When Worlds Collide

Summary

"Now, Steve wasn’t usually an emotional person. He was emotional when the situation called for it, like when he was watching his mother die a slow incurable death, when she finally passed, and when they lowered her coffin into the ground. But when a man wants a push lawnmower but they were out of stock, this is not the time to get emotional. But it was hard to listen to that logical part of his brain though, when the rest of it was so tired."

Written for this prompt: “Some asshole customer is screaming at you for doing your job and I can tell that you really want to yell back but I’m assuming you can’t so excuse me I’ll do it for you.” AU.

Notes

Steve meets James Barnes.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Steve Rogers hated working at Fury Hardware. The customers were rude, the managers were rude, and most of the other staff were rude.

He tried so hard to be positive, he really did. But when a person has been up since five in the morning, working non-stop in a place he hated, with no end for three more hours, you can’t blame them for getting emotional.

Now, Steve wasn’t usually an emotional person. He was emotional when the situation called for it, like when he was watching his mother die a slow incurable death, when she finally passed, and when they lowered her coffin into the ground. But when a man wants a push lawnmower but they were out of stock, this is not the time to get emotional. But it was hard to listen to that logical part of his brain though, when the rest of it was so tired.

That morning, the first thing Steve registered was the sound of his neighbours screaming at each other. The girl had cheated again, by the sound of it, but Steve knew they weren’t going to break up. He had never been in the same room as them, but he heard them arguing enough to know that this wasn’t an unusual occurrence. He always forgave her, and she always cheated again. The next thing he registered was the sight of his phone charger, on the floor beside his mattress, not plugged into the wall. Steve groaned and sat up, checking his phone for the time. It was dead. After a glance at the little clock on the wall, he was suddenly wide awake.

It was five in the morning. He had to be at work in half an hour for his shift. He tripped twice trying to get his trousers on whilst simultaneously looking for his name tag, forgot to brush his teeth, missed breakfast, and knocked his phone off the table. The screen had cracked, but he couldn’t check if it was actually broken, as it was still dead. There was no point bringing it to work if it wasn’t even switched on, so he dropped it on his mattress on the floor, and quickly ran out of his one-bedroom apartment. All he and his mother could afford towards the end of her life. It was hell living there. The only person who lived there that Steve could stand was Peggy, a beautiful British woman who lives across the hall. The hot water never worked, the electricity was always short-circuiting, and there was always some kind of vermin or bug infestation. But still, he clung to it as if it was the last connection he had to his mother. He could barely make enough money to pay the rent at the end of the month, though, and that’s even whilst working two jobs.

Not the ideal start to the day.

And then there was Mr Schmidt. A weasely German man who always looked angry about something. But usually, that was just how his face looked. Today, though, he was really angry. At Steve.

Usually Schmidt came in twice a week, and always walked away looking dissatisfied, no matter how good the service was. Everyone tried their hardest to keep him happy, since he knows the owner of the store and could probably get them fired in a second if he wanted to.
He came in ten minutes after Steve came back from organising the drills and demanded he show him to the lawnmower section. Schmidt looked down on Steve the whole time they walked over to the right section together. When they arrived there, Steve thought that would be the end of his obligations to interact with this vile man, but he was wrong. As he tried to walk away, Schmidt clicked his fingers and asked where the Push Lawnmowers were. As soon as Steve said they were out of stock, Schmidt’s eyes narrowed at him.

He started by demanding that Steve check the stock room, but after he followed the scrawny boy to the tills and Steve came back from the stock room with no results, he started yelling. None of the other staff around Steve wanted to get involved with Schmidt, and all continued with their work as if nothing was happening, so Steve was left to stand in front of his till and tolerate the torrent of abuse this man was throwing at him.

*God, I wish Sam was here. He’d take over for me.* Steve thought mournfully. Sam was one of his best friends, and his favourite co-worker, but he was on his break.

Schmidt then insulted Steve’s competence, the store, and when none of that got a rise out of Steve he turned to insulting the boy more personally.

Steve wasn’t allowed to say anything back. If they were anywhere else, he would have yelled back at the old man, but if he did that here he would be fired. He *needed* this job.

“Why is a scrawny little brat like you allowed to work here, anyway?! You can hardly see over the counter! You’re in no position to work in a hardware store! You’d be crushed by a handsaw!”

Steve didn’t see what any of this had to do with the fact that they had no push lawnmowers in stock, but he couldn’t voice this. All he could do was clench his jaw and his fists, and wait for it all to be over so he could go lie down in the dark back room for a few minutes.

*Shit, am I going to cry?* Steve almost screamed internally as his vision started to swim slightly with unshed tears. *Don’t cry here! This is no excuse to cry!*

“Why aren’t you defending yourself?! Didn’t your father ever teach you how be a man?!”

That made Steve snap. He wasn’t *allowed* to argue back, that’s why he wasn’t defending himself. But bringing up his father was too far. If his father had been around, Steve had no doubt he’d teach him all there was to know about being a man. He was a soldier, after all.

Thankfully, before he could argue back or burst into tears (Steve wasn’t sure which was more likely to happen), someone else seemed to want to do it for him.

Steve hadn’t noticed the man stood a few feet beside Schmidt, being served at another till, until he heard him.

“Hey! What the hell is your problem?” The man challenged Schmidt.

In his surprise, Schmidt went silent as he stared at the man, giving Steve the opportunity to do the same. He wasn’t sure if he could really refer to him as a man, he didn’t seem that much older than Steve. He was slim, but his tight t-shirt showed that he was well toned. Not enough to draw attention, unless you were looking, but enough that Steve could tell he probably played some kind of sport. Most likely swimming or running, not weightlifting or football. Steve’s eyes dropped down to his legs, wrapped in tight black denim. Yes, definitely a runner. Then, Steve quickly looked up, hoping the man hadn’t seen him staring at him below the waist. He was still glaring at
Schmidt with bright blue eyes, his brown hair artfully tousled in a messy quiff.

It must have only been a second since the man had spoken, but it felt like a lot longer to Steve, who was holding his breath in anticipation of Schmidt’s response.

“Excuse me?” Schmidt’s voice was oddly calm.

“The kid’s just doing his job, why the fuck are you yelling at him?” The man replied, looking furious.

“Because he’s not doing his job properly! All I want is a lawnmower!”

“Well, I’m sure all he wants is you to fuck off, but I guess neither of you are getting what you want. They’re clearly out of stock, it says so in block letters in the garden section, or can’t you read?”

Schmidt looked scandalised. “Who the hell asked for your opinion, Abschaum?!” Schmidt stepped closer to the younger man.

“It’s his opinion, I’m just the mouthpiece since he’s not allowed to yell back at идиоты like you! Yeah, I can insult people in different languages too!” He grinned as the young girl next to him – who looked about thirteen – laughed and smacked his arm playfully.

Schmidt clearly didn’t know what to say to that. He looked between the man and Steve, who was trying so hard to keep a straight face although he could feel a smile fighting its way onto his lips.

Schmidt huffs and points to Steve. “I’ll be having a word with Nick about you!”

With that, the German stormed out of the store and Steve let out the breath of air he had been holding since the stranger had first spoken up in his defence.

After being sure that Schmidt was gone, Steve turned to thank the man but the brunette held his hands up to stop him before he could do more than open his mouth.

“Don’t worry about it, I understand.” He winked at Steve before taking his bag from the cashier who had been watching. As he turned to leave with the girl, Steve felt a sense of panic.

“Wait!” Steve called out and the other man turned back to face him. But now he had no idea what he was supposed to say... “What’s your name?”

_God, that was lame._ Steve’s internal voice scolded him. He expected the brunette to roll his eyes and leave, but he didn’t.

He just smiled and replied. “James. What’s yours?”

Steve looked down to make sure he was wearing his nametag. He was, but when he looked back up at James, he saw that he was still looking at Steve’s face, awaiting an answer.

“Steve…” The blond replied, and James smiled.

“Nice to meet you, Steve.” James winked again before draping an arm over the young girl’s shoulders and escorting her out of the store with him.

Steve tried. He really, _really_ , did try not to stare at James’ ass as he left. But his skinny jeans were so tight, and hugged his figure perfectly. And his t-shirt stopped just low enough to cover most of his black leather belt, but left the back of his jeans completely uncovered.
“Earth to Rogers!” Sam, Steve’s co-worker, called out near his ear.

Steve flinched slightly and looked over at him. “Huh?”

“You could not have been checking that dude out more obviously if you tried.” Sam laughed, and Steve blushed.

“I wasn’t! I was just… Making sure he and Schmidt didn’t run into each other outside. It looked like they were seconds away from a fight.”

“Sure, sure,” Sam nodded. “Whatever you say, Steve.”

Steve didn’t answer, but he did glance over at the receipt Sam took out of his till as the woman who had served James with it left to take her break. James’ receipt. He didn’t know why he cared, as if James’ purchase would tell him anything about the man.

*Five pack of Phillip Screwdrivers*

*2x Stanley Knives*

*2x Packs of Black trash bags.*

As expected, that showed Steve nothing about James.

“You need to take your break, Steve.” Sam nudges him and Steve nodded as he went to clock out for his break. He decided to go out the front of the store to get some fresh air as he tugged his coat on. It was warm, but there was a slight chill in the air and Steve shivered as a gust of wind ruffled his blond hair.

Blue eyes scanned the parking lot he was looking out at and stopped when they spotted messy, brunette hair and a leather jacket. Steve couldn’t see the girl, but James was there, leaning against a black Ford Fiesta.

Before he could stop himself, Steve was walking over. James had put on a pair of sunglasses and had his head tilted back against the roof of the car so he didn’t see Steve coming, but he didn’t look surprised when Steve stopped in front of him.

“Hey, Steve.” James smiled at him when he dropped his head forward to look at him.

“Hey… Do you need help with anything?” Steve looked around to see if he needed anything loading into his car, but then he remembered the receipt.

“Nope, just waiting for my sister to get back.” James lifted a cigarette up to his lips and took a drag, blowing the smoke out of the corner of his mouth so he wouldn’t be carried into Steve’s face by the light wind. Now that they were both calmer, Steve could pick up James’ accent. He sounded like he was from Brooklyn, like Steve.

“Where is she?” Steve glanced around, mostly just for an excuse to direct his face away from the smoke. An asthma attack would not help his attempt to look cool and casual.

“She went to get candy from across the street.” He pointed his thumb behind him at the small
corner shop across the road. “She just got back from the dentist, and she has no cavities, so it’s a reward.”

“You’re rewarding her for not having cavities by giving her something that could give her cavities?” Steve couldn’t resist a small smile.

“At least I’m helping keep the dentist in business.” James gave Steve a wide grin, showing his own teeth. They were all white, but his canines were a bit crooked and forced his front teeth slightly forward. He looked like he may have needed braces at one point, but either he never got them or his teeth used to be more crooked and the braces just didn’t straighten them out completely.

God, his smile is cute. Steve thought before he could stop himself. He mentally shook his head to clear this thoughts.

“So what’re you doing out here?” James spoke again.

“I’m on break. I have half an hour.” Steve shrugged, trying again to act casual, and hoped James didn’t ask why he came over.

“When do you finish for the day?”

“One.” Steve sighed, just now realising how far away one o’clock felt.

“That sucks, I start work at one.” James took another drag of his cigarette before dropping it and putting it out with the toe of his black boots. Steve didn’t have time to ask why that was a bad thing before the little girl from earlier, who Steve now knew was James’ little sister, came back over to them holding a bag of Harribo.

“Ready to go?” The girl asked before seeing Steve and smiling at him. James nodded and turned to unlock his car.

“Bye, Steve. See you around.” He sends the smaller boy one last toothy grin before getting into the car and starting it up.

Steve waved as James pulled out of the parking lot and drove away.

See you around. God, Steve hoped so.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Steve gets a little infatuated, but accepts that he'll probably never see James again.

He is wrong.

After work, Steve was invited to Sam’s house for dinner. Sam knew that Steve didn’t have a lot of expendable income… Or income at all, so he didn’t have a lot of money to spend on food. The little food he did have was cheap and pretty low in nutritional value. Sam was polite enough not to say that this was the reason he was inviting Steve over. He claimed that Steve just didn’t have many friends, and Sam wanted to make sure he wasn’t completely isolated all the time.

“Are you old enough to drink yet?” Sam asked as he came into the living room with a case of beer.

“This year, the drinking age was lowered to eighteen, so yeah.” Steve smiled as Sam handed over a beer and Steve thanked him. “What’s for dinner?”

“Chicken breast and pasta salad.” Sam sat beside Steve on the couch and flipped through the channels on the TV. “That okay?”

Steve just nodded and smiled over at his friend. Sam was the first person Steve had met on his first day working at Fury Hardware. Sam was in charge of showing Steve around the store and training him. Nick Fury – the owner of the store – had been reluctant to give Steve the job, but then he saw how determined Steve was to do well and paired him with Sam. Sam was in the military, he was a Private and saw a lot of dedicated young men struggle though training. He took pity of Steve as soon as he saw him, and glared daggers at any other employees that sniggered as Steve struggled to lift the boxes in the stock room. From then on, Sam had been like Steve’s guard dog and mother hen.

He constantly hounded Steve for forgetting to have breakfast, always reminded him when to take his breaks, and invited him for dinner whenever Steve will accept. That way, Sam could be sure that Steve got at least one proper meal a day.

Sam was also the first person Steve came out to. He had been terrified that Sam wouldn’t want to be around him anymore, or he would be uncomfortable around him, but Sam had just smiled and thanked Steve for trusting him enough to tell him. Since then, Sam had stopped trying to set Steve up with women he knew, and instead started trying to set him up with men he knew. He didn’t seem to hear Steve whenever he said he wasn’t ready for a relationship.

“So? Who was that guy?” Sam smirked slightly as he turned to Steve, the familiar match-maker glint in his eyes.

“What guy?” Steve kept his eyes firmly fixed on the TV. He knew Sam was referring to the man who had stood up for him at the store. Sam had come back from his break just in time to catch the
end of James’ argument with Schmidt and he had tried to subtly find out who he was for the rest of Steve’s shift, but Steve just dodged the questions as best he could. James was just a Good Samaritan. That’s it. “What was his name?”

“James,” Steve answered a little too quickly.

After a few more questions, Sam got Steve to open up and tell him what had happened. He reported everything he could remember from the encounter, not realising he had even included what James was wearing until Sam pointed it out.

“What was his name?”

Steve shrugged, trying to act like he wouldn’t care either way. “I’ve worked in that store a year and I’ve never seen him in there before. I doubt he’ll be a regular.”

“You never know.” Sam dropped it after that, talking about a football game Steve didn’t really have any interest in.

They had dinner, and Sam let Steve talk about an artist Sam didn’t really have any interest in, then Sam drove Steve home.

He said hello to Peggy briefly in the corridor as he went inside and she left for her night shift as a waitress at the local diner, then put his phone on charge.

Steve didn’t have to go to the hardware store tomorrow, but he did have to his other job at the library. It didn’t pay as much as Fury’s, but he enjoyed being around the books. His mother had been the one who helped him see the beauty in books.

Libraries were quiet lately, and Steve was the only staff member most days. The owner came in once a week to help with inventory, to collect profits and give Steve his pay. Other than that, Steve had the place to himself. He spent his time sat behind the counter drawing, or browsing the books. He loved working at the library and, in an ideal world, he’d work there part time. Just for fun.

His real job would be as an artist. He’d draw whatever he wanted and have his work showcased in galleries. He’d be invited to the most prestigious art shows all over the world. Paris, Rome, Spain…

But that wasn’t realistic. He couldn’t afford art school, and whenever he showed his drawing to galleries in the hopes of someone buying just one piece, he was brushed aside. Steve’s art was mediocre at best.

Nevertheless, he enjoyed drawing, and he didn’t let their opinion deter him.

As he relaxed, he pulled his sketchbook closer to him and stared at the blank page. Steve never knew what he was going to draw before he drew it. He picked up his pencil and shut his mind off, letting the graphite tip scratch against the crisp white sheet. The sound was soothing.

After half an hour, his phone buzzed to notify him of a message, pulling him back to his dingy apartment. It was a voicemail from Nick Fury, telling him he got a complaint from Schmidt, but assuring him not to worry and that he’d take care of it. Since it was technically the other customer
that caused the trouble, there was little Fury could do, and even less Steve’s fault.

Steve smiled as the message finished, and checked all the features on his phone to make sure it was working correctly. Thankfully, it was.

After putting the phone down again for it to continue charging, Steve glanced down at his paper to see what he had drawn. He hadn’t finished, but what he had drawn was a portrait of a person.

The person had nice cheekbones and a sprinkle of stubble shaded over a cleft chin. The lips were full and smiling, showing slightly crooked teeth…

*James…*

Steve instantly went to rip the page out and crumple it up, but he stopped himself with his hand hovering inches over the paper.

Instead, he picked up his pencil again. No matter how hard he tried, Steve could never draw eyes. They always looked uneven, wonky, or too fake. Steve thought back to when they were stood outside the store in the parking lot, and James had been wearing sunglasses. Steve smiled as he drew the shape of James’ nose. Then, he drew the sunglasses resting on top of it and shaded under the frames, over his cheekbones. He drew James’ ears, and his jawline, then his hair. James’ hair was beautiful. Perfectly messy. It took Steve longer to perfect James’ hair than the rest of the drawing, but it was worth it when he saw the finished product.

Steve thought about why he subconsciously drew James. He had only spoken to him twice, and all they spoke about was an angry customer and the dentist. He would probably never see James again, so he should logically just forget about him.

*No point obsessing over a guy I’ll never see again… Though he was really attractive. No harm in capturing the beauty while it’s fresh in his mind…*

He smiled back at the drawing of James and closed the book, putting it on the floor beside his mattress to curl up under his scratchy blankets to sleep.

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The library opened at ten in the morning, meaning Steve had to be up by nine. His alarm actually went off this time, and he managed to get dressed and even have some breakfast in time to be out of the apartment by half past nine to walk to the library. He clutched his sketchbook as he closed his apartment door.

“Hey, Steve!”

Steve turned around from where he was locking his door and smiled at Peggy. “Hi Peggy. How was work last night?” He pocketed his keys and turned to give her his full attention.

“Pretty dull. People ordered stuff, I brought them it. Same old, same old. How was your work?”

Steve thought about telling her about James, but decided against it. “People asked me questions about DIY, I bullshitted my way through the answers. Same old, same old.”

Steve couldn’t help but smile when he heard Peggy laugh. “You have got to find a better job, one
you enjoy and that pays you enough to get out of this dump of a building.”

“Yeah, I know. Anyways, I got to get to work, I’ll talk to you later.” He rearranged the sketchbook in his grip and smiled at her again. “Say hi to Angie for me.”

Peggy nodded and said goodbye with a promise to pass on Steve’s pleasantries to her girlfriend.

At the library, Steve checked the returns slot and put away the few books that were in there before taking his place behind the counter. He let the pages of his sketchbook fall open and blushed when he saw the drawing of James from last night. For a reason he can’t quite place, Steve looked around to make sure no one in the empty room saw, and flicked the page to a new sheet.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed before he looked up and realised someone else was in the library. Steve quickly shoved his sketchbook down on the counter, closed, and waited for the person to come over. It only took a few seconds until a young girl walked over carrying a stack of books high enough to obscure her face. Steve tried to hide his surprise, but when she put the books down and he saw her face, he couldn’t help it.

He was originally shocked that someone her age (a young teenager) wanted that many books, but then he recognised her.

James’ little sister…

She hadn’t looked at Steve yet, busy fishing her purse out of her bag to get out her library card, muttering an apology. Steve busied himself with scanning all the books the girl wanted then took her card to scan that in.

“Hey, do I know you?” The girl asked. Steve kept his eyes down on her card as he shook his head.

“I don’t think so.” The name on the card said Becca Barnes, and Steve tried to avoid it but he automatically linked the last name with James in his mind.

James Barnes…

“Oh, I do know you!” Becca called out in excitement. “You’re the one who works at the hardware store, right?”

Steve looked up then, and instantly noticed that Becca’s eyes are the same colour as James’. “Yeah… You’re J-- the sister of the guy who stood up for me, right?”

Becca nodded with a smile. “Did you get in trouble because of my douche brother?”

He looked surprised. “Uhm… No, no, I really appreciated it.”

“Oh good, then I won’t have to yell at him when he comes in.”

“He’s coming in?” Steve couldn’t help but feel excited at the thought of seeing James again.

Almost as soon as he asked, James walked in whining about how long Becca was taking, but he
stopped as soon as he saw Steve.

“Hey, Steve, right?”

Steve nodded and smiled, nervous all of a sudden.

“You work here? I got to start comin’ in here more often.” James leant against the counter, smiling at Steve, then looked at the stack of books Steve was still scanning for Becca. “Jesus, Bex, really?”

Becca just shrugged and took her card back as Steve finished. “Okay, I’m going to go now.”

James nodded and pushed himself up off the counter, but Becca glanced between Steve and Bucky then spoke again. “Actually, Buck, I’m going to walk home. Fresh air and all that. You should check out some books too.”

“Are you sure?” James looked a little confused.

Becca just nodded and leant up to kiss James’ cheek before she left. James looked on after her as she left, but just shrugged and turned to Steve with a smile.

“Buck…?” Steve repeated was Becca had said, trying to figure out why she had called him that.

“Huh? Oh, it’s a nickname. Bucky… My friends call me Bucky. It’s short for Buchanan.”

Steve looked confused again. “Buchanan…”

“My middle name.” James chuckled and leant against the counter again. As Steve nodded in understanding, James looked around the room and saw the sketchbook. “You draw? Can I see?”

Before Steve could give or deny him permission, James had already grabbed it and started flicking through it. Steve was going to give him permission anyway, but then he remembered the drawing he did last night. All the colour drained from Steve’s cheeks as he watched James’ face. There was nothing he could do now, if he tried to take the book back James could hold it two inches to one side and it would be out of Steve’s reach.

James was smiling as he looked through the book, but Steve could pinpoint the exact second he saw Steve’s drawing of him because the smile dropped. Steve could feel his face heat up as he waited for James to awkwardly put it down and leave, or call him a creep or a stalker and storm out of the library.

But he didn’t do either. James stared at the paper and Steve felt like the world had stopped as he waited for the reaction.

“This is…” So creepy, Steve finished in his head. So weird. Stalking. “Amazing!”

It took a few seconds for Steve to react to that. “W-What? You like it?”

James nodded quickly. “Yeah!” He didn’t look up from the paper, running his fingers over the lines.

“You’re not… freaked out?” Steve asked tentatively.

“No, this is great. It looks just like me! But… There is one problem…”

We don’t even know each other.
We met once.

How did you remember my face so well?

James took a pen out of his pocket and scribbled something at the bottom of the page then closed it and handed it back. “All better. I have to go to work now, so I’ll see you later.”

James smiled again and quickly left the library before Steve could look at his book. As soon as James was out of sight, Steve opened it to the right page. There were no differences on the actual drawing, but at the bottom where Steve had written “James”, it had been crossed out and “Bucky” had been written in its place.

Under that, there was a phone number.

Steve couldn’t help but smile as he took his own phone out and added the number to his contacts as “Bucky Barnes.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Steve invites Bucky out on a date without even realising.

It had been two days since Bucky had given Steve his phone number, but Steve hadn’t yet to gather the courage to use it. Not that he didn’t wanted to, god he wanted to. But he had remembered the three-day rule Sam had talked about once.

“When a chick gives you her number, you need to wait three days at least to use it. So you don’t come off desperate.” Sam had told Steve as he passed over the salt.

“But you want to talk to her, and she wants to talk to you or she wouldn’t have given you her number.”

“Yeah, but if you text her too fast, she’ll think you’re already too into her.”

“Isn’t it good for her to think you’re into her?”

Sam had laughed at that. “Oh Steve, you really don’t understand the female mind, do you?”

This was before Steve had told him he was gay, so Steve wasn’t sure if the three-day rule applied for guys too. Bucky had already seen Steve’s drawing of him, so he already knew Steve must like him. But Steve was already toeing the creepy line.

Peggy might know…

Peggy was home, across the hall, and she was always telling Steve he should come over more often. He could go over and ask. She was the only female friend he had that wasn’t just his friend because she was dating his friend. That’s how he knew Zoe, who was dating Steve’s friend from high school, Patrick. Zoe was great, and he really enjoyed her company, but he hadn’t really spoken to her without Patrick in the room so it might be awkward to randomly ask her for relationship advice.

Relationship? You’ve met him twice, Steve, this hardly counts as a relationship.

He shook his head lightly and started walking to the door. Peggy was the only other person he knew that had dated men. She was with a woman now, Angie, who she met at her diner. But she
was bisexual, so Steve assumed she had probably been with men before. He stood outside her apartment door for a few seconds, wondering whether he should call first. He had Peggy’s number, but since they only lived across the hall he’d never had cause to use it, and he didn’t really see the point of calling before going over since all he had to do was raise his voice in his own apartment and Peggy would hear.

Steve knocked on the door before he could change his mind and waited. Angie opened the door, wearing yoga pants and a tank top. Her brown hair was up in a messy bun on top of her head and she wasn’t wearing any make up, but she still looked as beautiful as always.

“Hey, Steve!” Angie greeted him with a wide smile and stepped aside to allow him into the apartment before Steve could say anything.

Peggy’s apartment was the same size as Steve’s, and probably had all the same problems with the heating and electricity, but it looked nicer. The main room was carpeted and she had a brown, leather sofa in the living room area in front of a small TV. The whole room was decorated in rich reds and blacks, and the coffee table that usually sat between the TV and the sofa had been pushed back to make room for two yoga mats. Peggy was doing the half downward dog pose on one of the mats and looked up when she heard Angie say Steve’s name, smiling at him. After a few more seconds she dropped the pose and stood up to come over and greet Steve with a kiss on his cheek.

“What brings you over?” Peggy asked as she took a glass of water from Angie’s hand. She offered Steve one too and he took it, politely thanking her.

“I needed some advice…” He started nervously.

“What can I help you with?” Peggy wandered over to the sofa and patted the seat next to her for Steve as Angie sat on the opposite side.

Steve sat between the women as he told them everything about Bucky. From when he stood up for him at the hardware store to when he wrote his number on Steve’s drawing. He ignored Angie’s ‘awh!’s and asked whether he should call Bucky or not.

“I don’t understand, why don’t you think you can call him whenever you want?” Peggy looked at Steve in confusion, so Steve explained the three-day rule he heard from Sam, but she just looked more confused.

“I know what he means.” Angie nodded. “That’s why I waited so long to call you, Peg.”

“Really? Well, maybe you can give Steve some advice then.”

Steve spoke before Angie could agree or not. “Well, you’re a girl, and the rule says to wait three days before calling a girl. I was wondering if you’ve ever been the first to call a guy and how long you waited…”

Both the girls laughed at that but Angie was the first to speak. “Steve, if you want to talk to James, talk to him. The ‘rules’ are more like guidelines. They’re not law.”

“It won’t make me look desperate?” Steve picked at his fingernails. He expected them to laugh again, but they must have sensed his unease, because instead they both shook their heads.

“You’ve waited two days, right?” Peggy asked, and Steve nodded. “Well, I think that’s enough time to avoid looking desperate. And, for the record, I wouldn’t have cared if Angie had called me sooner. It wouldn’t have changed my opinion of her. And if how soon you call him changes this guy’s opinion of you, then he’s too shallow and you shouldn’t waste your time on him.”
Steve nodded in thought and thanked them for their advice, then they insisted he stayed to try Angie’s secret cupcake recipe. They were delicious, and she insisted Steve take some home with him in a Tupperware container.

When he got home, Steve put the cupcakes in the fridge for later and picked up his phone again. It was six in the afternoon, so although Steve didn’t know what Bucky did for a living, there was a high chance he’d be finished working by now. He thought about calling, but then realised he had no idea what he was going to say. So instead, he decided to text. That way, he could think about what he was going to say, then read it back a few times and make sure he was happy with it, before sending it. There would also be no awkward silences.

“Hi Bucky. It’s Steve. Just texting so you can save my number.”

Steve stared at the screen for a few seconds. What if he doesn’t remember me?

“Hi Bucky, it’s Steve from the hardware store and the library. Just texting so you can save my number.”

Too formal?

“Hey Bucky. It’s Steve from the hardware store and library :)”

Too familiar? Is the smiley too much? Steve groaned in frustration and just hit the send button. What’s the worst that could happen?

He put his phone down next to him on his stained, old sofa and tried to busy himself straightening the small coffee table up so it was better in line with the ends of the sofa, so he wasn’t just sat waiting for a reply. After making sure everything was lined up, Steve checked his phone. No reply.

That’s fine. It’s only been two minutes.

Steve went to the fridge and freezer to find something to make himself for dinner. He settled on a steak and ale pie, and put it on a tray while he preheated the oven. Thankfully, it was working today.

Once the pie was in, he went back to his phone and saw he still had no messages.

It’s only been ten minutes… Steve tried to rationalise in his head, but he couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed. Maybe Bucky had just given him his number as a joke, or just to be nice, or because he felt sorry for him. He was so attractive, Bucky probably got attention all the time. Steve didn’t even know Bucky’s sexuality, he could be straight, and just didn’t want to reject Steve to his face.

No matter what sexuality he was, he probably got advances from every gender. And from much more appealing people too. People who don’t look like they could be snapped in half by a strong breeze. He was already regretting sending the text. He shouldn’t have even saved the number. He should have just acted like he never met Bucky, he should have—

(1) New Message – Bucky Barnes

Steve looked down at his phone in shock and quickly opened the message.

“Hi Steve from the hardware store and the library :)”

Steve couldn’t resist smiling as he read the message, a light blush colouring his cheeks when he
saw the winking emoticon. It was probably an accident. He meant to send a smiley face and hit the semi-colon by accident. Steve waited two minutes before replying, so he didn’t look like he was waiting for Bucky to reply.

“Just texting so you can save my number” No emoticons this time.

Bearly a minute later, he got a reply. “What’s your last name? I have two other Steves in my phone”

“Rogers :)” Steve replied right away.

“Okay Steve Rogers, thanks. So wuu2?”

“Making food, wbu?”

“Just finished cooking for Becca”

“Awh, what a nice son you are, cooking for your little sister so your parents don’t have to.” Steve regretted the message as soon as he sent it. It was too personal, too assuming.

“Well if I waited for them to cook for us we’d starve.” Steve wasn’t sure how to reply to that, wasn’t sure if it was a joke or not, but he got another message from Bucky before he could type. “They’re dead.”

Shit. Steve shouldn’t have mentioned them. Now Bucky was going to be upset, and annoyed, and he wouldn’t want to talk to Steve anymore.

“Hey, are you freakin out?” Another message from Bucky came up on Steve’s screen.

“I’m so sorry I mentioned it.” Steve sent of quickly, then followed it with: “Sorry for your loss.”

It took a few minutes for Bucky to reply this time. “Don’t worry about it. It was a while ago.”

Steve quickly changed the subject, asking how Becca was and if she was enjoying the books. Apparently she wouldn’t even put the book she was currently reading down long enough to eat her dinner. Then Bucky followed that message up with a picture of Becca sat on a white couch with red rose patterns, holding a book in one hand and a fork in the other. There was a plate of spaghetti Bolognese resting on the arm of the couch, the fork hovering a few inches above it. The caption under the picture simple read: “She hasn’t moved in ten minutes.”

Steve couldn’t help but laugh at that. He had been the same when he was younger, while his mother was at the hospital (working, not dying at this point) he had curled up on the couch as soon as he got home from school, either with his sketchbook, a history book, or a fiction book. He would be in the exact same position hours later when his mother would come home from a twelve hour shift. Then, she would make him dinner and do any other household chores that needed doing, such as laundry, before going off to bed herself, trusting Steve to go to bed when he was supposed to. Looking back, Steve wished he had made more of an effort to be a good son. He could have made dinner himself, enough for both of them, for when she came home from work. And he could have done the laundry and cleaned up so that she wouldn’t have to do anything when she got home besides relax.

But it was too late for that. She was gone now, with his father in heaven. Steve still wasn’t sure if he believed in heaven and hell or not, but his mother had. So, he liked to believe she was right and she wasn’t gone forever. She was in a better place, where she still had the long, blonde hair she was so proud of before the chemotherapy robbed her of it, she was reunited with the love of her life,
Joseph Rogers, and she was no longer in pain. No more doctor’s appointments, no more scans or injections, no more chest pains. Just peace.

He wondered if Bucky believed in that sort of thing. If he believed his parents were in a better place. But he didn’t mention it.

Steve and Bucky continued to text back and forth for a few hours, before Steve regretfully had to go to bed. He was at Fury’s again tomorrow, and he had to be up early. Bucky assured him it was fine, and he had to be at work early tomorrow too, but he didn’t say where he worked.

They said goodnight and Steve put his phone on charge before curling up under his blankets, smiling slightly.

For two next weeks, Steve and Bucky didn’t run into each other again, but they did text whenever they could. Although Steve still didn’t know what Bucky did, he did know that Bucky couldn’t text between one in the afternoon and five. He would reply to Steve, then drive home and continue texting for about half an hour. Then he would make himself and Becca dinner, and he would be free to text for the rest of the night. Although he didn’t have to work until one, he would always be awake at around seven in the morning to make sure Becca got up and ready for school on time, then he would make her a packed lunch and drive her to school.

Steve worked at Fury’s from six in the morning until two in the afternoon every day except Thursday, and he worked at the library from four in the afternoon until eight every day except Saturday and Sunday. Some days he would go to Sam’s between his two jobs, so Sam could feed him. That had been his schedule since he finished high school a year ago. The year his mother had died. She had thankfully made it to his graduation, but she could only stay long enough to see Steve collect his diploma, then her nurse had to take her back to the hospital. Steve had gone to the hospital after the ceremony, still wearing his graduation robe and hat, and had his picture taken with her in her hospital bed. Despite the oxygen mask strapped to her face, her wide smile could be seen through the plastic.

This Saturday was his first Saturday off in months and he had been looking forward to it all week. But on Friday he realised that he had no idea what he was supposed to do for the day. He could just relax… Draw, or read all day…

Or he could see if Bucky was busy that day?

It was eight in the afternoon on Friday when Steve decided to ask Bucky if he wanted to hang out. He would have had dinner with Becca by now, so Steve decided now would be a good time to text him.

“Hey, are you busy tomorrow?”

Steve hadn’t been nervous about texting Bucky since the first time he had done so, but now the nerves were back in full force.

“Nope, why?”

Steve smiled in relief and asked if he wanted to do something together, since Steve didn’t have to work. Bucky accepted and asked Steve for his address, saying he would pick him up and they
could go watch a movie. Steve checked to make sure he had enough money in his bank account to go see a movie before replying with his address. Bucky said he would come round at one in the afternoon and asked what Steve wanted to see.

Steve wasn’t a big fan of going to watch a movie, mostly because modern movies were all kind of predictable and boring, but also because he was usually going alone. When he told Bucky he didn’t know what was available, Bucky just said they can decide when they get there. After that was decided, Steve asked how Becca’s science fair went and Bucky spent the next ten minutes typing up paragraph after paragraph about how awesome it was. A large portion was about how cool Becca’s project came out, but the rest was about science in general.

Turns out, Bucky Barnes is a huge science dork.

The next day, Steve woke up at ten and spent a few hours drawing different animals to practice proportions. At noon, he started looking through his closet to decide what to wear. As he struggled to choose between his red shirt and his blue shirt, Steve suddenly stopped.

Is this a date?

Steve had never been on a date before, but he was pretty sure dates don’t usually start at one in the afternoon. But they did start with one person picking up the other from their home, and going to see a movie together was a pretty cliché first date trope.

Did Bucky think this is a date?

If Steve assumed it isn’t a date, and wore something casual, then Bucky showed up wearing a suit jacket it would be embarrassing for both of them. If Steve assumed it was a date and wore something a little nicer, and Bucky wore normal clothes, it would also be embarrassing for both of them. If he asked Bucky if it was a date, and he said no, it would be embarrassing.

Steve had to stop himself thinking and grab his inhaler. After a few breaths from it, he calmed down and sat on his mattress, looking at his clothes. He eventually settled for a blue button-up shirt and dark blue jeans with his sneakers. Bucky had only seen him in his work uniform at the hardware store, and his white button-up shirt and black pants that he wears for the library. For all he knows, this is how Steve always dressed.

He had already showered, and by the time he was dressed, his hair was dry. All he had to do was comb it and he was ready to go. But it was only twelve thirty. He still had half an hour to kill before Bucky would be there.

Steve decided to sit on the couch and continue drawing until Bucky got there. He was sick of drawing animals by that time, so he shut his mind off and drew whatever his pencil wanted him to. He ended up drawing the bottom half of a face, the lips curled around a cigarette.

The knock on the door was a lot louder than he expected and made Steve jump, but he quickly recovered and shoved his sketchbook under the coffee table. After straightening out his shirt, Steve opened the door and smiled when he saw Bucky stood there.

He was wearing black, skinny jeans again with black combat boots, and a loose grey t shirt with a leather jacket in his hand. His sunglasses were hanging over his chest, one of the arms tucked over
the neck of his t-shirt and he was smiling as he leant against the doorframe.

“Hey, Steve.” Bucky greeted him as he pushed off the wooden frame.

“Hi, Bucky.” Steve smiled back. Thank god he hadn’t dressed up any more than he had. Bucky’s outfit screamed “casual”. Steve wasn’t sure if he was supposed to invite Bucky in for a drink or something before they left, but luckily Bucky answered that for him.

“Ready to go?” Bucky tilted his head to indicate to the corridor as he stepped back for Steve to walk out of his apartment. Steve nodded and grabbed his wallet, phone, and keys before leaving and locking up behind him.

“Ready.”

Bucky nodded lightly and walked back down the stairs and out of the dingy apartment building. Bucky was kind enough not to mention what a dump the place was, and Steve was thankful. The brunette opened the passenger-side door for Steve and Steve tried his best to hide his surprise as he muttered a ‘thank you’ and got in.

Okay, Steve thought in his head. So, Bucky picked me up from my home, that’s one point to ‘maybe this is a date’. But he’s dressed casually. That’s one point to ‘this is not a date.’ Bucky opened the door for me, that’s one point to ‘yes this is a date’...

Bucky started the car and drove towards the cinema. “Given any thought to what you want to see?”

Steve shook his head lightly. “Still got no idea. You?”

Bucky shook his head. “There’s a few horrors we could see, but they’re on a lot later. Have you seen the new JurassicPark movie? Jurassic World?”

“No, but it looks pretty good. I loved the old movies, me and my mom used to watch them all the time.”

“Same!” Bucky put his sunglasses on and smiled at Steve before looking back at the road. “So, Jurassic World?”

Steve nodded in agreement, smiling back at Bucky, even though the other man wasn’t looking at him. Bucky looked good from this angle, and with his hand resting on top of the steering wheel Steve could see the thin muscles under Bucky’s fair skin. Steve noticed a tan line on Bucky’s shoulder where the neckline of his t-shirt had slipped to one side, showing that Bucky probably wore a tank top in the sun. Steve had assumed Bucky would be the type of person to go shirtless when it was warm, but then he reminded himself he barely knew Bucky so he wasn’t in a position to be surprised when his random assumptions were wrong. They stayed silent throughout the whole ride to the cinema, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. Bucky had a rock song playing on the car stereo, but the volume was too quiet for Steve to make out what song it was. When they arrived, Bucky parked up and shoved his hands in his pockets as he walked with Steve into the building.

“So, can you get away with a child’s ticket?” Bucky asked, gesturing to Steve’s height with a smirk.

Steve wanted to be annoyed, he hated people insulting his height, but he couldn’t help but smile. For some reason it was different when Bucky said it. He wasn’t saying it to be malicious, he was just making a friendly joke.
“No, I pay for an adult ticket. I am nineteen.” He rolls his eyes with a small smile. “How old are you? Twenty three?” Steve guessed.

Bucky laughed and shook his head. “Also nineteen. But people assume I’m older all the time. I was fifteen when I first got served in a bar.” He grins, obviously proud of that.

Bucky wasn’t particularly tall for their age, and he didn’t have any weathering on his face to suggest that he was older. It may have been the light sprinkle of stubble over his face, or the way he carried himself with such confidence, but Steve had just assumed he was older. If he was anything like he was now when he was fifteen, Steve could definitely imagine him getting served at a bar without needing ID.

Bucky asked for two tickets to Jurassic World and took out his wallet. As Steve reached for his own Bucky shook his head.

“I got this.” He smiled and handed over enough money for both tickets. “Want anything to eat or drink?”

“Uhm… Popcorn? And a coke?”

Bucky nodded and ordered two tubs of popcorn and two cokes. Again, before Steve could get his money out, Bucky had already paid.

One more for ‘maybe this is a date’.

Bucky handed Steve his food and drink, and they walked into the screen room together, sitting at the back of the room so they weren’t around anyone else who was there. They hadn’t communicated this, Bucky had just started heading up to the back as soon as they walked in. Steve smiled slightly in the dark. He loved sitting at the back. They wouldn’t have to worry about others talking or eating too loud around them. It seemed Bucky had a similar idea.

They didn’t speak throughout the film, which Steve was also thankful of. Again, the silence was comfortable as they watched the movie together. Bucky didn’t do any cliché pretending-to-yawn-to-put-your-arm-around-the-other-person stuff, but he did put his arm of the same armrest as Steve so their arms were touching. He had his arm on the rest on the other side of his chair too, so it could just be him getting comfortable. Nothing to do with touching Steve.

By the end of the movie, Steve had finished his popcorn but still had a lot of coke left. The movie was incredible. Steve was grinning by the end and turned to see Bucky’s reaction as the lights faded on to lighten up the room, other people in the room moving to leave.

He’s… Asleep… Steve stared at Bucky’s face. His mouth was slightly open and he was resting his head on his hand. And his eyes were closed.

“Bucky…?” Steve moved in his chair to look at Bucky at a better angle. He didn’t react.

Shit, what do I do? I have to wake him up, but what if he’s one of those people who hate being woken up? But I can’t just leave him here. And I can’t wait for him to wake up on his own, that could take hours!

Steve decided there was no way around it, he had to wake Bucky up as nicely as he could. He touched a hand to Bucky’s shoulder and shook it lightly. “Bucky?”

Bucky groaned and blinked awake. He looked disorientated, then his eyes focussed on Steve. “Oh… Did I fall asleep?”
He stretched in his seat, making his tshirt ride up slightly, showing off the light trail of hair leading under the waistband of his jeans. Steve quickly averted his eyes back up to Bucky’s face. His eyes were closed again but he eventually opened them.

“Sorry…”

Steve shook his head with a small smile. “It’s okay… Didn’t you enjoy the movie?”

“No, I did. I just sometimes fall asleep when I’m watching stuff, no matter what it is.” Bucky shrugged and sent Steve a sleepy smile.

Steve couldn’t help but smile back as Bucky stood up with him. “Are you okay to drive?”

Bucky nods. “I always drive tired, don’t worry about it.”

That didn’t sound safe, but if Bucky got distracted or they almost get into a crash, Steve can always reach over and grab the wheel. He wouldn’t be able to break for him, but he could avoid obstacles. He would offer to drive for him, but Steve had never learnt.

Steve followed Bucky out to the car and his worries were quickly dismissed almost as soon as they got outside. It seemed the fresh air cleared Bucky’s head, because he was already ranting about how cool the parts of the movie he actually saw were. Steve smiled at his enthusiasm and nodded along. He wasn’t sure how long Bucky had been asleep, but he didn’t talk about anything that happened after the first hour. Steve was surprised he could get that excited over just seeing the first half of a film, but the enthusiasm was endearing.

By the time they got back to Bucky’s car, the brunette was practically skipping and Steve couldn’t help but smile wider.

God, he’s so cute!

Bucky opened the door for Steve, like he had when he picked him up, before going to the driver’s side and starting the car.

“It’s still early, do you want to go somewhere else? Maybe get some food?” Steve asked nervously as Bucky pulled out of the parking lot.

“Sorry, I have to help Becca with a school project…” Bucky answered regretfully and Steve quickly reassured him that it was okay.

Bucky drove Steve home and, despite Steve’s protests, he walked Steve up to his apartment.

When they got to the door, Steve unlocked the door then turned to Bucky with a smile. “Thanks for paying, Bucky. I had a lot of fun.”

Bucky smiles brightly. “No problem, we should hang out again sometime.”

Steve nodded and, for the first time since Bucky had picked him up, Steve was uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure how to end a maybe-date. Before he could say or do anything stupid, though, Bucky leant forward and kissed Steve’s cheek.

“Bye, Steve.” He smiled, turned, and left before Steve could react.

Steve felt a blush colour his cheeks and lifted his fingers up to where Bucky’s lips had been. Although they had only been there for half a second, Steve could tell they were soft, and smiled.
After a couple of seconds, Steve realised he was still stood in the hallway and quickly went inside his apartment, still smiling.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Steve attends Becca's school talent show with Bucky and learns another piece of information about Bucky

“It was a date!”

Steve cringed slightly as Angie and Peggy both yelled at him in unison. He had gone over the day after his “date” with Bucky to see what they thought it was. Apparently, it was pretty obvious.

