyes plead with him to accept his offering. Steve insinuated himself into Sam’s space and pushed himself between his knees. His legs were powerful, tapered and sleek with muscle, and Steve had fantasized about finding himself here, in the V of his thighs, but under lighter, more ideal circumstances. He heard Sam’s sharp little intake of breath when he pulled him into his embrace.

“What…?” Sam’s voice was a croak of surprise. Steve worried that he’d gone too far, but he felt Sam’s body tense, then suddenly relax against him. Sam’s voice pushed itself out in a sigh, and Steve heard him sniffle in warning. He tightened his arms around him, lending him his strength. Sam’s body was rock hard and smooth, but slowly, he felt his muscles unknot, and the tension began to flow out of him. Steve’s own fear that Sam would reject him fled from him at the feel of Sam’s arms spanning his back, and his own eyes burned when Sam began to cry.

Steve felt tears trickling down his neck where it joined his shoulder, feeling the sounds of Sam’s sobbing and his gulping breaths vibrate through him, burning him. Steve caressed his back, firmly
stroking it, palming the supple muscles and feeling the arch of his spine, normally so proud and strong. Sam held onto him so tightly, as though he needed this, making Steve chafe again with the knowledge that Sam actually believed he would let him shoulder this alone.

Like hell.

Steve rocked him, arms locked around him. His fingers crept into Sam’s hair again, fascinated with it. Sam’s already shaky breath stuttered at the feel of Steve massaging his scalp. He just listened to Sam’s drumming heartbeat and felt his pulse pressed against his cheek. They were both covered in cooling sweat, but Sam felt less feverish, and his muscles felt slack and more relaxed.

“I’ve got you. I’m here, Sam.” He hoped that Sam believed it.

Sam wouldn’t give him the confirmation that Steve craved that this was helping, but he held him more tightly.

“I’m here for you, okay?” Steve cradled his nape in his palm and kneaded it. He felt Sam sigh and master his breathing, even though it was still coming out in near-silent sobs and hiccups. Steve held him, replacing the visions of Riley’s fall with his touch and slow breathing and the scent of the hotel soaps, chasing away the flames and blood.

Steve felt the shift in him, even though Sam didn’t push him back and send him on his way. Steve’s traitorous body didn’t cooperate with his brain’s demand to release him, and his hands continued to stroke Sam’s bare back. That proud, warm, beautiful, smooth back.

“Is it always like this for you?”

“Yeah.”

“It is for me, too. Guess I was just hoping you didn’t have to deal with what I deal with, myself.”

“Goes with the territory,” Sam told him. Steve felt Sam lift his hand away to wipe at his face, hearing him sniffle. “Ain’t my first rodeo.”

Steve smiled and nodded, but he didn’t find the laughter that phrase usually would have evoked. And he held him. Once Sam allowed him too, letting go of him was both unwelcome and unthinkable. Sam belonged in his arms, held close to his heart, a place where he already lived. It wasn’t something Steve could just casually admit. Not while they were searching for Bucky. Not when Sam had risked and given up so much of the life he deserved to follow Steve into chaos. How dare Steve have the temerity to demand more? How could he expect Sam to throw his lot in even further and trust him with his affections? It wasn’t a conversation they’d even had beyond Sam joking that Steve could be his new wing man, as long as he made Sam look good without showing him up.

And it hurt, because Steve wouldn’t stand in the way of Sam pursuing other people. Even while it killed him to watch. Sam flirting with other people - women, whenever Steve was paying attention - chipped away pieces of him that Steve kicked into the corner, pasting on a knowing, supportive smile. Sam deserved more than what Steve felt he could give him, but that didn’t mean that everything he had to give didn’t already belong to him. Every time. Every goddamn time.

Steve had never mentioned the other side of his friendship with Bucky. How the lines had blurred. How his feelings then, too, had felt one-sided and futile. How he’d sometimes felt unworthy. He’d
been just as reluctant to let go of Bucky the night he freed him from Azzano. He’d convinced himself, for a moment, that Bucky returned his embrace just as fervently, not just out of relief. He’d always second-guessed the things Bucky said, reading more between the lines every time he stared into those blue eyes. Once in a while, Steve hugged him back a little too tight. Stared at him too long. Felt his gut clench whenever he watched Bucky dance, with or without a partner. He transfixed Steve. Made him want impossible things. Forbidden things.