“How could you not realise that that was a date, Steven?” Peggy shook her head in mock disappointment. “He picked you up, you went to see a movie, and he kissed you goodnight.”

“It was technically afternoon, not night.” Steve tried to argue back and received a light smack to the back of the head from Angie.

“It was still a date!”

Steve had, by this point, accepted that they were probably right. It was a date. He had been on his first ever date and he hadn’t even realised it until it was over. Now he couldn’t stop thinking back and overanalysing every detail of his interactions with Bucky on said date.

Did he act right? Did he do or say the right things? Did Bucky think he was boring?

As if she could sense his mind going into overdrive, Peggy spoke again, this time in a reassuring voice. “It sounds like you did great.”

Steve smiled and thanked her. Maybe he didn’t do too terribly. Bucky had decided to kiss him at the end of the date, so it couldn’t have been that awful. But, the kiss was only on the cheek…

After a rant from Angie about his diet, Steve accepted their invitation to come out to dinner with them. They were going to a nice restaurant and Steve tried to decline, not wanting to be the third wheel, but sensed Angie was two seconds from picking him up and carrying him to the car, so he excused himself to go home and change before going out with them. He had never been to the restaurant they had chosen before, but he walked past it a lot on his way to and from work, so he knew it was classy. His work t-shirt with “Fury Hardware” on the chest and black trousers wouldn’t do.

He changed into his dark brown, button-up shirt but kept the black trousers, stopping to change out of his sneakers and into black dress shoes at the last minute before going back over to Peggy’s apartment.

Angie was still in Peggy’s bedroom getting dressed, but Peggy was already sat on the sofa waiting for them both. She was wearing a beautiful red dress and matching high heels. Her lipstick was also a similar shade, and her eyeliner and mascara accented her brown eyes perfectly. She smiled at Steve and made a comment about how well he cleans up, and thanked him when he complimented her dress.
Angie came out a few minutes later wearing a pastel blue dress that stopped just above her knee, matching heels, and a silver necklace that rested on the centre of her chest above the sweetheart neckline of the dress. She had light blue eyeshadow to match the dress and light pink lipstick. Steve complimented the necklace and Angie smiled brightly, telling Steve about how it was the first piece of jewellery Peggy had ever bought for her. It was for her birthday three years ago and Steve smiled throughout the story, telling Peggy she had good taste.

After the girls checked they had everything they needed in their clutch bags, Steve followed them downstairs to Peggy’s light blue Beetle Convertible. Even without the heels, the girls were both a few inches taller than Steve but with the heels, Steve felt like a child. Especially when Angie opened the door for him.

The drive to the restaurant wasn’t that long, and the whole way there Angie ranted about how much better the food here would be in comparison to the stuff they sold at the diner. Peggy nodded in agreement as she drove, but other than that they both let her talk without needing to input anything into the conversation.

Another reason Steve liked being around them, there was never any pressure to make conversation or to full the silences. Angie did that just fine for all three of them, and she never got annoyed when no one contributed to the topic she spoke about. She just kept talking until someone had something to say, or until Peggy asked her to be quiet for a little while. Peggy was a bit of an introvert, like Steve, but Angie was an extravert through and through. Meaning, Angie could talk and be around other people for hours on end, always finding something to speak about, or something fun to do without getting worn out. Peggy loved that about her, Steve could tell. But Peggy liked silence. She didn’t like being around people for hours on end, and when she did she usually walked away feeling exhausted, just like Steve. Angie talking non-stop, she could handle most of the time. But sometimes, when she had just finished a long shift at the diner or if she was trying to concentrate on her college work (Peggy took an online college course in her spare time, training to be a police officer), she really needed Angie to shut up for a while. And all she had to do was say so, and Angie would smile, apologise, and stay quiet until Peggy reinstated the conversation. And Angie never minded.

Peggy parked in the multi-storey parking lot across the street and they all walked over to the restaurant together. Angie insisted on paying for all three of them, but both Peggy and Steve argued against it. Eventually, Angie stopped pushing it, but Steve knew the conversation would start up again as soon as the bill came.

The waiter showed them to a table for three and Steve sat on one side of the circular table with Peggy and Angie sat opposite her girlfriend. Steve only ordered a chicken salad, so Peggy insisted they all order a lot of dessert. They talked about Peggy and Angie’s jobs at the diner, then about Fury’s but only briefly. Most of the night, Steve and Peggy talked about artists and authors with Angie occasionally asking questions to clarify some things. She didn’t know much about art or books, but she enjoyed hearing Steve and Peggy talk about them. It was cute how enthusiastically they talked about it.

As Peggy ranted about Dante, Steve glanced over at Angie and saw her watching Peggy with adoration clear in her eyes. She had her chin resting in her hands and a small smile on her face. Her eyes followed Peggy’s hand gestures when she used them then flicked back up to her face, alternating between looking at Peggy’s lips and her eyes, which sparkled with excitement. Steve
couldn’t help but smile as he saw how Angie looked at Peggy and briefly wondered if that’s what he looked like when he was watching Bucky talk about the movie and dinosaurs in general.

They ended up ordering a fruit platter for them all to share and three pieces of black forest gateau. Peggy was nice enough to ask the waiter to not put cherries on one of the pieces for Steve, because he’s allergic to cherries and Steve is too shy to ask himself. If she hadn’t have asked for him, Steve would have just picked the cherries off himself as well as the whipped cream they were sat on, in case the juice from the fruit had gotten onto the cream. The waiter agreed and assured them it was no trouble before leaving to get their dessert.

As expected, when the bill came, Angie snatched it up before Peggy or Steve could reach for it. When they protested, Angie just shook her head and warned them not to make a scene in such a nice place. Peggy shook her head but smiled endearingly at her girlfriend, and Steve promised to pay them back. Angie dismissed that too, and left a generous tip as a ‘thank you’ to the man for making sure no cherries touched Steve’s plate.

When they got home, Steve thanked the girls for the invitation and went into his own apartment. Peggy had invited him to come in, but he could tell by the way Angie’s lips were practically glued to Peggy’s shoulder that he would be overstaying his welcome. He had politely declined and taken his shoes off as soon as he got inside. He went into his room and fell on his bed, one hand over his stomach.

Steve checked his phone and saw he had three text messages, all from Bucky, and couldn’t help but smile as he opened them.

“Hey Steve, sorry I had to cut yesterday short.”

“I had a lot of fun yesterday though.”

“Are you upset with me?”

Steve shook his head lightly as he types out a reply: “No, sorry, I was out with some friends. I had a lot of fun too, and it’s totally fine. How’s Becca’s project coming along?”

Steve could almost feel the relief in Bucky’s next message. He told Steve that her project was almost done and she was really excited about it. When Steve asked what the project was, Bucky told him it was for the talent show at her school. Before Steve could type out a reply about wishing her luck, he got another text asking if he wanted to come see it with him. Luckily, it was on Thursday, so he wouldn’t be at Fury’s but he did have to be at the library at four. Bucky told him the show started at five and Steve was about to regretfully decline, but then he stopped. He had never taken a day off since he started working there, and the owner was really nice. She always insisted that if Steve wanted a day off, all he had to do was let her know at least two days in advance and she could get someone to cover for him. It would mean missing a day’s pay, but he had been saving up a lot lately and figured he could afford it.

He texted his boss first and almost instantly got a reply, saying it was fine and he could have Thursday off. Steve smiled as he texted Bucky, telling him he was free and asking if it would be okay with Becca and the school if someone who’s essentially a stranger came.

“Becca’s the one who suggested it. The school won’t care as long as you don’t bring any weapons or some shit.”

Steve smiled again and accepted the invitation, and Bucky said he would get Becca to get Steve a ticket and he’ll pick him up from his place on Thursday.
The rest of the week was pretty uneventful. Bucky texted Steve less and less at night, the closer it got to Thursday, but he assured him it was just because he was helping Becca practise. As the night got closer, Becca got more nervous about her act (which Steve still didn’t know anything about) and even considered dropping out a few times. But apparently Bucky wasn’t letting that happen.

Steve loved hearing Bucky talk about his little sister. He was so dedicated to her, and it was nice to hear about. All Steve’s friends from high school who had siblings were always complaining about how horrible they are, but Steve could tell just from the texts alone that Becca never had anything to complain about in regards to Bucky, and vice versa.

On Wednesday, Steve was called into Fury’s office. Fury was sat behind his large desk, too large for such a small room, and looked up when Steve entered. He had his eyepatch in his hand and quickly put it over his mangled eye.

Steve didn’t know the exact story of what happened to Fury’s eye, but there were a lot of rumours amongst the staff. The most popular ones were that he had been in the army and got hit by shrapnel, but Sam said it was unlikely that just his one eye would be effected. It was more likely his whole face would be scarred, or at least one half. Another was that it had happened in a bar fight, and another that it was a construction accident. No one was quite brave enough to ask him, though.

“You wanted to see me?”

Fury nodded and gestured to the seat opposite him for Steve to sit down. When he did, Fury handed over a piece of paper. It was a complaint form, filled in by Johan Schmidt. Steve sighed and read the report, but it was all wrong. The complaint didn’t even mention Bucky, or anyone else for that matter. Just Steve.

“This boy refused to serve me, and when he did he was very rude about it. He told me he didn’t want to help someone like me and when I asked what he meant by that, he called me a Nazi. He then insulted my country and heritage, and refused to get a manager for me to speak to.”

“That’s not what happened!” Steve exclaimed desperately, as soon as he was finished reading, and Fury held his hands up.

“This boy refused to serve me, and when he did he was very rude about it. He told me he didn’t want to help someone like me and when I asked what he meant by that, he called me a Nazi. He then insulted my country and heritage, and refused to get a manager for me to speak to.”

“That’s not what happened!” Steve exclaimed desperately, as soon as he was finished reading, and Fury held his hands up.

“I didn’t think it was. I spoke to Sam Wilson, Peter Parker, and Gwen Stacey. Sam only caught the end of the encounter, but Peter and Gwen saw it all. They told me what they saw, and I must say, it sounded much more likely than that,” Fury gestured to the complaint form still clutched in Steve’s hands. “I know you’re not racist, Steve, to anyone. And I know you wouldn’t snap at a customer, even if they had done something wrong. You definitely wouldn’t snap at someone who had done nothing. Johan, on the other hand…”

Steve looked back down at the paper. Why the hell is Schmidt doing this?

“Can I ask you a question?” Steve asked as he glared down at the complaint.

“Ask away.” Fury sat back in his chair as he waited.

“Why are you friends with him?”
Fury laughed at that. “Friends? I’m not friends with him. He knew my father, and he’s a powerful man. Better to have as an ally than an enemy, that’s for sure.”

Steve nodded slightly. That made sense. “So, am I in trouble?”

“Why would you in trouble? From what I’ve heard, you followed the procedure almost perfectly. If a customer is yelling at you, you can’t yell back, and you didn’t. Although you are supposed to get a manager as soon as possible. But it’s not against company policy not to get a manager.” Fury picked up a piece of paper from the desk in front of him. “According to Gwen’s statement, it was the ‘extremely attractive brunette man’ that upset Schmidt most.”

Steve blushed slightly at that and smiled. Fury saw it. “Who is the extremely attractive brunette man?”

“I didn’t know him at the time…” Steve clarified, and Fury didn’t pry further. He just nodded, and Steve held up the complaint form again. “Why did Schmidt submit this to you?”

“He wants me to fire you. And ban this other man from the store. But, since I have eyewitnesses saying it wasn’t your fault and we don’t know who this other guy is, and therefore won’t remember him if he came back in here…” If Fury had both his eyes on view, he probably would have winked at Steve at that point, indicating for him to go along with it. “There’s not really much I can do about it, is there?”

Steve figured that would be a rhetorical question, but Fury kept staring at him, waiting for an answer. “Right…” Steve nodded a little.

Fury smiled at that. “Okay, well then there’s nothing more to talk about. This won’t go on your record, and your job is safe.”

“Thank you so much, Mr Fury.” Steve stood up and shook Fury’s hand, smiling brightly. Fury shook his hand and laughed lightly, gesturing for him to get back to work.

When he got home, Steve checked his phone and saw a message from Bucky about when he was picking him up the next day. He said that they had to be there by half part four, the doors opened at four, and the actual show started at five and asked when Steve wanted picking up. He also clarified that Becca was able to get Steve a ticket. Steve said it was up to him, but Bucky told him he would be at the school from half past three with Becca anyway.

They decided that Bucky would pick Steve up at quarter to four, in order for them to get to the school by four. He assured Steve that there would be drinks and cookies there, and he wouldn’t ditch him. Steve was worried about looking like a creep if he was alone at a school talent show, but Bucky joked about how Steve would blend in with the other kids there. Again, Steve couldn’t bring himself to be annoyed at the jab at his height.

Bucky mentioned to Steve to wear something casual before they both said goodnight.

On Thursday, Steve spent most of the morning doing laundry and cleaning his apartment. He managed to put together enough food to constitute as a lunch and started making a shopping list for when he had time to go to the supermarket. After that, he took a shower, watched some TV and eventually got dressed. He wore a faded band shirt and dark jeans with his scruffy converse. It
wasn’t a particularly attractive look, but Bucky had said casual.

When Bucky arrived, he was wearing dark blue jeans and a hoody over a plain green t-shirt. He had his usual combat books on and his leather jacket. He smiled as he greeted Steve and they both walked down the stairs to Bucky’s car parked on the street. It was winter, so even though it wasn’t even four o’clock yet, it was already dark. Steve sat in the passenger seat and put his seatbelt on as Bucky shut his door. The inside lights went off, throwing the inside of the car into darkness until Bucky started the engine. The blue lights of the dashboard controls illuminated Bucky’s face in a delicate blue hue.

“This is Steve.” Bucky said, and Steve glanced over at him in confusion. Bucky didn’t say anything else as he pulled away from the curb and started driving towards the school, having to turn his headlights on to see the road in front of him.

After a few moments of silence while Steve tried to figure out why Bucky had seemingly introduced him to his car, Steve told Bucky about his meeting with Fury and Bucky laughed lightly. “I’m glad I didn’t get you fired.”

Bucky handed Steve his ticket – a little piece of paper with a smaller version of the posters plastered around the school printed on it – and they both got out of the car. Steve waited for Bucky to lock his car and lead them into the school entrance, but instead he just stood beside his car, apparently waiting. Steve was about to ask what they were waiting for when the door to the back seats of the car opened and a red-headed woman stepped out. She was slim, but seemed muscular, and she wore a red t-shirt under a brown leather jacket. Steve couldn’t see the rest of her body because of the car as she stood next to Bucky and whispered something in his ear. Bucky laughed lightly and looked over at Steve.

“What’s wrong, Steve? You look like you’ve seen a ghost?” He smirked slightly as he slung an arm around the woman’s shoulders, pocketing his keys after locking the car.

“Sorry… I didn’t see you in there…” Steve admitted awkwardly.

The woman didn’t look offended, and laughed. “Don’t worry about it.”

She had an American accent, but there was an underlining… Something else to her voice. A different accent that had apparently been phased out after years of living in America. He couldn’t quite place the other layer of the accent.

“This is Natasha,” Bucky clarified as she wrapped her arm around his waist, bunching his jacket up his hip slightly. Natasha gave Steve a slight wave before turning back to Bucky and suggested they go inside now.

Steve followed them into the school and handed his ticket to the receptionist after they had handed theirs in, and they all went into the main hall. The hall had lots of rows of seats in front of the stage, and the spotlights were on, shining different colours onto the stage. Off to the side, at the back of the hall, there was a table set up with cookies and stacks of disposable cups next to a jug of orange juice and two steel cylinders with “tea” and “coffee” printed on them.

“I have to go check on Becca, she’s probably already pacing a hole in the ground by now.” Bucky announced as Natasha led them to the refreshments. “See, I promised I wouldn’t leave you alone.” Bucky said to Steve, gesturing to Natasha with a wink before disappearing off behind the stage to find his sister. There was a teacher stood at the door to the backstage area, obviously there to make sure no one who posed a threat to the children could get to them. But Bucky just smiled at her and she seemed to know him and let him through.
Once Bucky was out of sight, Steve turned to Natasha, who was already looking at him. In the lights of the hall, Steve could see her face properly and the rest of her body. She was several inches taller than Steve, possibly about Bucky’s height, but when he looked down he saw that she was wearing heeled boots. Without them, she would still be taller than Steve, but not as tall as Bucky. As far as Steve could tell, she wasn’t wearing any makeup except red lipstick that matched her short, curly red hair. Natasha was holding one of the plastic cups up to her lips, but she wasn’t drinking, just smiling at Steve.

Steve wasn’t sure what to say. It was no secret that Steve wasn’t used to being around new people, at least not without someone he knew there as a buffer.

“So… How do you know Bucky?” Steve decided to start off.

“Dance class.” She answered plainly. She didn’t elaborate when they had met or how.

“Like, at school?”

Natasha shook her head. “We were school aged at the time, but the dance class wasn’t in the school.”

Steve couldn’t imagine Bucky doing a non-compulsory dance class, but he could imagine Natasha would be a good dancer. She had a certain elegance in the way she moved that Steve imagined would be perfect for dancing.

“How old were you?” Steve pressed, more to fill the silence than anything else. The silence was different with Natasha than it was with Bucky. It wasn’t as comfortable, it felt like she was analysing him, watching his every move.

“Six.”

“And Bucky?”

“Also six.”

Steve nodded lightly. So she was nineteen too. Like Bucky, she looked older than she was. Not because of her face or her height, but just because of her aura.

After a few more seconds of silence, Steve started talking again. “I met Bucky a few weeks ago. He came into the hardware store I work at and--“

“I know.” Natasha interrupted and drank her orange juice.

“Oh…” Steve wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“He does that a lot,” Natasha goes on. “Standing up for random people who are being yelled at for no reason.”

For some reason, that stung. Steve wasn’t sure why, surely it was a good thing that Bucky stood up for people whenever they needed help. But it was also nice to think that he had only done it for him.

“But he usually never speaks to them again, after making sure they’re okay.”

*Could she tell that it had hurt?* Steve smiled a little and nodded but didn’t reply, just busied himself with getting a cup of juice.
Bucky came back then and got himself a coffee.

“How’s Bex?” Natasha asked as she leant against the table.

“Freaking out, but I managed to calm her a little. She’s doing some last minute practises.”

“So what is she doing in the show?” Steve asked, and Natasha looked surprised.

“You don’t know what she’s doing?” She raised an eyebrow at Steve.

“Go easy on him, Nat, he doesn’t know Becca that well,” Bucky nudged her playfully then turned to Steve. “She’s dancing.”

Steve nodded and went back to sipping his juice. Bucky and Natasha talked amongst themselves for a few minutes but they were talking about dance moves, and Steve didn’t understand any of it, so he simple stood and listened. After a while, a voice came on over the speakers announcing that the show was about to start, and Bucky took Natasha’s hand and gestured for Steve to follow them to the front row. They sat a little off to the right with Bucky between Natasha and Steve. He kept hold of Natasha’s hand and Steve couldn’t stop himself from glancing over every few seconds during the first few acts. The first few acts were all singing, and Steve was surprised by how good they were. The next few were children playing instruments. One girl played a guitar while singing an acoustic version of a Guns ‘N’ Roses song.

Next was Becca. She came out onto the stage wearing a black leotard with a red skirt attached to the bottom and tights. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail high on her head and she was wearing light red lipstick and black eyeliner. She stood in the middle of the stage and a single red spotlight illuminated her as she waited for the applause to stop. Steve could tell she was fighting a smile as she heard Bucky whistle loudly, he and Natasha stood up. They eventually sat back down and resumed holding hands as Take Me to Church by Hozier started playing.

Becca started off laid on her stomach on the floor as the music started up. She arched her back and stretched her legs out, then rolled onto her back and then to her feet. She did several pirouettes and leaped across the stage. She moved so fluently, Steve could hardly register the idea that she could possibly have been nervous. She did some more specialised dance moves and Steve stared up at her in amazement. Becca did several more pirouettes and leaped to one back corner of the stage. There was a slight lull in the music before the chorus boomed out of the speakers. As it did, she started moving faster and Steve thought she was about to do a cartwheel, but her hands didn’t touch the floor. She flipped in the air and Steve saw Bucky grip Natasha’s hand a little tighter in his peripheral vision. Thankfully, Becca didn’t get hurt. She fell backwards when she landed then flipped her legs over her head to do a handstand. She held it for a few seconds then dropped into a forward roll.

Steve couldn’t quite keep up with what happened after that, but it was amazing to watch. She was a natural.

When the song came to an end, Bucky and Natasha weren’t the only ones giving a standing ovation. Steve stood up too, and so did most of the rest of the audience. Becca stood up and grinned widely. She didn’t even glance around the rest of the room, just looked straight at Bucky. Bucky and Natasha both cheered for her, as did Steve, and her grin widened. She bowed quickly and waved to her brother before leaving the stage. They all clapped a little longer after she had gone but eventually Bucky and Natasha sat down again, and Steve followed suit.

They sat through the last three acts. One other dancer, one contortionist that kind of freaked Steve out, and a boy who could make music from the rims of glasses.
The announcer came onto the stage and complimented the amazing acts they had seen, then declared that there would be a short intermission as the judges made their decisions. He also mentioned that the children would not be able to come out during the intermission to speak to any parents/guardians/other family members who were in the audience. As everyone started moving, Bucky dug a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and held it up in silent offering to Natasha. She nodded and they both stood up.

“Steve, are you coming out with us?” Bucky asked as he patted his pockets, presumably to look for a lighter. Steve nodded and followed them both outside.

They went back to Bucky’s car so they were away from the entrance and Bucky handed a cigarette over to Natasha. He held one out in offering to Steve too, but he shook his head and tugged his jacket tighter around himself.

Natasha and Bucky both gushed over how amazing Becca’s performance was, and how relieved Bucky was that she hadn’t hurt herself as far as he could tell. He asked Steve what he thought and Steve smiled as admitted it was amazing.

Once they finished their cigarettes, Bucky and Natasha stubbed them out and Natasha touched Steve’s hand before he could follow Bucky back inside.

“Buck, why don’t you go get us some drinks while I talk to Steve in private.” Natasha smiles as she placed a red-nailed hand on Steve’s scrawny shoulder.

Bucky looked sceptical. “Nat… Play nice.” He warned her and glanced over at Steve, probably to see if he was comfortable with it.

Steve shrugged and smiled reassuringly at Bucky, and Bucky took his car keys out of his pocket and passed them to Natasha. “Fine, you can talk in the car, it’s freezing out here.”

Natasha took the keys and nodded. “Tea. Milk and two sugars.”

“I know, I know. Steve, what do you want?”

“Just orange juice, please,” Steve smiled slightly and Bucky nodded as he went back into the building.

Natasha unlocked the door and got into the back, leaving the door open for Steve. He got in after her when she scooted to the other end of the seats and turned on the overhead light. The light wasn’t very bright, so when Steve closed the door and that one was the only one on, it made Natasha look like she was about to tell him a scary story around a campfire.

“So… What did you want to talk about?” Steve asked as he rubbed his hands over his thighs.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business…” Steve set his jaw, trying to look as serious as possible, and not as embarrassed and uncomfortable as he felt.
business. Especially since he won’t shut the fuck up about you.”

Steve blinked in surprise at that. “He talks about me?”

Natasha rolls her eyes before replying. “Yes. All the time. Literally, he can’t go five minutes without mentioning his new friend Steve Rogers. But you still haven’t answered my question. Do you want to have sex with him?”

Steve felt his cheeks heat up more, as well as the back of his neck and the tips of his ears. But he still didn’t answer. He hadn’t even thought about it. He had thought about kissing him. A lot. And Bucky was attractive… Very attractive…

Natasha sighs impatiently. “Look,” She moved a little closer to Steve, covering one of his hands with her own. “You’re not the kind of guy Bucky usually goes out with…”

Steve wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. But it did confirm that Bucky was, in fact, into guys.

“That’s a good thing,” Natasha clarified. “The kind of guys Bucky usually goes out with are assholes. But you seem different… For starters, you don’t keep grabbing Bucky’s ass while he’s trying to have a conversation,” Steve blushes at the thought of doing that, in public, to Bucky. The thought of doing anything in public made Steve uncomfortable, but that just sounded disrespectful.

“I swear, I’ve almost broke about three different dudes’ wrists.” Natasha scoffs and shakes her head.

“I wouldn’t do that…” Steve states and Natasha nods.

“I can see that.” She smiled a little and holds her hand out to Steve. “You seem like a decent guy, Steve. I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Steve smiled back and shook her hand. They both got out and locked Bucky’s car before going inside. Bucky was sat in his seat at the front sipping another coffee, and there was a cup orange juice on Steve’s seat and a pale tea on Natasha’s seat. They both sat down and with their drinks and Bucky glances over at Natasha quizzically, but she just handed over his keys and smiled.

Before Bucky could say anything, the announcer came back on stage and all the acts lined the back of the stage behind him. Becca waved slightly to them again and Bucky smiled and waved back.

They announced the child who came in third place first. It was the contortionist, and he got a medal. His parents were very proud, and he strode up onto a little step that resembled the pedestals used in the Olympics to show the winners of the bronze, silver, and gold medals. The winner of second place was the singer who played guitar. Everyone clapped again and she got a little trophy.

Now, either Becca had won or she hadn’t placed at all. Bucky and Natasha were holding hands again as the announcer paused for suspense. But this time, Bucky put his cup down and grabbed Steve’s hand too.

Bucky’s hands were warm from holding the coffee, and Steve could feel callouses on his finger tips and the top of his palm. Other than that, his hands were soft and smooth. Steve squeezed his hand back with a smile as they waited to hear who had won.

“Becca Barnes!” The announcer called out and Bucky, Natasha, and Steve all jumped to their feet clapping and cheering. Becca stepped forward, looking shocked but overwhelmed with happiness as she received her bigger trophy and stepped up onto the highest pedestal. The rest of the audience
clapped and cheered too as the school photographer took a picture of the three winners on their pedestals. They all got sashes too. The contortionist boy got a bronze coloured one with “3rd Place” written in cursive, the girl got a silver one with “2nd Place” in the same writing, and Becca got a gold one with “1st Place” written across it. They all got their picture taken with their arms around each other, and the boy and girl both kissed Becca on the cheek while she smiled widely for the camera.

As soon as the pictures were done, Becca ran into the crowd and straight into Bucky’s open arms. He lifted her up and he swung her round, hugging her tight. He didn’t put her down but he did pull his head back a little to look her in the face as he immediately started ranting about how proud he was of her and how amazing her dance was.

He eventually put her down and took her hand as she yawned. “Let’s get you home, we have ice cream we can celebrate with!”

She nodded and smiled at Natasha and Steve. “Did you guys enjoy my dance?”

They both nodded quickly and grinned. “You did great! I had no idea you could dance like that.” Steve said right away and Becca smiled at Bucky.

“I have a great teacher. Bucky taught me everything I know.”

Bucky dropped Natasha off at home first, and Natasha promised to dance with Becca as soon as her work schedule allowed her time off. Then, Bucky took Steve home and again insisted on walking Steve up to his apartment. He did lock Becca in the car, though. When Steve looked confused, Bucky rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly and shrugged.

“Just in case.”

Steve nodded at that. This wasn’t the safest neighbourhood, and Bucky was clearly protective over Becca. It made sense that he’d take precautions to make sure she was safe whenever he wasn’t there to protect her.

When they got up to his apartment, Steve smiled at Bucky. “Thank you for inviting me, I had a great time. Becca is really talented, she definitely deserved that win.”

Bucky nodded in agreement and grinned again. “Yeah, she’s pretty great.”

“Is it true? That you taught her?”

Bucky nodded. “I took dance lessons when I was younger, but by the time Becca showed interest in it, our parents couldn’t afford to pay for both of us to do it. So I carried on my lessons, and taught Becca myself.”

Steve smiled as Bucky showed, yet again, how much he cared about his sister.

“Did Natasha make you uncomfortable? What did she talk to you about?”

Steve simply shook his head. “She didn’t make me uncomfortable, and it doesn’t matter what we talked about.”
Bucky was about to say something else, but Steve stopped him by stepping closer, placing his hands on Bucky’s shoulders and...

He meant to kiss him on the cheek. He really did.

But Bucky moved, and Steve’s lips ended up pressed against Bucky’s. They both froze, and Steve’s eyes were open in shock. But Bucky’s were closed. Steve stood on his tiptoes to get a little closer to Bucky’s height before he could chicken out, and Bucky’s lips curled up in a small smile as he wrapped his arms around Steve’s middle.

Neither of them made a move to deepen the kiss, and eventually Steve put his feet flat on the floor again, looking at the ground in embarrassment. But Bucky’s arms were still around his waist and his chin was close to Steve’s forehead.

Steve didn’t want to move, but Bucky cleared his throat. “Becca is waiting… I should go…”

Steve nodded and eventually got the courage to look up at Bucky. Bucky was smiling, thank god.

“Goodnight Steve.” The taller man kissed Steve’s forehead before unwinding his arms from around Steve’s waist.

“Goodnight, Bucky.” Steve smiled back and watched as Bucky walked back down the hall. He waited until Bucky had gone down the stairs and out of sight before leaning back against his apartment door, still in shock over what just happened.

I... just kissed Bucky Barnes!
Halloween was getting closer, and Steve’s co-workers were already talking about what costumes they would wear and what they were doing for Halloween night. Fury was closing the store for Halloween, as he did every year after someone bought some saws from the store and, after a few too many drinks, had a nasty accident. It was easier to close the store early for the night than risk someone else losing a finger. The library wouldn’t be open that day either, so after working from one in the afternoon to four at Fury’s, Steve would have the night off.

Like every year, Steve had no plans for the night. He would watch some horror movies on Netflix, maybe, but other than that, it was just a normal night for Steve. Sam had a Halloween party every year, which he always invited Steve to, but it was a big party with over one hundred guests. That was too much for Steve, so he always politely declined. Peggy and Angie were going to a Halloween party at a nightclub and invited Steve to come too, but that was the same problem. Too many people. And Steve probably wouldn’t even get into the club.

On the twenty fifth of October, Steve got a text from an unknown number. Two texts, actually. From different numbers. And they both said almost the same thing.

“R U comin to the party?? Xx” Steve assumed it was someone texting the wrong number, so he moved on to read the next one.

“Steve you’re coming to the party, right?”

Steve frowned slightly. What are the odds of someone texting to his phone, when they were trying to text a different person, who happened to also be called Steve?

He decided to reply to the first one first.

“I think you have the wrong number, sorry”

Almost instantly, he got a reply from the same number.

“Steve Rogers? It’s Becca Barnes Xx”

Steve read the message a few times and hesitated before saving the number into his phone.

“Oh, yeah it’s Steve. Hi Becca. What party?”
“Mine n Buck’s xx”

Steve hesitated again. If Bucky wanted him there, why wouldn’t he have asked Steve himself? They had been texting lately, the same amount as usual. Steve had been nervous about texting Bucky after that night after Becca’s talent show. He wasn’t sure if he’d crossed a line when he kissed Bucky, even if it was technically an accident. Bucky had kissed back, but in retrospect, Bucky might have regretted it.

“Did Bucky tell you to invite me?” That seemed safe. He could be played off as a joke if Bucky hadn’t asked.

“Yeah, how do u think I got ur number? So r u comin?? Xx”

“Why didn’t he ask me himself?”

“He thought he did xx”

Steve frowned and went through his conversation with Bucky. He had asked Steve what he was doing for Halloween, but when Steve said he had no plans, Bucky had to go back to work and when he replied after finishing, he was ranting about how much of an idiot his boss was.

Steve eventually found out what Bucky’s job is. He works in construction, and he’s currently helping to build the new Stark Tower for Howard Stark. Howard’s son, Tony, was apparently in charge of this project, so that made him Bucky’s boss. Bucky was the only person who could talk to Tony without having to be dragged away by the other workers before he punched him, so he had been put in charge of communicating between Stark and the other workers. Which, although it stopped the assault charges, it was apparently a real pain in the ass. Especially when he had other jobs to do too.

“He did not. He asked what I was doing for Halloween but then he went off topic.”

“Lol yeah he can get distracted pretty easy, hes a scatter brain. He probably ment to ask u. So r u comin? Xx”

Steve smiled as he read the message and typed out a reply. “What kind of party is it?”

Becca told him it was a house party at their home, and it was going to be thirty people at the most. There would be alcohol, but Becca and her friends weren’t allowed to drink that. The alcohol was for Bucky and his friends. There would be plenty of soda for anyone who wasn’t drinking, and there would be a tonne of food that Becca and her friends were making Halloween themed. It would start at eight at night, and people could stay as long as they wanted. There was space for people to stay the night if they couldn’t get home, either because it was too far away or because they were too drunk to drive themselves home. Bucky would not be the designated driver. And the party was fancy dress.

“What’re you dressing up as?” Steve asked Becca before she could ask him. He had no idea what he was going to wear. He didn’t have any Halloween costumes, and he hadn’t dressed up for Halloween in years. Definitely not for a “grown up” party. He didn’t know what kind of costumes were custom for nineteen year olds to wear to parties. Asking a fourteen year old probably wouldn’t give him the best idea of what he should wear, but it was worth a shot…

“Jigsaw :D xx”

Steve wasn’t sure what she meant by that. Was she going as a puzzle piece?
Before he could ask, Becca sent him a photo attachment of a girl – not Becca – wearing a white dress shirt, a blazer, and a red bow tie. She had the same colour hair as Becca, and it was curly like her’s too. Her face was very pale, and she had red contact lenses in. Around her eyes, she was wearing eyeliner and eyeshadow blended around them. Her lips were red, and she had two black lines drawn on either side, down her chin, to look like the mouth of a ventriloquist dummy. She had swirls painted on her cheeks too.

Steve realised it was a female version of the doll from the Saw movies. *Oh, that Jigsaw!*

“That looks awesome! Can you do that kind of makeup?”

“God no! I’d take an eye out! Bucky’s friend is doin it 4 me. What r u comin as? xx”

Steve thought about it and admitted he had no idea and Becca reassured him he had plenty of time to figure it out. He also asked who the other person who text him was and, after sending her the number, Becca told him it was Natasha.

Steve texted Natasha back after saving her number, telling her he was coming. She didn’t reply.

The day of Halloween, Bucky checked to make sure Steve was coming three times. Each time, Steve said yes. He still wasn’t sure if his costume would be okay, but he was all he could make out of the little he had and the little he could afford to spend. He settled on a vampire. Vampires were pretty common, so at least he wouldn’t look too out of place. He made a cape out of some old sheets that he didn’t use because they were too scratchy. It was black and had red patterns on it in the shape of vines. He wore a white dress shirt and a black waistcoat with his black trousers and shoes. He wore a skinny tie tucked under the waistcoat. He would have preferred a bow tie, but he didn’t have one and he couldn’t afford to spend any more money after buying face paint and fangs. He also got temporary hair dye in a spray bottle that would make his hair black until he washed it. Steve still had some of his mother’s make up, but none of it was pale enough, so he had to buy more. Luckily, he managed to get a cheap Halloween make up set from a corner store. It included red lipstick, black nail polish, white face powder and cream, and black eye shadow. Steve left his lips pale, and didn’t use the nail polish, but he did make his face paler than usual and put some eyeshadow around his eyes to make them look a little more sunken.

He knocked on Peggy and Angie’s door as he readjusted the tie. They had offered to drop Steve off at Bucky’s house on the way to the club. Peggy wasn’t planning on drinking, so she would be okay to drive home when they were ready, meaning they were already taking the car anyway. Steve had accepted. That meant that Bucky wouldn’t have to drive from his house to Steve’s, then back home again. And it was Bucky’s party, so he shouldn’t have to leave it to come pick Steve up. The girls were going out at nine, so Steve told Bucky he would miss the first hour of the party. Bucky understood that Steve didn’t want to make Peggy and Angie go out earlier, or make them take Steve to Bucky’s just to go home again for an hour then go out. He said nothing really happens for the first hour of a party anyway, it’s just everyone arriving. No one arrives on time, Bucky had told him with a laugh.

They had started talking on the phone instead of texting all the time. They still texted, but with a phone call, they could do other things and put the phone on speaker so they can still talk. This is particularly helpful when Bucky’s is cooking. He always tries to cook a different meal every night for Becca, and make sure the meals were never predictable. He was always making new, intricate dishes, some that Steve had never even heard of. So, he put his phone on speaker and left it on the counter while he cooked, so he could still talk to Steve as he rushed around the kitchen cooking and putting the meal together.
Angie opened the door and smiled at Steve as she invited him in while Peggy finished getting ready. Angie was dressed as Sally from Nightmare Before Christmas, and she even had the stitches drawn on her face and neck. The dress she wore was patches of different colours and fabrics all sewn together. She had a long ginger wig on over her normal hair too.

As Stev predicted, Peggy came out of the bedroom dressed as Jack Skellington. She looked pale and had the stitches drawn from the corners of her lips and along her cheeks in a big smiling shape, she had black around her eyes too. Her hair was pulled back into a bun on top of her head and she was wearing a fitted pinstriped suit. The collar of the suit stuck out a little in the shape of a bat, with a plastic cat’s head in the middle over her chest.

“You guys look great.” Steve smiled at them and Angie insisted on dragging Peggy against her side so Steve could take a picture of them together. They also got a selfie with all three of them together, Steve in the middle. Then, they all got into Peggy’s car and Steve showed her the address Bucky had texted him. Peggy whistled when she saw the address and commented about it being a pretty expensive area. Angie asked Steve to steal an ashtray for her. Steve wasn’t sure if she was kidding or not.

Peggy said that Steve could text or call her when he wanted picking up and she’d drive him home. She warned him about drinking too much, and not to accept open drinks from people he didn’t know. Steve rolled his eyes as he listened to her safety rant. Peggy was twenty one, so she went into full mother-hen mode whenever anyone went somewhere new. She had given Steve a similar speech when he started working at Fury’s, ranting about stranger danger, and making sure he always knew where the managers were. Steve had also heard Peggy give this rant to Angie on multiple occasions, whenever she mentioned a new way home she had found. The day she mentioned taking short-cuts through back alleys, Steve thought Peggy was going to pass out she ranted so much without stopping to breathe.

Peggy pulled up outside the house and all three of them looked out the windows at it. Steve had never been to Bucky’s house before, so he wasn’t sure what to expect. It was a pretty basic house. It had two storeys and it was detached from it’s neighbours. The outside walls were a cream colour, and there was a large window into the living room. The pale curtains were pulled back to show the party inside. There were different coloured lights flashing and from what Steve could see, there were already people dancing. He thanked Peggy for the ride and told her and Angie to have fun tonight.

Steve could tell Peggy hadn’t driven away yet without having to look back. He walked up the path through the yard and up to the blue door and knocked as loud as he could. He was only waiting for about three seconds before the door was ripped open to reveal Bucky stood there, grinning.

_Holy shit_… Bucky was wearing a long leather coat with patterns on the lapels and six buttons down the middle. It was left open to show a dark brown, leather waist coat over a blood red, thin shirt with a red, Victorian style cravat around his neck. The cuffs of the coat where turned up, like a pirate’s jacket and he was wearing large, red-jewelled rings on both hands. Bucky was also wearing black leather trousers. Tight leather trousers. And knee-high, black leather boots with buckles up each side.

Steve blinked a few times then looked up at Bucky’s face. He had shaved off the usual shadow of stubble, he was wearing black eyeliner that made his blue eyes stand out more, and his hair was messier than usual. Not perfectly styled to look messy. Just messy, sticking up in odd directions.
“I… like you costume…” Steve stuttered out as he looked Bucky up and down again, and Bucky’s grin widened.

“Thanks. Can you guess who I am?”

Steve hesitated. He looked like a pirate… But before he could say that, Bucky grabbed a top hat off the table near the door and put it on. The hat had a piece of paper saying “10/6” tucked into the ribbon tied around it and Steve grinned.

“The Mad Hatter!”

Bucky nodded excitedly and almost bounces up and down on the spot. “Yes!”

Bucky stepped aside to allow Steve into the house. The music was a little louder than he expected, and they were only in the hallway and there was a door leading to the living room that was closed, so it would probably be louder in the main area.

“You’re a vampire, right?” Bucky has to speak up slightly for Steve to hear, and Steve nodded. He took the fake teeth out of his pocket and put them into his mouth to make it look like he had fangs. Bucky laughed at that. “You look more like Austin Powers than a vampire with those things!”

Steve laughed and took them out, putting them back in his pocket. “I don’t like wearing them anyway, they’re too big for my mouth.”

Bucky had to lean down slightly to hear Steve and laughed as he wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders. His boots were slightly heeled, meaning he was even taller than Steve now and Steve’s shoulder fit under Bucky’s arm. He pointed down the hall. “That’s one bathroom.” He points up the stairs opposite the front door. “The first room on the right when you turn the corner is Becca’s bedroom, so stay out of there. The next room is my parents’ room. Stay out of there too. And the door at the end of the hall is another bathroom. On the left side of the corridor, starting from the top of the stairs is the spare room, then my room. You can go in there if you want a bit of peace.”

Steve nodded as he listened, then Bucky pointed to the end of the corridor they’re stood in. “That’s the kitchen, food and drinks are all set up in there,” Then he pointed to their right. “And that’s the living room where the main party is.”

As they spoke, a few more people came in the front door and waved at Bucky as they went into the living room. The music got louder when they opened the living room door and Bucky turned to Steve. “Kitchen or living room?”

Steve was nervous, but he decided on the living room. They both went in and Steve winced slightly at the volume of the music. There were a lot of people around Bucky and Steve’s age, a few older, and a few people Becca’s age. He glanced around to see if he could see her and spotted her in the corner of the room, talking to a ground of girls her age. Her make up looked just like it had in the picture of the girl she had sent him. She glanced over and he smiled and waved in greeting, expecting her to wave back then returned to her conversation, but instead she smiled and came over to them.

“Hi Steve!” He had to almost shout over the music, even though she was just a few feet in front of him.

“Hi! You look amazing!” Steve smiled and Becca blushed slightly under the white make up.

“Thanks! Clint did it for me!”
Steve didn’t know who Clint was, but he didn’t have time to ask before Becca shouted “Hey!” as Bucky took the drink she was holding out of her hands. He raised it to his face and sniffed the contents before handing it back, nodding in satisfaction. Steve laughed as Becca rolled her eyes, and he noticed she had even gotten some red contact lenses. *Looks like the Barnes’ really go all-out for Halloween.*

Bucky was already in conversation with a group of women off to his side but he still had one arm over Steve’s shoulders as Steve spoke to Becca. After a while, Becca got dragged away to dance with her friends, who were dressed in cliché kids’ Halloween costumes. The older guests had more unique costumes, most of them had been made themselves. Some were funny, like one person who had come as a giant hot dog, and others were damn near terrifying. Someone came as a very realistic-looking zombie. He looked like his guts were falling out of his stomach, and he was holding a very realistic heart. Steve had seen the living room through pictures Bucky had sent Steve of him or Becca, but it looked even bigger in reality, even with all these people. The floors were a cream colour that matched the outside of the house and the curtains were a mint green. The white couch that Steve had thought had red roses on it, turned out to be pink roses, and there were white cushions with mint green flower patterns each corner of it that matched the curtains. The coffee table that Steve had seen a picture of when Bucky was showing him how much homework Becca had wasn’t there. It may have been moved elsewhere to avoid getting broken or damaged during the party. He also saw nails on the wall that were currently being used to hold up “Happy Halloween” banners and plastic skeletons.

As Steve looked around the room, he didn’t notice Bucky lean down until he spoke with his lips close to Steve’s ear. “Want to go get a drink?”

Steve stiffened slightly, having not expected to hear Bucky’s voice so close. He had almost forgotten he was there, and had gotten used to having Bucky’s arm around him so that he hardly noticed it anymore. But as soon as he heard Bucky’s voice he felt every inch of Bucky’s body that touched his own. His arm around his shoulder, his fingertips resting against Steve’s bicep, his ribs against Steve’s other arm…

Steve remembered Bucky’s question and nodded quickly in reply, his throat suddenly dry. Bucky led Steve through to the kitchen. There were a few people stood around talking in there, most of them holding bottles of beer or smoking cigarettes. Steve couldn’t stop himself from coughing slightly when they first entered the room. It felt like walking into a wall of smoke to Steve, but Bucky wasn’t effected and didn’t notice Steve’s reaction. He pulled Steve over to the coffee table that had been moved in there and was covered in snacks and drinks. The music was quieter in here, past the solid wood of the kitchen door.

Bucky’s arm slipped off Steve’s shoulders as he went over to the drinks. “What do you want?”

Steve looked over the different drinks around Bucky. Most of the ones he was stood in front of were alcoholic, but Steve wasn’t much of a drinker. He didn’t even recognise most of the drinks there. He looked over at another section a little off to Bucky’s left, the drinks there were all non-alcoholic. Most likely for Becca and her friends, but Bucky must have noticed Steve looking at them, because he moved closer to those drinks and started reading all the names out to Steve. Steve settled on a can of coke, and as Bucky handed it over to him, Becca barged into the kitchen and came straight over to Bucky. Bucky smiled at her, but only for a second, then his face grew concerned. He must have noticed something on her face that told him something wasn’t right.

She walked closer to him and tugged the lapel of his coat to get him to lean down slightly. When he did, she whispered something in his ear, and Bucky rolled his eyes and groaned. He nodded to Becca and stormed out of the kitchen into the living room with a deep from on his face. Steve
started to follow, but Becca grabbed his arm before he could get more than a few steps towards the living room.

“Steve… Will you stay in here with me? Just until Bucky comes back?” She looked nervous, and Steve hadn’t seen her look this uneasy before. Now Steve was nervous, but he nodded and moved back over to Becca.

“What’s going on?” He asked as he played with the ring pull of his can of coke, his eyes glued to the door to the living room.

“Bucky’s ex is here.” Becca bites her lip and steps a little closer to Steve, who sensed her agitation and tentatively wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She was about two inches shorter than him, and as soon as his arm was around her, she leant against him.

“I’m guessing that’s a bad thing?” Steve asked and Becca nodded. She fiddled with the rim of her own drink, but didn’t elaborate as she too watched the kitchen door.

Whoever this ex is must be one of the guys Natasha had mentioned the night of Becca’s talent show.

Speaking of Natasha, where is she? She claimed to be Bucky’s best friend, wouldn’t she be at his party? He was about to voice this thought to Becca when Bucky stormed back into the kitchen, his pack of cigarettes already in hand. Becca stood up straight and took a step towards Bucky, but before she could say anything, Bucky answered her question.

“He’s gone, go back to your friends. Romey is a little shaken up.” He puts the end of a cigarette in his mouth and sparks his lighter, but before he lights the cigarette he looked up and notices Becca is still standing there. He takes it out of his mouth again and rolls his eyes. “Go back to the living room, Becca.”

She still doesn’t move, watching Bucky carefully.

“Becca, go!” Bucky didn’t quite shout, but he did raise his voice with a stern edge to it. She didn’t flinch and just stepped closer to her brother to hug him, then disappeared back into the living room.

As soon as the door closed, Bucky lit his cigarette and leant against the counter, letting the smoke out with a sigh. As much as Steve hated smoking, he had to admit Bucky looked pretty good smoking. Especially in that costume. He had taken the hat off at some point, so now he was back to looking like a pirate. The other guests who were in the kitchen had left at some point, leaving Bucky and Steve alone.

“Who was that?” Steve asked quietly, not wanting to upset Bucky if it was a sore subject.

“No one important.” Bucky shook his head as he breathed in more smoke. He tried to blow it away from Steve, but the room was small, and Steve still ended up breathing in some eventually and had to turn away to hide his cough.

Seconds later, Natasha surged into the kitchen. She was dressed in a skin tight, leather jumpsuit with what Steve hoped was a fake gun strapped to her hip.

“What happened?” She ignored Steve and spoke directly to Bucky.

“Nothing. He just showed up, Becca told me, I spoke to him, and he left.”

“What did he say to you? What did you say to him?”
Bucky glanced over at Steve before turning back to Natasha with a smile. “I told him to leave, he made a comment about how hot I look, I told him to leave again and he left.”

Natasha didn’t look convinced and crossed her arms. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Bucky smiled again and kissed Natasha’s cheek. Steve was glad to see Bucky smiling again, but there was something different about this smile. Usually he showed his teeth, but his lips were pressed firmly together this time.

Natasha nodded a little and stayed in the kitchen to have a cigarette with Bucky. Bucky finished first, having started first, and Natasha told him to take Steve into the living room away from all the smoke. Bucky nodded and followed her command, his arm around Steve again after he grabbed his drink. Just a Fanta, nothing alcoholic.

Once they got into the living room, Bucky slumped down on the couch and dragged Steve down next to him. Steve laughed lightly as he landed on the cushion. Bucky checked his watch and shouted Becca. She was just able to hear him over the music and came over. “It’s nearly ten, I promised the parents I’d get their kids home by ten. Are your friends ready to go?”

Becca nodded and went to gather three of her friends. The others were walking home, according to Bucky. They didn’t live that far away, but Natasha was walking each of them home anyway, just in case. Steve offered to walk with her, but Bucky told him to ‘hold down the fort’ here at home. It might have felt weird being in Bucky’s house without Bucky or Becca home, but he agreed nonetheless. Bucky introduced Steve to his friend, Clint, before they left. Clint was a few years older than them, and worked as a make-up artist for the shows at the dance school Natasha taught at. He was only a tiny bit taller than Steve, so Bucky said they’d hit it off. Both he and Clint had rolled their eyes as that, and Clint gave Bucky a good-natured punch to the arm as he left to take Becca’s friends home.

Clint told Steve about his work at the school, and how much fun it was watching the little girls’ amazed faces when they saw his work. Steve complimented the work he did with Becca’s make up and Clint said he loved working on Becca because she had smooth skin, she wasn’t allergic to any kind of makeup, and she was open to experimenting. He said he liked doing Bucky’s make up too, when he let him. When Steve looked confused he clarified that he puts foundation on him or concealer when he looks particularly tired from working too much or looking after Becca when she’s ill and up all night. He also proudly told Steve he was the one who decided to put some eyeliner on Bucky for tonight.

When Bucky got back, he burst into the room and loudly declared that he could now get drunk. He had no plans to drive anymore tonight. Natasha immediately put a glass of amber liquid in his hand and he smiled brightly as he drank it. Then he made his way back over to Steve and pushed Clint out of the way so he could sit next to Steve on the couch. Clint just rolled his eyes and got up to dance with Natasha, telling Steve it was nice to meet him.

“Do you like Clint?” Bucky asked before he downed nearly the whole drink in one gulp.

“He’s pretty cool, he’s good at his job.” Steve gestures to Bucky’s eyes, and Bucky grins.

“You like the eyeliner?” Bucky leant a little closer to Steve and winked at him. His eyes looked a lot darker than usual, his pupils dilated widely.

Steve cleared his throat and nodded with a smile. “Makes your eyes look nice. Well, nicer than usual.” Steve ducked his head as he blushed, surprised he had said that.
There was a few seconds of silence, and when Steve looked up, Bucky looked a little surprised too but he was smiling slightly too.

“You like my eyes?” He asked, leaning closer to Steve so he wouldn’t have to speak so loud and Steve felt his face heat up more. Bucky’s arm was around Steve’s shoulders again and his fingertips were dancing along Steve’s bicep.

Steve nodded a little and smiled, but didn’t say anything else. After a few seconds of staring at each other in silence, Bucky pulled away with a laugh.

“You need to loosen up a bit more. Here,” Bucky held up his glass that still had about a quarter of the amber liquid still in it. “Drink this. Relax.”

Steve hesitated, remembering what Peggy had said about accepting open drinks from people. But she had said not to accept them from people he doesn’t know. He knows Bucky, and he had seen Natasha give the drink to Bucky. Natasha wouldn’t put anything in it to harm Bucky. He took the glass and sipped the liquid. Steve wasn’t a child, he knew it was whiskey. He’d just never had it before. As soon as the liquid touched his tongue he cringed but swallowed the mouthful he took. As he swallowed, he winces and coughed, handing it back to Bucky. Bucky was laughing lightly at Steve’s reaction.

“You okay?” Steve nodded and wiped his mouth, his face still screwed up in discomfort until he took a sip of his coke to wash out the taste of the whiskey.

“How can you enjoy that stuff?” Steve asked Bucky, and Bucky shrugged.

“I’ve been drinking it for a while. And my dad drank it all the time, it must be in my blood. Come on.” Bucky got up and dragged Steve into the kitchen again. There was a woman sat on the counter and a man stood between her legs as they kissed, but Bucky didn’t even look at them and dragged Steve over to the alcoholic drinks.

Bucky spent the next half an hour mixing different kinds of cocktails for Steve to taste, trying to find a drink or combination of drinks than Steve liked. They eventually settled on Smirnoff and Fanta, and by that point Steve was starting to feel a little drunk. Steve hadn’t been drunk in about a year.

A man who was clearly the oldest person at the party – probably closer to forty than thirty years old – walked into the kitchen at that point and Steve initially thought it was a parent of someone at the party who was looking to drag his kid home. But, he smiled at Bucky and they both hugged. Bucky called the man “Alexander” as he asked about work, and Alexander returned the question after giving a vague answer.

Alexander took out a pack of cigarettes and handed one to Bucky without asking if he wanted one. Bucky automatically took it and Alex lit the end for him before lighting his own. Steve was pretty sure Bucky doesn’t usually smoke this much. He only usually had one or two a day, and he knows he had one at work earlier in the day because he had texted him while he was on a ‘smoke break’.

He didn’t question it though, and just stepped back a little so Bucky and Alex could talk. The amount of smoke in the room was starting to irritate Steve’s lungs, and he remembered that he hadn’t bothered bringing an inhaler. There was several other people in the kitchen now and Steve started to feel a little claustrophobic.

He was about to say something to Bucky, but his throat felt too tight, so he decided to just leave the kitchen and go into the corridor or something to get some air and explain why he ran off to Bucky
later.

But as he turned to leave the kitchen, more people came in and he had to push past a few people to get to the door. The door felt too far away and Steve’s chest tightened. His anxiety flared up as he struggled to get past everyone, and that mixed with the loud music and the alcohol was making Steve’s head hurt. He felt dizzy and disorientated as went to grab the counter to stop himself from falling, but his perception was off and he missed.

The last thing he heard before he passed out was Bucky shout his name.

Chapter End Notes

My inspiration for Bucky's Mad Hatter costume is Sebastian Stan as the Mad Hatter, Jefferson, in Once Upon a Time.

Sorry about the cliffhanger, I'll update ASAP
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Steve wakes up.

The first thing Steve felt when he regained consciousness was pain. His chest hurt, his head hurt, and so did his cheek. He couldn’t remember what exactly happened, the last thing he remembered was Bucky mixing drinks for him, and then…

Steve couldn’t open his eyes yet, his body refused to listen to him. He felt cool air on his chest and realised at least the first three buttons of his shirt were open. He couldn’t tell if the rest were buttoned or not. His waistcoat was also open, and the cape was gone from around his neck. Steve briefly remembered being on the floor at some point, but he was face-first, and Steve could tell that now he was on his back. And his back wasn’t on a floor, it was too soft to be the kitchen floor, and there was a pillow under his head. More than one pillow, actually.

Steve, again, thought back to what Peggy had said about accepting open drinks from people. The can of coke had been sealed when Steve was given it, and he opened it himself. The whiskey he had drank was originally Bucky’s, and had been given to Bucky by the man’s best friend. Even if that drink had been drugged for some reason, Bucky had gulped down half of it before giving some to Steve, so he would have passed out before Steve did. He couldn’t remember Bucky passing out.

The rest of the drinks he had had that night were all from Bucky. Steve couldn’t quite follow what Bucky had been mixing into the drinks, his hands moved so fast, but Steve hadn’t thought anything of it at the time. He was too mesmerised by the fast movements of his thin fingers to be worried about anything his eyes may have kept missing.

But Bucky wouldn’t do that… Bucky wouldn’t drug him! Bucky stood up for people in stores, and cheered at his sister’s talent shows, and spent hours cooking perfect meals, and got giddy when Steve correctly guessed his costume… He was completely innocent!

Then Steve remembered that his shirt was open, and he couldn’t feel if he was still wearing his pants or if the fabric he felt was just the duvet that was over the bottom half of his body. Steve’s mind was clearer now than when he had first woken up, probably from the shock of the conclusion his mind was trying to form about Bucky.

He wouldn’t… Would he?

Steve had watched the crime channel, and he’d heard stories about women or men who had been drawn in by another person’s kindness and good nature before said kind person attacked them.

He forced himself to open his eyes, but he was met with darkness. He could hear music in another room as his eyes adjusted to the dark. He could make out the shape of the bedside table beside him, and a photo frame on top of it, but he couldn’t see what the photo was. There was a lamp on the table too, and Steve leant over to switch it on. The lampshade was purple, so cast the room in a calming purple hue. The photo was of Natasha, Bucky and Becca. He planned to look around the rest of the room after making it a little lighter, but his eyes were immediately glued to an armchair
Bucky was curled up in the chair with his head resting on one of the arms. He was facing Steve but his eyes were closed and his face relaxed, so Steve knew he was sleeping. He was still wearing his Mad Hatter costume, but he had taken the coat off and he was using it as a blanket. Steve eventually looked down and saw that he was right, his shirt was open and so was his waistcoat. His pants were still on, and he sighed quietly in relief.

_Bucky wouldn’t have…_ Steve stared at the man asleep in the chair. His eyeliner was a little smudged, and his hair seemed even messier, but other than that he looked exactly the same as he had for the rest of the night.

Steve tried again to remember what had happened before he passed out. He remembered being in the kitchen, with Bucky, and another man came in. He hadn’t acknowledged Steve when he came in, and had gone straight to Bucky for a hug and a cigarette. It was an older man. He didn’t remember what Bucky and the man had talked about, but he remembered Steve started to get lightheaded after they had both lit their cigarettes. There were others nearby smoking too…

Bucky shifted slightly in the chair and yawned as he woke up slowly. Steve froze as he watched Bucky wake up and rub his eyes. He much have forgotten he was wearing eyeliner, because when he moved his hand away and saw the smudge on the heel of his palm he groaned and forced himself to sit up. The chair mustn’t have been comfortable, especially not for someone of Bucky’s height. He stretched out, having not yet noticed that Steve is awake. When he did see him, he immediately got up and knelt in front of the bed, near Steve’s head.

“Steve, are you okay?” He looked so concerned, and Steve’s brow furrowed slightly in confusion.

“What… What happened?” He sat up and rested a hand on his own chest, cringing slightly at the tightness he could feel in his lungs.

“You passed out in the kitchen… I was hoping you could tell me what happened…” He still looked concerned and lifted a hand to press the back of it to Steve’s forehead, feeling his temperature.

As soon as his hand touched Steve’s head, he flinched back, moving out of his reach and Bucky frowned slightly.

“You really don’t know what happened?” Steve wanted to trust Bucky so much, he wanted to believe him. He wanted to keep thinking Bucky was an amazing person, who would never hurt anyone, or trick anyone.

He watched Bucky’s face carefully, and when Bucky replied by telling him he really didn’t know what happened, his expression was so open and honest that Steve felt himself starting to believe him again.

“You are asthmatic?” Bucky asked after a few seconds of silence and Steve nodded. As soon as he did, guilt took over Bucky’s expression. “And you were stood in the kitchen surrounded by people smoking? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Steve just shrugged. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t told him. Maybe because he wanted to spend time with Bucky, and if that meant standing around in an enclosed space filled with smoke, Steve hadn’t even considered other options. But he didn’t voice this.
“I didn’t think about it…”

Bucky sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry… Natasha said you might have had an asthma attack or something.”

Steve thought about that. He used to pass out from asthma attacks when he was younger, but he hadn’t in about ten years. Although that could have been because he usually always had his inhaler with him.

“It’s okay… You didn’t know.” Steve smiled reassuringly at Bucky, but he couldn’t help feeling guilty. It was his own fault he passed out. Bucky hadn’t forced him to stay in the kitchen, he hadn’t made him forget his inhaler, and he definitely hadn’t drugged him. He couldn’t believe he had assumed Bucky would do something like that, and he hoped Bucky didn’t realise what he had been insinuating.

Steve remembered that his shirt was undone and blushed slightly as he looked down. Bucky saw it and explained right away. “You weren’t breathing properly, and Natasha unbuttoned your shirt. She said the clothes were restricting your breathing.”

“How does Natasha know all this stuff?” Steve asked as he buttoned up his shirt, noticing how Bucky’s eyes followed his hands. He was probably just worried that if Steve did the buttons back up his breathing would be constricted and he’d pass out again.

“She works at a dance school.” Bucky shrugged, but Steve just looked more confused. He didn’t see how that explained why Natasha knew what to do when someone passed out and wasn’t breathing properly.

“A lot of the younger kids either push themselves too hard trying to copy complex dances older people can do so effortlessly, or the parents push them too hard,” Bucky clarified with a slightly sad smile.

“Does that happen a lot?” Steve asked as he took the waist coat off.

“Too often. It happened with Becca a few times. She only passed out once, but she’s had a lot of injuries from trying to do moves without the proper training. The flip she did at the talent show, I learnt years ago. I can do it easily, but I was trained by a professional on a crash mat. She was trained by me in the basement. She claimed she could do it if I could do it, and I showed her a few times so she thought she could do it just from watching. She broke her collar bone.”

Steve nodded a little. He’d heard about ballerinas breaking toes or their ankles trying to stand on their toes for too long, but he didn’t know that other dance styles suffered similarly.

“What time is it?” Steve asked and Bucky turned a clock on his nightstand round to read it.

“Three in the morning,” Bucky replied and stretched again.

Steve cringed slightly when he heard Bucky’s joints crack and wondered how long he had been curled up in that chair. “Have you been up here since I passed out?”

Bucky nodded and Steve looked down in guilt. “Sorry I kept you away from your party.”

“It’s okay, we have one ever year. I’ll have fun at the next one.” He smiled reassuringly at Steve, but the smaller man still looked guilty so he continued. “And we’re having one for Christmas too, so that’s not too far away.”
Steve smiled a little at that and nodded. “Good…”

After a few seconds of silence, Bucky spoke again, the guilt back in his voice. “Again, I’m sorry I was smoking around you…”

“It’s okay, Buck, you didn’t know I was asthmatic.”

“Still… I usually don’t smoke around people who don’t smoke. I’ve never smoked around Becca, I should have asked if you minded or not.”

“I probably wouldn’t have said I minded…” Steve looked down and picked at his fingernails.

“Why not?” Bucky looked confused again.

“I like spending time with you… I don’t care what we’re doing at the time.” He kept his eyes down, looking at his hands as he waited for Bucky’s reply.

When Bucky didn’t speak for several minutes, Steve couldn’t stop himself from looking up.

Bucky was watching Steve’s face with a small smile but he didn’t say anything. After a few more seconds, Steve cleared his throat and readjusted the pillows propping his back against the headboard. He couldn’t even remember when he had sat up.

“Do you remember after Becca’s talent show? When I walked you to your door?”

“And we kissed?” Steve finished quietly, blushing again as he remembered accidentally kissing Bucky. He hadn’t regretted it, but it was still embarrassing that his first kiss had been an accident on his part.

“Did you like it?”

Steve hadn’t even thought about that. He didn’t have anything to compare it to, so he didn’t know if it was a particularly good kiss. The situation wasn’t exactly awful, they had had a good night and he’d had fun. And he really liked Bucky, so he didn’t think he’d ever regret Bucky being his first kiss. Having Bucky’s arms around his waist felt amazing, and Steve often woke up feeling them around him. Steve usually didn’t dream, or at least he didn’t remember the dreams when he woke up. Lately, he had remembered fragments from his dream when he woke up. The most prominent thing he remembered was strong arms around his waist, and the hands against the small of his back. He usually woke up from these dreams with a smile.

“Yeah… It was good… Well, I’m assuming it was.” Steve looked down again.

“What do you mean?” There was a beat of silence before Bucky spoke again. “Wait… Was that your first kiss?”

Steve’s face heated up again and he cursed how easily he blushed. He didn’t want to look up and see how Bucky was looking at him, so he just nodded lightly.

Bucky didn’t say anything again for a few seconds. “Now I feel bad,” He chuckled lightly and Steve saw him run his hand through his hair in his peripheral vision.

Steve eventually looked up with a small frown. “Why?”

“Because it was pretty boring. Aren’t first kisses supposed to be more… Passionate?”

He didn’t know what Bucky meant by that. Usually a person’s first kiss was sweet and innocent in
movies and TV shows.

“Is that was your first kiss was like?”

Bucky laughed again and leant back on his elbow. “My lip bled from my first kiss.”

“Really?” Steve sniggered slightly. Either they kissed for too long, or someone was too violent during the kiss.

“Yeah, he bit me.” Bucky laughed with him and tilted his head, causing his neck to crack loudly and Steve cringed again.

“Why do your bones keep cracking?” Steve exclaimed as he pushed the duvet off his legs.

“From sleeping in that damn chair!” Bucky shouted back with a laugh. He got up then and went to the door to turn the light switch on.

Now that Steve could see the room properly, his eyes widened slightly. Along the wall next to his door was a large floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, crammed full of books of different sizes. The wall adjacent to that one had a large window along it with sky blue curtains covering it. The walls were cream, except for the one that Bucky’s bed was pressed against, which was a dark blue. The wall opposite the window had four shelves with different trophies, ribbons, and certificated on each one. Framed pictures covered the wall above and around the shelves. Steve got out of the bed to go over to the picture frames on the wall. There were a few pictures of Bucky and Becca, and one of the pictures – which must have been taken when Bucky was a lot younger – was of them at what Steve assumed was a dance competition, holding a trophy. Becca was wearing a blue and black dress and Bucky was wearing a blue shirt with black dress pants. Bucky looked about fourteen in the picture, meaning Becca must have been nine. Bucky’s hair wasn’t styled as it was now, his bangs falling almost in his eyes, and his face was a little rounder but Steve could tell it was him. He and Becca were both grinning as they held one side of the trophy each, their other arms around each other.

There was a picture of a little boy with brown hair, holding a new born baby, and Steve smiled as he realised it was Bucky holding Becca. Bucky must have been five then, and there was another picture next to it of him looking almost exactly the same with a little girl the same age with red hair.

That must have been Natasha.

There were a few other pictures of Bucky and Natasha throughout the years, including some of other people Steve didn’t know. He recognised Clint in a photo that looked like it had been taken recently.

Steve heard Bucky move around behind him and assumed he was going back to sit on the bed. The second biggest pictures on the wall was one of Bucky around fourteen with Becca and an older woman, in her late thirties. The woman was between Bucky and Becca, and she was leaning down slightly (as was Bucky) so they could be at the same height as Becca. She had black hair, and the same bright blue eyes as both Becca and Bucky. They were all smiling brightly and Steve smiled too. It looked like they were at a beach or something. She was wearing a bright pink sundress, as was Becca, and Bucky was wearing a white t-shirt that looked like it had sand on it.

“Is that your mom?” Steve asked quietly and heard Bucky get up and walk over to him. He stood slightly behind Steve, and nodded lightly when Steve pointed to the picture he was referring to.

“Yeah… Her name was Bella.”
“Bella, Bucky, and Becca?” Steve smiled slightly and Bucky laughed with him.

“You’re forgetting my name isn’t actually Bucky. It’s James,”

The biggest picture was at the top of the collection, closest to the ceiling, and of four people on a couch. Bucky and Becca were in the middle. Becca only looked about two and her curly hair was up in two high pigtails, and Bucky was about seven. Both Becca’s and Bucky’s legs dangled from the couch, the same couch that was currently in the living room. They had their arms around each other. Next to Becca was the same woman from the beach picture, and next to Bucky was a man. He was around the same age as Bucky’s mother, maybe a little older, and had brown hair like Bucky and Becca, and the same eyes. He was very muscular, making the children look even smaller in comparison, and he was clearly tall.

That’s probably where Bucky got his height from.

He also had the same cleft in his chin as Bucky had, and had a similar facial structure except his head was definitely bigger.

“You dad?” Steve pointed to the picture and Bucky nodded again.

“What was his name?”

“James,” Bucky answered quietly while he looked up at the picture.

“James and James, and Becca and Bella?” Steve smirked slightly as he looked back at Bucky. Bucky just smiled slightly then walked away and back to the bed.

Steve decided not to mention it again and just followed him to sit on the bed with him.

“Is Becca in bed? I’m assuming the party is over…”

Bucky nodded. “I sent her to bed about two hours ago. She was worried about you, but I assured her I’d keep an eye on you. You should be honoured, she’s never cared this much about the guys I bring home before.”

Steve briefly wondered what he meant by ‘guys he has brought home’ but didn’t mention it.

“So…” Bucky moved a bit closer to Steve. “I was your first kiss?” He smirked slightly and Steve frowned.

“Yeah, so?” He answered defensively.

Bucky just smirked again. “If I’d have known that, it would have been a lot different.”

“Different how?” That was a loaded question, but Steve didn’t register that before he had said it. Honestly, he wouldn’t mind if Bucky kissed him. Actually, he kind of wanted him to. Steve still remembered how soft and warm Bucky’s lips were, and he’d give anything to feel them against his own again, and--

Steve’s mind immediately went blank as he felt said lips against his own. Steve breathed in sharply through his nose in surprise and he could smell Bucky’s cologne. It wasn’t strong, he couldn’t smell it before, but with Bucky this close he could. It smelt like clarey sage and sea minerals, with a hint of mint and whiskey. He smelt so good, Steve could definitely imagine getting addicted to Bucky’s scent.
The kiss started off gentle, like Bucky was giving Steve chance to pull away if this wasn’t what he wanted, or like he was afraid of hurting Steve.

Bucky’s eyes were closed, like they had been last time, but Steve’s remained open in surprise. He could see just how much Bucky’s eyeliner had been smudged from this close, and he also realised he was wearing mascara too, making his eyelashes look longer and thicker.

Bucky’s right hand came up to cup Steve’s face and Steve’s eyes closed then. His mind started up again in full force, panicking. He didn’t know how to kiss. This hadn’t been so much of a problem last time, because neither of them had expected it so Bucky wouldn’t have had any expectation.

Bucky’s lips moved against his own and Steve tried to copy him, but he felt clumsy and it was just embarrassing how badly he felt he was doing. Their noses bumped together and Bucky let out a little laugh against Steve’s lips. Again, he expected Bucky to pull back, but he didn’t. He just moved a little closer so their knees were touching and tilted Steve’s head so their noses weren’t bumping into each other anymore. Steve’s hand moved up to Bucky’s chest, not to push him away, but just because he wasn’t sure where else to put it. His other hand was clenched at his side, and his body was tense. But Bucky’s seemed relaxed. His hand was just resting on the side of Steve’s face lightly, while Steve’s hand on Bucky was slightly anxious.

God, his lips are so soft, and he’s so good at this.

Steve was very self-conscious about his own chapped lips. Bucky sucked lightly on Steve’s bottom lip, and Steve let out a small groan without meaning to. He tried to pull back in embarrassment, but Bucky’s hand held him there. He kept sucking, then Steve felt something wet, Bucky’s tongue, swipe along his bottom lip. He gasped softly and Bucky took that as permission to lick into his mouth. Steve’s breathing sped up slightly as he opened his mouth a little more for Bucky’s tongue. His mouth tasted like whiskey and cigarette smoke. Steve would have expected that combination to taste disgusting, but he liked it almost as much as he loved how Bucky smelled. Steve was briefly worried about what he tasted like, after having slept, but whatever he tasted like Bucky didn’t seem to care. Steve tried to copy Bucky’s movements again with his own tongue. Again, it felt clumsy.

Again, Bucky didn’t stop as Steve expected.

Eventually, breathing was getting a little difficult for both of them, so they broke the kiss. Bucky didn’t pull all the way back though. He rested his forehead against Steve’s, his eyes still closed. Steve’s eyes opened and he looked up slightly at Bucky’s face. His cheeks were slightly pink, and from this close, Steve could see little freckles sprinkled over Bucky’s cheeks and over the bridge of his nose. There wasn’t many of them, and they were so small that it would be impossible to see them if they weren’t so close.

Steve couldn’t help but smile slightly. They somehow made Bucky look even cuter. Steve imagined his own face was much more coloured than Bucky’s, but he honestly didn’t care anymore.

Bucky’s lips were darker than usual and a little swollen, and Steve had to pull back slightly to see Bucky’s whole face.

Even with the eyeliner smudged around his eyes, Bucky was the most beautiful thing Steve had ever seen. Especially when Bucky’s eyes slowly fluttered open, showing a small ring of teal around dilated pupils.

Steve was speechless, and he guessed Bucky was too, because they both just stared at each other
for what felt like hours. Steve could never get bored of looking at Bucky.

Eventually, Bucky was the first to speak. He cleared his throat first and moved back a little more.

“You should sleep… You can stay here, if you want. I think I’m still a little too drunk to drive, and it’s a little late to call your friend.”

Once he said that, Steve remembered Peggy telling him to call her when he needed picking up and swore internally. She was probably worried. Steve quickly dug his phone out of his pocket and Bucky’s hand dropped from the side of his face while he did, looking down at the phone in his hand.

“Something wrong?” He looked concerned.

(8) Missed Calls – Peggy
(6) Missed Calls – Angie
(1) Missed Call – Sam Wilson
(24) Unread Messages
(13) Unopened Voicemails

Bucky frowned as he saw Steve’s display. “Wow… I swear I didn’t hear your phone go off, especially not that many times.”

Steve shook his head as he opened the messages. Fifteen were from Peggy, and the other nine were from Angie.

Peggy: “Hey Steve, why aren’t you answering your phone? Angie and I are going home now, do you want picking up?”

Peggy: “Steve, are you okay? It’s getting kinda late… Text me back ASAP.”

Peggy: “Steve answer the phone!”

Angie: “Dude, English is freaking out. Answer the damn phone!”

Angie: “Now I’m freaking out. ANSWER THE PHONE!!!!”

As the messages went on, the girls got more annoyed, then they progressed to getting more worried. The last message was received three minutes ago and it was from Peggy.

“STEVE IF YOU DON’T CALL ME BACK RIGHT NOW IM CALLING THE COPS ON THAT LITTLE BASTARD!! I REMEMBER THE ADDRESS!!!”

Steve quickly called her back, hoping she hadn’t called the police already. He didn’t want Bucky to get in trouble, or arrested, for nothing.

“Steve?” Peggy’s panicked voice sounded through the small speaker on Steve’s phone.

He was really tempted to do a creepy voice, and tell her Steve is dead. But then he decided that he had put her through enough stress tonight.

“Hey Peggy, I’m fine, have you called the cops yet?”
“Angie was just dialling them. Are you really okay? If you’re being held captive or something, say ‘the ice cream is in the bottom drawer’,”

Steve laughed lightly at that and shook his head. “No, Peggy I’m fine. I had a bit too much to drink so I forgot to call you, and I couldn’t hear my phone over the music.” Technically, he wasn’t lying. But if he told Peggy what had really happened she definitely would insist on coming to get him.

“You little shit!” Steve had to rip the phone away from his ear then to avoid being deafened. He heard Angie ranting in the background too. “We have been worried sick about you!”

“I’m really sorry, Peggy, but I’m fine and you can go to bed now.” There was a moment of quiet as Peggy repeated that to Angie.

“Don’t you need a ride home? You said this Bucky guy would be too drunk to drive you back.”

Steve tried not to get offended by how Peggy said Bucky’s name, and held his tongue. She had every right to be upset after what Steve had done. But she should be upset with him, not Bucky. Bucky had done nothing wrong. He didn’t say any of this though.

“I’m… Actually going to crash here…”

Steve could hear Angie shouting something about Steve finally getting laid and he blushed, looking up to see if Bucky had heard. Bucky wasn’t sat in front of him anymore, though. He wasn’t sure when Bucky had gotten up, but he wasn’t even in the room anymore.

“Are you sure, Steve?” Peggy sounded concerned.

“I’m sure. Don’t worry about me, get some sleep.”

There was a few moments of silence as Peggy deliberated what to do. She eventually, although reluctantly, agreed to go to bed.

After agreeing to call if he needed her, and Steve had hung up, Bucky came back into the room with a smile. He was carrying some clothes and he had changed out of his costume into plaid pyjama bottoms and a loose, light blue t-shirt. Bucky had also managed to get all the eyeliner and mascara off his face. He came over and held out the clothes to Steve.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to sleep in your costume, so I brought you a change of clothes… They’re too small for me, so they should fit you…”

Steve stood up and took the clothes, smiling as he thanked him.

“I would say you can sleep in the spare room, but Natasha and Clint are sleeping in there. So, you can sleep in here. I’ll sleep on the couch downstairs. Do you need anything else?” Bucky looked a little nervous and Steve couldn’t help but smile slightly at how endearing that was.

“Won’t the couch be a mess? You just had a party down there…”

Bucky shrugged. “I’ll live.”

“I’ll take the couch, you sleep in your bed.” Steve tried to bargain, but Bucky shook his head.

“No way. I’ll take the couch.”

Steve felt guilty about making Bucky sleep on a couch that probably had alcohol and food spilt on it, but Bucky had already turned to leave the room. “Wait!”
Bucky turned back to face Steve, and Steve glanced between him and Bucky’s bed.

It was a king sized bed, with white sheets over the mattress and a blue duvet with blue pillows. It was big enough for two people, and definitely big enough for Bucky and Steve. And it was a lot more comfortable than the couch must be. Bucky had already spent some time sleeping curled up in an armchair because of Steve, it didn’t seem fair for him to have to sleep on the couch as well.

“Why don’t we both sleep in the bed?”

Bucky didn’t say anything, but his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“It’s big enough for both of us… And I don’t mind. I only take up a little space,” He smiled slightly and Bucky smiled back.

“Are you sure?” Bucky asked, and Steve nodded. “Okay… I’m going to go brush my teeth and stuff, so you can get changed in here…”

Steve nodded a little and waited for Bucky to leave the room before changing into the pyjamas Bucky had given him. The black trousers were soft cotton and the red t-shirt was a little baggy, but comfortable. More comfortable than what Steve was used to sleeping in.

Bucky knocked on the bedroom door to make sure Steve was ready before he came in. Steve had bunched up his clothes and left them in front of one of the bedside tables, the one on the left of the bed, and awkwardly asked Bucky if he had a spare toothbrush. Bucky laughed and nodded.

“There’s a pack of them in the medicine cabinet behind the mirror that have never been used, take one of them.”

Steve nodded and went to the bathroom. It was huge compared to his own. On the right, there was a large bath, and there was a shower cubicle in one corner. The sink was opposite the door and the toilet was a little to the left. The walls were tiled in blue and there were dolphins carved into the ceramic tiles with water coming out of the blowholes.

He washed his face and hands, then opened the mirror above the sink to find the toothbrushes that Bucky had mentioned. There was floss and unopened toothpaste in there and a lot of different medicine bottles. Most of them were aspirin or other over-the-counter painkillers, but there were a few others too.

Anti-depressants. Steve didn’t mean to pry, but he glanced over one of the bottles and recognised the name. His mother had been on them when she was first diagnosed terminal, so they were strong.

Were they Becca’s or Bucky’s…?

He tried not to think about it as he grabbed the toothbrushes and took one out of the pack, then put the packet back and closed the cabinet door. He quickly brushed his teeth and used some of the mouthwash.

There were two types of mouthwash, one for smokers, and Listerine. He used the Listerine one and screwed the cap back on before going back to Bucky’s room. Bucky was already in bed on the right side, and had turned the main light off, leaving the bedside light on to give Steve enough light to get into the left side.

“Feel free to push me out of bed if I get too cuddly.” Bucky winked at Steve and Steve laughed as he laid down. Bucky turned the bedside lamp off and the room was plunged into darkness.
All Steve could hear was Bucky’s steady breathing as he closed his eyes. “Goodnight, Bucky.”

“Goodnight Stevie.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The morning after.

Steve woke up from a pleasant sleep to a weight on his chest. But this wasn’t the uncomfortable weight in his chest that he woke up to last time, after his asthma attack. This was something external on top of him, and it was warm and solid.

Steve slowly opened his eyes and looked down. There were a few rays of light shining through the curtains which made it easier to see. Steve couldn’t help but smile as he saw Bucky’s arm slung over his chest. Bucky was still asleep, and his face was resting against Steve’s shoulder. Mouth slightly open as usual.

Steve didn’t dare move, not wanting to risk waking Bucky. But he also didn’t want Bucky to wake up and see him staring at him. According to Bucky’s bedside clock, it was only six in the morning, so Steve closed his eyes and tried to get a little more sleep.

His bladder, on the other hand, had other ideas.

He tried to ignore it, and just sleep, but the need to relieve himself kept getting more and more persistent. Eventually he muttered a quiet curse and started trying to get free. Bucky wasn’t particularly heavy, and it was only his arm he had to get out from under, but Steve didn’t want to disturb him up.

After a few minutes of moving as slowly as possible, Steve managed to free himself from under Bucky and quickly rushed to the bathroom. Once he was done he washed his hands and looked up at the mirror. The pale make up and black eyeshadow he had put around his face was smudged everywhere. He had completely forgotten about it, and when he saw it he realised he must have still had it on when he and Bucky kissed.

Well I bet that was attractive!

Luckily, it didn’t look like the black spray in his hair had faded at all, so at least Bucky’s pillow wouldn’t be stained in black.

Steve ran the tap and wet some toilet paper to try and scrub it off but he couldn’t scrub hard enough to have any effect without the paper breaking up. He didn’t want to use one of the towels or cloths in the bathroom, because he knew he’d stain it.

“There’s make-up wipes in the medicine cabinet.”

Steve’s heart almost gave out there and then when he heard a voice behind him. He could have sworn he had closed the bathroom door, but when he turned round it was open and Natasha was stood there. She was wearing a baggy, men’s tshirt and – from what Steve could tell – no bottoms. Her red hair was messy, and her make-up had been removed. Steve envied how good she still looked.

She chuckled lightly as Steve clutched his chest, trying to will his heart to slow down, and
wandered over to open the medicine cabinet. She took out a pack of make-up wipes and pushed Steve down to sit on the edge of the bathtub before starting to wipe the make-up off his forehead.

“I can do it, thanks…” Steve awkwardly tried to move away but Natasha just gripped his chin to keep him still. She didn’t speak for several moments.

“Did you do it?”

Steve frowned in confusion. “Do what?”

“Have sex with Bucky.”

Steve’s face heated up and he saw the corners of Natasha’s lips tug up slightly. “N-no…”

“Really? Your face says otherwise. And the fact that you’re in his bed.”

“Again, it’s none of your business, but we were just sleeping…”

“That’s what Bucky said when he slept with my cousin.”

Steve wasn’t sure how to reply to that, but it turned out he didn’t have to because Natasha kept talking.

“Although, I warned Bucky not to sleep with him. I’ve told him to sleep with you, so he probably won’t. He tends to do the opposite of what I advise…”

“Do you usually have such an active involvement in Bucky’s sex life?” Steve retorted, trying to sound challenging, but probably coming across bratty.

“When he asks,” Natasha replied simply as she started cleaning Steve’s cheeks.

“He asked you if he should sleep with me…?”

Natasha simply nodded, but didn’t say anything else.

“Why?”

She didn’t reply for a while, and Steve assumed he wasn’t going to get one, then Natasha put the wet wipe down and gripped Steve’s chin tighter. She lowered her face to Steve’s level as her nails lightly dug into Steve’s face.

“Because the past three people Bucky has slept with, including my cousin, have been demons. I warned him off all three of them and Bucky ignored me, because he always wants to see the good in people. And it always gets him hurt. Then I’m the one who has to pick him up and put him back together. The last guy he was with was my cousin, and he almost destroyed James. He was manipulative, and—“

Natasha visibly stopped herself before saying whatever she was about to say and took a deep breath before continuing. “My predictions were right about all three of these guys. It’s a shame Bucky had to get hurt for him to see this, but now he has accepted that not everyone has good in them. So, whenever he likes someone, he asks for my advice. Because I’m always right.

“After I met you at Becca’s talent show, he asked me what I thought of you. He also told me you kissed him. I wasn’t sure about you. I liked you, until he told me about the kiss. That was a bit forward of you.”
Steve was about to explain that it was technically an accident, but when he opened his mouth her grip on his face tightened slightly, warning him to stay quiet.

“But, I went out on a limb and told Bucky that I thought you were a good guy. Remember, Steve, I’m always right. Don’t break my winning streak, don’t prove me wrong and turn out to be a dirt bag. Or I will end you. Bucky has been through too much and I’ll be damned if I let anything else bad happen to him.”

Steve was a little scared, but he understood what Natasha was saying.

“Please don’t hurt my friend.”

“If I ever hurt Bucky, I’ll gladly let you end me. I really like him, and I don’t want to hurt him. Ever.” Steve replied honestly.

She watched his face for a few seconds before nodding and loosening her grip slightly. She finished cleaning Steve’s face and smiled as he put the used wet wipes in the bin under the sink.

Natasha opened to medicine cabinet and put the wet wipes away, and Steve spotted the anti-depressants again.

“What are those?” He asked, trying to sound casual.

She glanced back at him to see what he was referring to, then closed the cabinet. “You might find out eventually. Or you might not. It’s not my place to tell.”

Steve respected than and nodded.

“I need to pee, so are you done in here?” Natasha spoke bluntly and Steve almost tripped over his own feet as he got up to leave, rambling apologies.

He heard Natasha laugh lightly as she closed the bathroom door behind him, and Steve smiled too as he went back into Bucky’s bedroom. Bucky had moved while Steve was away, and he was curled up on his side, facing Steve’s side, with his arms wrapped around himself.

Steve crawled back under the covers and laid on his back with his eyes closed. Eventually, he fell back to sleep.

This time, there was no weight on his chest. No warm body close to his either. Steve opened his eyes and saw that the bed was empty.

He heard laughing downstairs and rubbed his eyes as he got out of bed. He contemplated getting dressed, but Steve was so comfortable in what he was wearing that he decided against it.

Becca, Bucky, Clint, and Natasha were all in the kitchen when Steve went in. Thankfully, they were all also in their pyjamas, so Steve wasn’t the only one. Becca was wearing a Batman tshirt and pink pyjama bottoms with little Batman symbols on them, and Clint was just wearing some shorts.

Becca and Bucky were cooking, while the two guests sat at the island in the centre of the kitchen.

“Morning, Sleepy Stevie!” Becca greeted him in a sing-song voice and he laughed lightly.

“Morning everyone…”
Natasha smiled at him as though nothing had happened last night, and waved slightly as she pulled out a chair next to her. Steve silently went over and sat down.

“Do you like pancakes, Steve?” Bucky asked as he flipped a pancake onto a plate.

“Yeah, but only with syrup,” Steve answered and Bucky slid a plate of five pancakes over with a bottle of syrup following soon after.

Clint’s head raised from where it had been resting on the counter top. “Hey! We’ve been waiting longer!” He pouted dramatically.

Steve looked over and saw he was wearing sunglasses. He was probably hung over.

“Yes, but you’re a healthy weight. Steve is too skinny,” Becca retorted before Bucky could, and he smiled proudly at his little sister.

Natasha laughed as Clint grumbled and dropped his head back onto the counter. Bucky eventually finished making enough for everyone and sat down opposite Steve and next to Becca.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” Bucky asked Steve as he cut up one of his pancakes.

Before Steve could reply, Clint cut in. “I bet he did if he shared a bed with you, Buck,” He winked over at Bucky and Bucky just rolled his eyes, looking at Steve for an answer.

“Yeah, I did, thanks.” He smiled. “Did you?”

Bucky already had a mouthful of pancakes, so he just nodded in reply. Natasha talked about a concert she was going to see and asked Becca if she wanted to come with her. Bucky interjected, asking how much it would cost, but Natasha assured him he would buy Becca’s ticket for her. All Bucky had to do was drive them there, then back again in the morning. The concert ended late at night, so they were going to stay at a hotel. Again, Natasha told them she would pay. Bucky didn’t seem happy about it at first, but Natasha assured him that she would look after Becca properly, and Bucky reluctantly accepted.

Steve finished his pancakes first and took his plate to the sink to wash it, but Bucky told him to just leave it on the side and he’d wash it with everyone else’s when they’re all done. When that time came, Steve insisted on helping Bucky wash the dishes since there was a lot from last night that needed washing too.

Bucky begrudgingly accepted as the others went into the living room to tidy the mess in there and allowed Steve to dry while Bucky washed. At first, they washed everything in a comfortable silence, but that gave Steve time to really think about what Natasha had said.

He glanced over at Bucky, who was smiling slightly even though all he was doing was washing a plate. He looked so happy all the time. Bucky didn’t look like he had been ‘destroyed’, or even hurt at all. Steve wondered if the ex that had shown up last night was one of the three Natasha mentioned.

“Who was the old guy who came round last night?” Steve asked to fill the silence.

Bucky looked a little surprised, and Steve thought he saw a hint of fear flit over his features, but it was only brief. “What guy?”

“I think you called him Alexander?”
Some tension dropped from Bucky’s shoulders. “Oh! That’s the owner of the construction firm I work for, HYDRA.”

“Does that stand for something?”

Bucky nodded, but before Steve could ask what he stood for, Bucky stopped him. “Before you ask, I have no idea what it means. I just know they’re initials for something and I’ve never had to learn the full name.”

Steve laughed lightly and they descended back into silence. Steve couldn’t stop thinking about what Natasha said, and remembered the night before when Bucky’s ex had shown up.

Becca looked concerned, and didn’t want Steve to leave her side until Bucky came back – presumably meaning until she knew this guy was gone – and Bucky had looked upset when he came back in. And he snapped at Becca, which didn’t seem like something he did regularly.

“Why was your ex there?” Steve winced slightly at how bluntly he said it, and Bucky’s hands stilled in the water.