Steve never knew if Bucky would have truly rebuffed him. The answers never came to him, only the dreams. Bucky’s terror warred with his smiles in Steve’s fractured, chaotic memory.

Within the space of that embrace, Steve was aware of Sam’s most minute movements. His fingertips grazing his skin and the way his foot crept around the curve of Steve’s knee, hooking his ankle around it to anchor himself. Steve felt a prickle of pride and satisfaction with that gesture. His closeness wasn’t unwelcome. Sam’s breathing was relaxed and even. His body was poured into Steve’s arms, tangible and warm, and Sam’s fingers were combing mindlessly through his hair. Steve heard Sam’s yawn and knew they needed to wrap things up. He was still exhausted and deserved his rest. Steve was tired of the lamp light and wanted to get Sam settled again amidst the cool sheets.

“God, it’s late,” Sam murmured through a second yawn. His voice sounded so tired. “Think you can try to sleep now? Drink a little more water.”

“Okay, Mama,” Sam joked. He disengaged his ankles from their perch, freeing Steve’s legs, and he eased back from his embrace. Steve’s arms dropped, and he patted Sam’s knee before handing him the rest of the water. One last gesture of comfort. He felt like he was letting go of his soul. Sam still looked uncertain, but he gave Steve a wobbly smile, lacking its usual wattage. Steve wasn’t fooled. “You okay?”

“I will be. Somewhat.” Sam dutifully finished the water and Steve took the cup from him, placing it back on the nightstand. The tear tracks on Sam’s cheeks beckoned to him, and Steve gently reached up and swiped them away before he could stop himself. The gesture was intimate. Likely too much.

Steve’s heartbeat ran off the track when Sam leaned into the caress. His own heart began to pound when he caught the back of Steve’s hand, cradling it against his own cheek, and Sam softly brushed his lips over Steve’s palm. His lips felt velvety and soft. The curve of his firm cheekbone felt like it belonged in his hand.

Steve’s other hand rested on Sam’s knee, drifting there of its own volition. That contact steadied him, a consolation prize for having to let Sam withdraw so he could give him space and time to regroup. But the breath punched its way out of his chest when Sam’s eyes pinned him. Seeing the emotions written on his face. Steve felt exposed and split open. His pulse rabbited and he felt heat spread over his face and through his chest.

Sam turned his lips into the meaty pad of his palm again and kissed it. There was no mistaking the gesture. Not a thank you.

An invitation.

They eliminated the space Steve had created between them as Steve gave in to the siren call of Sam’s body, and those intelligent brown eyes that burned into him, sliding his hand around to Sam’s nape to pull him into a scorching, hungry kiss. He swallowed Sam’s low grunt of surprise that turned into a low hum of pleasure. The sound sang along Steve’s nerve endings and zoomed into his groin. He surrendered to the madness of it, arguing with his fantasies as they manifested themselves in the tiny,
poorly booked hotel room. The air conditioning kicked on, barely keeping up with the humid night outside. Steve’s hands roamed over Sam’s body, finding his hips and gripping them, holding him fast, as though he could evaporate if he let go. Steve lost himself in Sam’s taste and the heat of his mouth, the nip of his teeth as he teased him, urging him to open. Arousal flared within him, and Sam owned him with every slide and stroke of his lips, his hands wandering over Steve’s flesh.

Steve knew his face looked wrecked with passion. Sam’s face was slack with lust, passion burning in his eyes. He’s so fucking beautiful. Steve stared down at Sam’s mouth, at the way his chest heaved. Gotta come up for air, Rogers.

“Neither one of us is sleeping on the couch, Wilson.” Steve blurted out his first priority, and Sam laughed at his lack of chill.

“That’s a bold assumption you just made. That we’ll be sleeping.”

“I didn’t say when.”

Chapter End Notes

Smut will happen. I'm getting back into the swing of writing. It's been harder lately, and I've just been exhausted. Thanks for being patient with my muses.
Like Sleeping on a Marshmallow

Chapter Summary

Smut. What else did you expect? You know me. YOU KNOW ME.

Chapter Notes

I love writing these two. Yes, I’m a Stucky fan, but Sam/Steve gives me life, too. They’re good to each other. I wish this pairing got more love than it does.