“Natasha talked to you again, didn’t she.” Bucky threw the fork he was cleaning back into the water and made suds flick up into the air at the force, and Steve flinched slightly at the sound of the fork hitting the metal sink and stayed quiet. “I told her not to fucking talk about this shit to anyone!”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned it.” Steve apologised quietly. He expected Bucky to start yelling about how it was none of his business, or him to storm out and yell at Natasha. But he didn’t do either.

“Brock.” He said quietly as he cleaned one of the forks. “His name is Brock. He’s also Natasha’s cousin, but they don’t get on,”

_The one who almost destroyed him, according to Natasha_. But Steve didn’t say that.

“The break-up was… Messy.” Bucky carried on, and Steve nodded slightly like he understood what he meant. But given that Steve had never had a boyfriend, he really had no clue what constitutes as ‘messy’…

“Messy how?” He couldn’t stop himself from asking.

Bucky was quiet for a while before he replied. “The whole relationship was doomed. We always argued, he always yelled too much and threatened me. He never actually hit me, at least not while we were together. But he would always punch walls, then he’d complain about his knuckles hurting. Every time, I’d say his knuckles wouldn’t hurt if he stopped punching walls and he would always say the same thing back… ‘I punch the walls to keep you safe. If I didn’t punch the walls, I’d punch you. And I never want to hurt you, Jamie’. I hated being called Jamie…” Bucky glared at the water as he continued.

“He cheated on me, and when I found out I tried to break up with him. He didn’t take it very well. Refused to accept it, tried to convince me it was my fault he cheated. _Succeeded_ in convincing me, actually. Made _me_ feel guilty about _forcing_ him to cheat. We were together for another month. Natasha said it was like I was brainwashed that whole time. She tried to persuade me to leave him, but I was so certain that he was right… That it was my fault…” Bucky shook his head as though he was trying to dispel the bad memories.

“Anyway. When I eventually saw how much of a horrible person he was, I tried to break up with
him again, and he look it even worse this time. He flipped out, screamed at me, tried to make me think I was the one who had done something wrong and he was doing some kind of charity by staying with me... Then he got violent.”

Bucky didn’t elaborate after that. As much as Steve wanted to know exactly what this bastard had done, he didn’t push it. But he was angry, and he wanted to find Brock and beat the shit out of him for manipulating and hurting Bucky like that.

“I’m sorry…” Steve settled on saying, and Bucky shrugged, flashing Steve that tight-lipped smile again. The one that didn’t quite look right. But Steve smiled back, regardless.

After they finished washing up, they put everything away and went to see how the others were doing in the living room. The place looked spotless and Clint’s grin was the proudest of them all.

There were three trash bags filled with rubbish that they had all collected and Bucky helped Natasha take them all outside. Steve had assumed Bucky and Clint would take them out, but by the time Clint had stood up to help, Natasha already had two of the bags in hand while Bucky grabbed the other. They looked heavy, and Steve looked slightly surprised at how easily Natasha could carry two. Especially since Bucky was struggling slightly with just one. But he guessed it wouldn’t be wise to mention it.

Becca gestured for Steve to come sit between her and Clint on the couch as she turned the TV on to some generic sitcom. With how hungover Clint was, the basic plot and cheap laughs seemed to be the perfect entertainment for him. They sat in a comfortable silence until Bucky and Natasha came back in and took over the two armchairs.

At the end of the episode, Natasha stood up and stretched before clipping Clint around the head. “We should be leaving, I promised Matt I’d get you home in time for your landlord to yell at both of you for the rent being late and not just him.”

Clint groaned at the thought of being yelled at and Steve couldn’t blame him.

They both kissed Bucky on the cheek as he walked them out and said goodbye to them, then came back over to where Steve had stood up.

“I should be going too. I’m sure Peggy and Angie have a tonne of questions for me, and I’d prefer if I could have some time to relax before the tsunami hits.”

Bucky laughed and said he’d give Steve a ride home, then told him to go get his stuff. While he was upstairs he could hear Bucky persuading Becca to go back to bed. She was clearly still tired from the party and Steve noticed her eyes closing every few minutes while they were watching TV.

Becca went into her bedroom and Bucky came up a few minutes later with a glass of water. Steve came out of Bucky’s bedroom at the same time, wearing the white shirt, pants and shoes from last night but carrying the waistcoat, tie and cape in his hands.

“Where shall I put the pyjamas you borrowed me?” Steve asked and Bucky shrugged.

“Keep them, they’re too small for me so I’m never going to use them. I’ll get you a bag for the clothes in a second, just wait downstairs for me,” Bucky smiled and took the glass of water into Becca’s room.

Steve waited downstairs as instructed after getting the pyjamas.
Bucky gave him a plastic bag for the clothes then led him to the garage to get his car to drive him home. Bucky had to wear sunglasses while he drove, but it wasn’t particularly bright out so Steve assumed he was a little more hungover than he let on.

They got to Steve’s apartment building without problem and Bucky got out of the car to walk Steve up to his apartment like always. Steve had given up arguing that he didn’t need to.

“About last night…” Bucky rubbed his forehead as they approached Steve’s door.

Steve wasn’t sure which part of last night Bucky was referring too, and he also wasn’t sure just how drunk Bucky had really been. His hangover seemed to be hitting him now harder than it had before, because he kept his sunglasses on even though they were in the dimly lit hall. And he kept his hand on his forehead as if he was in pain.

Was he drunk enough that I had technically taken advantage of him when we kissed?

Bucky had initiated it, but Steve still wasn’t sure. He decided to just wait to see what Bucky had to say.

“I really liked kissing you, Steve…”

Steve smiled as they stopped in front of his door. “I enjoyed kissing you too…”

“But…” Oh god, not a but. What but? “I feel like we still could have done better.” There was a small smirk on Bucky’s face and Steve let out a breath.

“You think so?” Steve smirked back. He tried to look as cocky and confident as Bucky, but he could feel a blush colour his cheeks.

Bucky nodded. “And we also didn’t do the build-up right. I want to fix that.”

“Build-up?” Steve looked confused and Bucky looked down at the floor timidly.

“Steve, will you go on a date with me?” He rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

Steve may not have been sure if their trip to the movies had been a date, but now Bucky was blatantly asking him. He felt something strange but nice in his chest.

“I’d love to go on a date with you, Bucky.”

Bucky smiled brightly, showing his teeth, and Steve couldn’t help but smile back.

“Great! Well, I’ll text you and we can sort out a time and place.”

Steve laughed lightly at Bucky’s enthusiasm and nodded. “I look forward to it.”

Bucky leant forward and kissed Steve’s cheek. “Bye, Steve. Have a nice day.”

He was still grinning and, not for the first time, Steve was mesmerised by how beautiful he is.

“You too, Bucky.”

He waited until Bucky had turned and left, and couldn’t stop himself from glancing down at Bucky’s ass as he watched him go.
His jeans always fit him so well and hugged his body so perfectly…

Steve eventually snapped himself out of it and glanced around to see if anyone had seen.

Across the hall, Peggy and Angie were stood in their doorway, both wearing their diner uniforms. And they were both smirking.

Oh crap… Guess I won’t be getting some time to relax before the tsunami of questions hit.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky go on their first official date.

“Everything. Spill anything.” Angie was grinning from ear to ear as she handed Steve a glass of water then sat down beside him. Peggy was sat on the other side of him waiting eagerly.

“Start from when you got out of the car,” Peggy clarified with a smile.

Steve told them about when he guessed Bucky’s costume and they both ‘awh’ed. Steve couldn’t blame them for that, he was close to doing the same when he was there. He then told them about Bucky having his arm around him for the first half on the party, and had to clarify for Peggy that Bucky hadn’t had a drop of alcohol before he drove the kids home. She nodded in satisfaction and gestured for him to go on. Steve was tempted to leave the asthma attack out of the story, but he couldn’t think of any fib he could tell in its place that would have resulted in him being in Bucky’s bed. So he kept his eyes on his drink as he told that part, and didn’t stop talking long enough for them to interject about it.

When he told them about the kiss, Angie had to cover her face to stifle the noises she made as she muttered about how adorable that was. Peggy remained quiet as she listened, but when Steve looked up he saw that she was smiling widely.

“You really like him, don’t you?” She asked, but he sounded more like a statement than a question.

Steve just looked down at the glass again as he nodded.

He didn’t mention the pills he saw in the bathroom, or what Natasha told him about Bucky’s exes. Steve figured that was too personal to Bucky and they didn’t need to know about that. Bucky didn’t even know Peggy and Angie, so he assumed he wouldn’t want them to know.

“So when are you going to go on a date?” Angie seemed more excited than Steve was. Although that was probably because she didn’t have to worry about screwing everything up by saying or doing something stupid.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to wait until the shifts are announced at work, then work it around that. Fury has started putting people into shifts to avoid people always working the same areas.”

Angie asked Steve to talk about the kiss again, but in more detail. During the story, he had just said they kissed. Steve wasn’t sure how to describe it at first, or what kind of details Angie wanted, but as soon as he started talking he couldn’t stop. He described everything from how Bucky’s lips and tongue felt, to how he smelled. As soon as he was finished, Angie went into the bathroom and came back out with a bottle of Radox Muscle Soak and handed it over to Steve. When he looked confused she unscrewed the lid and pushed it up to his face.

“Did he smell like this?”

Steve was still confused, but he held it under his nose and smiled. “Yeah…”
Peggy took the bottle from Steve to smell it, smiled too, and handed it back.

After that, they started talking about what Steve and Bucky were going to do on their date. Well, Peggy and Angie did. Steve had no idea what to expect from a date, since he’d never been on one. Angie wondered if Bucky would take Steve to see another movie, but Peggy disagreed. Since Bucky fell asleep last time, they might do something else so Bucky will stay awake this time. She guessed that they would go out to dinner, and Angie accepted that as an option. Steve listened to them for a little while, but the hundreds of different options they were talking about were making him feel a little nauseated. Steve lifted the bottle of Muscle Soak up to his nose again and smiled as the smell reminded him of Bucky.

Steve eventually got to go home and take a nap. On his way out he forgot he was still holding the bottle, but when he tried to give it back to Angie she told him to keep it. She had other bottles of it and Steve needed to relax more. Apparently, she was a huge believer in aromatherapy.

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Steve woke up from his nap with stiff muscles. His back hurt and his neck was sore. Sleeping in Bucky’s bed for the night must have given his body standards, because apparently now his mattress on the floor and threadbare covers weren’t good enough for it. He groaned as he sat up and tried to stretch out his aching joints. But apparently that just made things worse.

He glanced over at the little table in the kitchenette through his open bedroom door and saw the Muscle Soak sat there. Steve shrugged and stood up to get it. His bathroom was small, but it had a pretty comfortable bathtub and a shower over it. The hot water usually didn’t work, but today the water started to heat up as soon as he turned the tap on with an annoying squeak. Steve sat on the edge of the tub as he waited for it to fill up and read the back of the bottle of Muscle Soak.

“Inspired by nature. We’ve selected and combined natural ingredients with our feel good fragrance to create this unwinding blend. Your Muscle Soak bath soak with clary sage and sea minerals will help to ease tension out of your aching muscles.”

He also read the ingredients but none of it really made sense to Steve, so he just poured some into the running water. It smelt amazing and Steve already felt relaxed. He got his phone and placed it on the wicker wash basket in his bathroom so that he wouldn’t miss any calls or texts, then got undressed and lowered himself into the bath. The water was the perfect temperature and Steve closed his eyes as he laid back against the edge.

Steve had only been in for five minutes when his phone buzzed to alert him of a message. He wanted to be annoyed as he dried his hand on a towel and picked his phone up, but the annoyance disappeared when he saw Bucky’s name on his screen.

“How’s Saturday? :)

Steve smiled slightly as he tapped out a reply. “Saturday sounds great. What’re we doing?”

“You like art, right?” Bucky didn’t answer Steve’s question, but Steve didn’t push it.

“I love art!”

Bucky didn’t reply for about fifteen minutes, but when he did it was just several smiley face emoticons and nothing else.

Steve smiled at his screen and put his phone down to enjoy the rest of his bath. After a while, he washed his hair and body then got out of the water. He felt a lot more relaxed, and his muscles were definitely less sore.
The next day, the shifts were posted on the wall in the break room. Steve had to wait until everyone else was done looking at them before he could get to the sheet.

“Steve Rogers………. Saturday – 4:00pm-10:00pm”

Steve groaned and checked the list for anyone he could switch shifts with. Fury didn’t really care who came in when as long as he had the right number of staff at any given time.

“Sam Wilson……….. Thursday – 6:00am-1:30pm.”

Sam hated working morning shifts, he was more of a night person. Four in the afternoon was pretty ideal for him, and six in the morning was his worst nightmare. Sam wasn’t in yet, so when he came into the break room Steve said good morning to him and waited for the inevitable noises of pain when Sam saw the board.

He was not disappointed. Sam groaned for a solid thirty seconds before slumping down in a chair.

“What’s wrong, Sam?” Steve smiled slightly as he sat next to him.

Sam’s reply was muffled by his hands over his face. “You know damn well what’s wrong!”

Steve had to laugh at that. “Well, I suppose we could switch… I’ll do your six to one thirty if you do my four to ten on Saturday…”

Sam looked up at the sheet, presumably to make sure it was four in the afternoon and looked back at Steve suspiciously.

“And why would you do that?”

“To help a friend.” Steve tried to smile as nicely as possible, but Sam wasn’t buying it.

“What’re you doing on Saturday?”

Steve sighed in defeat. “I… I’m going on a date…”

Steve had never seen someone’s eyes light up so quickly in his entire life. “Really? You got a date?”

Steve nodded and Sam grinned. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Remember the guy who stood up for me against Schmidt…?”

“About six foot, brown hair, blue eyes, cute butt?” Steve looked surprised and Sam shrugged. “What? Because I’m straight I can’t appreciate when a guy has a nice ass?”

Steve laughed and nodded. “Yeah, him. His name is Bucky.”

“That’s great, Steve! Sure, I’ll switch with you.” Sam got up and scribbled out his name to replace it with Steve’s then scribbled out Steve’s to replace it with his own. “Is this your first date with him?”

“Not quite…” Steve explained the movie maybe-date, and the Halloween party and Sam smiled through the story.

“Congrats, I hope you have fun. And use protection,”
Before Steve could reply to that, Sam had got up left the break room, leaving Steve blushing in his absence.

The Thursday shift wasn’t awful. Steve was used to being up early, so he was okay with that aspect, and there were very few customers that early in the morning so he didn’t really have much to do. The woman who ran the library, Lorraine, agreed to give him Saturday off too. When Steve clarified why he wanted the day off, Lorraine made a similar comment about using protection as Sam did. He really should introduce those two. They’d get on great.

Steve texted Bucky on his break and told him he could definitely make it on Saturday. Bucky was very excited, and told Steve to wear something nice but not too formal.

When Saturday came around, Steve wasn’t sure what Bucky had meant by that. Bucky was coming to pick him up at two in the afternoon, and at one o’clock, Steve went across the hall to ask the girls for advice.

“Did he say where he’s taking you?” Peggy asked as he went through Steve’s wardrobe.

“No…”

“Did he say if it would be outdoors or indoors?”

“No.”

“Did he say if it would involve moving around a lot? Like an activity?”

“No.”

Peggy frowned in thought as she took out a blue shirt and a blazer. “What about these? And some slacks. And comfortable shoes, in case it is an activity. If it turns out you’re too overdressed, you can take the jacket off and roll the sleeves up, then you’ll look more casual.”

Steve nodded a little and took the clothes to get dressed in the bathroom so Peggy could give her opinion of what it looked like on.

“Perfect!” She clapped as Steve came out of the bathroom. “You look great!”

Steve smiled as he looked at himself in the mirror on the back of his bathroom door. He had to admit, he did look pretty good.

“Do you think he’ll like it?”

“If he doesn’t, he needs to get his eyes tested because you look stunning.”

Steve blushed slightly but smiled at Peggy. “Thanks Peg…”

“Would you like some last-minute dating advice?” She offered and Steve nodded quickly.

“Okay, first of all; small talk is good, but it should always be returned. If he asks about your day, tell him, then ask about his. If you ask about his day and he tells you, but doesn’t ask about yours in return he’s probably a self-absorbed asshole.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I know he’s not an asshole, Peggy.”
“Okay, okay,” She raises her hands in mock surrender. “Next thing; if you’re not comfortable with something don’t be afraid to tell him. For example, if you don’t like where he takes you for the date, say so. You don’t have to pretend to enjoy something for his benefit. If he really cares about you, he’d prefer if you told him you didn’t like it than if you went along with it and had a miserable time because of it.”

Steve nodded for her to continue.

“The wait-until-the-third-date-to-kiss thing doesn’t really apply here, since you’ve already kissed, but I don’t agree with that shit anyway. If you both want to make out, make out. As long as you’re both comfortable, whose business is it?”

Steve assumed that was a rhetorical question, but he did nod.

“Bring enough money to pay for anything he might have planned. Even if Bucky is an angel, it doesn’t mean he’s assumed he should pay for it all. Rightly so. He was the one who asked you, so he might pay for everything, but if not you should be prepared to cover your half of the bill.”

Steve had already thought of that. Although he didn’t know how much it would cost, he had made sure he had enough to at least make a dent in whatever bill they ended up with.

“This next piece linked into what I said before about kissing…”

Steve waited for her to continue, but he could tell whatever she was going to say would probably be uncomfortable.

“If you both decide to go further, which you both have the right to, make sure it’s what you both want. Don’t let him pressure you into doing something you’re not comfortable with yet, and make sure he’s comfortable with everything you do.”

Steve hadn’t really needed that piece of advice. He would never do anything Bucky wasn’t comfortable with, and he knew Bucky wouldn’t do anything Steve didn’t want.

“And if you’re both comfortable with going further, use protection.”

Steve cringed. “Why does everyone keep saying that?”

Peggy laughed and sat on Steve’s mattress. “Because it’s important. Now, you have fifteen minutes before Bucky will be here. Do you want me to leave?”

Steve hadn’t realised they’d been choosing clothes for that long, and he looked at the clock to confirm what Peggy had said. He hadn’t even brushed his hair yet! It was still wet from his bath!

Peggy seemed to sense that Steve was starting to panic, because she spoke again before Steve could answer her question. “Your hair is still wet, and it won’t be dry before Bucky gets here. Do you have a hairdryer?”

Steve shook his head and Peggy stood up. “I’ll bring Angie’s over, hers is magic. Her hair goes from dripping wet to dry and styled in ten minutes.”

Steve nodded as Peggy left the apartment and waited for her to return with Angie’s hairdryer. She assured him that Angie was at work and wouldn’t notice that it was gone. She sat Steve on the edge of the mattress and she knelt behind him to dry his hair. She combed it for him too, and held up a mirror she had brought over with her so Steve could see.
He needed a haircut. His bangs were a little too close to his eyes, but there was nothing he could do now.

Steve thanked Peggy and she got up to leave as there was a knock at the door. She opened it for him and smiled at Bucky, who looked a little confused seeing a woman open Steve’s door. But he recovered quickly and smiled at her. He was wearing his usual skinny jeans, but instead of his leather jacket he was wearing a sports jacket over a dark red t-shirt, and black, high-topped converse instead of his usual boots.

“Hello, you must be James. I’m Peggy Carter.” She held her hand out to him and Bucky shook it with his usual smile.

“Yeah, hi. You’re Steve’s friend right? That a great accent, whereabouts in England are you from?”

“Central London, thank you for asking.” She smiled at him and stepped aside to give Steve space to stand in the doorway with her. “Are you coming in for a drink before you two go?”

Steve tried to hide his uneasiness as he glanced around his apartment. It looked awful, and dingy. But before he could say anything about needing to be off, Bucky accepted her invitation and stepped into the apartment when Peggy stood aside.

He glanced around the place briefly before turning to face Steve and Peggy with an easy smile.

After a few moments of silence, Peggy looked pointedly at Steve but he wasn’t sure what she was trying to portray. She eventually just rolled her eyes and spoke for him. “Would you like a drink of water, James?”

Bucky glanced between her and Steve, looking slightly amused as he nodded. “Yes please, Ms Carter.”

“Oh please, call me Peggy.” She smiled in return and touched his arm as she walked past to go to Steve’s little kitchen, leaving Steve and Bucky alone.

“Does she always welcome your dates for you?” Bucky spoke quietly as he stepped closer to Steve.

Steve laughed nervously. “She was helping me pick an outfit.”

Steve couldn’t help but squirm as he felt Bucky’s eyes scan over his body. “She has great taste.”

“I’m just glad I’m not overdressed.” Steve chuckled nervously and Bucky smiled at him again.

“You’re so cute when you’re nervous.”

Thankfully Steve didn’t have to reply to that, because just then Peggy came back over and passed him a glass of water and Steve another. Steve hadn’t even realised how thirsty he was before, but since he saw Bucky, his throat felt like sandpaper.

“I’m going to go home now, Angie will be wondering where I got off to,” Liar, Steve thought. Angie isn’t home. “So, you kids have fun.”

Bucky said goodbye to her and she said it was nice to meet him. He returned the sentiment as she left and he drank some more of his water.

“Nice place you got here,” Bucky commented as he looked around.

Steve didn’t reply and just put the glass on the table. “Ready to go?”
Bucky nodded and put his glass next to Steve’s. He saw Bucky glance through to the bedroom and look at the mattress on the floor that constituted as his bed and Steve thought he saw a flicker of sadness, but he didn’t dwell on it and just led Bucky out of the apartment then locked it behind them.

As they sat in Bucky’s car, Steve got a text from Peggy.

“WOW! Good job, Steve! He is hotter up close than I imagined when I saw him from the back! ;) x”

Steve blushed and quickly closed the message before glancing over to see if Bucky had seen, but his eyes were fixed firmly on the road ahead of them. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel, as if he was nervous. Definitely more nervous than he had been when they went to the cinema together.

“How was your day?” Steve asked to fill the silence.

“It was okay. I spent the day watching TV with Becca, mostly. How was yours?”

“Good… I took a bath then spent the rest of the day drawing.”

“I need to see more of your drawings.” Bucky chuckled and Steve wasn’t sure what to say back.

“So… Where are we going?”

“Brooklyn Museum.” Bucky answered and glanced over at Steve to see his reaction as he stopped the car at some lights.

The Brooklyn Museum was an art museum. It looked like a university building, complete with pillars outside the main door. The Brooklyn Museum was part of the Heart of Brooklyn, which is the name of a unique partnership among six of Brooklyn’s most prestigious cultural institutions: Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn Children’s Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Public Library, Prospect Park Alliance, and Prospect Park Zoo. To utilize their collective resources to better serve a diverse Brooklyn-based community as well a larger public, these organizations formed Heart of Brooklyn as a nonprofit organization in July 2001.

Steve used to visit the Brooklyn Children’s Museum when he was a child, his mother would take him whenever she had the day off work and Steve wasn’t at school. That was probably where Steve had first fallen in love with art. He hadn’t been to the Brooklyn Museum nearly enough, and definitely not lately. He hadn’t expected Bucky to put this much thought into where to go, and he smiled brightly.

“I love that museum...”

“I thought you might,” Bucky smiled back. “Seemed like your style.”

“What’s that mean?” Steve chuckled.

“Beautiful,” He looked away from Steve as the lights changed and started the car again to continue driving.

Steve was glad he looked away then, it was way too early in the date to start blushing.
The inside of the museum was even more breath-taking than Steve remembered. They went through all the different exhibits slowly so they could see every piece of art in detail. A few times, Steve had looked over to Bucky to see his reaction to the pieces but he would often be looking around the room at other things. But whenever Steve started talking about a specific piece, he had Bucky’s full attention. He looked carefully at the specific part of an art piece that Steve was talking about, nodded along as Steve ranted about the amazing brush work, and smiled every time Steve did.

Steve remembered what Peggy had said about small talk and looked over at Bucky. They were in an Egyptian exhibit and there were sculptures and artefacts all over the room.

“Um… Do you like Egyptians?” Steve internally cringed at how lame that was, but it was too late to take it back.

Bucky looked a little confused at the sudden question. “They were pretty cool, I guess… I like how they took out all the person’s organs and put them in jars.”

Steve winced slightly and Bucky laughed at the reaction as he wandered over to a big cat sculpture that looked like it was made out of white clay or stone.

“I also support the fact that they worshipped cats.”

“You like cats?” Steve followed him over to the statue. He loved cats, but his building wouldn’t allow pets. Besides, he’d never be able to afford to take care of one.

“Cats are awesome. They don’t put up with people’s shit, and they act as if it’s a coincidence they’re in the same room as you ninety five percent of the time. I like how they’re always pretending they’re not as clingy as dogs, but they totally are.”

Steve smiled as he listened to Bucky talk, then followed him as he moved over to some little sculptures in clear plastic boxes. Steve started talking about things he had heard in art history class in high school about the ancient Egyptians, but halfway through his explanation of what each tool was used for he looked up and noticed Bucky staring at him with a small smirk.

“What?” He asked self-consciously.

“Nothing,” Bucky shook his head and looked at the tools Steve was talking about. “Just really glad I chose this place.”

Steve was about to question why, but he guessed he knew the answer and if he heard Bucky say it he would blush again. “I’m glad you chose this place too.”

They finished looking around the Egyptian exhibit and decided this was a good stopping point to go get something to eat. There was a café in the museum that they could go to, and Steve just got a chicken sandwich and a water. He didn’t want to get too much, the nerves were starting to set in as he sat with Bucky and he didn’t want to risk throwing up. Bucky got a chicken salad and a coffee, then proceeded to pour the contents of three sugar packets into his drink.

They then went back to walking around the museum. Steve talked about the different art pieces as they did and Bucky nodded along. He asked questions every now and then when Steve mentioned something Bucky wasn’t sure about. Usually it was particular art styles, or an art tool that Steve would point out. Most of the time, Bucky remained quiet and Steve noticed that Bucky had spent more time looking at him than the art.
He really hoped Bucky wasn’t bored.

At six in the evening, they had to leave. Steve got a new sketchpad in the gift shop and a new set of pencils, and Bucky got a book about the history of Egyptian art.

“Can I see more of your art?” Bucky asked as they walked down the steps outside the museum.

“Why?” Steve looked confused and glanced up at Bucky. The light was fading and it was almost sunset. The low light casted shadows over Bucky’s face and accentuated his cheekbones and lips.

“Because you’re really good, and I want to see every piece you do,“

Steve blushed again and looked down, hoping Bucky wouldn’t see. He tried to stifle his smile, then he noticed that Bucky wasn’t beside him anymore. Steve turned to see where Bucky had gone and saw him sat down on the steps outside the museum.

“What’re you doing?” He looked at Bucky in confusion.

“I thought we could watch the sunset…” He smiled up at Steve as he rested his elbow back one step up from the one he was sat on. Steve smiled back as he sat next to him.

His fingers tapped on top of his new sketchpad and he itched to start drawing. The sunset was so beautiful, he watched the sketch it out right then instead of waiting until he got home in case he forgot any of the details. He looked over at Bucky and saw him watching him with a small smirk on his face.

“If you want to draw, please do…”

“You don’t mind?”

Bucky shook his head. “I want to see you draw.”

Steve opened the sketchpad with a smile and broke open the new packet of pencils. Luckily, they were ready-sharpened. He looked out at the landscape around them and started sketching that and the pond in front of them first. He was a little nervous about drawing around Bucky, Steve had never drawn in front of anyone before. He was terrified that he was going to mess up horribly and Bucky would judge him. Or that the drawing would turn out horribly, and Bucky would judge him for that too.

But eventually, he forgot Bucky was even there and was completely immersed in his drawing. He managed to finish the drawing before the sun went down completely and it got too dark to continue. It wasn’t the best drawing he had ever done, but it wasn’t awful either.

Steve remembered where he was and who he was with and looked over at Bucky. Bucky had a serene smile on his face, his eyes trained on Steve’s paper. He hadn’t noticed Steve was done, and kept watching Steve’s hand as he played with the pencil. When the tip didn’t touch the paper again, Bucky looked up at Steve’s face and noticed him watching his face.

“I’m done.” Steve smiled a little and Bucky looks back down at the paper again, and grinned.

“That looks amazing. It looks better than the actual sunset did,” He sat up to look at the picture properly, his chest against Steve’s shoulder.

Steve shook his head a little at that and looked over his shoulder slightly to look at Bucky properly. It was starting to get cold and Steve’s jacket wasn’t doing anything to protect him from the biting
wind, causing him to shiver slightly. Bucky smiled back and wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders to pull him a little closer. His jacket was just as thin as Steve’s but he didn’t seem effected by the chill at all, his hands were still warm and so was his chest. The heat coming from his body was welcoming and Steve let Bucky pull him closer. He rested his head against Bucky’s chest and closed his eyes as he hugged Bucky, his arms under Bucky’s jacket to press against his thin t-shirt.

Bucky’s arms circled around Steve to hug back and he could feel the strength in them, making Steve feel safe.

“Thank you, Bucky. This date has been great,”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Bucky kissed the top of Steve’s head and he could feel Bucky’s lips curl up in a smile against his hair. He briefly wondered if Bucky could smell the bath soak he had used and realised it was the same one he must use, but he didn’t mention it.

Steve pulled back just enough to look up at Bucky’s face but didn’t break the hug as he leant up to kiss Bucky softly. Bucky instantly kissed back, his warm hands on Steve’s cold back. Neither of them moved. Steve didn’t want to ruin it by trying to deepen it and messing that up. Eventually, one of Bucky’s hands moved up to the back of Steve’s neck and Steve felt goosebumps prickle his skin and he presses closer to Bucky. One of Bucky’s knees where between Steve’s in an attempt to get closer to him. Steve’s hand slipped under Bucky’s shirt and Bucky gasped lightly against his lips when he felt Steve’s cold skin on his own.

Bucky broke the kiss, and Steve opened his eyes, assuming it was over. But Bucky was just moving to kneel on the step so he could get closer to Steve. Steve looked up at him as Bucky raised to a higher angle before kissing Steve again. The new angle meant that Steve had to look up a lot more, and Bucky’s hand rested on his neck. Steve wasn’t sure where to put his own hands, but as Bucky kissed him he closed his eyes and reached out to grab whatever part of Bucky’s body his hands came in contact with first. It happened to be Bucky’s hips. He felt the bottom of Bucky’s jacket and his belt against his fingers, then debates moving his hands up a little. But Bucky didn’t seem phased by Steve’s hand placement, so he didn’t bother moving them. He really didn’t want to let of go Bucky, or even move his hands off his hips. His hips were thin, but Steve could feel the slight curve of them under his jeans.

One of Bucky’s hands moved to Steve’s hair and held it lightly to keep Steve’s head in the right position. Steve gripped Bucky’s hips a little tighter and tugged him closer without thinking. The angle and how Bucky was positioned on the stone steps meant that he didn’t have the best balance. Steve really should have been able to tell, since Bucky’s other hand was resting quite heavily on Steve’s shoulder. Not enough to be uncomfortable or hurt Steve, but enough that Steve should have noticed before trying to pull Bucky closer. Because as soon as he did, Bucky squeaked slightly in surprise and tumbled forward on top of Steve.

Steve fell back so he was laying across the step and he and Bucky both laughed as Bucky held himself up with his hands either side of Steve’s head. Steve looked up at Bucky, who was still laughing, but as soon as Steve saw his face his amusement disappeared.

His lip was bleeding, and looked a little swollen. Bucky noticed that Steve had stopped laughing and looked down at him. He must have seen the guilt on Steve’s face, because he frowned then.

“What’s wrong?” He hadn’t even noticed he was bleeding.

Honestly, it was only bleeding a tiny bit, but that didn’t stop Steve from feeling bad. He probably bit his lip by accident when he fell back. Steve pointed up at his lip and Bucky balanced on one
hand to wipe his lip with the back of the other. He saw the red streak now on the back of his hand and shrugged.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Steve still looked guilty, but as Bucky sucked on his own bottom lip to clean the blood, he felt his guilt disappear and bit down on his own lip lightly. Bucky smirked at him as he noticed the change in his expression and, as soon as the blood was gone from his lip, he leant down and Steve assumed he was going to kiss him again. But instead of his lips connecting with Steve’s, Bucky kissed his neck lightly. Steve’s breath caught in his throat as Bucky lightly sucked on his neck. He felt a hint of teeth against his skin and one hand came up to grip Bucky’s soft hair. Steve tried not to grip it hard enough to hurt him, but he couldn’t really think of anything except Bucky’s lips, tongue, and teeth on his skin. He felt heat pool lower in his body and briefly worried that Bucky would feel it. But Bucky had already pulled away and sat up again, holding a hand out to help Steve up.

As soon as he was vertical again, Steve pulled the sketchpad back onto his lap in the hopes of hiding his arousal from Bucky, but he knew his face was red. He could feel the heat there too.

Bucky’s face was slightly flushed too… Steve wanted to see if Bucky had been effected as much as he had, but Bucky was still watching his face and he knew as soon as his eyes flicked down Bucky would be able to tell.

So he kept his eyes glued on Bucky’s face. Bucky, on the other hand, evidently didn’t care if Steve saw him look down. He wasn’t subtle about it as he smirked down at Steve’s crotch.

“Did you enjoy that?”

Steve’s mind stumbled over itself as he tried to think of how to reply to that. Apparently, his body decided the best response would be to move the blood from his crotch to his face, because he felt his face heat up more.

Bucky laughed and stood up to hold his hand out to Steve. “I’ll take you home.”

Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky was referring to Steve’s home or his own, but he took Bucky’s hand and allowed him to pull him up anyway. He gathered his sketchpad, pencils and eraser up before following Bucky back to his car.

Bucky turned his radio on as he drove towards Steve’s apartment, and a classic rock track started playing. Steve noticed Bucky mouthing along to the lyrics and tapping his fingers on the top of his steering wheel.

When they got to the apartment building Bucky walked Steve up to his apartment as usual. This time, Steve made sure to glance at Peggy and Angie’s apartment door to make sure it was closed and there was no one in sight.

Once he turned around to face Bucky, he noticed how close he was to him and just like that his heart rate was up again.

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but he honestly didn’t know what he was about to say.

It didn’t matter anyway, because before he could make a noise Bucky’s mouth was against his own again. Steve gasped in surprise as Bucky pushed him against his apartment door and Bucky ran his tongue against Steve’s bottom lip. Steve accepts his tongue into his mouth eagerly and moaned as he wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky’s hands enclosed around Steve’s waist and held him close against his own body as he kissed him heatedly.
There was no way in hell Bucky couldn’t feel Steve’s erection against his thigh. Steve was sure of this when he felt Bucky’s own erection against his stomach. But when he felt that, Steve started to panic.

*Bucky wants to have sex. Tonight. Will he get mad if I say I’m not ready?*

Bucky broke away from Steve’s lips and started kissing his neck again. He started at the base of Steve’s neck where it meets his shoulder. Bucky moaned quietly against Steve’s neck as he pressed his lower body closer to Steve’s, seeking friction. Steve couldn’t help but moan back, but the panic was too high for him to really enjoy it.

*I have to stop this…*

Steve pushed on Bucky’s shoulders lightly, but Bucky hardly felt it. So he pushed again a little harder and Bucky stumbled back half a step. He didn’t let go of Steve’s hips though, but he did pull back enough to look at Steve’s face. Steve was breathing heavily, and noticed that Bucky was too.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asked quietly, his voice slightly deeper than usual.

*Please don’t get mad!* Steve though desperately as he looked up at Bucky’s face. But there was no sign of annoyance on his face.

“I’m not… I don’t want to…” Steve really didn’t want to anger Bucky by rejecting him. He wasn’t saying he never wanted to sleep with him, he just wasn’t ready…

But he didn’t need to finish the sentence. Bucky leant forward to kiss Steve again, and Steve was about to push him away again, but it was just a light kiss.

“It’s okay, Steve.” He wasn’t angry, he didn’t even look irritated. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m sorry… I’m not saying no… Just not yet…” Steve sounded a little desperate and Bucky shook his head.

“Steve.” Bucky cupped Steve’s face with both hands to make him look up at him. “It’s okay. You’re comfort is more important than me wanting to get laid,” Bucky chuckled.

“You’re really okay with waiting?” Steve still felt unsure, but Bucky’s expression of honesty put him at ease.

“I’ll wait as long as you want,”

“What if you get sick of waiting and go… elsewhere.” Steve’s insecurities were starting to flare up again. He still didn’t understand why someone like Bucky was showing any interest in someone like Steve in the first place.

Bucky leant down slightly to kiss Steve. Again, it was soft and sweet. “I’m not going anywhere,”

Steve smiled at that and hugged Bucky, resting the side of his face against his chest as Bucky kissed the top of his head.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Bucky tells Steve what happened to his parents while they have a picnic

Steve completely forgot that Sam knew about his date. They were both working on the next Monday together, and Sam wouldn’t stop grinning at Steve. He didn’t understand why at first, and he couldn’t ask why because there were a lot of customers that day and they were both kept busy. But they both started at the same time, so they both took their break at the same time.

“How’d it go?” Sam asked as soon as they sat down.

“Well, there was one woman who couldn’t find the step ladders so I had to show her but other than that I just manned the till all day,”

“Not work!” Sam rolled his eyes. “The date!”

After ten minutes of Sam trying to get more and more details out of Steve, he ended up telling Sam everything. Sam looked like he was going to punch something when Steve was talking about when he wanted to stop but Bucky didn’t back off, but he explained that he pushed lightly and Bucky probably didn’t feel it then told him he backed off when he pushed a little harder and Sam seemed to relax.

“I want to meet him.” Sam announced at the end of the story. “I want to make sure he’s as good as you seem to think.”

Steve shook his head. “I’m old enough to decide that for myself, and I’ve decided he’s a great guy.”

“If he’s such a great guy you won’t mind me meeting him, and he won’t mind because he’ll appreciate that I just want to make sure you’re safe with him,”

“Peggy seemed to approve of him,” Steve tried to reason with him. Sam had met Peggy and Angie on several occasions and they got on well, and agreed on pretty much everything. Sam respected Peggy’s judgement, and her opinion, but he usually liked to find out things for himself. “And it’s a little early to be introducing him to my friends.”

“Have you met his friends?” Sam retorted.

“Well, yeah… But that’s because we were at a party that they were also invited to. And I’ve only met a few, I’m sure he has more.”

“How close is he to the friends he introduced you to?”

“Natasha is apparently his best friend. And the guy I met, Clint, seemed to be pretty close to him,”

“So he introduced you to his best friend and you’re not going to introduce him to yours?” Sam looked offended as he gestured to himself.
Truth be told, Sam was Steve’s best friend. Definitely.

“I’m not just going to say ‘Hey, I know we’ve only been on one official date, but my best friend wants to meet and interrogate you to make sure you’re a suitable mate for me. Are you in?’ It’ll freak him out!”

Sam was quiet for a minute as he thought before he spoke. “Does he like sports?”

“I don’t know… He dances, does that count as a sport?”

Sam laughed and shook his head. “Dancing is not a sport. Definitely not a guy’s sport. He seriously dances?”

Steve frowned slightly. “Why isn’t it a guy’s sport? And what’s wrong with Bucky dancing?”

Sam held his hands up in defence. “Okay, okay! I guess it depends on the dance style. He doesn’t go ballet or some shit, does he?”

“I don’t know what dance style he does, I’ve never seen him dance. But his sister dances, and Bucky said she’s had several injuries from it. So dance can be a dangerous sport.”

“I’ll take your word for it. If he’s seen you drawing shouldn’t you be able to see him dance? Showing one talent in exchange for another and all that?”

Steve hadn’t thought of that. But he did really want to see Bucky dance, so maybe he’ll ask them when they talk on the phone tonight.

“I don’t know, maybe…”

“So, what are the guy’s friends like?”

“Clint’s cool. Natasha is… Intense,”

“Intense how?” Sam looked confused.

“She’s… protective of Bucky. Very protective;”

“He’s a grown man,” Sam frowned. “Why is she so protective of him?”

Steve decided against telling Sam about Bucky’s exes. Again, it was too personal to tell someone Bucky doesn’t know. “They’ve been friends since they were kids, and I guess she has her reasons.”

Steve shrugged.

“She sounds weird, have you got a picture of her?”

“Why?”

“So I know who I need to befriend if I ever want to be friends with Bucky,” Sam smirked as he drank from his coffee, but Steve could tell he did actually want to see a picture.

He scrolled through his and Bucky’s text conversations and found a picture Bucky had sent him a few days before of him and Natasha at a park. Steve had asked what he was doing, and he had told him he was trying to avoid Natasha dunking his head in a fountain. When Steve asked if he was being serious, he had sent a picture of himself with wet hair and Natasha stood next to him and had one hand raised in a wave to show the water on her jacket sleeves, a big grin on her face. There was a fountain behind them. Steve showed the picture to Sam and asked what had happened. As he
explained it, Sam continued staring at the picture.

“So, what’s Bucky’s deal? Is he gay? Bi? Pansexual?” Sam asked once Steve was finished with the story.

“I don’t know… I know he’s had boyfriends before, but I don’t know if he’s interested in girls. Why?”

“Because he looks pretty close to this Natasha,” Sam had scrolled across to see the next picture of the same scene but Bucky was kissing Natasha’s cheek as she laughed and tried to get away from him to avoid getting fountain water on her face. “And I was wondering if those two were a possibility.”

Steve scowled and shook his head. “Bucky and Natasha are just best friends. There’s nothing romantic there.”

“Can you be sure?”

“Bucky would have said if there was anything between him and Natasha.”

“That’s if he knew.”

Steve frowned at Sam in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He might think they’re just really close friends, but she could be completely in love with him,”

Steve shook his head. “No, that’s not possible. Bucky is very observant, and I’m pretty sure there’s something going on with Natasha and Clint anyway.”

Sam dropped it then and suggested he, Steve, Bucky, and Natasha go out together some time. Then he wouldn’t be ganging up on Bucky, because Natasha would smash Sam down if he was rude to her friend. Steve agreed to bring it up to Bucky some time, but he made no promises or time frames.

That night, Bucky called Steve at six. Steve was a little surprised, since he was usually already cooking by now, but Bucky told him Becca was home early, so he got off work early and came home to make her food. Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky’s sister getting out of school early was a good reason for Bucky to leave work, but when he brought it up teasingly Bucky just said his boss was okay with it and changed the subject.

They talked about Steve’s work, but Bucky brushed off any questions about his own day. If Steve could see him, he assumed Bucky would be shrugging a lot. He said his day was pretty standard, then he would ask something else about Steve to get them talking about that instead. Steve noticed, but he didn’t push it.

There was a few moments of silence, and Steve wasn’t sure how to fill it. So he blurted out: “My friend wants to meet you.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, and Steve had to pull the phone back to make sure they hadn’t been disconnected. They hadn’t.

“When?” Steve put the phone back to his ear in time to hear Bucky’s response.

“Whenever you want, really. As long as it’s when me and Sam aren’t working… And you can
bring Natasha too, so you have a friend, and I have a friend…” Steve knew he was rambling, but Bucky didn’t stop him, so it just slowly phased out.

“I don’t know if I can meet him any time soon, I’m busy with work,”

Steve nodded, then remembered Bucky wouldn’t see him. “Okay, that’s okay. Can we still see each other?”

Bucky’s voice had been a monotone throughout their whole conversation so far, but Steve could hear a smile in his voice now. “I’ve always got time for you, Steve.”

Steve smiled widely at that, mostly because Bucky’s usual personality was starting to shine through again. They agreed to see each other again in a few days when Steve wasn’t working. Bucky was working that day, but only from nine in the morning until two in the afternoon. And Bucky said he was fine with meeting up with Steve after work. They agreed to meet at three so that Bucky had time to go home, shower, and change his clothes before they went to the park together for a picnic. It was such a cliché, but Steve liked the idea.

Bucky started talking about the Egyptian Art book he bought from the museum and Steve couldn’t help but smile as Bucky talked about particular parts that he liked. Bucky asked him if he’d been using the sketchpad. He said he had, but he didn’t want to admit that it was mostly full of pictures of Bucky.

Steve waited for Bucky at the park. It was only five minutes from his apartment, but half an hour from Bucky’s, so Bucky would drive to meet Steve at the park.

Steve had insisted on bringing the picnic. He needed to go shopping anyway, and Bucky had paid for everything at the museum including Steve’s items from the gift shop, and he wanted to return the favour. He had gotten the usual things that one would find at a picnic including sandwiches, sausage rolls, potato salad, and cooked chicken strips. He also put some candy in his pack lunch box and some water and juice in his bag.

He got to the park at quarter to three to make sure that he would be there by the time Bucky got there. He set everything out and made sure that he could see the parking lot from here to make sure that he could see Bucky as soon as he pulled into a parking spot and could call him if he didn’t spot Steve.

Bucky was a little late, but he had been working so Steve didn’t mind. Bucky spotted Steve right away and walked over with a smile. Steve stood up to greet him when he got close enough, but he wasn’t sure exactly what greeting he was going for. A hug seemed like the best option, and Bucky hugged him back in return. Steve couldn’t smell the muscle soak on him, but he smelled soap and mint. There was a lingering smell of sawdust too, and Steve assumed that was from the construction site.

Bucky sat opposite Steve on the blanket he had laid out and smiled as Steve took the food out of the Tupperware box and set it all out.

“I wasn’t sure what sandwiches you liked, so I made a variety. There’s cheese, ham, chicken, corned beef, cheese spread, and beef spread…” Steve was nervous that Bucky wouldn’t like any of them, but Bucky didn’t seem fussed. He took one of the chicken sandwich and Steve took the cheese spread one.

“How was work?” Steve asked between bites.
“Fuckin’ sucked.” Bucky grumbled as Steve passed him a disposable cup of diet coke.

“What happened?”

“Dum Dum called in sick and so did Monty, so we were two men down before we even started. I had to finalise the plans with Stark, but he was too hungover to pay attention so I had to talk to his PA instead. Honestly, I prefer talking to Jarvis. He’s easier to negotiate with. But whatever decisions we make, Stark always goes over later and changes it all. The foundation is finally finished, but now we have to start the electronics and plumbing, and that’s Monty’s speciality. We have no idea what the fuck we’re doing in that department. So all we could do was finalise the plans with Jarvis and get the materials ordered, then dig out the areas where the pipes would be. Bet Stark isn’t going to be happy about it. He’ll probably complain that it’s not aesthetically pleasing. Me and Jarvis think it looks fine, but Stark is a picky little bastard.” Bucky sighed when he was finished and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry…”

Steve just smiled and shook his head. “It’s okay, you can rant about work as much as you want. It might help to vent a little. What’s Howard Stark like? From what I understand, Tony is a dick, but what about Howard?”

Bucky finished his sandwich as Steve spoke then drank his coke. “He’s okay… He’s a bit self-absorbed, but he’s one of the richest guys in the country so that’s kind of to be expected. I only met him a few times, and that was right at the start of the project before he let Tony take over, but I’d imagine he’s easier to work with. He’s more open to suggestions and experimentations,”

Steve had seen Howard Stark and his son on TV a lot, and Howard seemed like a nice guy. But Tony was always on the news for drinking scandals rather than new inventions, usually with his PA, Edwin Jarvis looking fed-up behind him. From what Steve understood, Jarvis used to work for Howard but after Tony started to get out of hand Jarvis was passed on to be Tony’s assistant in the hopes he would keep him in line.

“Oh the plus side, we’re getting new workers in tomorrow to add to the team in the hopes it’ll get done quicker if we have more hands. We’re already a week behind on schedule because of Stark.”

“I’m sure you’ll get back on schedule soon.” Steve smiled reassuringly and Bucky smiled back.

“I just hope the new guys are easy to work with,”

Steve understood now better why Bucky couldn’t meet Sam yet. Work seemed to be stressful lately and that, along with taking care of Becca by himself, looked as if it would keep Bucky busy for a while. Steve was sure Sam would understand that too.

Bucky moved round to sit next to Steve instead of opposite him to show him a picture of Becca’s attempt at baking a cake. There were pots all over the counter in the kitchen, and cake batter covered ever surface, including the walls. There was even some on the ceiling. Bucky didn’t move back to the other side of the food when he put his phone away and took his jacket off since it was starting to get warm. Steve didn’t understand how Bucky could still wear skinny jeans in this weather. Steve was wearing loose jeans and he was boiling, but Bucky just shrugged when he questioned him, saying he wasn’t bothered by the heat. It was strange to have heat at this time of the year, but after looking at the forecast for the next week, Steve was pretty sure it wouldn’t last.

They talked about Steve’s work for a while but it had been pretty uneventful. Instead, he talked about Sam in the hopes that Bucky will want to meet him sooner if he knew what a great guy he is.

He told Bucky that Sam used to be in the army and that he plays football at the weekend when he
can, and that he’s from Washington. Bucky nodded along with a smile as he listened to Steve talk.

“Just so you know, I didn’t say no to meeting your friend,” Bucky said when Steve stopped to breathe. “I just can’t do it yet, you don’t have to persuade me.”

“I know… but maybe if you know how cool he is you’ll want to meet him sooner,”

“Why do you want me to meet him so bad?”

“He’s my best friend… And he kind of wants to interrogate you to make sure you’re suitable for me,” Steve smiled so that Bucky might think he’s kidding if the idea sounded daunting to him.

“Interrogated by an ex-army man… That sounds fun,” Bucky chuckled.

“I promise I’ll intervene before he gets to the waterboarding.” Steve joked and held up the coke in offering. Bucky held his cup up for Steve to refill it, then Bucky asked a question no one had asked Steve since he was sixteen.

“What do you want to be?”

Steve looked a little confused as he refilled his own cup. “What do you mean?”

“Like, do you want to work in a hardware store and a library your whole life? Or do you want to be something else?”

Steve thought about that and debated lying. He knew he would never be an artist, so there was no point in admitting that it was his dream. But Bucky had asked what he wanted to be, not what he was going to be.

“I want to be an artist. Profession artist.” He looked down at his cup as Bucky watched him.

“Why aren’t you doing that then?” The answer seemed so obvious, Steve wondered if Bucky was joking or not. But when he looked up, Bucky’s facial expression was part-confused, part-interested, and one hundred percent serious.

“I need money to live. If I was going to be a professional artist it would take up all my time, and it could be years before I actually start earning money from it. I can’t survive that long without money, Buck,”

Bucky nodded in understanding.

“What do you want to be?” Steve asked in return. Bucky had never shown any interest in being anything but a construction worker, but Steve assumed the question must have come from somewhere. Maybe he was getting sick of dealing with Stark, and having to rely on others coming into work to be able to do his own job.

“Writing…” Bucky replied quietly. “I want to write,”

“You write?” Steve was surprised, but he tried not to let it show too much. Bucky had never mentioned writing before, and Steve had never seen him writing. But he remembered the floor-to-ceiling bookcase in Bucky’s room and figured he must read more than he lets on, and that could be why he wants to write.

Bucky just nodded and bit into a candy bar. Steve assumed that Bucky’s reason for not doing it professionally was probably the same as his, especially given that he has Becca to think of too.
“But Becca wants to go to college.” Bucky continued.

“Do you want to go to college?” Steve asked and Bucky shook his head.

“I never did very well at school. I don’t do well on tests, so even though my class work was good, I still failed a lot of subjects. I hated school because of it. I think I’d hate college too. I just don’t like the education system.”

Steve nodded in understanding. “I didn’t do well in my tests either, despite my class work being good. But that’s because I’m dyslexic and I didn’t get diagnosed until half way through my finals, so there was nothing the school could do to help by them.”

“I’m not dyslexic, I’m just stupid.” Bucky chuckled, but Steve could tell he wasn’t kidding.

*Bucky genuinely believes he’s stupid…* Steve frowned.

“You’re not Stupid, Buck… Some people just don’t get on with tests.” He tried to reassure Bucky, but Bucky just changed the subject.

“Becca is good at tests, she’s a genius. And mom and dad promised her that she could go to college. I don’t want to break that promise for them.”

Steve bit his lip as they sat in silence for a few seconds. “Do you mind if I ask what happened to them?”

“Before I tell you, I have to ask you something.” Bucky looked up at Steve and Steve nodded to gesture for him to ask. “Do you think crazy can be hereditary?”

Steve thought about that for a minute, so that Bucky wouldn’t assume he jumped to the response to avoid upsetting him.

“No, I don’t. Certain mental disorders are hereditary, but that doesn’t make people crazy. If people do go crazy I think it’d be more an environmental factor that causes it, even if there is some kind of mental disorder that makes them more susceptible to going insane.”

Bucky nodded as he listened to Steve and smiled a little, but it quickly dropped and left a frown instead. “My dad lost his job. He started drinking a lot more, and he had a much shorter temper… And he started beating my mom, but she wouldn’t leave him. Then he started threatening us, and Mom told him if he ever hit either me or Becca she’d leave him. He laughed and said she wouldn’t. A few weeks after Mom had told him that, I accidentally dropped his whiskey bottle and it smashed. He got mad and punched me, then he told me not to tell Mom or Becca, or he’d kill all three of us. But when Mom asked what happened when she saw the bruise on my face, I told her. I thought she’d just take us and leave him. But she told me to get Becca and take her to go see Nat, and when we came home a few hours later there was police tape around the house and cops everywhere.

“My dad killed my Mom, and he was arrested. I was sixteen, so they said we could stay in the house with just the two of us as long as I got a job that paid enough to support us both. We used the money my Mom had put aside for my college fund to survive until I could get a job. What’s left of it is in a bank account for Becca’s college fund.”

Steve didn’t know what to say. He had expected some kind of accident, not murder. He leant over and hugged Bucky, who was a little surprised at first but hugged back nonetheless.

“Sorry…” Bucky muttered and Steve shook his head.
“Whatever you’re apologising for, stop it. You don’t have to apologise.”

Bucky went quiet but continued hugging Steve tight. “Thanks…”

“You’re welcome, Buck.”

“What happened to your parents?”

“My dad was a soldier in the army, he was killed in action. He jumped on a grenade to save the rest of his team… And my Mom had breast cancer. She died a year ago.”

“I’m sorry.” Bucky smiled sadly at him and Steve smiled back.

The rest of the picnic, they talked about books. Bucky was a big fan of Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemingway, and Steve listened to him talk about his favourite books. The sadness he had seen in Bucky’s eyes as he talked about what happened to his parents was gone. Then they started kissing again. They kept kissing for a while before it started raining and Steve almost bit Bucky’s lip again because of the shock.

Steve drove Bucky home so he wouldn’t have to walk home in the rain and walked him up to his apartment. As they stood in the doorway, Bucky kissed Steve again and he smiled against his lips as Steve placed his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky’s phone beeped in his pocket to announce that he had a text and Bucky pulled back to look at it. Steve couldn’t see the screen, but whatever the text said it wasn’t good.

“You have got to be kidding me…” Bucky muttered as he stared at the screen.

“What’s wrong?” Steve frowned and looked at the screen, but all he saw was “Our new co-workers” and a list of names.

“I have to go.” Bucky shoved his phone back into his pocket and kissed Steve’s cheek. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Bucky turned and quickly left the building before Steve could respond, and Steve frowned.

_Maybe the new co-workers are just people Bucky doesn’t get on with..._
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Bucky vents about his new co-worker, and they go on another date.

“He’s working, I understand if he can’t meet me,” Sam reassured Steve when he told him what Bucky had said. He had also reeled off all the things Bucky had said about work lately to punctuate his point. “Just let me know when his work is a little less pressing.”

“Thanks for understanding, Sam.” Steve smiled as they walked home from work. They lived on the same route, so Sam walked Steve to his building whenever they finished work at the same time then continue walking a few blocks to his own apartment building. It had been a very early shift, so early that the birds had only just started chirping.

Steve also mentioned Bucky’s reaction to getting the text with a list of co-workers and asked what Sam thought, and Sam agreed with Steve that it probably just included someone who he didn’t get on with and it may make his job even harder. Especially if it was someone who didn’t get on with Stark too. More friction between Stark and the construction crew would not go well and the others were already giving Bucky a headache with their daily complaining about Tony’s decisions and attitude.

Sam said goodnight to Steve outside his apartment and carried on as Steve went inside. He got upstairs and plugged the charger into his phone. It had died at some point while he was working.

When it turned on, he saw he had a message from Bucky.

“I need some advice.”

The message had been received twenty minutes ago, so he quickly typed out a reply apologising for the late reply. He explained that his phone had died and asked what he needed advice about. He got a reply almost instantly.

“I know one of the guys who’s working with us today, and I don’t want to work with him. But it’s for a personal reason. I’m sure he’s good at his job, I just don’t like him. Should I bother bringing it up to the boss or just deal with it?”

So that was why Bucky’s mood had suffered when he got the text. He and Sam were right. Steve thought about his reply for a minute before typing it out.

“Depends why you don’t like him. If it’s something that’ll effect your ability to work with him, like something horrible he did or does, you might want to bring it up. But if you just don’t like him because he’s annoying or something, it’d be unprofessional to let that effect your work.”

He didn’t get a reply for a while, and when he did, Bucky apologised and told him he was getting ready for work, then thanked him for the advice. Steve asked what made Bucky hate this guy, but Bucky replied ten minutes later saying he was at work and couldn’t talk anymore, but he did say he’d call him after work.

Steve showered and drew for most of the day until he got the promised phone call from Bucky, six
hours later. Before Steve could even say hello, Bucky spoke.

“That was fucking exhausting! Is the offer to vent at you still there?”

Steve laughed lightly and sat up on his bed, putting his sketchpad to the side. “Sure, go ahead.”

“I was so wrong! He cannot do his job! This guy is such a fucking dick! I’ve been appointed the head of the crew, but everything I say he questions it! He claims I’m giving him shit work because I don’t like him. I’m giving him shit work because everyone else has already been assigned to the other jobs because they have more qualifications than him. The three new guys we got were him, a dude called Rollins, and an old guy called Armin. Armin claimed he can’t do physical work, he’s better at thinking. Why the fuck is he doing construction if he can’t do physical work? And why the fuck has he been assigned to work on the Stark Building? If we fuck this up, HYDRA are going to be so pissed off and we’re probably all going to be fired. But they send us a fifty year old guy who can’t do physical labour. But he can talk to Stark more than the other guys can, so at least he can do more communicating and I won’t have to. Rollins is a dick, but at least he has a license to operate a crane and a bunch of other construction vehicles. Rumlow is useless. He can’t talk to Stark, he can’t operate any equipment except the basics that everyone needs to know how to use to work in a construction site, he refuses to wear a hard hat because it messes up his hair, he wondered off half way through the day and came back with beer, and he keeps making racist comments about Jim because he’s Asian.”

Steve listened and cringed occasionally. “Isn’t that enough for you to get him kicked off the site?”

“No, because it turns out he’s Alexander’s son. If I say a bad word about him, I could be fired.”

Steve remembered that Alexander was the owner of HYDRA and, although this guy should have gotten fired for the racist comments alone, Steve wasn’t naïve enough to believe that Alexander would actually fire his son.

“Did you know he was Alexander’s son?”

“No, they have different last names so I never thought about it. Apparently Rumlow is his mother’s name because Alexander was absent for the first few years of his life, so his mother wrote Rumlow on the birth certificate, assuming Alexander wouldn’t show up again. But Alexander did show up when he was six, and twenty nine years later I’m stuck with this fucker on my team. Fucking thirty five year old man who can’t wear a hard hat because it’ll mess up his stupid fucking hair!”

Steve could sense that Bucky was getting more and more frustrated. “Are you at home yet?”

“No, I’m still just outside the site. I needed to vent before I got behind the wheel of a car or I’d run Brock over with it.”

That name sounded familiar, but Steve couldn’t remember where he’d heard it. Then it clicked. Brock was Bucky’s ex, Natasha’s cousin. The one who manipulated Bucky into staying with him after Brock cheated on him.

“Wait, your ex? That’s who you have to work with?”

“Yeah, did I forget to mention his last name when I told you about him?” Bucky sighed over the phone.

“Yeah, now I understand why you were so annoyed when you got the text…”

“Yeah… I need to ask you something…”
“Ask away…” Bucky sounded nervous, and that made Steve nervous too.

“He asked me if I have a boyfriend... Do I?”

Steve hadn’t expected that, but it did make him smile and blush, even though Bucky wasn’t there and couldn’t see him.

“I think you do…” Steve answered quietly, hoping the smile was evident in his voice.

He could hear the smile in Bucky’s when he replied. “Good, because that’s what I told him before telling him to get back to work. It felt good to be able to boss him around for the first five minutes before he stopped working altogether.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Steve smiled again.

“I’m much calmer now. I think I can drive home without experiencing any homicidal tendencies. I’ll talk to you later.”

Steve said goodbye and Bucky hung up. As the silence settled in, Steve got more and more worried about Bucky working with Brock. He didn’t think he’d leave Steve for this man, he clearly annoyed Bucky too much for that to ever be an option. Natasha had told him how horrible Brock was for Bucky, and Bucky had told him how awful he was. But Steve knew he was very manipulative given how he managed to persuade Bucky that it was his fault Brock had cheated. And Bucky had been so wound up after working with him for one day. Bucky had already been having a stressful time at work without Brock making it harder for him. Bucky acted laid back and care-free most of the time, but after what happened to his parents, and having to work and take care of his sister from the age of sixteen, dealing with Stark, and now Brock and Armin, he had a lot of causes for stress and pressure in his life. His days were spent either working or doing something for Becca. The fact that he ever had any time to spend with Steve or his other friends at all was a miracle.

He really hoped Bucky wouldn’t have to work with Brock too much.

When Bucky called Steve later on after making Becca dinner and helping her with her homework, they agreed on another date on Saturday. Bucky wasn’t working that night, and Steve only had to work at the library from lunch until four. Bucky said there was a really nice restaurant he wanted to take Steve to, and Steve smiled as he accepted the invitation.

Bucky picked Steve up as usual, this time at seven in the evening, and they talked about Becca’s latest dance competition coming up. It was out of town, so Bucky was hoping to get the weekend off work so he could take her and watch her perform. But if he couldn’t, Natasha was willing to go with her. The kids from her dance school were also going to be there, so she was going anyway. Natasha couldn’t openly announce that she hoped Becca won, but Bucky knew that that was the case. Steve told Bucky to wish Becca good luck from him.

The restaurant was beautiful. It was a little dimly lit, but it created a romantic setting. There were lanterns set around the room and on the tables, and the walls were a deep red. Bucky had made a reservation under “Barnes” and the waiter showed them over to a table for two with a bouquet of red roses on it.

Steve looked at Bucky, a little confused. “None of the other tables have roses…”

“I paid extra for them, a little thank you for letting me vent at you so much lately about work. And a sorry too, for the same thing.”
“You don’t have to apologise, Buck. I don’t mind,” Steve smiled and kissed his cheek, then sat down when Bucky pulled his chair out for him.

“So how has your work been?” He asked as he sat down opposite Steve and passed him one of the menus.

“Schmidt came in a few times. He looked really pissed that I’m still working there, but he didn’t say anything to me.”

“Good. If he does, let me know.”

Steve smiled a little at Bucky’s words and looked down at the menu. Everything there was so expensive, there was no way Steve could afford this place. He must have been frowning, because he felt Bucky’s hand on his and looked up.

“Order whatever you want, I’m paying.”

Steve smiled slightly and waited until Bucky looked back at his own menu before dropping the smile. He hated that Bucky had to pay for all their dates. He had Becca to support, he didn’t need Steve taking his hard-earned money too. But he knew if he voiced this, Bucky would insist that he didn’t mind. Steve silently promised that he would make it up to him some day. Even if he never got to be a professional artist, he still hoped to get a better job soon and when he did, he would buy Bucky anything he could ever ask for. He’d take him on dates wherever he wanted, he’d buy him new clothes, new books… Bucky would never have to work another day in his life. Steve would support him, and Becca, so that Bucky could spend the rest of his life relaxing. He’d never have to put up with bosses like Stark, or workers like Brock, ever again.

“Steve? Have you decided?” Bucky waved his hand in front of Steve’s face. He must have zoned out thinking about the amazing things he would do for Bucky if he just had the money.

“Just soup.” Steve decided and put the menu down.

Bucky frowned and closed his own. “Steve, I really don’t mind what you get. Or how expensive it is. You can get whatever you want.”

“I just want soup.” Steve smiled. “What’re you getting?”

“Pasta Verde.” He decided and repeated it to the waiter, but he waited for Steve to place his own order. Steve could tell Bucky was hoping he’d change his mind, but Steve asked the waiter for the tomato soup. He could tell Bucky was a little disappointed, but he didn’t say anything else about it.

“Has Brock been giving you any more trouble?” Steve asked as they waited for their food.

“Yeah, he hasn’t showed up for work in the past two days. And when he does show up, he just wonders around the site purposely annoying everyone. I haven’t even seen him pick up a piece of equipment since his first day. He spends most of the time following me around.”

“What does he do when he follows you?”

“Just asks really personal questions and tries to tease me into telling him the answer.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Questions about you…” Bucky replied as the waiter brings their drinks over. They both thanked him.
“What about me?” Steve frowned.

Bucky shook his head. “You don’t want to know.”

“I do.” Steve insisted and Bucky sighed and repeated that he didn’t. “If he’s talking about me I want to know what he’s saying.”

“It’s not anything about you specifically…”

“Bucky, what is he asking about?”

He sighed again and leant a bit closer so no one could overhear them. “It’s about… our sex life.”

Steve frowned as he blushed. “What… Sex life? We haven’t… done anything.”

“I know. But it’s none of his business, so I didn’t tell him.”

“So he’s asking questions about a sex life he doesn’t even know if we have or not?”

“Yes, that’s it.” Bucky sat back again and thanked the waiter as he put the food down in front of them.

“Does it… Bother you that we haven’t done anything?” Steve asked as he ran his spoon through the soup.

Bucky sighed as he picked up his cutlery. “I told you, Steve, I don’t care. I’ll wait as long as you need.”

“But don’t you get… Frustrated?” Steve imagined his face was as red as his tomato soup as he kept his eyes trained down on it. They had made out a lot, and on many occasions it had gotten heated. It was always at Bucky’s, though. Steve still wasn’t comfortable letting Bucky see the apartment he lived in, and Bucky wouldn’t like it there anyway. It was always cold, and there was mould starting to grow in the top corner but Steve couldn’t reach it. So they would go to Bucky’s and watch TV in the living room, which eventually led to kissing. If Becca was home and in the living room, they sat in Bucky’s bedroom talking or listening to music before, again, it would lead to heated kissing. Steve had always stopped it though, and Bucky had never pushed him to go further. He never got annoyed, or even sighed. He just stopped whenever Steve insinuated that he wanted to.

“That’s why masturbation is a thing.” Bucky smirked as Steve blushed more profusely.

Steve changed the subject then and asked how the building was coming along. Bucky said it was still a long way away from being finished and although Brock and Armin are useless, Rollins is a great addition to the crew and now they’re back on schedule. But Stark had changed his mind about a lot of plans, so they had to sort that out before they did anything else.

“Order a dessert.” Bucky passed Steve his menu after he saw Steve finish his soup. “Anything you want.”

Bucky picked up his own menu and looked over the dessert section. Steve could tell he was looking at the names, whereas Steve stuck to looking at the prices. He decided on a piece of cheesecake, but Bucky wasn’t happy with that and insisted he ordered something more filling. Bucky chose a chocolate fudge sundae and Steve ordered the same thing, just to make Bucky happy.
Steve wasn’t sure he’d be able to finish it all when the waiter put it down in front of him. Bucky thanked the man and immediately started eating his own sundae as Steve watched in amazement.

*How can he eat so much?*

Steve managed to eat half of it before he felt like he was going to explode and had to stop. Thankfully, Bucky didn’t say anything about it and just continued eating his own while Steve talked about one of his favourite books, *The Picture of Dorian Grey.*

“My mom used to read that to me all the time!” Bucky replied excitedly. “She said it’d teach me not to be self-obsessed, but really it just made me scared to look at pictures of myself for months.”

“Really?” Steve laughed.

“Yeah, I put all the pictures in the house face down because I didn’t want to get older. I was six, so I missed the point Wilde was trying to make.”

“I understood why Dorian didn’t want to get old though. When I was little, I wished I had a picture of myself that would get older instead of me.”

“You didn’t want to grow up?” Bucky finished his dessert and leaned forward, closer to Steve.

“No, I wanted to stay a kid forever because my mom was always stressed with taking care of me and making sure I had everything I wanted. She always talked about the responsibilities that came with being an adult, and they sounded awful. I just wanted to keep colouring in my pictures and having fun.”

Bucky smiled at that. “I know what you mean. How old were you when your mom died?”

“Eighteen. It was just over a year ago. So at least I had a mother longer than you had, so don’t feel sorry for me.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you.”

Steve looked surprised at that, until Bucky elaborated.

“I mean, I do feel sorry for you. But I feel more sorry for her. Breast cancer is an awful way to go, and having to leave you behind must have been hard. Knowing she wouldn’t be able to support you anymore, and not knowing if you’d be okay. I know Becca isn’t my kid, but I’d hate to know I’m going to die and leave her with no one. I don’t know if she’d forget to feed herself a lot...”

Steve nodded a little. He hadn’t thought of it from his mother’s point of view. Not because he didn’t think about her, but because he didn’t want to think about what it’d be like to leave a child behind with no support. He wished he could tell her he’s okay, and wondered if she’d be proud of him. But, she always called him her little artist, so she probably wouldn’t have been proud of him for giving that up and working in retail instead.

“Steve? You zoned out...” Bucky looked a little worried. “Are you okay?”

Steve shook his head slightly to clear it. “I’m okay, just never thought of it like that before...”

They sat in silence for a few seconds before the waiter came over and asked if they wanted anything else. Bucky looked over at Steve, who shook his head, and asked for the bill. Steve immediately went to get his wallet out.
“I told you, Steve, I’m paying.” Steve was about to protest, but Bucky went on. “Tell you what, how about we make a deal? Whoever picks the place for the date pays for it. I picked this restaurant, so I pay for it.”

Steve thought about that, then nodded. “Okay, that seems fair.”

Bucky smiled again as he counted out the money and put it on the table under the bill, then stood up.

“Ready to go?” Bucky held his hand out for Steve who took it with a smile, letting Bucky lead him out of the restaurant. Bucky’s hands were warm, even though he had spent the past ten minutes holding the sundae bowl steady. Warmer than Steve’s, but that’s probably because of his crappy circulation. Steve gripped Bucky’s hand a little tighter as they stepped outside.

It was starting to get colder now, and the chill was getting to Steve through his thin jacket. Bucky let go of Steve’s hand and took his long, felt, black jacket off to drape it over Steve’s shoulders. He started to protest but Bucky stopped him with a kiss. Bucky used the lapels of the jacket to pull Steve closer whilst simultaneously wrapping the jacket tighter around Steve’s thin frame. He tilted his head back so Bucky wouldn’t have to lean down as much and smiled into the kiss as he wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist.

He could taste the ice cream that lingered on Bucky’s tongue and tightened his arms around him to pull Bucky closer. Bucky’s whole body was like a furnace against Steve’s. Bucky broke the kiss after a few more seconds but kept his hands on the lapels. “The coat suits you…”

Steve shook his head with a smile. “Short people can’t wear long coats, it makes us look shorter.”

Bucky laughed as he shook his own head and wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders to continue walking to the parking lot he had parked in a block away. It had gotten dark while they were in the restaurant. It must have only been eight thirty at the latest, but it looked like the middle of the night. Even in the dull light, Steve couldn’t help but admire Bucky. He was wearing a fitted black suit that looked as though it was tailored specifically to his body, with a dark blue shirt and black skinny tie. Steve’s outfit was not as good. He was wearing a suit that was a bit too big, his mother had promised he would grow into it but he hadn’t, and his tie was too big and he had to wrap the end around twice whilst making the knot so it didn’t show underneath the larger part. He tugged at the tie self-consciously.

“You look great, Steve.” Bucky told him as he tightened his arm around Steve.

Steve smiled at Bucky. He was amazed that Bucky could tell what he was thinking before Steve could react to his own thoughts properly. Steve remembered reading some old folk lore about soulmates being able to read micro expressions of each other’s faces so well that it gave the impression that they could read each other’s minds. But it was the same kind of stories like how twins could feel each other’s pain, so Steve doubted it was--

Soulmates?

Steve hadn’t even realised he thought of Bucky that way. They hadn’t been together that long. They hadn’t even known each other that long, but Steve was already thinking of him as his soulmate.

He shook his head slightly. He couldn’t think that way about the first person to show him any affection. Even if Bucky did really care about Steve as much as Steve liked him, that didn’t make them soulmates.
They walked through the parking lot to where Bucky had parked his car and Bucky slipped his hand into the pocket of his jacket, which was still on Steve, to get his keys. As he was looking down, Steve looked to Bucky’s car and saw a man leaning against it with smoke rising from his hand. He lifted it up and Steve saw the end of a cigarette light up as the man took a drag from it. Steve stopped walking and Bucky carried on for a few steps before realising he was walking alone. He looked back at Steve, keys in hand.

“Steve? What’s wrong?” Bucky frowned and walked back over to his boyfriend.

Steve jerked his head in the direction of the car and Bucky turned to see what was bothering him. When he saw the man, Bucky froze.

“Do you know him?” Steve whispered to Bucky as he stepped up behind him. Bucky took his car key off the keyring and put it in his trouser pocket.

“Take the keys and walk back the way we came, take South Street.” Bucky replied and passed the rest of his keys back to Steve, making sure not to let them jingle too much.

“What? Why?” Steve was starting to get nervous, and the tone of Bucky’s voice wasn’t helping. His voice sounded tense. Bucky turned to Steve, his face rigid. He took the keys and moved Steve’s hand so that the end of one of Bucky’s keys was sticking out between his index and middle finger, then closed his fist around the rest.

“If anyone touches you, use the key to stab them and run. Do you remember your way home from here?”

Steve was getting scared now. “Bucky, what’s going on?”

“Do you remember your way home?” Bucky pushed again and Steve nodded. “Go home, Steve. Go straight home.” He tugged the coat tighter around Steve.

“Bucky, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on. Who is that?”

“Steve.” Bucky grabbed Steve’s shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “Go. Home. I’ll call you later.”

Steve looked over at the man, but it was too dark to see any of his features properly. He was tall, taller than Bucky, and muscular. But that’s all Steve could tell. His head was tilted slightly in their direction, meaning he was looking at them. Even though he couldn’t see his eyes, something about him made Steve feel colder despite Bucky’s coat around him.

“Are you going to be okay?” Steve reached up to cup Bucky’s face. He didn’t want to leave him alone with this guy. There was something unsettling about him.

“I’ll be fine, just go home Steve. Please. And text me when you get home.” He seemed to be getting desperate, and Steve glanced over Bucky’s shoulder to see the man drop his cigarette and grind it into the concrete.

“Text me when you get home too…” Steve insisted and went to take off Bucky’s jacket to hand it back over to him, but Bucky took his head.

“Keep it… It’s cold. Just give me it back next time we see each other,”

“How will you get in the house?” Steve gestured with the keys still gripped tight in his shaky fist.
“Becca’s home, I’ll just knock and she’ll let me in. Don’t worry about me, just go.”

Steve nodded lightly and wrapped Bucky’s jacket tighter around him as he started walking back the way they had come. He glanced over his shoulder every few seconds and walked slowly to make sure Bucky wasn’t in danger.

Bucky walked to his car and stood in front of the other man with a few feet between them. The man tried to close to gap, but Bucky stepped back with his hands up. Steve watched them as he kept walking and didn’t notice the man in front of him until he walked into his chest.

Steve grunted and stumbled back, then looked up at the man in front of him. He had dark hair that was combed back and greasy, with light stubble over his face. The man was taller than Steve, and much more muscular.

“Are you dating James?” The man asked and Steve blinked in surprise.

“Who are you?”

“Are you Steve?” The man asked.

Steve knew he shouldn’t tell him, that he should walk away. But when he tried to, the man stepped into his way.

“Answer the question, Squirt.”

Steve tried to step around him again, then the man tried to grab Bucky’s coat to stop Steve. He remembered the keys in his hand and jabbed it into the man’s stomach as hard as he could. The man grunted in pain and dropped to his knees.

He let go of the coat and Steve ran.

Steve’s lungs felt like they were on fire when he burst into his apartment. He was sweating, but he still clung to Bucky’s coat as he tried to suck in the air. He stumbled into his bedroom and opened his draw to get his inhaler. He pulled it out and took several deep breaths from it before he felt his airways open up again and was able to breathe better. After he was able to calm down, he remembered Bucky.

He left Bucky there, alone, with two dangerous men. Steve dug his phone out of his pocket and called Bucky, but there was no answer. He started to panic again.

What if they hurt him? Or kidnapped him? The man who stopped me knew Bucky.

Steve tried to call Bucky again, then when he still didn’t get an answer he called Becca. She answered after the second ring.

“Hey Steve, how was your date with Bucky?”

“Is Bucky with you?” Steve asked frantically.

“What? No, I thought he was with you. What’s going on?” He could hear the worry in Becca’s voice, but before he could explain, she went on. “Oh, one sec, there’s someone at the door.”

There was a moment of silence as she got up to answer it, then she told Steve that Bucky was there.

“Is he okay?” Steve asked quickly. He heard Becca repeat the question, as well as ask why he
didn’t have his keys.

He heard Bucky take the phone. “Steve? I’m fine, are you? Did you run into any trouble?”

Steve told Bucky about the man, but his memory was hazy and he couldn’t remember any details about him. Bucky told him to relax, and said everything was okay. He apologised for the bad end to the night, but assured him he would make it up to him next time they go on a date. Bucky told Steve he’d stop by the hardware store the next day to get his coat and keys, then he said he was going to bed and wished Steve goodnight.

Steve still wasn’t sure if everything was okay… But Bucky was okay, and that’s all the mattered.

He curled up on his bed, using Bucky’s coat as his blanket, and fell into an uneasy sleep.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets drunk. Then he and Steve talk, and Steve blushes a lot

“Bucky!” Steve screamed as he struggled against the grip of the man behind him. He had his arms wrapped around Steve so he couldn’t move his arms.

Bucky was a few feet away, on the floor, and he wasn’t moving. He was laid on his back and Steve could see his eyes were closed and he was covered in blood. The man who had been leaning against Bucky’s car was stood over him with his boot on Bucky’s neck. He pressed his foot down a little harder and Bucky started struggling against him, but the man wouldn’t let up. The other man behind Steve, holding him back, was laughing.

Bucky opened his eyes and looked at Steve, but he couldn’t breathe or speak. He reached out and Steve tried so hard to break out of the man’s grip to help him, but he couldn’t move. Steve tried to kick and claw at the man, but it made no difference. The man felt like stone enclosed around him.

The man stepped on Bucky’s neck harder and Steve heard a sickening crack before Bucky went still. His eyes were still open, but they weren’t as expressive as they usually are. They were dull and lifeless.

Steve screamed as he sat bolt upright in his bed. He was breathing heavily and there was a gleam of sweat over his skin. The blankets around him felt constricting and reminded him of the man’s arms around him, preventing him from saving Bucky. He kicked off the blankets frantically and jumped up to stand on his mattress, stretching his arms out to reassure himself that he wasn’t being held back.

Steve grabbed his inhaler and took a few deep breaths from it before he was able to calm down, then he grabbed his phone to call Bucky. But it was late, and Bucky was probably sleeping. He was fine, at home.

Steve couldn’t shake the feeling something wasn’t right, though.

Bucky came into the store at the end of Steve’s shift, and Steve gave him back his keys and coat as he collected his own things to leave. Sam was at the counter, but he didn’t speak to Bucky. Steve did see him watching him though, so he introduced them. Technically, he wasn’t breaking the agreement with Bucky to wait until later for them to meet. It would just be rude if he ignored Sam while he was with Bucky.

Sam smiled and held his hand over the counter to shake Bucky’s, who smiled back at him, then Sam said he had work to do so they had no time to do more than say it was nice to meet them.

Bucky and Steve left the store and passed Schmidt as they did. Schmidt glared at them and Bucky smiled at him, but Steve quickly dragged him away by Bucky’s hand before there was any trouble. Bucky had offered to give Steve a ride home before he had to go to work and Steve accepted after
Bucky promised it was no trouble.

Steve kept looking up at Bucky every few seconds as they walked to Bucky’s car, searching Bucky’s neck for any signs that he was hurt. There were no bruises, no red marks, and definitely no indication of a broken neck. Bucky caught him watching and frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

Steve quickly looked forward again as he held Bucky’s hand. “Nothing.”

Bucky stopped walking, and his grip of Steve’s hand made him stop too. “Are you still a little freaked out about last night?”

Steve nodded. “I’d feel better if I actually know what happened…”

Bucky shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat and looked down at his boots. “Brock… Brock was the one who was leant against my car. I don’t know who the guy who tried to grab you was, but I’m working on finding out.”

“Brock? Your asshole ex who you now have to work with?”

Bucky nodded.

“What did he want?”

“He tried to hug me, then he wanted to meet you.”

“Maybe it would have done him some good to meet me,” Steve glared out at a random spot over Bucky’s shoulder. “Then he could see how people are supposed to treat their boyfriend.”

He focussed his eyes back on Bucky and saw him smiling. “What?”

“I like when you call me that…”

“Boyfriend?” Steve smiled a little as Bucky nodded, and he leant up to kiss him.

“But in all seriousness,” Bucky started when he broke the kiss. “I’m not letting him anywhere near you. I don’t know what he’d do, and that’s unsettling.”

“I’m not worried.” Steve took Bucky’s hand again and started walking to Bucky’s car. But he couldn’t ignore the feeling of relief when he didn’t see anyone near the car. Bucky put his car key back on the ring with his other keys before unlocking the door and starting it once Steve was inside.

“So you have to work with him again today?”

“If he shows up.” Bucky sighed as he drove towards Steve’s house.

Steve was even more worried about Bucky going to work now, especially now that Brock was practically stalking Bucky and he had a friend with him who was on Brock’s side. If he said this, Bucky would just tell him to relax and say that he’ll be fine, but he did anyway. To his surprise, Bucky just nodded a little when Steve voiced his concerns, as if he was thinking the same thing.

“He won’t do anything on the site. Not with all the security around all the time, and all the other guys who would take my side if Brock did anything bad.”
“What about after work?”

Bucky smiled that tight-lipped smile at Steve, the one that Steve could see right through. “Don’t worry about it, I can take him down in a fight.”

Steve had never seen Bucky fight, but he somehow doubted that. Brock was bigger than Bucky, both in height and in build.

Bucky stopped outside Steve’s apartment building. “Sorry I can’t walk you up to your apartment today, I’m going to be late as it is.”

Steve shook his head with a smile and leant forward to kiss Bucky. When he pulled back, Bucky looked a little less guilty. “Don’t worry about it. Just get to work, avoid Brock as much as you can, then get home safe.”

Bucky nodded with a promise to call him after work, then Steve got out and waved to him before going up the steps to the door of the building. Bucky didn’t drive away until Steve was inside the building.

Bucky called him, as promised, after work.

“I need to ask you about the guy who tried to grab you.” Bucky sounded tense.

“I can’t really remember much… But go ahead.”

“Did you see a scar on his forehead?”

Steve thought back. It was dark, so he couldn’t see his face properly. There may have been a scar on his head, but it could have just been the very little light there was catching his face at an angle.

“I’m not sure, maybe. It was dark.” Steve answered unhelpfully.

He heard Bucky speak to someone else before replying to Steve. “I think I know who it was, but I hope I’m wrong. Anyway, how are you?”

All Steve had done today was watch TV, so he didn’t have much to say. When he asked Bucky about his day, he expected ranting but Bucky just said it was fine. Steve asked if Rumlow had given him any trouble and this time there was a pause before Bucky said he hadn’t seen him. He decided not to ask why he hesitated.

“I have to drive home now, then I’m helping Becca with her dancer for the competition so I probably won’t be able to talk to you until tomorrow.”

Steve was a little surprised, but he said it was okay and he understood then said goodnight to Bucky. Then, he went back to watching TV and drawing. As usual, he turned off his mind while he drew and looked down in interest to see what his pencil had created.

As expected, it was a picture of Bucky, but Steve felt a chill travel up his spine as he looked at it. Bucky was on his back on the floor, his head tilted to the viewer and his hand outstretched, but he was covered in blood. The bloody areas were coloured in darker than the rest of Steve’s lines. There was blood coming from Bucky’s nose, dripping into a pool from his mouth, a large gash on his forehead, and even some dripping from his ear. There were sketched lines coming from his eyes too, but these were lighter, indicating that they were tears. His eyes weren’t done in as much detail as he usually drew them. The lines of his irises and his pupils were very light, making them
look glossed over and lifeless.

There was also the dark shape of a boot over his neck.

Steve felt like he was going to hyperventilate again. He quickly ripped the page out and screwed it up into a tight ball, then threw it into his trash can near his mattress. Instead, he kept his mind focused, and drew him and Bucky kissing.

This picture was much more calming. Bucky’s lips were curled up slightly in a smile as they pressed against Steve’s, and they were sat on Bucky’s bed. Or, more accurately, Steve was sat on Bucky’s bed and Bucky was on all fours in front of him so he could lean over Steve’s legs and kiss him.

Steve drew a light blush on his own cheeks, because he knows exactly how much he blushes and he is under no impression that he doesn’t blush every time he feels Bucky’s lips against any part of his own body. He knew he was going to be a wreck when he and Bucky had sex.

*If that ever happens…* Steve thought as he turned the page to a new sheet. He wasn’t sure if he would ever be ready. He really wanted to, but he was scared. Scared of it hurting too much, scared Bucky won’t like it, scared he would do something wrong…

His pencil moved over the fresh page as he thought about what it would be like. Bucky would be as patient as he had been so far, he would probably concentrate on making sure Steve was comfortable every step of the way.

Steve concentrated his focus back on the sheet when he felt his pencil stop moving and felt his face heat up as he saw the drawing. The picture was of Steve and Bucky in bed, the sheets a mess around them, with Steve on his back and Bucky leaning over him between Steve’s open legs. Bucky was kissing his neck and Steve’s eyes were closed in pleasure, his mouth hanging slightly open. He couldn’t see Bucky’s face in the picture, but there were scratches on his back leading to where Steve’s fingers were digging into his skin.

He couldn’t quite bring himself to tear this one out.

The sound of his phone ringing roused Steve from his sleep and he frowned as he looked at his alarm clock first.

3:23?!

Steve groaned as he grabbed his phone. Bucky’s name flashed up on his screen and he frowned, more from confusion than annoyance. Bucky had been working, then helping Becca perfect a dance too.

Steve answered the phone. “Buck? It’s three-twenty in the morning…”

“*Is it?!”* Bucky sounded genuinely surprised, not mocking.

“Yeah, it is. What’s going on? Why aren’t you asleep?” Steve rubbed his eyes as he sat up.

“*Becca’s mad at me…*” Bucky’s voice gave off the impression that he wasn’t that bothered about that, but Steve knew better. “*I went to a bar…*”

“Did you get served?”
“Yeah… Lots…” Bucky let out a high-pitched giggle. “But now I can’t go home… Can’t drive, and I’m not sure where I am.” He sounded upset now. “And I think I saw a guy staring at me, but I’m not sure... Could just be paranoid.”

Steve suddenly remembered the picture he had drawn of Bucky dead and bloody, and instantly he was wide awake. “Are you still at the bar?”

“Mhmm.”

“Stay inside, preferably somewhere the bartender can see you. What’s the name of the bar?”

He heard Bucky move around as if he was pulling himself up from a curb or something. “Happyfun Hideaway.”

Steve vaguely remembered that place. It was a gay bar, on Myrtle Avenue. Steve had never been in there, but he had passed it enough times to remember the name. He got out of bed and quickly changed. As he did, he spoke to Bucky. He could still hear the noises of the cars on the street in the background and it took three attempts to persuade Bucky to go back inside and sit at the counter. If he was inside the bar, there would be others who could see him and not just the man Bucky thought was watching him. The bartender would see if the man tried to harm Bucky, and would hopefully step in. And he was less likely to hurt himself in his drunken state.

Steve didn’t have a car, but he could walk Bucky home and make sure he got to bed unharmed.

He followed street signs as best he could to get to the bar. When he did, he was a little relieved to see that Bucky wasn’t inside, and he was sat at the counter talking to the bartender. Steve wasn’t so happy to see another drink in his hand, though.

Steve dodged through the few people in his way to get to Bucky while he glanced around the rest of the area, looking for anyone who might be watching Bucky. He thought he might have seen two men in the corner looking at Bucky but if they had, it was only a fleeting look from what Steve could tell. He tapped Bucky on the shoulder, and he almost spilled his whiskey on Steve as he turned quickly. Tapping his shoulder with no warning probably wasn’t the best way to get Bucky’s attention after he had specifically said he thought someone was watching him, but Bucky wasn’t mad. He just grinned when he saw him and threw his arms around Steve’s shoulders. Steve stumbled slightly as he tried to support Bucky’s muscular weight.

“Stevie!” Bucky almost shouted in excitement next to Steve’s ear and Steve winced.

“Come on, Buck. Let’s get you home.” He wrapped one arm around Bucky’s waist and took away his glass with the other hand to place it on the counter. Bucky leant against him with one arm around his shoulders while Steve helped him out of the bar. Once they got outside, Steve tightened his arm around Bucky to avoid the possibility of Bucky slipping out of his grip and getting hurt. He didn’t remember the way to Bucky’s house from where they were, but he did remember the way back to his own apartment.

“Bucky? Do you know how to get home from here?”

Bucky just shook his head, his eyelids starting to droop. Steve figured he didn’t have long before Bucky passed out from the alcohol consumption and if he did, there was no way Steve would be able to get Bucky home or even just off the street. He made the decision to take Bucky back to his own apartment. There was no point worrying about how awful his apartment was now.

Steve heard footsteps behind him and tightened his arm around Bucky’s waist, his other hand
holding Bucky’s arm around his shoulders. Bucky’s feet were starting to drag slightly as he struggled to keep up with Steve’s quickened pace. He groaned in annoyance as he almost tripped and muttered to Steve to slow down. The footsteps Steve had heard behind him turned a corner and he let out a breath in relief, slowing down a little.