“I didn’t say when.” Steve’s voice held a smug note. His lips curled in a lopsided smile, and his eyes were full of heat, unchecked. Sam’s ankle curled itself back around the back of his knee, and he tugged him close, gripping those satisfyingly hard, rounded shoulders. He smiled into the kiss, until he couldn’t.

Sam’s eyes were burning with exhaustion, but his body came alive under Steve’s hands, and he kissed Sam with hunger, tilting his head and opening for him without hesitation. Sam groaned at the taste of him, feeling his tongue stroke the interior of his mouth. He cupped the back of Steve’s head, curling his fingers into his soft waves of hair. It was already a tousled wreck, no longer shower-damp, and Sam loved the feel of it and how letting his fingernails scratch his scalp made Steve make that little noise that made Sam go hard as a rock.

Steve was kissing him. This was real. Whenever Sam’s eyes drifted open, he stared into that face, magazine cover-handsome and masculine, seeing the hint of green in those blue eyes. The reality of him was almost too much, so many sensations to process. Steve’s scent drove Sam crazy, no less than the richness of his deep voice that escaped him in low, satisfied sighs.

“You feel so good,” Sam murmured into his mouth. Steve loved the roughness of Sam’s moustache and goatee and the way his hips felt in his hands, narrow and hard.

“So do you. This has been killing me, Sam.”

“What?”

“Being this close to you, lying next to you when you’re just in your underwear. Or in a towel. Look at you.”

“Go ahead. Look as much as you want. We can even keep the lights on.”

Steve’s eyes dilated at that suggestion, and he closed in on Sam again, kissing him until their heads swam. Sam’s legs wrapped around Steve’s, clamping around his hips and thighs, and Steve’s hands skimmed around Sam’s hips to grip his ass, squeezing it through the thin cotton of his boxers. Sam had a fantastic ass. Despite Steve’s obnoxious habit of lapping him, running did Sam’s body good.

“If you want,” Steve husked. “Because I wanna see you, Wilson.”
“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.” Steve’s voice was husky with want. “I wanna see you.”

Sam nodded and kissed him again, hard. Drugging. Steve’s skin felt hot beneath his palms despite the air conditioning. Super soldiers ran warm, Sam knew, from being with him in close quarters. They’d camped out in the woods on an English countryside a few weeks back, a day that was merely “breezy” giving way to a frigid night where the dampness seeped into their bones. They hadn’t been too shy or too precious to huddle against one another. Even sleeping with his back to Steve, pressed against his bulk, Steve’s warmth permeated Sam’s body, and his teeth stopped chattering within seconds.

Steve’s blunt nails lightly scratched over Sam’s glutes, making little thrills run through him. He needed to get them off. Steve’s short sweats had been driving him crazy since he walked out of the bathroom, shapeless and drab, an injustice to that body and those muscular legs and perfect glutes. Sam knew Steve was commando underneath, and that knowledge was doing things to his blood pressure. Sam’s calves clamped themselves more tightly around Steve’s legs, shifting his balance. He didn’t know if he wanted to sag forward and drop onto Steve’s lap, or tip himself back and take Steve with him. Both options were tempting.

Steve was just as indecisive, letting his lips nip their way down Sam’s chin, trailing fire down the line of his throat. Sam’s breath shuddered out of him as those nerves reacted to it, sending ripples of pleasure over his flesh, all the way down to his dick. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“Been dreaming about this,” Steve admitted into his skin. “You taste so good, Sam… fuck, you taste good…” That tongue was tracing over Sam’s collarbones, following the divide of his sternum as he moved his way down. That made up Sam’s mind that he was moving back, then, because Steve needed room to move. Reluctantly, he let his legs relax, but Steve didn’t withdraw. His blue eyes looked dark with lust, pupils dilated, and there was a flush creeping over that fair skin.

“God, Steve.” Sam’s voice was awed. He stared down into Steve’s face as he lapped at his skin, gradually moving to one dark, plum brown nipple and drawing it into his hot mouth. “Steve…!!!”