“Sorry…”

Bucky made a non-committal noise, and Steve figured that was the only kind of replies he’d be getting from Bucky for a while. They got back to Steve’s building, and Steve struggled slightly to get Bucky up all of the stairs, but they managed it. He moved Bucky so he was leaning against the wall next to Peggy’s apartment door while Steve unlocked his own door, but when he turned back round Bucky was on the floor, his legs splayed out in front of him. His chin was resting on his chest, and Steve briefly wondered if he was sleeping, but then he saw the packet of cigarettes in Bucky’s lap that he was trying to open. He was struggling to grip the plastic to pull it off the packet and he frowned when Steve took them off him and put them in his pocket. Then he leant down to pull Bucky up off the floor and help him into the apartment.

Steve kicked the door closed behind them and debated where to put Bucky. The couch was uncomfortable and stained, and there were springs sticking out in some places that could scratch him. The mattress wasn’t that much better, but it was in a slightly warmer corner of the apartment, so he led Bucky over to the mattress and dropped him onto it. Bucky slumped on the mattress and curled up into a ball on top of it.

He would be asleep in a matter of minutes, so if Steve wanted answers he’d have to get them now. And since Bucky had called him at such a ridiculously early hour, he figured he deserved some answers.

“What happened between you and Becca?”

If Bucky was sober, Steve had no doubt that he would just shrug and say it’s not important. He’d claim it’s just a little thing, despite the state it’s left him in, and he’d reassure Steve that he didn’t have to worry about it. But, apparently, Bucky was much more open and truthful when drunk.

Not that Bucky lied a lot when sober. He just didn’t want to worry or bother others with things that were bothering him. Bucky just prefers making sure everyone else is happy above taking care of himself or seeking support for his own problems.

“She wanted me to call the police.”

That was vague, but it was a start. “Call the police about what?”

“Brock and that other guy who tried to grab you.”

“And you’re not going to?”

Bucky shook his head and started patting his pockets, presumably looking for the pack of cigarettes still tucked in Steve’s pocket.

“Why not?” Steve was starting to get confused about why Bucky seemed to want to protect this guy who was so awful to him.

“I’ve already had a word from Alexander.”

“You’re boss? And Brock’s dad? What did he say?”
Bucky muttered something, but Steve didn’t hear. He spoke too quietly, and his words were slurred by the alcohol in his system. When he asked him to repeat himself, Bucky looked up at Steve before talking more clearly.

“Said if I get Brock in trouble I’m fired. And so are my team.”

Steve was shocked at that. Brock could be dangerous, but this guy was expecting Bucky to deal with it just so his son didn’t get in trouble. If Brock attacked him, would he still have to keep quiet?

“Won’t be able to find a new job. He’ll make sure of that.” Bucky muttered again, but Steve heard him this time. He also heard Bucky’s voice crack near the end, and saw Bucky’s hand cover his eyes.

Is he crying? Steve had no idea what to do in this situation. He had never seen Bucky cry. He had never really had to comfort anyone who was crying. What was he supposed to say? It’ll all be okay?

Steve sat down beside him on the mattress and wrapped an arm around Bucky’s shoulders. He still didn’t know what to say, so he hoped his presence alone would help to calm Bucky.

Bucky leant against Steve’s shoulder as he tried not to make a sound, but Steve could hear the quiet sobs against his shoulder. It didn’t last long, though, and eventually Bucky fell asleep against Steve’s shoulder. Steve carefully moved Bucky to lie him down on the mattress, making sure he didn’t wake him up. He took Bucky’s shoes and socks off for him, then his shirt, hoping it would mean he could sleep a little more comfortably, then pulled the covers around them both. He didn’t want to leave Bucky’s side when he was clearly upset, and he didn’t have to go to work tomorrow.

Steve woke up later at around eleven. He would have been surprised by this, but he had woken up at three earlier, so he figured he deserved a lie-in. Bucky was still asleep beside him, and he had one arm over Steve’s chest.

Steve carefully moved his arm off him so he could get up and go to the kitchen. He didn’t know if Bucky usually got hangovers, but given how drunk he was last night he figured it was a high possibility. Steve got a glass of water and a few aspirins and placed them on the bedside table for when Bucky woke up.

While he waited, Steve took a shower and cleaned up the apartment as much and as quietly as he could. It still looked depressing when he finished, but at least it was neater. He didn’t want to turn the TV on and risk waking Bucky, so he sat on the couch and drew for a while.

An hour later, he heard a groan from the mattress and smiled slightly as he saw Bucky cover his head through the open bedroom door. Bucky looked around the room, but didn’t see Steve through the door. But Steve saw his eyes widen slightly in panic when he saw he had no shirt on.

“No… I didn’t… Oh fuck…” Bucky muttered to himself, just loud enough that Steve could hear him.

Steve stood up and walked over to the bedroom as Bucky searched frantically for his shirt. He cleared his throat and Bucky looked up like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle.

“No…” Bucky looked confused, then looking around the room again and seemed to recognise that he was in Steve’s apartment. Bucky sighed in relief and sat back down on the mattress. But the relief only lasted a few seconds, then he looked back up at Steve in concern. “Did we…?”
Steve wasn’t sure what Bucky was getting to at first, but when he did he blushed and shook his head quickly. “You called me while you were drunk, but I didn’t know the way back to your house from the bar you were at, so I brought you here.”

Bucky looked relieved again, then Steve realised why Bucky had panicked when he first woke up. He didn’t realise he was at Steve’s apartment, so he thought he was at a random person’s house. He thought he had cheated on Steve while he was drunk.

Steve came over and passed Bucky the water and painkillers from the bedside table, and Bucky took them gratefully. He sat back against the wall with his eyes closed, and Steve wasn’t sure what to say.

“I’m sorry I called you. I bet it was at a stupid time, wasn’t it.” Bucky muttered with one hand over his eyes.

“It’s okay, I’m glad you called me.” Steve reassured him.

“Really?” Bucky moved his hand away from his eyes and looked at Steve in confusion. “Why?”

“Because you were very drunk, and upset, and I’d rather you had called me than trying to get yourself home and getting hurt.”

“What time did I call you?”

Steve checked his call log on his phone. “Three-twenty three...”

Bucky groaned and hid his face against his hands again. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s okay.” Steve reassured him again. “I’d prefer to be woken up early in the morning to come get you and make sure you’re safe, than wake up after a long sleep and find out that you’ve been hurt… Or worse.”

Steve didn’t want to think about the ‘or worse’ part. He didn’t want to, but his brain imagine waking up to a text from Becca or someone, saying Bucky tried to drive home drunk and died in a car accident, or that he tried to walk home and fell into the road and died when a car ran over him. Or that someone had attacked him, and killed him... He had to stop himself from thinking about it anymore, and looked over at Bucky to assure himself that he was okay. Bucky was safe.

Bucky leant over then and went to kiss Steve, but he stopped himself and went into Steve’s bathroom. He looked a little confused, then he heard Bucky gargling mouthwash and laughed lightly. When he came back in, Bucky immediately kissed Steve. He tasted strongly of peppermint, and Steve was briefly worried about his own breath, but Bucky cupped his face to keep it against his own when Steve went to pull back. He kept his hand there while Steve’s hands wrapped around Bucky’s middle, and Bucky pulled Steve closer. Every time Steve tried to pull away, worried he was doing something wrong, Bucky’s hand held his face a little tighter. Not enough to hurt, but enough to keep him still.

Steve eventually stopped the kiss when he felt his body react a little too much, and Bucky didn’t stop him this time.

“We should probably talk…” Steve’s breathing was a little faster, and he was blushing. Bucky didn’t look like he knew what Steve mean, which made him blush more as he realised he’d have to explain himself. “You know I’ve never… Had sex before, right?”

Bucky nodded, and waited for Steve to go on.
“I don’t know what I’m doing… And when we do… Do it… I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”

Bucky, again, nodded and waited for Steve to continue. But that was where Steve was hoping Bucky would start talking, so they sat in silence for a few moments before Bucky realised it was his turn to talk.

“Why do you think you’ll make a fool of yourself?” He looked genuinely confused, so Steve knew he wasn’t just saying it to make Steve more embarrassed.

“I don’t know what to do…”

“So?” Bucky’s face was still completely void of any mocking emotions. He was completely serious, and Steve was struck again by how genuinely nice and caring Bucky was. This conversations could have been a thousand times more embarrassing if Bucky was being his usual teasing self. But Bucky knew when to be serious, and when Steve needed him to be serious, and he was so thankful for that. “Do you think I knew what I was doing my first time? No one does. You can read all the magazines you want, or watch all the videos, or read all the articles about how to have sex, but really it means nothing when it comes to the real thing.”

Steve had been doing his research. He had watched more porn in the past week than he had watched in his entire life leading up to this week. He had read articles entitled “How to Have Sex” but most of it was about a man and a woman. The ones he had found for two men were less detailed, and mostly just highlighted the importance of lubricant and preparation.

“I guarantee,” Bucky continued as he took one Steve’s hands into his own and covered it with his other. Bucky’s hands were so warm, even in the cold apartment. “Everything you’ve read or seen to try to be ready for sex will completely disappear from your head the moment we actually start.”

“Really?” Steve appreciated that Bucky was trying to make him feel better, but that just made him feel worse. He had been wasting his time educating himself to be ready, but none of it would matter.

Bucky nodded. “But it’s okay. I remember what my first time was like, how I felt… How scared I was. I’ll take care of you, Steve. And if you have any questions, feel free to ask me whenever, and I’ll answer them.”

The raw honestly and care in Bucky’s voice almost made Steve’s eyes well up with tears. To hide this, he wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders to hug him tight, and Bucky hugged back.

“And we don’t have to go all the way the first time. We’ll go as far as you’re comfortable with, and you can stop it whenever you want. I’ll never force you to do anything you don’t want to do, or anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“Thank you, Buck.” Steve smiled against Bucky’s shoulder and felt Bucky do the same.

“But we should talk in more detail about what it is that you’re comfortable with, and what you’re not comfortable with.”

“I don’t know what I’m comfortable with.”

Bucky rolled his eyes but smiled to show he wasn’t actually annoyed. “You’ve watched gay porn before, right?”

Steve tried so hard not to blush, he really did, but he felt his face heat up nonetheless as he nodded.
“Well, have you seen anything you wouldn’t be comfortable with or willing to try?”

Steve thought about this. “Hitting… I don’t want to hit you and I don’t want you to hit me…”

“Hitting?” Bucky looked confused again. “What kind of porn have you been watching? Of course I’d never hit you, Stevie.”

Bucky leant forward and kissed Steve’s forehead softly, playing with his hair as Steve smiled.

“And rimming…” The blush seemed to intensify and Steve didn’t even know how that was possible.

“You’re not comfortable with giving them or receiving them? Or just the idea of them all together.”

“The idea of them all together. I’m not completely against it, I’d be willing to try it…”

Bucky nodded in understanding and smiled in encouragement. “Okay, this is a good start. Anything else? Any other questions?”

Steve nodded. He did have a question, but he had been too embarrassed to ask it before. But Bucky was being so supportive and careful not to embarrass Steve any more that he felt he could ask now.

“Who would… Do what?” He really hopes he didn’t need to elaborate on that, or he might back out.

Thankfully, Bucky seemed to understand right away. “I’m versatile. Do you know what that means?”

“Flexible…?” Steve didn’t understand what that had to do with this, he imagined Bucky would be flexible from dancing since he was six. But it was good to know.

“No, I meant in gay sex terms.” Bucky clarified and Steve shook his head. “It means I enjoy it either way. I can top or I can bottom. Whichever you want to do, I’ll go with it.”

Steve assumed Bucky was waiting now for Steve to tell him what he wanted to do, and he had to look down this time as he admitted he wanted to ‘bottom’. Bucky nodded and wrapped his arms around Steve’s shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Steve. We won’t get to that just yet. We’ll start off with other stuff and work up to it.”

“Other stuff?” Steve looked up at Bucky, and Bucky smiled at him as he kissed him again. “Do you have to go to work today?” Steve muttered against Bucky’s lips.

“No, do you?”

Steve shook his head as he mentally prepared himself for what he would say next. “I want to do something with you… I don’t want to have full sex yet… But…”

Bucky nodded again in understanding and Steve sighed in relief when he didn’t have to explain himself further.

“And I don’t really want it to be here…” Steve continued, but this time he knew he’d have to explain. “This apartment sucks, it’s always a little too dark, the mattress is uncomfortable, it always smells weird, and it’s just overall depressing. I don’t want the first time we do anything to be in here.”
“Becca isn’t home… She’ll be at school until seven, practising in the dance hall…”

Steve nodded, knowing what Bucky was saying. “Okay…”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

A whole chapter of smut.

Bucky’s house was as quiet as it always was in the middle of the day, when it was just him and Steve. Sometimes the TV would have been left on from before Becca went to school, or before Bucky came to pick up Steve. Or the washing machine would be running in the kitchen, or the dishwasher. But today there were no appliances running. Bucky was slightly worried that Becca wouldn’t have gotten up for school without him there knocking on her door every five minutes, but when he went up to her room it was empty and her school bag was gone.

While Bucky was checking upstairs, Steve waited in the living room and saw a note taped to the TV with “Bucky” written on it in Becca’s cursive handwriting. Steve noticed that her handwriting was strikingly similar to Bucky’s and couldn’t help but smile at that. The first time he had seen Bucky’s handwriting in his book, he had been surprised by how neat it was, and if he didn’t see him write it himself Steve would have assumed an orderly woman wrote it for him.

Steve took the note off the TV and shouted up to Bucky, then handed it over without reading it. It was addressed to Bucky, he had no right to read it. Bucky opened the folded piece of paper and smiled a little as he read it, then handed it back to Steve, silently giving him permission to read it.

“Bucky.

I’m sorry I yelled at you last night, I was just worried. You know I always hated Brock and after what he did, I’m surprised you can be anywhere near him without wanting to either scream or cry. Or both.

Anyway, it’s your choice whether or not you talk to the police. But just know I really think you should. He’s dangerous, you know that. And I don’t want you to get hurt, or Steve.

Look after Steve, he’s the best thing that’s happened to you in a long time, Buck.

I’ll be staying late at school tonight, as I said yesterday.

Just text me when you see this note to let me know you’re okay? You were pissed as fuck last night and I just want to know you’re still alive and safe.

I’ll (hopefully) see you tonight.

Lots of love,

Becca x”

When Steve looked up from the note and at Bucky, he already had his phone out, presumably to text Becca. Barely thirty seconds after Bucky had put his phone back in his pocket, he got a reply and Steve smiled when he saw Bucky smile at his screen.

“Reconciliation complete.” He chuckled and Steve smiled again.
Then Steve remembered the reason they were there, and he got nervous again. Bucky must have sensed it, because he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist.

“Just relax, Doll.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Steve thought he should be offended by the pet name. He was not a ‘doll’, ‘doll’ is the kind of thing guys called girls back in the forties. But he couldn’t find it in him to get offended with Bucky that close to him, with one of his hands on the small of Steve’s back and the other cupping Steve’s face. He leant up to close the distance between his own lips and Bucky’s, and almost melted as soon as he did.

He forgot why he was nervous, what he was afraid of, as soon as Bucky kissed him back.

Bucky moved his hands off Steve to take his hands. “Bedroom? It’ll be more comfortable there…”

Steve nodded a little and let Bucky lead him to his bedroom. He had been in there plenty of times before, and it had never been this daunting. Bucky led Steve to sit on the bed.

“So, when you say you’ve never had sex, does that mean you’ve never done anything else either?” Bucky wanted to clarify as he sat next to him.

“I had never even kissed anyone before I met you.” Steve thought he should be embarrassed but there was something special about saying that Bucky’s were the only lips he had ever felt against his own.

“But even playing Spin the Bottle or something?”

Steve shook his head. “I was never invited to play anything like that…”

Bucky suddenly looked a little sad, so Steve leant forward to kiss him again in an attempt to fix that. Bucky’s hands came up to Steve’s shoulders and he thought he was trying to push him away, but when Steve moved back, Bucky followed him. He realised Bucky was encouraging him to lie back, and Steve did so with a nervous smile against Bucky’s lips.

As expected, Bucky laid slightly on top of Steve. Not enough for Steve to feel any of his weight, but enough that he could feel Bucky’s body heat. Bucky placed his knees either side of Steve’s legs and his hands either side of Steve’s head, then leant down to kiss him again. Steve kissed back as he cupped Bucky’s face with both of his hands. If he pretended this was just their usual make-out sessions, he wouldn’t panic.

They sometimes ended up with Bucky on top of Steve, or Steve on top of Bucky. This was nothing new. But when one of Bucky’s hands moved down to Steve’s hip, Steve remembered that this wasn’t just their usual make-out sessions. This was something they had never done before, and Steve was suddenly worried again. But he didn’t stop Bucky’s hand as it moved to Steve’s stomach. Bucky appeared to have stopped there for a reason, to test Steve’s reaction. When Steve didn’t pull away, or push Bucky away, he moved his hand a little lower.

If he hadn’t been so worried about not doing something wrong, it may have felt good having Bucky’s hand on his belt. He wasn’t trying to undo it, his hand was just resting there lightly. Steve guessed Bucky was waiting for his reaction again. This time, Steve stopped him. He placed a hand on Bucky’s chest and added a little pressure, and Bucky immediately broke the kiss and searched Steve’s face for an insight into his thoughts.

“Maybe it’d help if… I knew what we were doing?”
Bucky looked a little annoyed, and Steve was worried it was because of him. “Shit, yeah… Sorry…”

Then he realised that Bucky was annoyed with himself for not telling Steve what would happen.

“How do you feel about blowjobs?”

Steve was a little surprised at the question, and wasn’t sure how to react. “I don’t know how to give one.”

“I know, I’m not asking for you to give me one.” Bucky chuckled lightly, and for the first time, Bucky was blushing.

Steve couldn’t help but smile at that, even though he was pretty sure he was blushing too. Bucky smiled back, but still waited for an answer.

“Is that what you want to do?” Steve asked and Bucky was about to say something, presumably about it being up to Steve. But Steve continued, to clarify his point. “Because it’s your mouth…”

“I’d be happy to,” Bucky smirked and Steve smiled a little as he blushed more. Bucky’s lips were always soft, and his mouth was always warm and deliciously wet.

“Then, okay…” Steve replied and he could tell Bucky was about to make sure that this was what Steve wanted, so again he stopped him by talking again. “Blowjobs sound good…”

I’m probably the colour of Peggy’s favourite hat by now. His mind muttered to him as he felt more heat rise to his cheeks. Bucky smiled, though, and leans down to kiss Steve again. He then moved to kiss Steve’s neck as he spoke.

“Since you’ve never had one before, I’m assuming you don’t know the universal rules that you have to abide by when someone has your dick in their mouth.”

Steve both wished Bucky would stop talking so crudely, and wanted nothing more than for him to say more things like that. It was a confusing time. But he shook his head nonetheless.

“Obviously,” Bucky kisses Steve’s neck every so often throughout his sentence, “the rules are changeable, depending on what each person giving the blowjob likes or doesn’t like. I would say it doesn’t matter what I like or don’t like, I just want you to like it, but…”

Steve spoke before Bucky could continue. “This is about you too, Bucky. I don’t want to do anything you don’t want to do. I want this to be good for you too.” As he said that, Bucky sucked, licked, and kissed along his neck.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” Bucky muttered against Steve’s skin. Then, he pulled back to look at Steve with a serious expression. “The first rule is non-negotiable and it will never change. If you piss in my mouth, I’ll bite your dick.”

Steve cringed. “Why would I piss in your mouth?”

Bucky just laughed. “You and I have seen very different types of porn.”

Steve obviously knew that that was a thing. He wasn’t a kid. But still, the thought of it made him feel a little sick. He nodded to that rule and Bucky continued.

“The other rules probably won’t last long. The more blowjobs I give you, the looser the rules
become because I’ll get more comfortable with you and more comfortable with not having these rules.”

Steve looked a little lost, not sure what rules Bucky could have that he would be okay with abandoning if he became more comfortable having Steve’s dick in his mouth. But, again, he nodded for Bucky to continue.

“You can touch my hair, but don’t grab it, or grip it. And don’t hold my head down or try to take over the speed or how far I take you in.”

Steve wasn’t confused about that one, and he completely understood why Bucky had those rules. Having something foreign in his mouth didn’t sound very appealing, but the thought of someone controlling how much of the foreign object he took into his mouth or being forced to keep it in for longer than he wanted made Steve feel uncomfortable. Steve had seen blowjobs in porn, and he had seen how some of the guys getting the blowjobs would get really into it. They would hold their partner’s head in place, or still them by gripping their hair, and Steve could hear the other person choking. But the one holding them in place didn’t let up. When they finally did let go, the other person would cough and splutter, breathing deeply to compensate for the lack of oxygen from earlier. Their faces would be red, and tears would be leaking from their eyes, presumably from having something stuck in their throat for too long.

Steve definitely didn’t want to do that to Bucky. He didn’t want to choke him, or force him to do anything more than what he was willing to do.

Steve nodded to that one and Bucky smiled slightly. “Anything else?” Steve asked.

“Tell me when you’re going to come.”

Steve couldn’t help but blush at that, but he nodded too.

“How clothed do you want to be?” Bucky asked as he played with the hem of Steve’s shirt.

Logically, Steve knew Bucky had seen him practically shirtless before, at the Halloween party. But he still felt nervous. He was so skinny, Steve could see every single one of his ribs when he looked in the mirror shirtless. His stomach concaved in slightly, his shoulders were sharp, and his arms were skinny. And, of course, Steve had seen Bucky shirtless too, just the night before so he still remembered how Bucky had looked. He was all firm muscles and perfect skin. He even had abs. Steve barely had a stomach and Bucky had abs! His skin was lightly tanned too, whilst Steve’s was pasty and colourless.

But it didn’t matter. Bucky didn’t care what Steve’s body looked like. He had proved that time and time again. Steve sat up suddenly in his resolve and almost headbutted Bucky. They both laughed and Steve apologised as he took his shirt off. He saw Bucky’s eyes scan over his chest and stomach, but it wasn’t with the disgust he had been unconsciously dreading. Bucky’s pupils were already dilated, and his eyes looked as though they had gotten darker as he looked at Steve. They were usually the colour of a clear sky, but now they looked more like the ocean during a stormy night.

Steve almost felt like he wasn’t as bad as he thought he was. Then he remembered what Bucky had under his shirt and, despite how inadequate he felt next to Bucky, he was even more uncomfortable with being the only one of them who wasn’t wearing a shirt. He tugged at the hem of Bucky’s shirt, and he allowed Steve to lift it off for him.

He looked even better in this light, and Steve internally cursed his own body when he saw
Bucky’s. Bucky had a necklace on that Steve hadn’t noticed before. It was a thin silver chain, and there was a circle pendant hanging off the end, right in the middle of Bucky’s pectorals.

His skin looked so soft, and Steve couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to run his hand over Bucky’s abdomen. He was right, his skin was soft. But it didn’t hide how hard his muscles were, especially when they twitched under Steve’s cold touch.

Bucky ran his own hand down Steve’s chest, and Steve bit his lip lightly. His hands were always so warm, and Steve was always so cold. It felt perfect.

Bucky then dropped his hand back down to Steve’s belt and looked up at him for permission or rejection.

“Can you…” Steve started, and the blush was back and this time it covered his chest as he continued, “Take yours off first?”

He felt so immature asking, but maybe if Bucky was more undressed first Steve wouldn’t feel as uncomfortable or on display. Like the “Imagine your audience naked” thing. Except Bucky would actually be naked. And so would Steve.

Steve was starting to lose his nerve, but Bucky just chuckled quietly and sat back to undo his own belt. He moved off Steve and laid down beside him so he could lift his hips up and push his skinny jeans off his legs. Steve couldn’t help but stare as he did. He expected Bucky’s legs to be hairier than they were for some reason. Maybe he just never imagined Bucky would shave his legs, but it looked like he does, maybe not recently, but at some point in the last month.

Maybe it’s a dancer thing? He thought about saying something about it, but Bucky might just like how it feels and he didn’t want to make him feel uncomfortable about that by mentioning it. His legs were as muscular as the rest of his body. Not enough to draw attention if you weren’t looking, but enough to show he was clearly in good shape.

He noticed that Bucky was watching his face when he looked back up at Bucky’s face. Steve wasn’t even sure what expression his face was showing, but Bucky was smirking.

“Your turn.” Bucky prompted.

Now Steve was nervous again, but Bucky had done it, how hard can it be?

He copied what Bucky did and lied down as he unbuckled his belt them pushed his jeans down. Steve’s legs looked even skinnier than usual in comparison to Bucky’s. And paler.

Steve sat up to push his shoes and jeans off, along with his socks, then looked over to Bucky for his reaction. Bucky’s eyes scanned over Steve’s body and smiled slightly as he looked up at his face.

“Still nervous, Steve?”

Steve nodded a little and Bucky moves back to his position above Steve. Despite the fact that they had kissed like that a hundred times before, it was so much different without the clothes even though they were both still wearing underwear. Steve could feel Bucky’s body heat more intensely and as he ran his hands up Bucky’s back. He felt Bucky’s muscles twitch and jump under his fingers.

Bucky kissed his neck again and Steve moaned as Bucky’s chest pressed against his own. One of Bucky’s hand ran down to Steve’s underwear and rested over his crotch. He moaned quietly and
squirmed under Bucky’s warm touch. He wasn’t sure whether more pleasure was coming from the hand on his crotch or Bucky’s lips on his neck, but Steve wasn’t going to complain about the sensory overload.

He suddenly remembered the picture he had drawn and almost laughed at how similar the image was to what was happening now. But he stopped himself just in time before he laughed, because if he did, he would have had to explain to Bucky what he was laughing at.

Then Steve was very aware that Bucky’s lips were moving down. He felt Bucky’s soft hair tickle his neck as he kissed Steve’s clavicle then ran his tongue along his prominent collar bone. Steve wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do, or where to put his hands. He decided to go for his usual default hand placements and rested his hands on Bucky’s hips. He felt the waistband of his underwear underneath his pinkies and debated slipping his hands inside, but he would have no idea what to do when they were in there. Instead of pushing his whole hand under Bucky’s waistband, he just pushed his little fingers past the elastic and Bucky stopped kissing his body in surprise. He quickly recovered, though, and moved down lower to kiss Steve’s chest. The light stubble on Bucky’s face scratched lightly at Steve’s sensitive skin, but it felt amazing.

Steve gasped as he felt Bucky’s lips close around one of his nipples and moaned when he felt his tongue flick against the small nub. Steve moves one hand up to Bucky’s hair, but remembered the rules Bucky had told him about. He ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair but didn’t grip it. He felt Bucky smile against him in appreciation, and the loose grip Steve had on his hair allowed him to move lower down without pulling his hair or struggling against Steve’s hand.

Steve’s hand stayed on Bucky’s head as he moved down and kissed at the dip between his hips. Steve realised how close he was when he felt Bucky’s hand move to Steve’s waistband. He almost panicked, but it felt so good he couldn’t bring himself to feel self-conscious anymore.

Bucky slowly pulled Steve’s underwear down and kissed each bit of skin that he revealed. He pulled back slightly as Steve’s cock sprang free and looked up at Steve to make sure he was still comfortable. Steve looked down at Bucky, his face next to his erection and bit his lip to stop himself from moaning at that alone. He had never been harder in his entire life. Bucky looked so perfect, as always. His hair was a mess from Steve running his fingers through it and his face was flushed slightly. He pulled Steve’s underwear down around his thighs and waited for Steve to react before pulling them off completely. He ran his hands up Steve’s bare legs and up to cup his balls. Steve moaned quietly and gripped Bucky’s bedsheets to avoid touching his hair again. Touching his hair while his lips were on chest wasn’t so bad, but now Steve knew wouldn’t be comfortable for Bucky. Even if he had no intention to grip his hair, Bucky might think he was going to and he didn’t want Bucky to get nervous.

Steve didn’t blink as Bucky moved his hand up to stroke him slowly and looked into Steve’s eyes. Steve couldn’t break the eye-contact as he felt pre-come leak out of his slit.

Bucky then licked his lips and Steve held his breath as he realised what that meant. Bucky took the head of Steve’s cock into his mouth and Steve couldn’t bring himself to feel embarrassed about the noise that came out of his mouth. He gripped the sheets tighter as Bucky sucked lightly on the head.

Bucky tightened his lips around Steve’s cock and slowly lowered his mouth over him. He stopped about half way down and moved back up as Steve moaned again.

At the noises Steve made, Bucky was encouraged on and started sucking harder and faster. Steve twisted the sheets in his hand as he struggled to stay still. His hips wanted to thrust up into the warm, wet cavern of Bucky’s mouth. But if Bucky didn’t want him holding his head, Steve didn’t
think thrusting up into his mouth would be much better. He tried so hard to stay still and to keep his hands by his side. He didn’t want to annoy or upset Bucky by not following his few rules. Steve brought one hand up to his mouth to try to stifle the string of moans and whines that came out of his mouth, but it didn’t work. He looked down and saw that Bucky was still looking up at him.

The obscenity of the image of Bucky looking up at him with his cock in his mouth almost made Steve climax, but it was too soon and it’d just be embarrassing, so Steve managed to hold back. He looked down the line of his thin body at Bucky. He wasn’t looking back up at him anymore. His eyes were closed, his dark eyelashes resting on his cheek, and his cheeks were hollowed around Steve’s cock. Each time he pulled back off Steve’s shaft, he ran his tongue around the head and dipped it into the slit, and each time Steve almost saw stars.

He reached up and grabbed Bucky’s hair. He didn’t mean to, and he didn’t even realise he was doing it. Steve moaned as he ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair. Steve noticed Bucky stop moving and looked down to see if he was okay. His eyes were screwed shut a little tighter and one of his hands moved from Steve’s thigh to grasp Steve’s wrist. His fingertips went white as they dug into Steve’s wrist and Steve immediately let go of Bucky’s hair.

“Sorry!” Steve quickly said as he looked down at Bucky, wanting to make sure he was alright. Bucky pulled off Steve for a few seconds then looked up at Steve with a smirk. “Stick to the rules, Big Boy.”

He winked and Steve blushed again as Bucky took him back into his mouth. This time, Bucky took him in further and Steve felt the blunt head of his cock jab the back of Bucky’s throat. He thought Bucky would gag and pull back, but he only pulled back a little then took him in to hit the back of his throat again.

Steve gasped and gripped the sheets again, making sure to keep them off Bucky’s hair this time. Bucky’s hand moved to fondle Steve’s balls, rolling them in his warm palm, and Steve bit his lip hard.

“Bucky… God…” He moaned and squirmed slightly, breathing heavily.

Bucky moaned around him and the vibrations sent spikes of pleasure up Steve’s shaft.

“I’m going to…” Steve didn’t manage to finish his sentence before his balls drew up to his body and his vision went white. He couldn’t hear himself call out in pleasure, but he heard Bucky’s name and assumed it must have been him.

He was breathing heavily and briefly regretted not bringing his inhaler. There was a thin layer of sweat covering his skin too, and Steve eventually opened his eyes to look at Bucky. He was smirking, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. When Bucky moved his hand away, Steve saw that his lips were slightly swollen and red. Steve really wanted to kiss him.

Are you supposed to kiss someone after they’ve given you a blowjob, or is that weird?

Steve eventually decided it would be more offensive to expect Bucky to suck his cock, then refuse to kiss him afterwards. So when Bucky moved up, Steve immediately sat up and kissed Bucky. Steve felt a little lightheaded as he sat up, but luckily Bucky already had his arms around Steve’s back, holding him up.

Bucky’s mouth tasted a little saltier than before, and Steve realised he must have swallowed. He didn’t remember Bucky taking his cock completely out of his mouth, so that made sense. Steve
moaned quietly into Bucky’s mouth as he kissed him back. Bucky moaned too and ran his hand up to Steve’s hair.

“How are you feeling?” Bucky muttered against Steve’s mouth.

“Amazing… You’re so amazing…” Steve mumbled back and Bucky laughed lightly, pulling Steve to lie down with him.

Steve noticed that Bucky’s cock was still erect in the confines of his boxers, but when he looked up at Bucky to say something, the brunette just shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Stevie. It’ll go away.”

Bucky kissed the top of Steve’s head and Steve smiled a little. He felt kind of guilty about not returning the favour, but he had no idea how and he didn’t want to risk accidentally biting Bucky or something. Bucky stroked Steve’s sweat-damped hair and closed his eyes. Steve followed suit and, although he didn’t mean to, he fell asleep there in Bucky’s arms.

When Steve woke up, Bucky was still sleeping by his side. He tightened his arms around Bucky’s waist and smiled as Bucky mumbled in his sleep. He woke up after a few minutes and looked down at Steve with bleary eyes and a sleepy smile.

“Hey…”

“Hey…” Steve smiled and leant up to kiss Bucky.

Steve realised he was still completely naked whilst Bucky still had his boxers on and he blushed.

“Would you feel better if I took my underwear off?” Bucky asked as if he had read Steve’s mind to know what was making him uncomfortable.

Steve blushed brighter and nodded a little. “You don’t have to, but…”

Before he could finish that, Bucky moved his hands off Steve to push his underwear off. Steve tried not to blush as he looked down before he could stop himself. Bucky was bigger than Steve, and Steve couldn’t help but think even his dick was beautiful. Bucky turned on his side to face Steve again and wrapped his arms around him again.

It wasn’t as awkward as Steve thought it would be. Bucky was so relaxed and comfortable that it was contagious, and Steve instantly relaxed against his chest.

Steve’s hands rested on Bucky’s hips and, without the underwear blocking the contact, Steve could feel Bucky’s pelvic bone under his soft skin. He dug his fingertips in slightly and watched Bucky’s lightly tanned skin turn paler under his touch before turning bronzed again. Bucky didn’t really react to it, and just looked down at Steve with a sleepy smile. Steve moved his hand up to Bucky’s abdomen to trace the ridges in his six-pack. Bucky reacted to that, but he only squirmed slightly before going still again.

Steve traced his fingers slightly lower on his abdomen. He looked down and noticed Bucky’s member started to harden. Bucky’s eyes were closed when Steve looked up at him and his lips were slightly parted. He moved his hand slightly lower and brushed over Bucky’s pubic area, near the base of his now-hard shaft. Bucky’s body tensed slightly and he looked down at Steve’s hand.

“Steve… You don’t have to…”
“I want to.” Steve assured him as he wrapped his hand around him. He didn’t know how to give blowjobs, but he was nineteen. He had masturbated before. He figured a handjob was basically the same as masturbating, using the same methods, just on someone else’s penis.

Bucky bit his lip and stretched out on his back with Steve against his side. Steve’s hands were fairly large, but they still weren’t bit enough to cover Bucky’s whole length at once. He stroked him slowly as he watched for Bucky’s reaction. Steve thought the friction from his dry palm might cause Bucky some discomfort, but he seemed to be enjoying it and he didn’t say anything. Eventually, the slit on the head of Bucky’s cock started leaking pre-come and Steve was able to use it to ease his caresses. Bucky moaned quietly and opened his eyes to watch Steve’s hand on him.

“God, Steve…” He muttered quietly and reached out to run his hand through Steve’s hair. The soft touch made Steve smile and lean into his hand. “Faster…?”

Steve did as Bucky asked and sped up his movements, twisting his wrist every so often. Bucky moaned louder and pulled Steve to him by the hand on the back of his head to kiss him. The kiss was messy and Bucky couldn’t stop himself from moaning against Steve’s lips. His hips became restless as his breathing sped up and Steve guessed he was close. Bucky thrusted into Steve’s grip and Steve ran his thumb over his slit each time he stroked upwards.

Bucky let out a choked of groan into Steve’s mouth as Steve felt warm liquid pulse onto his hand. He kept kissing Bucky as he stroked him slowly through his orgasm. Steve eventually stopped, but Bucky’s eyes were still close and there was a light blush colouring his cheeks, so he kept kissing Bucky’s lax lips and slightly heated cheeks.

Bucky looked so cute as he laid there, completely relaxed in his post-orgasm glow. Steve smiled at him when he eventually opened his eyes to look at him, and Bucky smiled back. Steve kissed him again, and this time Bucky was present enough to kiss back, cupping Steve’s face.

Steve realised Bucky’s come was still on his hand and lifted it up slightly. Bucky turned and opened his bedside drawers, then turned back to him holding a pack of wet wipes, but Steve had a different idea.

He lifted his hand to his mouth and flicked his tongue out against his finger to taste the substance on his hand. It didn’t taste as bad as Steve had expected and, when he looked up at Bucky, he saw Bucky’s eyes wide and his mouth slightly open. He looked surprised but aroused, so Steve took one of his fingers into his mouth as he stared back at Bucky. Steve hollowed his cheeks around his finger as he had seen Bucky do to his cock and Bucky moaned quietly at the sight.

Steve did the same to his other fingers and licked the back of his hand too, cleaning up as much as he could. When he was done, Bucky took his hand to clean Steve’s saliva and what was left of Bucky’s load off it with the wet wipe. Then he leant forward and kissed Steve again, pushing his tongue into Steve’s inviting mouth. Steve knew Bucky would be able to taste himself on his tongue, the way he had tasted himself on Bucky’s, and Bucky let out more quiet noises of pleasure.

“Have I ever told you you’re amazing?” Bucky muttered against Steve’s lips and Steve chuckled.

“Yes, but I like hearing it.”

“You’re amazing.” Bucky stated again and kissed Steve’s jaw. “Thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me?” Steve was a little confused, and wondered if he was supposed to have thanked Bucky for the blowjob.
“For taking care of me last night… I haven’t had a fight with Becca that bad since we were kids. I was pretty fucked up last night. Bad shit probably would have happened if you hadn’t come to my rescue.” Bucky smirked slightly to insinuate he was kidding, but Steve knew he was being serious.

“I’ll always come to your rescue, Buck.” Steve smiled back, and hoped Bucky knew that he was being serious too.

Bucky’s smile, and the blush returning to his cheeks, told Steve that he knew exactly how serious he was being.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Roadtrip to Becca’s dance competition.

Bucky insisted that Steve stay for dinner. He was cooking at half past five so it would be ready for six, as usual, even though Becca wouldn’t be home until later. He said Becca didn’t mind reheating whatever he made, so he made food for himself, Steve, and plated some up for Becca to eat after practice. As Bucky cooked, Steve stood in the kitchen with him so they could still talk, but he kept getting in the way as Bucky buzzed around the room. So, Bucky lifted Steve up to sit him on the counter.

Steve usually would have been angry at someone for picking him up and moving him without his permission, but Bucky’s smile was contagious and he didn’t mean anything offensive by it, so Steve let it slide. He crossed his legs as Bucky hummed a tune Steve didn’t recognise and set the oven to preheat. He decided to make enchiladas after Steve assured him that he liked them. He had an enchilada kit with everything needed in it except chicken and cheese.

Steve constantly asked if Bucky needed any help, and eventually Bucky rolled his eyes and passed him the cheese grater and a block of cheese, then put a plate on Steve’s lap. Steve started grating the cheese as Bucky cut up the chicken.

“What kind of dance is Becca doing for the competition?” Steve asked.

“Ballet,” Bucky answered with a smile and threw a handful of chicken into the pan next to him before dicing up more.

“So this isn’t one you taught her?” Steve assumed Bucky didn’t do ballet, but that may have just been because he remembered Sam mentioning it as a joke and had just assumed it was a joke.

“No, it’s one I taught her.” Bucky didn’t sound offended as he corrected Steve.

“You do ballet?” Bucky nodded and Steve continued. “Can I see you dance one day?”

Bucky glanced over at Steve and shrugged as he dropped the rest of the chicken into the pan. “If you want.”

Steve smiled, but then wondered if Bucky was only agreeing to make Steve happy. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to… It’s your choice.”

Bucky laughed lightly and shook his head. “Steve, stop worrying. If you ask me to do something I don’t want to do, I’ll tell you. If you ask me a question I don’t want to answer, I won’t answer it. Relax. And I’m okay with showing you my dancing. I just having danced in front of anyone except Becca or Nat in a while.”

Steve nodded a little and grated more cheese. Eventually, Bucky took the plate, cheese, and grater away and put the plate to the side, the cheese back in the fridge and the grater in the sink to wash up later. He stirred the sauce in with the chicken then left it to simmer. As he waited for it to cook more, he came over to Steve and cupped his face to kiss him. Since he was sat on the counter,
Steve was almost at the same level as Bucky. He was a little higher than him, so Bucky had to tilt his head up. It made a nice change having Bucky have to look up at Steve instead of the other way round. Steve smiled against Bucky’s lips and tasted the enchilada sauce. He pulled away for a second.

“Have you been stealing the sauce when I’m not looking?” He accused and Bucky just laughed and kissed him again.

“Thief,” Steve muttered against his lips and Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist.

Bucky was wearing an apron to avoid getting his clothes messy, and Steve pushed it aside slightly to place his hands on Bucky’s chest. They heard the sauce and chicken start to sizzle and Bucky broke the kiss to mix it around some more.

Steve heated up the wraps in the microwave while Bucky added some cheese to the mixture. He brought the wraps over and they both made three eat. Two for Steve, two for Bucky, and two for Becca.

Bucky put Becca’s in the fridge and handed Steve a soda to take into the dining room with his food before grabbing himself one. He took the apron off and left it on the side before joining Steve in the dining room.

Steve complimented the food and Bucky complimented Steve’s wrapping skills, saying that the ones he did almost fell apart several times. Steve had one of the ones Bucky had made and he had to admit, it was the worst attempt at wrapping an enchilada Steve had ever seen. He didn’t say it, but Bucky laughed when Steve tried to keep it all together and he assumed Bucky knew what he was thinking.

He was starting to wonder if Bucky could actually read minds. He looked too perfect to be completely human, it’s possible he may be at least half-angel. He definitely looked angelic. Steve didn’t voice this. Although he wanted to see Bucky blush, Steve imagined that he himself would blush more from saying than Bucky would from hearing it.

There was one question that had been bugging Steve for a while now, since Bucky reminded him that Becca would be back from school late today. He wasn’t sure whether Bucky would answer it, but he had said that if Steve asked him something he didn’t want to answer, he’d say so.

“Bucky?”

“Hmm?” He still had a mouthful of food and Steve smiled slightly at that.

“What did Brock do that made Becca want you to call the police? Was it what happened after our date?”

Bucky stopped chewing and went still for a moment before he swallowed his food to answer Steve. “Partly that. Partly after what happened last time he was here.” He gestured to the house.

“At the Halloween party?”

Bucky shook his head. “The time before that.”

“What happened?” Steve was slightly worried he was overstepping some boundaries, but Bucky didn’t show any signs of being annoyed by the questions.

“I wasn’t home at the time. It was just Becca and her friends, Romey and Katie. He was looking
for me, and when Becca answered the door and said I wasn’t here he got mad because he thought I was there but I was ignoring him. He pushed into the house and searched the place for me. When he realised I actually wasn’t there, he waited in the living room with Becca and the other girls until I got home. He had a gun with him, so Becca was scared. Brock watched her type to make sure she wasn’t calling the police, and she called me. She told me what was happening, and Brock took the phone and said if I didn’t get there within the next half an hour he’d kill himself."

Steve was surprised at that, but he was more worried that Brock was going to hurt Becca or her friends. He felt a little bad for being relieved that he planned on hurting himself.

“That was not long after the first time I tried breaking up with him.”

Steve changed the subject to something a little more lighthearted after that and they spent the next two hours arguing about who would win in a fight; Kurt Cobain or Dave Grohl. They eventually agreed that they would have never gotten into a physical fight in the first place, because they were such good friends.

At quarter to seven, Bucky drove Steve home then went to pick up Becca. As he curled up on the couch, Steve thought about Brock. He sounded sadistic.

Again, Steve dreaded the thought of Bucky having to work with him.

For the next few weeks, Steve and Bucky didn’t get to see each other as much as Steve would have liked. He had to work a lot, and so did Bucky. Going on dates was really effecting Steve’s bank account. He didn’t want to say anything to Bucky about not being able to afford the dates Steve thought Bucky deserved. Since they had agreed that whoever invited the other on the date will be the one to pay for it, Steve really should have used that to his advantage and only took Bucky places he could actually afford. But when it came to actually picking a place, Steve couldn’t settle for cheap places. He wanted to take Bucky to amazing places that he’d enjoy, not crappy restaurants that’ll probably make him ill. He might have to start looking into alternatives, though, because he had had to pick up three extra shifts in one week to make sure he could afford the rent at the end of the month.

Steve and Bucky still talked every night, though, even if they couldn’t see each other. Becca’s dance competition was that weekend, and Bucky managed to get the weekend off work. He invited Steve too and, after checking his schedule, Steve agreed. Bucky told him Becca was looking forward to seeing him and, oddly, so was Natasha.

Angie had somehow sniffed out that Steve had done something sexual with Bucky, and kidnapped him to force him to tell her and Peggy what they did and how it was. Steve was as vague as possible to avoid blushing, as well as to avoid violating Bucky’s privacy. He did, however, tell them that Bucky was very considerate and caring. And that he really enjoyed it.

Bucky came to pick Steve up from his apartment at four in the afternoon on Friday. He came up to meet him, wearing a white tshirt with what looked like blue splatters on it, his usual skinny jeans, combat boots, and leather jacket. He was also wearing an extra necklace along with the usual one he wore, and a few rings on each hand. Steve smiled as he opened the door and ushered Bucky into the apartment while he finished getting ready. The competition was in North Carolina, and they had decided to drive. It would take just over eight hours, but Bucky said he could handle it and if he got too tired, Natasha would take over. She had driven Bucky’s car before, usually when Bucky had had too much to drink to drive himself, and he assured Steve that she was a great driver.
By the time they got there, it would be past midnight, so they already had rooms ready in a hotel for them. The hotel had been provided by the competition hosts, so Bucky assured Steve he wouldn’t have to pay a penny. They had two rooms, Natasha and Becca would share a room and Bucky and Steve would share the other. The competition was Saturday night, and they were driving home late on Sunday.

Steve finished packing by putting his sketchpad and pencils into his bag then zipped it up and turned to Bucky to tell him he was ready to go. Bucky was going through Steve’s kitchen cupboards, frowning.

“Where’s all your food?” He muttered as he checked the fridge and saw that practically empty too.

“I need to go grocery shopping, that’s all,” Steve shrugged and threw his bag over his shoulder. “I’m ready.”

Bucky turned back to him. He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push it and just followed Steve out of the apartment. Steve quickly went next door to let Peggy and Angie know he was leaving, as he had promised to do. Angie stared at Bucky throughout the whole exchange. Steve remembered that she had never met him properly and introduced them both. Bucky smiled and shook her hand as Steve introduced them and Steve quickly led him away before Angie could say anything inappropriate.

They went to the car and Steve smiled as Becca hugged him.

“Nervous?” Steve asked as Bucky put his bag in the trunk for him.

“A little. But I’m just kind of trying to avoid thinking about all the things that could go terribly wrong for now,” Becca laughed a little nervously and tucked her hair behind her ear. Instead of it being curly and slightly wild, it had been straightened and so it looked longer than usual. It reached just past her elbows and hung loose over her shoulders. She had a woolly hat on and a long toggle coat. It was starting to get cold now, and Becca immediately started ranting about Bucky forcing her to wear a coat and a hat whilst he was allowed to just wear his leather jacket.

Steve laughed and, to his surprise, she got into the backseat. He expected her to sit up front with Bucky, and glanced into the front passenger seat to see if Natasha was in the front, but she was in the back talking to Becca. Steve smiled as he got into the passenger seat, and Bucky got into the driver’s side.

“Everybody ready?” Bucky asked as he started the car. Becca and Natasha both cheered in response and Steve laughed as he nodded. “First, Natasha, don’t you have something to say to Steve?”

He looked at the redhead through the rear view mirror and Natasha sighed before leaning forward to talk to Steve.

“I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable. What you and Bucky do is none of my business, and I should respect yours and his privacy. Although I have been granted permission to get involved if Bucky asks me to, that doesn’t give me the right to get involved without permission. I’m sure you’re a great guy, and I shouldn’t make you uncomfortable unless you give me a reason to which, so far, you have not.” The speech sounded rehearsed, but Steve took it and smiled.

“I understand your concerns, but I have no bad intentions towards Bucky. You don’t have to worry about him when he’s with me,” Steve reached out to take Bucky’s hand as he spoke and smiled at his boyfriend, and Bucky smiled back as he squeezed his hand.
Natasha nodded, satisfied that she had fulfilled any agreement she had made with Bucky, and sat back. Bucky pulled out of his parking spot and turned on the Satnav. He switched his music on and almost immediately Natasha, Bucky, and Becca were all singing *Livin’ on a Prayer* as loud as they could. Steve couldn’t help but laugh and sing along. Eventually, Becca and Natasha claimed to have a headache, so Bucky turned the music down. But Steve suspected it was just to stop Bucky from singing along to every track so loudly and out of tune.

Becca and Natasha talked in detail about the dance in the back while Steve looked out the window at the scenery. They were on the motorway now and Steve loved watching the road go by. The car suddenly sped up and Steve looked over at Bucky to see what was happening. Bucky just grinned and winked at him.

After a few seconds, Becca and Natasha realised the car had sped up too and leant forward to tell Bucky to slow down. Steve was starting to get a little car-sick and covered his mouth.

“Oh, come on! It’s fun!” Bucky laughed and Natasha leant forward to grab Bucky’s arm.

“Bucky! Slow down!” She gritted out and Bucky reluctantly decreased the speed.

“Fine!”

Natasha released her grip on Bucky’s arm and sat back.

“I’m bored!” Bucky complained and sulked as he held the steering wheel at the bottom.

Steve looked at his watch and realised Bucky had been driving for three hours as Natasha spoke again. “Pull over at the next hard shoulder and I’ll take over.”

Bucky nodded and eventually indicated to pull over. All four of them got out of the car to stretch their legs and Bucky lit a cigarette, stepping away from Steve as he did. Natasha came over pouting and Bucky just sighed as he handed her the packet to get one for herself. She smiled as she took Bucky’s lighter and handed that and the pack back, thanking him. They wandered a little down the hard shoulder so Becca and Steve weren’t around the smoke as they started talking about something Clint had done recently. Steve leant against the car and Becca stood next to him, pulling her coat tighter around herself.

“Are you cold?” She asked Steve and he nodded a little. His winter coat had seen better days. The lining was almost completely gone and there were some holes in his pockets.

“Do you want to borrow my scarf?”

Before Steve could answer, she had already reached into the back of the car to retrieve a multi-coloured, long scarf. Steve laughed lightly as he took the scarf.

“Thanks…” He wrapped it around his neck a few times and, as ridiculous as it looked, he had to admit that it did help to fight off the cold as the light started to fade.

“No problem.” Becca smiled and looked out at Bucky and Natasha. There was a moment of silence before she spoke again. “Thanks for taking care of Bucky a few weeks ago…”

Steve quickly shook his head. “It’s okay. I was happy to help. Just glad he’s safe.”

Becca nodded at that and smiled before wrapping an arm around Steve’s shoulders.

“You’re my favourite.” She smiled as she kissed the side of Steve’s head. Steve blushed slightly
but smiled back at her as Bucky and Natasha returned to the car.

Becca sat in the passenger seat next to Natasha as Bucky got into the back seat. Steve got in next to him and Bucky dropped his head back over the back seat as Natasha started his car and pulled back into the road. After a few minutes, Bucky smiled at Steve and Steve smiled back.

“You look great today.” Bucky complimented him and Steve blushed.

He looked down at his outfit in confusion. Steve was wearing a black sweater and a worn down beige coat with light blue jeans and dirty sneakers. Steve never understood why Bucky always looked at him with thinly veiled lust, but he was starting to get used to it. And he really liked it.

Bucky just shook his head. “I’m fine. Are you cold? Because I could fix that.”

Bucky’s voice was starting to deepen a little and Steve blushed again. Bucky’s little sister was barely a foot away from them, how could he be talking like that so comfortably?

“Come here…” Bucky put an arm over the back of the seats, his fingers brushing through Steve’s hair. Steve immediately took up the over and unbuckled his seatbelt to scoot closer to Bucky. Bucky’s seatbelt had been undone the whole time, and Steve tried to remember if he was wearing it when he was driving. Bucky immediately wrapped his arm around Steve to pull him closer against him, and Steve was reminded how warm Bucky’s skin felt all the time. He sighed happily as he rested his head against Bucky’s shoulder. The leather of his jacket was cold, but he soon felt the heat of Bucky’s skin through it.

Becca and Natasha were talking about a TV show they had recently started watching, and Bucky leant down to tilt Steve’s head up then kiss his neck softly. One of Steve’s hands was on Bucky’s thigh and the other holding the hand around Steve’s shoulders. He tightened his grip on Bucky’s hand slightly and smiled at the kisses. Bucky moved his other hand around to Steve’s hip and tugged him a little closer as he sealed his lips over Steve’s. Steve immediately kissed back and turned his body slightly to face Bucky better. He almost completely forgot about the others in the car as he cupped Bucky’s face. But then he remembered and broke the kiss to look at the front and see if either of the girls had noticed. They were still immersed in their conversation.

“Relax, Stevie,” Bucky chuckled and kissed along Steve’s neck again.

“Bucky…” Steve almost moaned out but managed to keep his voice even to avoid the girls hearing and looking back to see what was going on. They weren’t really doing anything. They were just kissing, but it felt weird being affectionate around other people in general, let alone Bucky’s little sister and life-long best friend.

“Just relax.” Bucky chuckled lightly against his neck and the vibrations made Steve bites his lip. Bucky then pulled back and kissed Steve’s lips softly, but only briefly. “As if I’d do anything with my little sister in the car.

“Just if you haven’t!” Becca called back to them, and she and Bucky laughed.

“Oh please! That was nothing! It was just kissing.”

“And groping!” Steve saw Becca cringe. “I heard noises I never want to hear out of your mouth!”

Steve blushed at that, knowing exactly what the noises she had heard was. He had heard them himself, a few times now. Bucky always made the best noises. They hadn’t done anything more
than blowjobs and handjobs, but Steve was starting to want to do more with him. But Steve didn’t know what else they could do without having sex. He wasn’t ready for that yet. Steve might talk to Bucky about it later.

Bucky just laughed at Becca’s comment and kissed Steve’s temple. It was starting to get too dark to see the road without the headlights on now, but Natasha couldn’t figure out how to turn them on. She started getting frustrated. And shouted back to Bucky, asking how to turn the headlights on. He laughed and leant over to do it himself. He had to lift himself off the seats slightly and Steve tried – and failed – to avoid looking at Bucky’s ass. Bucky sat back down and wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulder again.

Steve told Bucky a funny story about something Sam did on the train when an old lady started being racist towards him. He had pretended not to speak English to annoy her, then stuttered through the sentence ‘I will try to articulate how you make me feel. In a universal language.’ Then he proceeded to scream in her face. Bucky laughed and agreed to meet Sam properly sometime in the next week, when they were all available. He invited Natasha too and she accepted.

Eventually, Steve fell asleep with his head on Bucky’s shoulder and Bucky’s hand running through his hair soothingly.

Steve woke up hours later to Becca shaking his shoulder. Bucky was in the front of the car getting his wallet out to make sure he had the ID he needed to prove he was Becca’s relative. He pulled out his driver’s license and smiled as he shut the car off to kill the lights. Steve realised he was leaning against the window and Becca was sat in the seat beside him. Natasha was sleeping in the passenger seat and Bucky was sat behind the wheel. They must have switched over again at some point, and Bucky must have moved him carefully so he didn’t wake him up.

He rubbed his eyes and stretched as much as he could in the car before getting out with Becca. They were parked outside a pretty nice-looking hotel. It was nicer than Steve had expected from a pre-paid-for hotel room. Bucky and Natasha gathered their’s and Becca and Steve’s bags from the trunk. Steve tried to help, but Becca linked arms with him to stop him and Bucky laughed as she skipped, dragging Steve along with her into the hotel.

They got the room keys and Becca took her bag from Bucky. She kissed him on the cheek and said goodnight to him and Steve before following Natasha to their room.

Bucky wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders again as they went to their room. They were in a room opposite Natasha and Becca’s and the bed was so much more comfortable than Steve’s. It felt like Bucky’s, but the sheets were a little thinner.

As soon as the door closed, Bucky collapsed into the bed. “So. Much. Driving.” He groaned and Steve laughed.

He sat on the bed beside Bucky, then laid next to him with his head on the pillows. Bucky was on his front, and Steve moved onto his side to face him. Then, Steve leant forward and kissed the back of Bucky’s neck, over the top of his spine. Bucky hummed happily and quickly turned round to pull Steve on top of him. Steve laughed as he kissed him. Steve had gotten a little more adventurous than he had been a few months ago, and dropped his hand over Bucky’s abdomen, his little finger tapping against Bucky’s belt.

Bucky seemed slightly surprised, but he didn’t complain as he ran one hand down to grope Steve’s ass. Steve pressed himself closer to Bucky as he tugged at his leather jacket, and Bucky pulled off his coat in retaliation. Soon enough, they were completely naked.
“Buck…?” Steve breathed out against his boyfriends lips. “I want to… try something new…”

“Anything specific in mind?” Bucky muttered in return, and broke the kiss to smile at Steve.

“I don’t know…”

Bucky sat on so that Steve was in his lap and ran his hands down to Steve’s ass and cupped each cheek in each hand. “What about fingering?”

Obviously, Steve had never had that done to him before, and he had never done it to himself. He had tried it once, but it hurt and Steve assumed he had somehow done it wrong.

“Does it feel good?” Steve asked nervously and Bucky grinned, his eyes dark again.

“It does when I do it,”

Steve briefly wondered if Bucky meant it feels good when Bucky does it to himself, or when he does it to others, but he didn’t waste time dwelling on it as Bucky moved him onto his back with Bucky on top of him. He kissed him eagerly, then Bucky broke the kiss to wait for Steve’s answer.

Bucky had been right about everything so far, so Steve nodded to clarify that he wanted to try it, then Bucky got off the bed and went into the bathroom. Steve was a little confused, then when Bucky came back in he had a bottle of massage oil and his rings were missing. Steve realised what he had done wrong when he had tried it. He hadn’t used lube, that must be why it hurt.

“Steve, you gotta be honest with me… If it hurts or you don’t like it, tell me. Okay?” His face and the tone of his voice was serious, and Steve smiled at that. No matter how many times Bucky showed how caring he was, Steve was never any less delighted.

“I will.” Steve nodded and Bucky opened the bottle of oil. He dipped one finger into it and nudged Steve’s legs apart, kneeling between them. Steve planted his feet on the bed so his knees were up and Bucky could get to his hole better.

Bucky kept his eyes on Steve for a few seconds, as if he was assessing if Steve was comfortable. Steve smiled at him, although a little nervously, and Bucky leant down to kiss him. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and almost forgot what they were about to do, until he felt Bucky’s finger circle around his pucker. His breath caught in his throat in surprise as he tried to stay relaxed. It didn’t feel good yet, it wasn’t the instant pleasure he had experienced when he first felt Bucky’s mouth around his cock. But he trusted that it would feel good soon. For the time being, Steve just felt a light burn as he stretched around Bucky’s finger. He bit his lip as Bucky sucked and licked his neck, occasionally biting lightly. The contrast between the burn of Bucky’s finger pressing into him, and the pleasure of him sucking on his pulse point, was a little disorientating as he tried to focus on every part of Bucky’s body against his own.

Finally, the burn eased, and Steve started to see how it could feel good. Bucky slowly moved his finger in and out of Steve, and eventually Steve started to breathe a little heavier. It was starting to feel good, and Bucky moved away from Steve’s neck to watch his reaction. He pressed another finger into Steve’s entrance after adding more lube and this time it didn’t hurt as much. He still felt the stretch, but the satisfying feeling overwhelmed it. The burning feeling was almost completely
gone by now, leaving just a dull pleasure in its place.

Bucky crooked his finger slightly and Steve had to cover his mouth quickly to stop himself from screaming as white hot pleasure shot through his body. He dug his nails into Bucky’s shoulder with his other hand and squirmed slightly, making Bucky laugh quietly. Steve knew basic male anatomy, so he knew that Bucky had just hit his prostate, and he knew that prostate stimulation was supposed to feel good. But he hadn’t expected it to be that good.

Bucky kissed Steve again as he rubbed over that spot inside Steve again, and Steve couldn’t stop himself from moaning louder this time. Bucky thrusted his fingers in and out of his hole and seemed to be purposely avoiding Steve’s prostate. Steve tried to move a little to get Bucky to repeat the stimulation, but Bucky stubbornly refused.

“Stay still.” Bucky almost pulled his fingers all the way out of Steve as a warning and kept just his fingertips inside until Steve forced his hips to remain still. “You look so hot like this, Stevie…”

Steve imagined he looked like a wreck. He could feel that his hair was a mess, his lips were swollen from Bucky’s kisses, there were probably love bites along his neck, and his face and chest felt heated with a blush. Bucky was always talking about how good Steve looked.

He leant down to kiss Steve again as he crooked his fingers to stroke Steve’s prostate again. It wasn’t a fleeting, teasing touch every few thrusts though. He stroked over it constantly and relentlessly as Steve squirmed and moaned underneath him. He felt himself start to sweat as he neared his release and Bucky leant down to take the red, leaking head of Steve’s cock into his mouth.

Steve grabbed onto Bucky’s forearm and dug his nails in, mostly just for something to hold onto and to stop himself grabbing Bucky’s hair, and Bucky’s hand covered Steve’s mouth to stifle his shrieks as he climaxes. That was probably a good thing, because they may have been kicked out after the volume of Steve’s noises.

Steve’s vaguely felt Bucky’s fingers pull out of him and reluctantly let go of Bucky’s arm. He felt the bed shift as Bucky got up and heard him walk around but he couldn’t quite pinpoint where he was going, and he couldn’t open his eyes to see.

Steve wasn’t sure how long Bucky was gone – he didn’t really have a good grip on time at the minute – but when he came back his hands were dry and he had some wet wipes to clean Steve’s come off his stomach for him. The touches were only light, but he felt sparks each time Bucky’s fingers brushed his own skin.

“You look so beautiful.” Bucky mumbled against Steve’s hair as he kissed the top of his head and pulled the covers up around him.

Steve was about to ask Bucky if he needed help with his own erection, but Bucky had already turned the light off and pulled Steve to his chest to cuddle with him, so Steve just smiled and let him tuck the sheets around him.

He fell asleep after only hearing two of Bucky’s heartbeats.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Steve, Bucky and Natasha watch Becca's dance competition, but Bucky's phone keeps buzzing with messages.

Steve woke up to a light, soft pressure on his cheek and smiled as he realised it was Bucky kissing him. His eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Bucky with a sleepy smile.

“Hey,” Bucky smiled back. “Did I wake you up?”

Steve nodded a little as he stretched. “It was a nice wake up, though.”

Bucky was laid on his side, and sat up to prop his head up on his hand, his elbow on the pillow. His hair was messy, and sticking up. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good. Really good. How about you?” Steve turned on his side to look at Bucky.

“Great. I love sleeping next to you.” Bucky grinned and leant down to kiss Steve, and Steve kissed back happily. Bucky was always very cuddly when he move up. After the kiss he buried his face in Steve’s neck, and Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders. Steve glanced at the clock and saw that it was eight in the morning. Becca’s competition started at four in the afternoon, but the dance hall was available for anyone who wanted to practise earlier from lunch time onwards. She wanted to go, so Bucky had agreed to go with her. Natasha was going too, so even though he wouldn’t be of much help, Steve had agreed to go too.

Bucky eventually pulled back and kissed Steve’s forehead before laying on his back with his hands behind his head. Steve instantly moved to rest his head on Bucky’s chest and wrapped an arm around his stomach, then Bucky moved one hand around Steve’s shoulders. He ran his fingers along Steve’s spine with a smile.

They stayed like that for another hour before Natasha knocked on their hotel door. Steve quickly made sure the blankets covered their bodies as Bucky told her to come in. She didn’t bat an eyelid at their state of undress.

“They want to go out somewhere for breakfast. You two in?” She asked as she leant against the doorframe.

“I’m in. Steve?” Bucky said as he ran his fingers through Steve’s hair softly, and Steve nodded too.

Natasha smiled and said she’d go tell Becca, and meet them at Bucky’s car. As she closed the door, Steve stretched and Bucky sat up, rubbing his eyes.

Bucky got out of bed first and went through his bag to get a clean pair of skinny jeans and a red t-shirt, along with underwear and socks then got dressed while Steve pulled his own bag to him. He dressed in a slightly baggy grey t-shirt and faded jeans then put his sneakers on and waited for Bucky to finish lacing up his combat boots.

Once he was ready, he handed Steve the room key to look after and Steve looked a little surprised,
but accepted it. He put his coat on, and the scarf Becca had given him to borrow, then Bucky took Steve’s hand and led him out of the room and to his car in the parking lot. Becca and Natasha were already leaning against it. Natasha had a thicker jacket on, as opposed to her usual brown leather jacket, and she had a scar around her neck as well as a beanie and fingerless gloves.

Becca was wearing her toggle coat again and a woolly hat, her hands shoved in her pockets. Steve could only see tights from under her coat.

It was really cold, and Steve glanced over at Bucky. He was just wearing his leather jacket and Steve frowned and stopped him. “Didn’t you pack anything warmer?”

Bucky looked a little surprised. “Like what?”


Bucky nodded. “I did, but it’s not that cold yet.”

“Bucky, it’s going to start snowing soon. Maybe today. Please go get something warmer?”

Bucky sighed dramatically but let go of Steve’s hand. “Fine. Wait with the girls.” He passed Steve his car keys. “Sit inside the car, it’ll be warmer.”

Steve took the car keys and handed Bucky the room key before going over to Becca and Natasha. Becca looked at him with wide eyes. Steve noticed she had put on eyeliner and mascara, making her eyes stand out more than her naturally dark eyelashes usually made them.

“Did you just persuade Bucky to go dress warmer?” She sounded surprised.

“Yeah… Why?”

Becca and Natasha looked at each other, sharing an impressed glance before looking back at Steve. “Well done, I have to whine at him for at least half an hour before he’ll lose the leather jacket and put his coat on.”

Steve unlocked the car as he laughed lightly, glad he seemed to have an impression on Bucky, and the girls got into the back seats to allow Steve to sit in the front with Bucky. Bucky came out a few minutes later wearing his long, black, felt coat and a black beanie. He also had a scarf around his neck and Steve smiled as he got into the car.

“Happy now?” Bucky asked as he took the car keys back from Steve and gave him the room key back.

“Very.” Steve grinned and Bucky shook his head with a smile as he started the car.

They ended up going to a Starbucks, and Becca and Natasha got a sandwich each to go with their drink while Steve and Bucky both got caramel shortbreads.

Becca talked about the song she’ll be dancing to when Steve asked, telling him it was *Chandelier* by *Sia*. She said she’d be doing the same sort of dance as the girl in the video, but some of her own unique twists to it to make it more like ballet. She had modified some of it so she wouldn’t need a set to jump around on and props to balance on then thanked Bucky for his help with that bit. Bucky waved it off as he drank his caramel latte, then said he was happy to help. Steve had a green tea, and Natasha had a Frappuccino despite the cold. Becca wanted something with coffee in, but had to get a tea instead. Bucky said she’s not allowed to drink coffee until she’s sixteen.
Natasha had to step away to take a call from her boss and tell her she was already in North Carolina and staying in a hotel with a friend. She came back a few minutes later and said some of the girls from her school will be at the dance hall too, so she may have to leave Becca to help them. Becca was okay with it, since it was Natasha’s job and she had Bucky to help if she needed it.

“You might get to see me dance today.” He pointed out as he nudged Steve’s shoulder. Steve wasn’t sure how he’d be able to dance in skinny jeans, but he clarified that he had some sweatpants in his car that he’d change into.

“Should I go on a diet?” Becca asked suddenly, and Natasha and Steve both looked up in surprise. Becca was the ideal weight for her age, and Steve wondered what made her think that.

Bucky didn’t look up from his shortbread as he answered almost immediately. “No.”

He put the last bit of his food in his mouth and looked up at Becca, who had her hand over her stomach.

“Honey, why do you think you should go on a diet?” Natasha asked, looking a little concerned.

“I saw pictures of the other contestants on the website, and they’re all skinnier than me,”

“Becca, I already told you the other night, those girls are unhealthy. Their parents should have them taken away for letting those girls get like that. They’re underweight.” Bucky argued.

Natasha nodded. “Yeah, three kids from work have passed out and had to be taken to hospital this month,”

“How old were they?”

“Six, twelve, and fifteen. The fifteen year old has been diagnosed with anorexia,”

Becca didn’t say anything to that for a few seconds, then she looked at Steve. “Steve is skinnier than I am, and he’s fine…”

Steve was about to say that he was that skinny because he couldn’t afford to eat, but Bucky spoke before he could. “I know, and I’m working on it, trust me.”

He smiled and winked at Steve, and Steve shook his head lightly. “Becca, if I could eat properly, I would. But I can’t afford the food I need to get to an ideal weight. If you have the food to stay healthy, eat it.”

“I work damn hard to make sure you have enough food, you’re gonna eat it!” Bucky tried to sound stern, but they all knew he was kidding, and laughed.

“Alright, fine, I won’t go on a diet.”

“Damn right.” Natasha nodded as she sat back with her drink.

After that, they went sightseeing around the area until twelve, when the dance hall was open for practicing.

Bucky parked outside the large theatre building and told every to get out so he could change into sweatpants. They stood outside the car and heard a lot of banging and muffled swearing coming from inside the car as Bucky changed. Bucky was tall, and the car wasn’t that big, so he struggled slightly in the confined space. Eventually, he got out of the car, a little out a breath. The sweatpants
were black, and fit him just well enough that they hugged his legs and ass, but so he could still
more around in them. He had changed his shoes too so he was wearing his black converse.

They gave their names to the receptionist and she let them through to the dance hall. It was a huge
open room with floor-to-ceiling mirrors along one of the longest walls, opposite the door, and a
ballet barre along it. There were a few other girls and two boys in the room practicing their own
dances. Natasha texted her boss asking when the girls from her school would be here and told
Becca that she could help her for an hour, then they would be here and she’d have to help them.
Becca nodded and started talking about the bits she thought she needed help with.

Natasha asked her to run through the dance from start to finish, so she could see which bits weren’t
on point and see if they were the bits Becca was worried about. She took her coat off and handed it
to Bucky to look after, and showed that she was wearing skin coloured tights and a blue leotard.

Bucky and Steve sat against the wall opposite the mirror as they watched them and Bucky put his,
Natasha’s and Becca’s coat on the floor next to him. Steve was a little cold, still, so he kept his on.

“You know we may be here until four, right?” Bucky asked and Steve nodded.

“I’m okay with that. As long as I’m with you.”

Bucky smiled and kissed Steve’s cheek before they both turned back to watch Becca.

Steve was, once again, amazed at how good she was. He couldn’t see anything wrong with her
performance, and had to resist the urge to applaud when she finished. But Bucky and Natasha both
saw a few flaws, and it turned out the parts they pointed out were the parts Becca wasn’t sure
about. Natasha started helping her with a few parts, but by the time they got the first two down, the
girls from her school were there and she apologised to Becca, but Becca just shooed her away and
gestured for Bucky to come help her. Bucky took his car keys and his phone out of his pockets,
then handed them to Steve to look after, before going to help Becca.

To Steve’s disappointment, he didn’t dance much, just helped her position herself and raise her
arms or legs a little more. He did more talking than demonstrating, but it was helping Becca, so
Steve didn’t mind that much.

Bucky’s phone buzzed in Steve’s hand and he looked down at the screen to see if it was something
important, or if it could wait until Bucky was done helping Becca.

(1) Message – Brock Rumlow.

“James answer the fuckin phone!!!”

Steve frowned and, under the message, he saw that Bucky had five missed calls from Brock too
and a few other text messages saying similar things. They started off nice, asking Bucky to answer
the phone and saying he just wanted to talk to him. Others saying they needed to learn to get on if
they were going to be working together for the next several months. They got gradually ruder, and
Brock stopped calling him Bucky and started calling him ‘James’ instead.

He looked up at Bucky and Becca, and smiled slightly as Bucky caught Becca before she hit the
floor after losing her balance, and they both laughed. He didn’t want to ruin Bucky’s good mood,
so he ignored the message and decided to wait until they were done, then he can give Bucky his
phone back and he can see the messages himself. The phone hadn’t signalled an incoming call in
the time Steve was holding it, so Bucky much have seen Brock trying to call him and ignored it.
The first few calls had been declined.
The phone started ringing again and Steve debated getting Bucky, but he probably wasn’t going to answer it anyway if he hasn’t answered it before. So he clicked the lock button to stop it vibrating, but let the call continue, so it wasn’t rejected.

He looked back at the siblings as Becca ran through a bit of her dance to incorporate what Bucky had told her into the rest of the moves, to make sure it flowed right. Bucky clapped when she nailed the move they had been working on, then moved onto the next bit that needed work.

Steve looked down as the iPhone in his hand vibrated again.

(2) Messages – Brock Rumlow

“James if u dont text me bak I will find that fuckin boyfriend of urs nd fuckin kill him!!!!”

Steve blinked in surprise as he read that, then looking up to see Bucky looking at him.

“You got a text…” He spoke up a little so Bucky could hear him from where he is, and he sighed and told Becca to keep practising the dance all the way through so far as he came over to Steve.

“Did you read it?” He asked as he knelt in front of Steve, not yet taking the phone. “I won’t be mad if you did.”

Steve nodded and held the phone out to him. Bucky scrolled straight to the bottom of the notifications showing on his screen, then scrolled up slowly as he read them all in the order Brock sent them. When he read the latest one, his eyes narrowed and Steve saw the muscle in his cheek jump as he clenched his jaw.

“Don’t worry, okay? He won’t get to you,” Bucky placed his hand on Steve’s shoulder, and Steve nodded.

“I know…” Steve smiled, completely confident that Bucky wouldn’t let this guy get anywhere near him. Bucky clicked the lock button to turn the screen light off, without opening any of the messages, then handed it back to Steve. “Just ignore anything else that comes through, and don’t answer his calls.”

Steve nodded and smiled as Bucky kissed his forehead before going back over to Becca. There was a brief look of worry on Becca’s face as Bucky presumably told her it was Brock trying to get in contact with him, but Bucky quickly waved off her worry and urged her to concentrate on the dance as they got back to work.

Bucky got another phone call, and Steve saw it was Brock and ignored it again. Then he started getting texts again.

“I remember wat he looks like from wen I saw him outside dat restaurant wiv u.”

“I can find him.”

“He’s cute, I’ll credit him on dat.”

“You fuked him yet?”

“Nah bet u aint. Bet he’s a virgin.”

“How bout I fuck him first b4 I kill him?”

Steve shuddered when he read that one. Logically, he knew that he should just stop reading the
messages. Bucky wouldn’t let Brock near him, and he definitely wouldn’t let Brock do any of the things he was talking about.

“Bet hes a right screamer. I kno what ur thinkin, ‘no way would he cheat on me’. Maybe you’ll drive him 2 it. Like u did wiv me.”

Steve almost growled as he read that. No, Steve would never cheat on Bucky, and there’s no way Bucky or anyone else could drive him to doing that.

“Doesn’t really matter tho does it? Not like hes gonna have a say in wether it happens or not ;)”

Steve cringed slightly and put the phone down on Bucky’s coat on the floor next to him.

He didn’t want to read anymore.

After two hours, Becca and Bucky both agreed that the dance was perfected, and they called Natasha over to watch it and she agreed too. They asked Steve’s opinion and he told them he thought it looked great to begin with, then Becca blushed and thanked him.

They went back to the car and waited outside while Bucky changed back into his skinny jeans and boots, then they all went back to Starbucks. Bucky relented and let Becca get something with coffee in, just this once, since she was tired and needed to be alert for the competition.

Becca wasn’t a huge fan of the taste, but she didn’t hate it. It tasted better when she added sugar. Steve noticed her hesitate slightly before pouring the sugar packet into the drink, but he smiled when she went through with it and didn’t change her mind. Steve looked at Bucky and guessed that he had noticed too, because there was definitely a look of relief in his features when Becca poured the sugar in.

Becca talked about the others in the competition, and said if she didn’t win she wanted Kitty (a girl in Natasha’s dance school) to win. She was a seven year old girl and she was doing a hip hop piece, this was her first competition. Natasha had said how nervous she was, since she was so young, but Becca and Natasha both said Kitty was a great dancer and she definitely has a good chance of winning. She was one of the very few girls in Natasha’s class that Natasha didn’t secretly dislike. The others were very stuck-up and believed they were the greatest dancers, even though they were standard at best. But she supposed it was their parents’ fault too, since they were always teaching them all to be “assertive” and telling them that they’re the best and they don’t have to put up with people below their own talent boundary (an actual thing she overheard a parent say to their stuck-up child when she had to be paired with a new boy in the class who couldn’t dance very well yet).

Bucky had met Kitty’s parents, many times, and said that they were an amazing couple. Two men called Erik and Charles. They had adopted Kitty and six other children, all from underprivileged or abusive environments, and given them the most loving home they could. They taught all their children compassion and humility, and insisted on them treating everyone equally. Unless another person targeted the child or one of their siblings. In that case, they had permission to get revenge for themselves or their brothers or sisters. That part was mostly Erik’s view point, but after years of arguing that point, Bucky said that Charles has accepted it.

Charles had been Bucky’s mother’s friend, so he had known him since Bucky was a child and they had stayed in touch after his mother’s death. When Bucky needed a little extra cash, he would babysit Charles and Erik’s seven children and Charles would give him way more than the job warranted.
Natasha challenged Bucky to name all seven children, in order of age, he had to think for a minute and Becca laughed saying that he didn’t know.

“Logan is the oldest, he turned eighteen last week. Alex and Scott are twins, they’re fourteen. Then there’s Kurt, he’s thirteen. John is ten and Bobby is eight. Then, obviously, Kitty is seven,”

Natasha and Becca looked surprised, and Steve laughed lightly.

*Yeah, he never fails to surprise me too.*

Steve heard Bucky’s phone vibrate in his pocket, but he didn’t get it out or even stop talking. He assumed it was Brock again.

Natasha had to leave then to sign the kids in and make sure everyone was there, then make sure they were all ready and fed. Bucky and Becca hugged her and told her they’d meet her back at the hotel room and Becca gave her their room key in case she gets back to the hotel before she does. If Becca got back first, Bucky said she can hang out in his and Steve’s room until Natasha got back.

They had one more drink each, then went back to the hotel room to do Becca’s make up. Some of her eyeliner had smudged earlier. Steve laid back on the bed while Bucky and Becca sat on the edge so they could face each other. Becca wiped off all the make-up she had put on earlier and put a hairband around her head to push the hair out of her face.

Bucky started putting foundation on Becca, so she’d look less pale in the spotlight and Steve was amazed that they had found yet another thing Bucky was good at. He didn’t know Bucky could apply make-up, but Becca said it as though it was common knowledge.

Bucky stuck his tongue out slightly in concentration as he applied Becca’s eyeliner then mascara. The eyeliner was heavier than what she was wearing earlier and she had black eyeshadow on to give her a smoky eyes look. Bucky then applied dark red lipstick too, a bit of blush to accent her cheekbones, and some lip liner. Bucky handed her a mirror and her face lit up.

“I look amazing!” She grinned and she tilted her head to the side as she looked at her own reflection then put the mirror down and threw her arms around Bucky in a hug. “Thanks, Buck!”

Bucky smiled as he hugged her back then checked the time. “Go get dressed, he need to get going soon.”

Steve thought that she was already dressed, but she nodded and left the room. While she was gone, Bucky got some hair curlers out of his bag and Steve laughed lightly.

“So that’s how you’re hair is always so perfectly curled,” He commented and Bucky laughed as he shook his head.

He left them on the side to heat up after plugging them in then came over to Steve. “Nope, this is all natural, Doll.”

Bucky winked and leant forward to kiss Steve. Steve kissed back with a smile then broke it with a blush when he heard Becca clear her throat behind them. She was wearing the same skin-coloured tights, but she had changed into a black leotard with a red miniskirt around her waist. Bucky laughed as she rolled her eyes and sat on the bed, then Bucky knelt on the mattress so he was behind her and split her hair into two layers. Becca passed him a hair clip and he pinned the top layer to her head so he could brush and curl the bottom half first. Steve watched him work with interest. Becca’s hair was curled in loose ringlets, then Bucky pulled it all up into a high ponytail, almost on top of her head. The length of her hair still reached her shoulders, so when she moved
the curls bounced around her face.

“You look great, Becca,” Steve smiled.

“Thanks, Steve!” She grinned as she looked in the mirror again.

Bucky drove them to the competition and gave Steve his ticket as they went inside. Becca went backstage to get her contestant number and to find out when she would be going on, then wait to perform.

Steve sat next to Bucky in their designated seats and picked up the program and opened it to the contestants’ page. The pictures were all school photos and there was a short paragraph next to each competitor’s picture and Steve quickly scanned the page for Becca’s.

She was right near the top, because it was alphabetical and Steve smiled. The picture was obviously from about a year ago. She had braces in the picture and she was smiling widely, her curly brown hair falling loose over her shoulders.

“Rebecca ‘Becca’ Barnes was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. She inherited her love of dancing from her mother and shares this passion with her older brother, who is now her primary caregiver after a tragic accident left them both orphans. Despite this emotionally trying time, Becca never let her love for dance suffer. Her brother ensured that her dance lessons could continue, and she is determined to make her brother and her late parents proud of her skill. She aspires to be a professional dancer.”

Steve smiled as he read it. He showed it to Bucky and he rolled his eyes but smiled too. Steve looked for Kitty, but he didn’t know her last name. Thankfully, there was only one Kitty in the book. Kitty Xavier-Lehnsherr. The picture showed a cute little girl with brown eyes and brown hair pulled back into a pony tail, wearing a private school uniform.

“Kitty Xavier (formally Kitty Pryde) is the seventh adopted child of renowned professor, Charles Xavier-Lehnsherr and his Activist husband, Erik Xavier-Lehnsherr. Kitty was born into an extremely toxic and abusive family, but was thankfully taken into care at age two, where she was found and adopted by Dr and Mr Xavier Lehnsherr after her birth parents relinquished all legal rights of her. Since being welcomed into the Xavier-Lehnsherr family, Kitty started showing a large interest in dance, and was hooked after her first lesson. She aspires to be a Social Worker.”

Steve was surprised that they had added the details about her birth parents in the program, but he supposed that he helped with the sympathy factor. These sorts of things use sympathy all the time. The judges each had a copy of the program and Steve saw each of them reading it already.

The first few contestants were from Natasha’s school, and once they were done, Natasha joined them. She sat next to Bucky with a sigh.

“Those girls are so pretentious. One kid refused to go on unless she got an iced tea.” She rolled her eyes and Bucky laughed.

Becca’s performance was as amazing as Steve had expected. There were a lot of lights flashing during the fast parts of the song, and she utilised the whole stage and the man operating the main spotlight had a hard time keeping up with her. When she finished, the judges looked very impressed.

Kitty was great too, and Steve agreed that either Becca or Kitty should win.

Steve clapped for the rest of the acts, then they had to wait for the results. They eventually
finished making their decision and Steve held Bucky’s hand, and Natasha held his other hand.

Third place was a boy from Rhode Island, Kitty got second place, and Bucky almost broke Steve’s hand in excitement when Becca was announced the winner.

They went out for ice cream after the competition and Becca insisted on taking her trophy back to the hotel room before going to the ice cream parlour. As they ate their ice cream, Bucky’s phone buzzed once, signalling a text message and Steve looked down as Bucky took it out of his pocket to read the message.


Steve frowned when he saw it, and noticed that it was from Brock. Then he got nervous. Bucky kept staring at the information on the screen. He had ignored the phone all day, but now he opened the text message and typed out a reply.

“What do you want?” He shoved his phone back in his pocket and smiled at something Becca said so that she wouldn’t notice anything was wrong. Steve took Bucky’s hand, then Bucky seemed to have just realised that Steve had seen the message.

“It’ll be okay, Steve.” He muttered so the girls wouldn’t hear. “I don’t know how he found out who you are, but it doesn’t matter.”

Steve nodded a little and leant forward to kiss Bucky’s cheek. “I trust that nothing bad will happen to me when I’m with you.”

Bucky smiled and went to kiss him again, but then he got another text and quickly pulled his phone out, opening it where Steve could see the message.

“You.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve come up with a plan to deal with Brock.

Steve looked up at Bucky’s face after reading the message and saw his jaw clench again. Before Bucky started typing out a reply, the phone started vibrating in his hand to signal an incoming call, and Brock’s name appeared on the screen. Bucky quickly stood up and left the parlour without saying anything to Becca or Natasha. They both looked up on surprise and concern as Steve stood up too.

“Excuse us…” Steve muttered as he left the building to follow Bucky. He was stood outside, still holding the vibrating phone, but he hadn’t answered it yet.

“Are you going to answer it?” Steve asked quietly and Bucky took his hand to drag him to his car. They both got in the back seat and locked the doors before Bucky answered the call and put it on speaker so Steve could hear what Brock said. Bucky pressed his finger to his lips to indicate for Steve not to speak, though.

“Ah, I thought you were ignoring me.” Brock had a New York accent, and his voice was deep and slightly gravelly.

“What do you want?” Bucky asked through gritted teeth.

“I told you, I want you.” Brock laughed quietly, but it was a humourless, unsettling laugh.

“Why me? Our relationship sucked!” Bucky was already getting worked up, and Steve reached out to touch his hand, hoping to convey some comfort to him. “All we did was argue!”

“And have sex, don’t forget that.”

Bucky had to close his eyes in frustration as he rubbed his hand over his forehead. “Yeah, that’s not a good foundation for a healthy relationship.”

“Who says it has to be healthy to be fun?” There was an evident smile in Brock’s voice.

“I’m with Steve, that’s not going to change,” Bucky dropped his hand back down to take Steve’s and Steve smiled.

“We’ll see about that.”

“Stay away from him, Brock!” Bucky was getting frustrated again, and Steve brought Bucky’s hand up to kiss his knuckles, finally making him smile slightly.

“Leave him, then. It’s the only way to keep him safe, Jamie.” Brock sounded serious.

Bucky looked up at Steve, as if he was considering that to be true. Steve saw the helplessness in Bucky’s expression and quickly shook his head, trying to tell him that that wasn’t true. They could be together, and safe. They’d find a way.
“You won’t get to him. I’ll make sure of that.” Bucky eventually answered. Steve wasn’t sure how Bucky could protect him all the time. He had a job, and Becca to take care of. Steve had a job too. Bucky couldn’t watch him all the time.

“We’ll see, babe.” Brock hung up as soon as he finished speaking, not giving Bucky time to reply, and Bucky sighed as he locked his phone.

“Shit…” He muttered and pulled his hand from Steve’s grip to cover his face with both his hands, the phone laid discarded on the seat between them.

“Bucky…?” Steve was worried about him.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” Bucky’s voice was muffled by his hands and Steve leant forward to take Bucky’s hands and move them away. He saw tears in Bucky’s eyes and felt a pang of pain in his chest. Steve held both of Bucky’s hands in his and moved closer so their knees were touching.

“You don’t have to protect me, Bucky…”

“I do. Brock is a psycho, he wasn’t just talking when he threatened you,”

“I can take care of myself.” Steve tried to reassure him.

“Not against him,” Bucky looked so defeated. “Steve…”

Steve could guess what Bucky was going to say, so he shook his head quickly. “No. We are not breaking up because of him. You can’t let him control your life. His input in your life finished the moment you broke up with him. Don’t let him stop you from being happy…”

Steve reached up to cup Bucky’s face and Bucky immediately leant his head against his palm.

“If you got hurt because of me--” Bucky started but Steve stopped him again.

“It wouldn’t be because of you. Nothing your psychotic ex does it because of you. Can’t you go to the police? You have text messages from him threatening us, that’s enough for a restraining order, right?”

“Alexander will fire me…”

“Tell the police about that too! He has no legitimate grounds to fire you!”

“He’ll make up a reason, he’s done it before. One girl told Alexander that Brock sexually harassed her and threatened to go to the police if he didn’t fire him. The next day she was found with cocaine in her car, and she swore it wasn’t her’s. I don’t think it was either, she’s a great person. Very professional. I doubt she ever took drugs, and even if she did, she wouldn’t be stupid enough to bring it to work with her.”

“Then just… Find a new job?”

“I can’t. This is the best-paid job I can get with my lack of qualifications. And I have to take care of Becca…”

He couldn’t think of any other solution. Steve stroked Bucky’s cheekbone with his thumb, frowning, and Bucky sighed softly as he closed his eyes. Steve couldn’t tell if he was content or just tired. Steve went to move his hand away, but Bucky’s hand came up to hold Steve’s wrist,
keeping his hand there and Steve smiled as he complied.

He wished, again, that he had enough money to be able to support Bucky and Becca himself. Even if it was just for a little while, until Bucky got a new job that paid enough to support them both. Steve wanted to help so badly, but he knew all he could do was offer emotional support. Financially, he was useless.

“Don’t worry, Buck. It’ll be okay,” Steve knew that that was lame, and generic, but he needed to comfort Bucky. And that’s all he could think of. Bucky clearly didn’t believe him, but he nodded anyway.

They eventually went back into the ice cream parlour, and Becca and Natasha immediately asked what was wrong, but Bucky’s carefree mask was back up. He just smiled and said it was a guy from work complaining about the schedule, but it was all sorted now.

Natasha didn’t seem convinced, but she didn’t push it. They finished their ice cream and Bucky gave Becca a piggyback ride back to the car, then up to her room. He hugged her and told her how proud he was, and how much she deserved that win, then said goodnight and waited until her and Natasha were in their room before walking across the hall to his and Steve’s. They would start driving back at midday the next day, so they would be home by eight in the evening.