Steve moaned, sending sensations vibrating through him, and his eyes closed in pleasure. He could do this. He could finally touch Sam and drink him in and take his time. So what if it was in a cheap hotel room with hardly any water pressure and downstairs from at least families who thudded up and down the outside stairs like a herd of elephants? Sam was willing and pliant beneath his hands, huffing out little curses and sounds of pleasure when Steve held that tiny peak between his teeth and lapped at it, swirling around it with the tip of his tongue. Sam’s dick strained with interest, wanting similar treatment. Sam was leaning back, supporting himself with the heel of his hand while the other tangled in Steve’s hair to keep him there. Steve’s arms caged him in, one hand still on Sam’s hip while he feasted on him, trailing kisses toward the other side, and within minutes, both nipples were cool, damp, tingling peaks. Steve kept kissing his way south, tracing Sam’s ribs and every can of his eight-pack. Sam tilted himself back to give him better access, and Steve was leaning in, fingers dipping into the waistband of Sam’s boxers. Steve’s tongue dipped into the curve of his navel and swirled around just to tease him. Sam huffed a laugh.

“Too sensitive…”

“Mmmmmmm… s’nice. S’cute.” Steve brushed kisses over it instead in apology. “It’s an inny.”

“Glad you like it,” Sam told him dryly, but he couldn’t stop smiling.

Steve loved that soft, wicked smile from the moment they met, while Sam sagged against the tree,
limp and bathed in sweat, with the last of the sunrise well behind them. That smile humbled the
dawn. Steve felt the rangy strength in Sam’s body when he pulled him to his feet, and his voice was
delicious to his ears. Steve nibbled just above the edge of the waistband, already seeing the bulge,
which twitched when Steve’s chin brushed against it.

“You’re killing me, Rogers.”

“What?” Steve asked innocently, but he smirked up at Sam before leaning down and *breathing over
it* just to push him a little closer to the edge. His lips skimmed over him through the cotton, breath
misting heat and making the hairs on Sam’s arms rise in response.

“Steve.”

“Don’t rush me.”

Sam tugged a lock of his hair in umbrage. Steve pouted at him, then breathed over him again and let
his lips skate over his bulge. Sam shuddered, groaning with need. Steve took pity on him. “Take it
easy. I was just playin’.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself. That’s not very gentlemanly, Cap’n.”

“Awwwww…” Steve sank his fingers beneath the waistband and tugged, this time drawing them all
the way down. Sam’s dick bobbed free of its trappings, waving hello, and Steve’s pleased intake of
breath was all Sam needed to hear. “I can be a gentleman if ya want, Sam.”

“Uh-uh,” Sam told him, shaking his head. “Wanna know what I want?”

“Think I know.” Steve’s voice lowered. “I’ve got a pretty good idea of what you want, Sam.”

His lips barely grazed the plump, engorged head, but Sam jerked to full attention. His dick twitched
again, seeking out the heat of that mouth and wanting to take shelter within its damp confines. Steve
scraped the boxers the rest of the way down Sam’s thighs, and he chucked them over his shoulder
with no ceremony before leaning down and giving Sam a damp, soft kiss, letting the tip of his tongue
tease the slit.

“God…”

Sam’s abdomen shivered and jumped, and he fought against the urge to yank Steve’s hair and push
him where he wanted to go. Sam stroked its softness instead, gently gripping Steve’s nape as Steve
sucked him inside, nursing him like a popsicle.

Steve ached, hard and heavy between his thighs. Sensation and heat flooded into his balls at Sam’s
responses and the sound of his choked, pleading voice. Sam Wilson naked and begging was a
revelation, at once tempting, beautiful, and maddeningly perfect. Steve hummed and moaned with
want, pleased with the musky, salty flavor of Sam sliding over the surface of his tongue, buffetting
the roof of his mouth. Steve’s hands gripped Sam’s splayed thighs and his taut hips as he let his head
dip shallowly, building up a slow, even rhythm. Sam hovered over him, transfixed by the sight of his
mouth stretched around him, snug and hot.

Steve lingered there, feeling Sam’s hand slide down to the arch of his shoulder, kneading his
trapezius, enjoying the feel of his knotted muscle. Sam was just as free to explore Steve’s body to his
heart’s content, taking pleasure in that face between his legs.

“I’m not sorry. I’m not sorry you only booked a single…”
Steve hesitated a moment, holding back a laugh. Sam was smiling down at him, but his face shuttered again as Steve slid farther down the length of his thick, pulsing cock. Steve caressed him, stroking the slope of his groin and the crisp, curling mat of hair. Steve cradled Sam’s stiffening balls in his palm, caressing them with his thumb, and Sam’s mind shut down. All he could do was feel and live inside the bubble of pleasure, feeling the difference in the room. They were alone, far from home, phones turned off and completely offline. They had all night for this.

“You’re mine,” Sam murmured. “You know that, right? You’re mine, now.”

Steve nodded slightly without disengaging, and he hummed his agreement. Sam kept kneading his nape, urging him to go a little faster. Take him in deeper.

Steve followed his unspoken direction, ringing Sam’s cock in his light grip and drawing him further inside. Steve didn’t need to come up for air yet. Meanwhile, all the air felt like it had been punched out of Sam’s lungs. Sweet Jesus. When had Steve had the chance to become good at this? Internet? PornHub? Hookups that Nat set him up with? Grindr?

Steve consumed him like he was starving.

Steve’s hands were roaming over him, teasing him, seeking out the places that made Sam turn up the volume. He teased those nipples again, rolling them between his fingers, and Sam’s hips jerked, pushing him up into Steve’s heat insistently. Steve’s eyes crinkled with amusement, and he took Sam all the way inside, past the base of his throat.

Sam keened, and he fell back, leaning on his elbows with his head tipped back. There was no way that he could support himself when Steve was doing those things with his mouth. Sam felt himself pulsing. Leaking. Steve was groaning with pleasure, and it was impossible to keep his fingers out of Steve’s hair. He had to clutch it, tangle it, grip it to keep Steve right where he was, and Steve enjoyed the desperation in his grip, snug against his scalp. Sam’s foot planted itself against the curve of Steve’s thigh, toes skimming under the hem of those awful shorts.

Steve tasted his saltiness dripping over his tongue and kept pulling at him, until suddenly he was draining him, drinking and swallowing him down. Sam bucked and jerked as the spasms hit him, making every muscle in his body go taut. “Oh, God, oh, GodohGodohGODohGODSTEVESTEVEnohGod…!!!!”

His abdomen contracted and his dick gave up every drop of his essence. Steve’s mouth loosened its grip on him as he lapped at him, cleaning him off. His lips kissed the tip, and Sam twitched one last time. He made a sound of denial.

“Too much… God, that was… Steve. Steve Rogers. What the hell.”

Sam collapsed onto his back while Steve lounged between his knees, leaning against his thighs. Sam reached up cradled his cheek in his palm, recalling the moment they’d kissed. Steve was smiling, looking like the cat that got the canary. He kissed the pad of Sam’s palm, just as Sam had done earlier, leaning into it and nibbling at his flesh and eventually holding his hand there, stroking it.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time.”

“I never would’ve guessed…” Sam gave him his best Are You Shitting Me Right Now Steve? look, and Steve rewarded him with a chuckle. Steve eased himself up toward Sam, covering him and
kissing his inner wrist and up the length of his bicep, nibbling on the pit of his elbow. Sam shivered, but he bucked up against him and gathered Steve close, kissing him and heedless of where his mouth had just been. Sam’s arms coiled around Steve’s waist - impossibly narrow and taut in contrast with his shoulders, the man was built like a Dorito - and he palmed Steve’s ass through the sweats, giving it a hard squeeze. Steve groaned in approval and ground himself down against Sam, despite Sam’s spent state. Steve was still hard and throbbing, seeking the recess between Sam’s thighs. Sam’s skin, cooled earlier by the damp cloth, was beginning to sweat again, and Steve gave in to the siren call of that beautiful body and its smooth muscles.

Sam’s refractory period lasted about twenty minutes. Steve kept grinding down on him, kissing him with just as much hunger. Sam tugged the shorts down as far as he could easily reach, and he felt Steve’s cock escape its bindings, hot and silky as it buffeted against him. Sam pulled the shorts down as low as he could get them, then toed them the rest of the way off, kicking them free impatiently. He needed to feel every inch of Steve’s body pressed against him after waiting so long.

“You feel so good,” Sam husked into his neck. He painted his skin with lapping kisses, nipping at his pulse, teasing his lobe with his teeth. Steve bucked against him and released a shaky breath.

“So do you… God, Sam, do that again. Please.”

Steve’s hair was wrecked from Sam’s fingers tugging on it, curling in its thick softness, and his eyes were glassy and dark with passion. Every time Sam opened his own eyes, Steve’s had drifted shut, and he saw his long, sandy lashes fanned out against the crests of his cheekbones. Perfect, sharp bone structure, with the appealing, unique flaw: Steve had a crooked nose. Sam noticed it one day when he was glancing down at Steve’s ID picture and security badge. So much of the time, when Steve talked to Sam about casual things, giving Sam that self-deprecating, shy smile, his face was always tilted down, whenever he leaned in doorframes and listened to Sam with his full attention. Staring into his face head-on like he was now, Sam noticed it. It just added to his masculine beauty, a Rodin or Michelangelo sculpture come to life.

Steve’s cock was sandwiched between their bodies, hard, smooth and dripping proof of his arousal against Sam’s groin and belly. Sam reached down and tugged on him, capturing both of them in his loose fist, and Steve groaned at the sensation. He thrust into Sam’s hand, feeling Sam’s awakening flesh and the rasp of the crisp, wiry hair. Sam was caged in Steve’s arms so that he could drink kisses from his mouth. Sam met his thrusts with his own, needing to make Steve feel just as good as he’d done. He couldn’t wait to watch him lose himself, to watch that beautiful face change when he reached his peak. Sam wanted to stare into those blue eyes when he found his pleasure.

They found a rhythm and kept it, building friction between them. Steve’s knees were getting sheet burn, but he didn’t care. Sam’s name was a living thing in his mouth; Steve groaned it, prayed it in tongues, gasped it, pleaded with it, sighed it as he rode him.

“You like that?” Sam knew the answer, but he felt smug satisfaction at Steve’s shaky, emphatic nod.

“You know I do….fuck, Sam… that’s nice…”

“I’ll treat you right,” Sam promised. “I’ll make you feel so good.”

Oh, how Steve believed him. “You do.”

And Steve’s face was intent, focused on Sam. His lips traveled over his face, peppering it with soft kisses as Sam brought him off. Steve’s features went slack, and his mouth dropped open on a long, wavering cry. His breath stuttered out of his chest, and he bucked and arched against Sam as he pulsed and spurted in his fist.
“Just a little more,” Sam grunted. “Gimme a little more… I’ve got some left, Steve-”

Sam’s voice cut off as he followed him to his second, less intense climax. His body wrung itself out painfully, and his vision whitened out. He collapsed back into the pillows, panting and trembling. Steve was in no better shape. He was breathing hard - Sam felt proud that he did that - in hot gusts against Sam’s chest and throat. His hair tickled Sam’s lips. With what strength that he had left, Sam eased his arms around him, letting their limp legs tangle together. Sam listened to his own hammering pulse and heartbeat; Steve’s felt like it was beating triple time through his back.

They were sweating and sticky, skin glistening in the lamplight. Sam kissed Steve’s hairline and caressed him, going back to kneading his nape. Steve sighed in contentment, shoulders relaxing as he let his entire body turn to jelly.

“I’m yours,” Steve murmured. “Just like you said.”

“Don’t you forget it.”

“I ain’t forgettin’ this any time soon, Wilson.”

“I’m gonna dream about that ‘O’ face of yours. You realize that now, right?”

Steve chuckled into Sam’s skin. “Don’t say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“I’ve dreamt worse.”

“You and me both, pal.”

Sam grinned up at the ceiling.

They eventually turned off the light and cleaned themselves with a second cold rag that Sam brought them this time, and they gradually slipped into a shallow sleep, easier than the first, waking a little after dawn for kisses and more groping that turned more urgent, until Steve admitted that he had a few “supplies” tucked into his duffel.

Minutes later, Sam was on his back again, with Steve’s slicked fingers probing him and slowly opening him up. By the time Steve wrapped himself in a condom and sheathed himself inside him, the sun was rising outside and Sam could hear a flock of starlings that had settled in the young parking lot trees outside overnight.

By the time they both came again, the sheets definitely needed to be changed.

Sam’s threat that he was never going to let Steve book their hotel again rang hollow when they stood in line for the continental breakfast waffle iron later that morning. Steve kept grinning at Sam over the rim of his orange juice glass. Sam nearly choked on his yogurt at Steve’s numerous double entendres and the way he waggled his eyebrows.

By the time they finished breakfast, the rest of the guests had to know what they’d been up to last night.

End Notes
Quick note: The talented, wonderful esaael made some gorgeous fan art for this story out on her Tumblr. Follow her if you haven't yet. My Tumblr, for the record, is downwarddnaspiral.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!