As soon as Bucky and Steve’s door was closed, Bucky’s smile disappeared and he muttered something about pyjamas before going into the bathroom to change. Steve changed into his own night clothes then crawled into bed to wait for Bucky.

Bucky came to join him a few minutes later wearing just his boxers, and Steve immediately pressed his body against his as he kissed Bucky. Bucky seemed to have been surprised by the kiss, but Steve felt him recover and kiss back quickly. Bucky tasted like toothpaste, and Steve was suddenly aware he had forgotten to brush his teeth before getting into bed because Bucky was in the bathroom. As usual, Bucky didn’t seem to mind.

Steve dropped his hand to Bucky’s hip and Bucky ran his fingertips up Steve’s spine again, making his shudder slightly.

“Why do you wear so much for bed?” Bucky muttered against Steve’s lips.

Steve looked down at his plaid pyjama bottoms and t-shirt in confusion. “This is ‘so much’?”

That made Bucky smile slightly and Steve smiled back when he saw it.

“I want to try something…” Steve said as he moved his hand from Bucky’s hip to his abdomen, but didn’t apply any pressure that would imply he was pushing Bucky away.

“What?” Bucky muttered against Steve’s jaw as he kissed along it then down his neck.

“How can I try giving you a blowjob?” Steve had tried it once before, but his jaw ached and he gagged a few times trying to take in too much at once. Bucky had insisted they stop, even though Steve wanted to keep trying, and had kissed Steve softly with a smile. He insisted that Steve didn’t need to, and he really didn’t need to try so hard, but Steve still felt disappointed that he couldn’t give Bucky the same pleasure he gave to Steve so easily and frequently.

“Are you sure? What about your asthma?” Bucky had brought that up last time too, and Steve fought back the pang of annoyance he felt every time anyone brought up any of his illnesses as a reason he shouldn’t do something.
“I’ll manage, and I have my inhaler,” Steve rolled his eyes, but Bucky didn’t see. He still had his face against Steve’s neck.

“You don’t have to…”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

Bucky obviously sensed the resolve in Steve’s voice, because he pulled back to look at Steve in confusion. “Why are you so determined to suck me off?”

Steve felt his infamous blush at Bucky’s wording, but he didn’t let it damage his resolve. “Because it feels good, and I want to make you feel good.”

“You make me feel good just by being with me.” That should have been cute, but Steve wasn’t having it this time.

“Please, Buck?”

“Alright…” Bucky relented and Steve felt a smile break out on his face. “But! If you gag, or you don’t like it; stop. Okay?”

Steve nodded in agreement, but Bucky wasn’t done. “Don’t try force yourself to take more than you can handle. I can deepthroat because I’ve been sucking dick a lot longer than you have, it takes practise. Practice that you haven’t had yet. And please, don’t feel bad about not being able to do the stuff I can do.”

Once again, Steve wondered if Bucky would read minds. But he nodded. He also wondered exactly how many people Bucky had given blowjobs too, but ultimately decided that it was none of his business since they were all before he and Bucky started seeing each other.

Steve accepted the conditions and nodded as he moved down Bucky’s body, Bucky’s eyes never leaving Steve’s.

Steve remembered some things Bucky had done to him in the past and tugged Bucky’s underwear down as he tried to remember exactly how they felt. Everything Bucky did felt amazing, so Steve supposed it didn’t really matter, but he wanted to be able to know exactly what Bucky would feel so he could repeat the things he liked the most.

Bucky reached down to run his fingers through Steve’s hair lovingly as he propped himself up with his other forearm to watch Steve.

“You look so beautiful…” Bucky muttered.

Logically, having his face this close to Bucky’s cock should have been what made Steve blush, not a comment. But that didn’t stop the colour heating up his skin at Bucky’s words.

Again, Steve was nervous, and Bucky looked as though he could tell. But before he could say anything about it, Bucky’s phone rang on the nightstand. He looked at it to see if it was important, and frowned when he saw the name.

“Who is it?” Steve asked as he sat up, guessing that it was important.

“Tony Stark.” Bucky sighed and answered the phone. “Hello?”

Steve couldn’t hear what was said on the other end, but Bucky sighed and covered his face with
his other hand. Steve tapped his hand to get him to look at him and mouthed “What’s wrong?”

Bucky took the phone away from his ear as Tony kept talking and whispered. “He wants me to come to his office on Monday to discuss the comments Jim has reported Brock making. Jim told Stark I heard it, so he wants an eyewitness for when he talks to Brock and Jim,”

Then, an idea stuck Steve. “Tell Tony Stark about Brock threatening us.”

Bucky looked confused.

“Alexander won’t fire you if you tell Stark first, because then he’ll have to explain why you happened to have gotten fired just after you filed a complaint to Stark about his son.” Steve had never met Tony Stark, so he didn’t know if the man would notice the connection, but he was hailed as a genius.

Bucky seemed to think about it for a moment. “That could work…”

“Tony?” He said into the phone, and Steve was a little surprised that he addressed Stark by his first name. “I have a complaint to file against Brock too…”

There was a moment on quiet from Bucky, presumably where he was listening to Tony’s response.

“Brock and I have a… Personal history—“

Tony interrupted before Bucky could say anything else and Bucky just rolled his eyes. Tony probably said something mildly inappropriate.

“Yes, that kind of history. It ended badly, and I’m with someone else now. Brock is threatening us, and I’m not comfortable working around him.”

He listened to Tony’s reply again and a grin broke out over his face. “Thank you, Tony… Yes… That’s what I was afraid of… Okay, thanks again… I’ll see you Monday!”

He hung up and grinned at Steve. “He knows that Alexander has a habit of favouring his son over other employees and he knows about Shelly – the girl Brock harassed – and what happened to her. He said we can talk about it Monday and Tony will file the complaint, so if I lose my job, Tony will know and he’ll call Alexander up on it.”

Steve grinned too and hugged Bucky, and Bucky’s arms immediately wrapped tight around Steve’s body. “That’s great!”

“Now…” Bucky broke the hug with a smirk. “Where were we?”

That was such a cliché, Steve had to laugh. He kissed Bucky softly then worked his way back down his body. Bucky looked as though he was about to stop Steve and say he was kidding, so Steve didn’t give him a chance to speak. He licked a strip along the underside of Bucky’s cock and Bucky moaned, probably mostly out of surprise. He gripped the bedsheets and Steve smirked slightly as his reaction. He repeated the action, but this time he took the head into his mouth when he got to the top, sucking lightly.

Last time, he had tried to take all of Bucky’s member into his mouth in one go, and that’s what had made him choke. This time, he made sure to remember to take it slow. He licked along the underside again, following a vein to the top, and flicked his tongue over the slit in the middle. Steve looked up and saw Bucky biting his lip, deciding this was a good sign. He took the head into his mouth again and slowly took a little more in, careful of his teeth, then pulled back to suck on
the head again. He repeated this a few times, taking a little more in each time, until he could get 
just over half of Bucky’s cock in his mouth. Steve heard Bucky moan and used his hand to stroke 
the rest of his shaft while he bobbed his head slowly. Bucky gripped the sheets tighter and closed 
his eyes in pleasure.

When Steve’s jaw started to ache, he pulled off Bucky and strokes him as he moved further down 
to lick as Bucky’s balls and Bucky tensed slightly in surprise before letting out a quiet moan. He 
put his hand over his mouth and moved the other to Steve’s shoulder. Steve felt his fingernails dig 
into his skin slightly and moaned against Bucky’s skin at the feeling. That made Bucky moan 
again, and struggle to keep his hips still.

Steve’s jaw felt better now, so he moved up and took Bucky into his mouth again. Steve resumed 
bobbing his head up and down, but moved faster, knowing that Bucky liked Steve speeding up 
when Bucky started to get restless.

Bucky was moaning with every exile now, and Steve felt proud of this. Steve remembered 
something he had seen in porn, and briefly wondered why exactly he had thought it looked 
attractive. He wasn’t sure, but he was willing to try it, to see if Bucky liked it.

When Steve sensed that Bucky was about to climax, Steve moved his mouth off him and kept 
stroking him. He kept his face near Bucky’s cock, though, so his come would cover his face. 
Bucky gripped Steve’s shoulder tighter, his eyes still closed, and kept his other hand over his 
mouth so he didn’t make too much noise.

“Fuck…” Bucky muttered and Steve waited for him to open his eyes and look at him. When he 
did, Bucky’s eyes widened slightly. “Holy fuck…”

Steve could help but smirk slightly at Bucky’s reaction and licked some of the substance off his 
lips. Steve could have sworn Bucky whimpered before moving forward to lick some of the come 
off Steve’s cheek.

“There’s no way you’re real. I got into a car accident on the way to that hardware store, and I’m in 
a coma. You must be a figment of my imagination.”

Steve laughed lightly as he kissed Bucky, moaned as Bucky licked his own come from Steve’s 
face, and then kissed him again. It was a truly amazing cycle.

When Steve’s face was pretty much clean, Bucky kissed along his jaw and down his neck as he 
dropped his hand between Steve’s legs, but Steve shook his head and lightly pushed Bucky away.

“I’m tired, let’s sleep…”

Bucky looked a little confused, but nodded and laid down with Steve. Bucky fell asleep almost 
instantly, and Steve smiled as he watched him for a while.

It’ll be okay. Stark will get Alexander to fire Brock without getting Bucky fired in the process, he’ll 
get to keep supporting himself and Becca, and he won’t have to work with Brock anymore. It didn’t 
solve the problem of the guy stalking him, but it was a step in the right direction. Maybe he can 
persuade Bucky to go to the police…

Steve woke up to Becca banging on their hotel room door, shouting to them to wake up, and 
groaned as he buried his face more against Bucky’s chest. He felt Bucky’s breathing change, 
signalling that he woke up too, then heard him groan.
“Becca, piss off!” Bucky shouted. They heard Becca laugh.

“Come on, I want to add my trophy to my many other trophies!”

Bucky groaned again and pushed himself to sit up. Steve moved from laying on Bucky to laying on the pillows instead. Bucky was more comfortable.

Bucky got dressed and eventually so did Steve. They went to Starbucks one more time, and Bucky insisted on paying for Steve’s drink since he was low on cash. Steve wasn’t exactly happy about it, but he appreciated the gesture. Then, they piled into the car and Bucky started driving them home.

Becca and Natasha napped in the back seats and Bucky shook his head in mock disappointment when Natasha admitted that she and Becca had stayed up late last night. Bucky turned the music down and the heating up so they could sleep more comfortably. They were only small acts of kindness, but Steve couldn’t help but smile at the fact that Bucky had even thought about it. The music hadn’t been very loud to start with, and the car wasn’t exactly cold, but it was more comfortable after he had adjusted the volume and the heat setting.

“It’s Christmas soon…” Steve muttered and glanced over at Bucky as Bucky nodded.

“So it is…”

“What do you want?” Steve asked and turned to look at Bucky properly.

“You.” Bucky winked at Steve and Steve just laughed.

“Seriously, Buck, what do you want?”

Bucky shrugged as he switched lanes. “You don’t have to get me anything.”

“Are you getting me something?” Steve already knew the answer, but he needed to prove a point.

“Well, yeah, but…”

“But nothing. If you’re getting me something, I’m getting you something. Now what do you want?”

Bucky glanced over at Steve and must have guessed that he would lose this argument, so he sighed in acceptance before replying. “I don’t know… Just get me some chocolate or something.”

“What’re you getting me?” Steve knew whatever it was, it would be more expensive than a box of chocolate. And he knew Bucky was only suggesting something like that because Steve didn’t have a lot of disposable income. But this was their first Christmas, and Steve was determined to get Bucky something good.

Bucky didn’t answer, just smiled, but Steve glared at him so he sighed. “I can’t tell you, it’s a present! It’s supposed to be a surprise!”

Steve shook his head and glanced into the backseat to see if Becca or Natasha had been woken by their conversation, but Becca was still leaning on Natasha’s shoulder with her eyes closed, and Natasha still had her head resting on top of Becca’s, her red hair obscuring most of her face. He could see one of her eyes, though, and it was closed.

“Please just pick something?”

“Steve, I know you don’t have a lot of money…”
“But I want to get you something good!” He glanced back at the girls again before sighing and lowering his voice. “This is our first Christmas…”

Christmas was always such a big deal with he was growing up. His mother would always make an extra effort to make Christmas special for him. She’d save up from January and go all out at December, decorating the whole apartment in red, green, and blue. Steve loved it so much, it was always the one time of year that his mother would smile the most. Their last Christmas, Sarah Rogers had been too ill to make the same effort, so Steve had done it instead. It wasn’t as great as what his mother could do, but Sarah had loved it.

Steve had been dreading this Christmas, until he started dating Bucky. Now, he knew he wouldn’t be alone. Even if he wasn’t with anyone on the actual day, he could still at least text or call Bucky and talk to him at some point during the day. He wouldn’t be completely alone.

“Which is why I don’t want you to bankrupt yourself for it. I don’t want you to be stressed because you can’t pay your rent, because you spent all your money on a present for me,”

“Bucky…” He sighed again. “Please just let me buy you something…”

“Chocolate.” Bucky replied stubbornly and Steve looked out of the windshield in annoyance. “I already have everything I need, I don’t have any interest except dancing and reading. And writing, but there’s nothing you can buy about that.”

Steve started to think of ideas related to that, trying to figure out what he could get for Bucky.

“Steve? Are you mad?” Bucky’s fingers tapped on the steering wheel anxiously as he glanced over at Steve then looked back at the road.

“I appreciate that you’re trying to look out for me. But I’m getting you something,” Steve could be stubborn too, and Bucky relented.

“Alright. Fine.”

After another few hours, Natasha woke up and stretched, waking Becca in the progress. She leant forward and tapped Bucky’s shoulder.

“It’s been four hours. Switch over.”

Bucky nodded and pulled over at the next opportunity.

“Steve, stay in the front, Becca wants to cuddle her brother.” Natasha pointed out and Becca nodded. Bucky chuckled and got out of the car, then Natasha slipped into his seat. She waited until Bucky and Becca were settled before starting the car.

It only took half an hour for Becca and Bucky to both fall asleep, in a similar position that Natasha and Becca had been in earlier. Once Natasha was sure they were asleep, she smiled at Steve.

“Hi.”

“Hi…” Steve looked a little uncomfortable and Natasha sighed slightly.

“You’re going to be around for a while, I don’t want you to be uncomfortable with me…”

“I’m not, I’m just…”

Truth was, Steve was uncomfortable. Natasha gave off the impression that she could kill a man
twice her size with her bare hands, then bake cookies for the kids at the dance school right after.

“I know you are. And I understand why. But Bucky is my best friend, and he’s your boyfriend. We should get along.”

“I agree…” Steve meant that. He did want to get on with Natasha. If Bucky had chosen her to be his best friend, she must be a great person. Steve wanted to get to know her and see why Bucky loved her so much. He had heard Bucky rant about how cool Natasha is, and all the great stories.

But he didn’t know what to say.

“Bucky said you draw?” Natasha started and Steve nodded. “How did you start?”

“What do you mean?”

“Every talent has an origin story. I started dancing because it was a therapy technique to deal with my shitty upbringing, Bucky likes writing because he uses it as an escape from the shitty reality we live in, Becca dances because it helps her feel closer to her late-mother… Why do you draw?”

Steve was slightly surprised by that. He never really thought his drawing had a deeper meaning, but as he thought about it, he realised it was true. His mother had shown him his father’s drawings, and told him how much she loved them. His mother always smiled when she looked at those drawings, and Steve wanted to make her smile as much as possible. When he first started drawing, Sarah had taken him to art museums, and he fell in love with art in general.

“My mother. She always smiled when she looked at my dad’s drawings, and I wanted to make her smile like that all the time. My dad died, a few months before I was born,”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Natasha looked genuinely sorry, and Steve just shrugged.

“It’s okay, my mom is with him now.”

Natasha nodded a little and remained silent on that subject, Steve was thankful for that.

They talked about movies and music they liked then, and Steve was surprised at how much he had in common with her. They both favoured older movies, but they adored any kind of spy movie.

Eventually they lapsed into a comfortable silence. The first comfortable silence he can remember having around Natasha. They parked outside a house Steve didn’t recognise, and then realised it must be Natasha’s. She reached back and woke up the Barnes siblings, then they all got out of the car. Natasha insisted that Bucky has a coffee before he starts driving, so they all went into her house. She lived there with her aunt, but she was out of town a lot. She made Bucky and herself a coffee, and Steve and Becca a cup of tea each.

Once he finished his coffee, Bucky got up to wash his cup out, then hugged Natasha and thanked her for the drink. As she hugged back, she kissed his cheek. She did the same with Becca, and Steve expected a handshake. But, instead, he was pulled into a hug, and felt Natasha kiss his cheek before releasing him.

They all said goodnight to her, and Bucky got her bag out of the car, then he drove Steve home.

He walked up to Steve’s apartment with him and kissed him softly. “Don’t spend too much on me
for Christmas, okay? I’ll be happy with anything.”

Steve sighed, but nodded. “Alright, I promise. And don’t spend too much on me either. And let me know what happens with Brock and Stark tomorrow, okay? As soon as you can…”

Steve nodded and kissed Steve again, softly. “I will… Goodnight, Stevie.”

“Goodnight, Bucky.”

They smiled to each other, then Bucky left to go take Becca home and go to bed. An hour later, Steve got a “goodnight” text from Bucky and he smiled as he replied, then got into bed himself.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Stark fires Brock as he promised Bucky he would. Brock doesn't take it well.

Monday was slow at work. There were never many customers on a Monday, so there were only ever a few people working. Sam was one of them, and he and Steve were both on tills, so Steve spent most of the day talking to him. Sam told him about the game he played on Saturday and happily announced that they won. He asked how Carolina was, and Steve told him he had fun, and Becca won. Sam must have sensed there was more to the story, though, because he wouldn't stop asking what else happened. Eventually, Steve told him about Brock.

“What a fucking creepy!” Sam cringed after Steve had finished telling him what the man had said.

“It’s okay, though. Stark is going to see to it that Brock gets fired, but Bucky doesn’t.”

“What about outside of work? I mean, I’m glad he’ll be away from Bucky while the dude’s working, but what about after? Obviously he knows where the work site is, and he knows where Bucky lives. And, apparently, where you live…”

“One step at a time…” Steve answered before serving a customer. Once the woman was gone, Sam spoke again.

“What if Brock works faster than that?”

Steve didn’t want to think about that. The nightmare of Bucky being killed suddenly flashed into his mind and he shook his head quickly, trying to think of something else.

“I’ll walk you home today.” Sam’s shift ended half an hour before Steve, but when he said this, Sam just shrugged. “I’ll go next door and get a coffee from the café and come back. Just don’t leave the store without me.”

Sam was about to refuse, but Sam just turned away to serve another customer. He figured that Sam had already made his mind up about this, so Steve didn’t bother arguing it anymore. Instead, he thanked him.

During his break, Steve texted Bucky. He told him Sam had insisted on walking him home, then asked if he had had the meeting with Stark yet. Bucky said he would be at work in three hours, and that’s when the meeting was. In three and a half hours, Steve would be finishing his shift. When he pointed this out, Bucky admitted to being even more relieved that Sam would be walking Steve home. Judging by when Steve had been Brock, although it had been in the dark and from a distance, he guessed that Sam was taller than him. Not by much, but he was more muscular. That could be enough to deter Brock from trying to get to Steve, and if not, he knew Sam could fight too. He had been in the army. And Steve had no doubts about whether Sam would fight to protect Steve.

He wished he didn’t need someone to be willing to fight his battles for him. Steve wanted to be able to protect himself, especially against Brock. If he could, Bucky wouldn’t be as worried about
him. He could be able to protect Bucky too, and Becca.

Sam sat next to him, snapping out of his thoughts. “Did you talk to Bucky?”

Steve nodded. “He said he’s glad you’re looking out for me.”

Sam smiled and shrugged. “Happy to do it.”

Steve glanced up at the clock above his till. Bucky would be in the meeting with Brock, Jim, and Stark now. Sam had clocked out and, as promised, he had gone to get coffee then he would be back to walk Steve home. He had asked Steve what he wanted too and insisted on buying him one when Steve said he had no money. There were a few other staff members around the room, but Steve didn’t really speak to most of them.

He smiled as he served another customer, then glanced at the clock again. He was counting down the seconds until he could get to the break room and check his phone. Logically, he knew Bucky would still be in the meeting. But he wanted to have his phone in his hand when Bucky got out of it. He wanted to know, immediately, where they stood. Sam came back in and placed the to-go cup of coffee on Steve’s counter. He took it gratefully and sipped it.

Sam must have noticed he was a little tense. “Steve, relax. Human Resources meetings can be long, he probably won’t be out of it before the end of your shift.”

“I know… But I just want to be sure I don’t miss a call from him.”

“Would it make you feel better if I went into the break room and got your phone for you?”

“You know I’m not allowed to have my phone with me when I’m working.”

“I’ll hold onto it. If you get a call from Bucky, I’ll answer it and explain the situation. If you get a text, I’ll read it out to you. I’ll even type out a reply for you.”

Steve thought about that and couldn’t really think of any flaws. He wouldn’t be breaking the rules, and it would mean he definitely wouldn’t miss any communications from Bucky. Steve nodded and Sam went into the break room to get Steve’s phone.

“Nothing yet.” He told him as he came back out and showed Steve the screen. No texts and no missed calls.

Sam made sure the volume was up and put the phone in his pocket as he leant against Steve’s counter. A few customers came in and, since Steve’s was the only till open now, Sam moved away so Steve could serve them.

Steve still kept glancing at the clock. Ten more minutes and he can clock out. Which means Bucky had been in the meeting for twenty minutes. That was plenty of time for Stark to say “You’re fired and don’t bother running to tattle on us to your daddy because I will sue him!” right?

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Sam take the phone out of his pocket, look over at Steve, then answer it. He served the last customer as fast as he could without coming across rude, but luckily Sam was still on the phone when he finished. He came back over as he nodded along to what Bucky was saying, his jaw tensed.

“What’s going on?” Steve asked and Sam held his finger up. Eventually, he moved the phone away from his ear.
“The meeting is over. Brock is fired from the Stark job, but he still works for HYDRA. When he left, he muttered something to Bucky. He didn’t catch exactly what he said, but he heard Brock say ‘Try protecting them now that I have more free time on my hands.’ So Bucky thinks he’s probably going to go after you when Bucky is working.” Sam then moved the phone back up to his ear to talk to Bucky. “Yeah, I’m still walking him home. And we’ll talk about what shifts he’s on and I’ll walk him here then home again as much as possible… No problem, man. You want to talk to Steve?... Okay, I’ll tell him… Bye.”

Sam hung up and Steve looked up at the clock. He could finally clock out, so he gestured for Sam to follow him while he does, bringing his coffee with him.

“He said to call him when you get home.” Sam told him and Steve nodded as he took his phone back. He clocked out on the machine then gathered his things so he and Sam could start walking.

Steve was glad Bucky didn’t have to work with Brock anymore and he hoped Alexander would fire Brock from the firm, but he had a feeling that that won’t happen. As they left the store, both he and Sam scanned the area. Although Sam didn’t know what Brock looked like, he was good at spotting a potential threat.

They walked in silence back to Steve’s apartment building, but when he stopped to say goodbye to Sam and thank him outside the building, Sam kept walking up the steps. He then realised Sam intended on walking him right to his door and smiled as he followed. It wasn’t necessary, but he appreciated it. When they got to the door, Sam asked if Steve wanted him to come in and check for anyone inside, but Steve politely refused. He had locked the door when he left that morning, and it was still locked, so no one could have gotten in. The only people who had a key was Steve and Peggy, for emergencies. Sam still insisted on coming in to make sure, so Steve let him.

“Thanks, Sam. I really appreciate this…”

“No problem, man. Just want to make sure you’re safe.” He smiled and Steve went to call Bucky.

He didn’t answer, and Steve initially thought he was working. Then he remembered that Sam told him Bucky said to call him when he got home, and felt a wave of panic. He called Bucky again, but again he didn’t answer.

The third time, Bucky did answer.

“God, Buck! You almost gave me a heart attack! Why didn’t you answer?”

Bucky was silent for a moment, and the panic started to rise again. “Brock wasn’t talking about you…”

Steve was a little confused at first, then he was back to panicking.

“What happened?” He started thinking about all the people Brock could have gone after to hurt Bucky. His first thought was the obvious one. The one person Bucky loved more than anything or anyone else. “Becca…?”

“He attacked her outside her school…” Bucky’s voice was quiet, but Steve could tell he was angry. And so was he. Becca was nothing to do with this. She had done nothing wrong. Then, Steve wondered what Bucky meant by ‘attacked’. That could mean that he verbally attacked her, or physically. And if it was physical, how bad was it?

“Is she okay?”
“She’s scared, but she’s okay.”

“Is she home?”

“Yeah.” Bucky’s voice was still quiet, but there was something else there besides anger. He was tired.

“Do you want me to come over?” There was a moment of silence before Bucky spoke again.

“Is Sam still with you?”

Steve had completely forgotten about Sam, but when he turned round he saw the man sat on his couch, watching him. “Yeah… Do you want me to ask him to walk me to your place?”

“Please…” Bucky muttered and Steve nodded. He told Bucky he would be there as soon as he could, then turned to Sam.

“He attacked Bucky’s little sister.”

“That’s got to be enough for Bucky to go to the police.” Sam stood up and Steve nodded.

“Can you walk with me to his house? I understand if you just want to go home, it’s okay—" Before Steve could continue, Sam held his hands up and interrupted him.

“I’ll walk with you, don’t worry, I’ve got nothing else to do,”

Steve quickly pocketed his phone again and walked back out of the apartment with Sam, locking the door behind them.

Steve directed Sam in the right way as they walked, and Sam asked how old Bucky’s sister is. When Steve told him, Sam shook his head in disgust. Steve told him he didn’t know how badly Becca was hurt, and Sam made sure that Steve knew if she was really hurt, they needed to take her to the hospital. Bucky might be in shock from it, or may just be hoping Becca isn’t that badly hurt, so he may be blind to how serious any injuries could be.

When they got to the house, Steve thanked Sam, again. He told Steve to call him if he, Bucky, or Becca needed anything. Steve knocked on the door and, when no one answered, let himself in. He called out Bucky’s name and heard him say he was in Becca’s room.

He went upstairs and opened Becca’s bedroom door. The room was decorated in different shades of purple and there were posters over most of the walls. Above her bed was a notice board with pictures of friends and family pinned to it, and against one wall was a unit with different trophies, ribbons, and certificates on it. Overall, it looked like a typical teenager’s bedroom.

Bucky and Becca were on the bed, with Becca’s face against Bucky’s chest and his arms wrapped tight around her. As he got closer he heard Becca crying quietly, and Steve sat on the bed closest to Becca so Bucky was facing him.

“Becca?” Steve placed his hand on her shoulder and she tensed slightly, then relaxed when she realised it was Steve.

He looked at Bucky and frowned. Bucky’s eyes looked completely empty. There was usually always something in his eyes. Amusement, excitement, sometimes anxiety or worry. But now, Steve couldn’t see any emotion there. And that was worrying, especially when he had his little sister crying in his arms. He should be feeling so much right now, but Bucky’s eyes looked dead.
As he looked at them both, Steve had never hated Brock more.

Given how spaced out Bucky seemed, Steve assumed he probably hasn’t checked Becca’s injuries to see how bad they are. “Becca? Where are you hurt?”

She didn’t reply right away, but when he did, instead of speaking she moved out of Bucky’s hold and sat up to face Steve. She had a small cut on her right temple, nothing of concern, a bruise over her right cheek, and a split lip. It wasn’t as bad as Steve had been dreading, and it probably looked worse than it was because blood was still smeared over her chin from her lip, and across for forehead from the cut.

“Do you mind if I take a picture? To show the police?”

Becca wiped the tear tracks from her cheeks and nodded as Steve took his phone out. She closed her eyes while he took the photo then Bucky sat up and rubbed her back.

“I’m going to get something to clean the cuts…” Steve announced and Bucky told him there was a first aid kit in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

Steve opened the cupboard and his eyes were immediately drawn to the bottle of anti-depressants. Every time Steve had been to the bathroom here, he always looked at the bottle, but it was always in the exact same place. But today, the bottle was on its side and the lid wasn’t on. The lip was next to the open top, and it looked like someone had opened the bottle – presumably to get a pill – and had put it away too quickly, not quite securing the lid on it, and knocking it over when they put it back on the shelf.

He tried not to dwell on it as he took the first aid kit off the top shelf and brought it back to Becca’s room. He took out some antiseptic wipes and apologised when she winces slightly. He cleaned the blood from around the cuts before swiping the wipe over as quickly as possible to avoid hurting Becca too much. Bucky had sat up, and had his arm around Becca’s shoulders, but there was still something wrong with his eyes.

“I think I’m going to take a nap now… Thank you, Steve,” Becca leant forward to hug Steve, who was on his knees in front of her.

“No problem…”

Bucky got up and kissed Becca’s temple on the side that wasn’t cut, then tucked the covers around her and turned the light off. He followed Steve out of the room and went straight to the kitchen. Steve watching him get a bottle of whiskey out of the cupboard and poor a generous amount into his glass.

“Bucky?”

“Hmm?” He put ice into the glass then picked it up to take a gulp from it.

“Talk to me…”

“I am.”

“You know what I mean.” Bucky took another drink of the whiskey and Steve walked over to take it out of his hand. “React…”

“If I react I’ll wake Becca up…”
Steve understood that, but Bucky being so quiet and calm was starting to worry him. He wondered if he was like this when he and Brock were together. Not reacting to awful things to avoid disturbing his family and friends, acting like he was fine, drinking…

“I have to talk to the police, don’t I…?” Bucky eventually said and Steve nodded.

“He needs to pay for hurting Becca. This isn’t just threats and text messages anymore, we have physical evidence that he attacked a minor. That’s a maximum of six months jail time. That, mixed with the stalking and the threats…”

Bucky nodded lightly. “Do you think we could go now? While Becca is sleeping?”

“To talk to the police? Sure!” Steve nodded and held his hand out to Bucky to lead him outside. Bucky followed him and locked the door behind him before going to his car. He assured Steve he was okay to drive, since he had only had a mouthful of whiskey.

The drive to the police station was very tense, and they both sat in silence the whole time. When they finally got there, Steve got out of the car and waited for Bucky to get out. He looked through the window and saw Bucky’s face lit up by the light of his phone. Steve was about to get into the car to see what was wrong, but Bucky locked the doors to keep Steve out as he moved the phone up to his ear.

Steve was confused, and waited for Bucky to get out of the car. But he didn’t. When he hung up, he kept staring down at his lap. Steve walked around to Bucky’s side of the car and knocked on his window. Bucky looked up eventually, and now Steve could see emotion in Bucky’s eyes. He looked scared and helpless. He rolled down the window so he could talk to Steve.

“Alexander just called…”

“What did he say?” Steve was almost scared to ask.

“If Brock gets arrested because of me, I’m going to get arrested because of him.”

“But you haven’t done anything to get arrested for…”

“He’ll tell the police that I hurt Becca and she’s just lying to protect me. There’s no witnesses to what Brock did to Becca, Brock made sure of that. Alexander already has three people prepared to lie about seeing me hit her.”

Steve opened his mouth, but he couldn’t think of any reasoning to avoid that. Alexander had called Bucky, not text him, so there was no evidence that that conversation happened. They had no witnesses for what really happened, and three people who could claim to be witnesses to what Alexander said had happened. It wasn’t unusual for the victim of abuse to claim they weren’t being abused, so if Becca denied it, it wouldn’t be hard to explain the differences in their stories away.

After a few moments of silence, Bucky unlocked the door and got out of the car. “Fuck it.”

Steve stepped back in surprise and followed him. “You’re still going to report him?”

“Yes. I’m sick of him fucking up my life, but hurting my sister crossed the fucking line. If there’s even the slightest chance that I can get rid of this bastard, I’m taking it.”

Bucky went inside and told the receptionist he wanted to report an assault. Steve gave Bucky his phone with the picture of Becca’s face on it and a cop took him into a different room to talk to him.
while Steve waited in the foyer.

Almost half an hour later, Bucky came out and smiled at Steve. The cop who Bucky had been with left the building and went to his car, then Bucky pulled Steve out and into Bucky’s car.

“He’s going to arrest Brock now, and I don’t want to be here when Brock is or I will be going to jail for assault, just not assault against Becca. I told him about Alexander’s call, and he took pictures of my knuckles. Becca said Brock punched her, and the rings he was wearing it what caused the cuts. If that’s true, Brock should have a cut or bruise on his knuckles. I don’t have any marks. And he took a copy of the picture for evidence.”

Steve smiled as Bucky talked. He seemed calmer now, and less concerned about getting arrested himself. Bucky leant back in his seat with his eyes closed and took a deep breath before starting the car to drive home. Half way back, he remembered Steve and glanced over at him.

“Do you want me to take you home? Or you could stay over? Your choice.”

Steve smiled and accepted the invitation to stay over.

When they got back to Bucky’s house, the door was locked, just as Bucky left it. They went inside and Bucky quickly went up to check on Becca before coming back down and assuring Steve that she hadn’t moved since they left.

Bucky turned the stove on to preheat the oven then opened the freezer to pick what to make. He turned to Steve and asked if he had eaten yet. When Steve shook his head, Bucky looked a little concerned as he looked at his watch. It was past six in the afternoon.

“Steve, you really have to start eating properly…”

“I would if I could afford to.” Steve muttered as he sat down. He didn’t expect Bucky to have heard him, but when he looked up he noticed Bucky staring at him with a sad expression. “But it’s okay. I eat enough to survive. And Sam invites me for dinner a lot. Really, I’m fine,”

Bucky didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push it. He asked him what he wanted, but Steve just said he’d be happy with anything. Bucky rolled his eyes and took out all the ingredients he needed to make spaghetti bolognaise. As he fried the mincemeat, he took an apple out of the fruit bowl and tossed it to Steve, who caught it and narrowly avoided being smacked in the face by it.

“We’re having dinner soon, why are you giving me an apple?”

“Just eat it, Steve.” Bucky kissed Steve’s cheek as he passed him. “I’m in a very protective and caring mood now. If you don’t eat it I’ll blend it, hold your nose, and pour it down your throat,”

_BWhen are you not in a protective and caring mood?_ Steve thought, but he didn’t say it. He just smiled and bit into the apple. He supposed after Bucky’s sister had been attacked, Bucky might be feeling a little useless because he wasn’t there to protect her, so he was overcompensating by making sure Steve definitely ate enough. Bucky would probably force Becca to eat everything he puts on her plate too.

When the food was done, Bucky asked Steve to go wake up Becca and he agreed and knocked on her bedroom door.

“Becca? Bucky made food, are you hungry?” He called through the door when he heard Becca move inside the room.
She opened the door, dressed in fluffy blue pyjamas and nodded as she rubbed her eyes. Before Steve could walk back downstairs, she caught his arm.

“Where did you two go earlier?” So she did wake up? The telepathy thing must be hereditary, because Becca continued immediately. “I heard the car and went down to make sure the doors were locked…”

“We went to the police station to report Brock for what he did to you.” Steve answered and Becca smiled and pulled Steve into a hug. He hugged her back with a smile and she kept an arm around his middle as they went downstairs, so Steve kept his arm around her shoulders in return.

Bucky looked up as they entered the kitchen and smiled at the image. Becca moved away from Steve and hugged Bucky when he put the pot he was holding down. He hugged her back and dropped his head on top of her’s. While they hugged, Steve finished putting the spaghetti bolognese onto the three plates Bucky had set out.

They then went into the dining room and Becca put on some music while they ate. Becca stopped half way through but all it took was a glare from Bucky to make her pick up her fork and keep eating. Steve suffered the same glare when he tried to stop. As always, Bucky ate every scrap of his own food, then took everyone’s plates into the kitchen.

Becca told Bucky she was going back to bed, and Bucky told her she wasn’t going to school tomorrow and he wasn’t going to work. She smiled as she hugged him again and said goodnight, then she hugged Steve.

As she left the room, Steve stood beside Bucky and started drying the dished he washed. They settled into a routine and remained quiet for a while.

“You did the right thing today, Buck.” Steve assured him, just in case he needed to hear that, and Bucky smiled.

“Thanks Steve, I’m glad you think so.”

Once the dishes were done, Steve dried his hands and pulled Bucky into a hug. Bucky immediately hugged back and kissed the side of Steve’s head.

“I’m sorry being with me brings so much trouble with it.” Bucky whispered and Steve tightened his arms around Bucky as much as he could.

“I’ll take all the trouble in the world if it means I can be with you,” Steve replied and leant up to kiss Bucky. Bucky kissed back and Steve felt his lips curl up in a smile, making him smile too.

Steve loved Bucky’s smile. He loved his kisses, and how he held Steve. He loved Bucky’s laugh, and when he made stupid jokes. He loved how much he cared about Steve, and his sister. He loved Bucky’s determination to protect the people he cares about, and to make them happy. He loved Bucky’s hands, and how they felt in Steve’s, or touching any part of his body. He loved Bucky’s furnace-like skin.

As Steve rested his head against Bucky’s chest, content in his embrace, he realised something that almost made him stop breathing.

*I’m so in love with Bucky Barnes.*

He looked up at Bucky to see if he had managed to read his mind then, but Bucky seemed completely oblivious to Steve’s revelation. He smiled at Steve and kissed him again, and Steve
kissed back with a smile.

They finished cleaning the kitchen, then went upstairs. Steve used the spare toothbrush in Bucky’s bathroom and some clothes Bucky gave him because they were too small for him, so they fit Steve well. Bucky claimed the clothes were his, but just too small, but they didn’t seem like they had been worn. Ever.

They weren’t faded, like the other clothes Steve sometimes had to borrow from Bucky. There was even still a crease down the centre on the pant legs. They were definitely brand new. But they were also definitely Steve’s size. Exactly Steve’s size.

He smiled slightly as he went back into Bucky’s room and curled up under the covers against Bucky’s chest. Bucky wrapped his arms around him after turning the lamp off and they both said goodnight.

*Yep... I’m definitely 100%, irrevocable in love with James Buchanan Barnes...*
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Brock has a friend who's as psychotic as he is.

Steve wasn’t working the next day, so he stayed with Becca and Bucky all day. He woke up before either of them, so he went downstairs and made them breakfast. He cooked scrambled eggs, toast, baked beans, and sausages then set it all out on a plate for them. Steve knew that Bucky would insist on Steve having some too, so he made three plates. The smell must have woken Becca up, because Steve heard footsteps on the stairs and smiled when Becca walked into the room rubbing her eyes. She looked a little surprised that it was Steve cooking and not Bucky, but she smiled and sat at the island in the kitchen.

“Morning, Steve.”

“Good morning. How’s your face?” Steve winced slightly at his own words, worried he had offended her, but Becca just shrugged.

“Still hurts, but I’m young and pretty healthy so it should heal soon,”

Steve nodded and poured her a glass of orange juice. She thanked him and drank almost the full glass in one go. “You didn’t have to cook, you know? Bucky is always happy to do it.”

Steve just shrugged. “I wanted to do something nice for you two, you’ve both been through a lot lately.”

Becca smiled as him and took the orange carton from Steve to pour more into her glass. “Is Bucky still sleeping?”

Steve nodded and stirred the beans to avoid them sticking to the bottom of the pan. Everything was almost done and, if Bucky wasn’t awake by the time he finished plating it up, Steve would go wake him up. He heard movement upstairs as he finished putting the last lot of food onto the plates and smiled when he realised Bucky had woken up on his own. Bucky came into the room looking confused, probably because as far as Steve knew, Becca didn’t cook. The confusion disappeared when he saw Steve, though, and he smiled instead.

Before Bucky could say Steve didn’t have to cook, Steve passed him his plate and cutlery. They decided to sit at the island in the kitchen to eat instead of going to the dining room. Bucky checked Becca’s face before going to sit next to Steve and pushed Steve’s hair back so he could kiss his forehead before starting to eat. Steve smiled and kissed Bucky’s cheek in return, then started eating his own food.

He always ate way more than usual when he was with Bucky, but he supposed that was a good thing. Steve had stopped feeling lightheaded after working for too long, and he supposed that was because of the extra food. He didn’t want to tell Bucky this, though.

Firstly, he knew Bucky would be mad that Steve ever got lightheaded in the first place. And secondly, Bucky would take it upon himself to make sure Steve definitely never felt lightheaded
from lack of food again. He had enough responsibility, he didn’t need Steve adding more to that.

They ate in silence, because Becca and Bucky weren’t really morning people. Bucky was cuddly and affectionate in bed in the mornings, but once he was forced to actually get up and move, it took all his energy not to go back to sleep, so conversation was too much of an effort. And Becca was pretty much the same. She seemed to be using all her effort just to keep her head up and lift her fork.

Once they were finished, Becca and Bucky insisted on doing the dishes and refused to let Steve help. It was their way of thanking him for the breakfast, so Steve stayed on his stool and waited.

Bucky washed the dishes while Becca dried them and put them away. Steve took out his phone while they did, and saw that he had a text from Sam asking if everyone was okay. He typed out what Brock had done, and what Alexander had said would happen if they reported him to the police, then explained their plan for how to avoid that happening. Sam suggested talking to Stark about it, and clarified that he had read somewhere that the Stark family had the best lawyers in the country. Steve decided to bring that up to Bucky later and thanked Sam for the advice. He agreed to call Sam later, when he got home.

He looked up when he heard Becca squeal and saw Bucky putting stud on her nose. They both laughed and she flicked some at him then hit him with the dishcloth, and Steve smiled at them.

Steve remembered his revelation last night as he watched Bucky teasing his sister. He wondered if he should tell Bucky, but there was so much going on lately, he decided it wasn’t the right time. He’d tell Bucky when everything calmed down and Brock wasn’t a constant threat to them.

Becca then went down into the basement to dance and Bucky told her to take it easy. He came over to Steve when she was gone and kissed him.

“Thank you for cooking.” He muttered against Steve’s lips and Steve smiled.

“You’re welcome.”

Bucky was leaned over the island to reach Steve and it couldn’t have been comfortable, but he didn’t try to move to get more comfortable, just leaned on one hand and cupped Steve’s face with the other. Steve eventually broke the kiss to go brush his teeth.

He opened the medicine cabinet and frowned when he saw that the antidepressants had been moved again. They were stood up again, but the lid was still not on properly, just resting on top of the bottle. Steve didn’t hear Bucky come up behind him, so he didn’t know he was there until Steve’s curiosity got the better of him and he picked up the bottle to see if there was a label on it with either Becca or Bucky’s name on it.

“Barnes, James B.”

He looked into the bottle to see that there were only a few left. Definitely less than there had been when he had first seen them.

“Yeah, they’re mine,“

Steve almost screamed in surprise when he heard Bucky’s voice, and quickly spun round to face him. He immediately started apologising, but remembered that he was still holding the bottle. Steve turned to put them back, but Bucky stepped forward and took them from his hand.

Steve thought Bucky would be mad. Steve was invading his privacy by even looking at the pills,
let alone reading the label to see who they were prescribed for. But he didn’t look mad. He looked completely relaxed as he took one out of the bottle and filled up a glass of water at the sink, then swallowed the pill with the water.

“You’re depressed?” Steve asked quietly and Bucky nodded.

“I was put on them while I was with Brock. I haven’t needed them in a while, though, but with what’s been happening lately…”

Steve nodded in understanding and stepped forward to hug Bucky before he could stop himself. He heard the pills rattle as Bucky hugged him back, still holding the bottle in one hand and the glass of water in the other.

“You don’t mind?” Bucky asked and Steve frowned then pulled back.

“I don’t mind what?”

“That I’m on pills…”

Steve shook his head. “If they help you, I don’t care. Anything that helps you is good in my books.”

Bucky smiled at Steve and kissed him again. He put the lid on the bottle properly before putting them back in their place in the medicine cabinet. “Thanks, Steve.”

Steve smiled as Bucky poured the water down the sink then smiled at Steve and left the room. Steve brushed his teeth then followed him downstairs.

The police came after lunch and asked to speak to Becca about what happened, alone. Bucky wasn’t particularly happy about it, but he stood in the kitchen with Steve while Becca and the cops sat in the living room.

Half an hour later, the cops came to tell Bucky they had gotten Becca’s statement and it matched what Bucky had said, and what Brock had said was completely different. He had said he saw Bucky punch Becca when she talked back to him. Steve saw the muscle in Bucky’s cheek jump as he clenched his jaw, but the police said that they didn’t believe that after what Becca had said.

One of the officers was a fairly young man, no older than twenty five, and told Bucky that Becca wouldn’t stop talking about how amazing her brother was when they mentioned what Brock had said happened. They also checked Bucky’s knuckles and saw that the bruises didn’t match. Bucky’s hands were too slender.

They asked him to make a fist and hold it next to Becca’s face and they saw that Bucky’s fist wasn’t big enough to make a cut on her forehead and split her lip in one hit. They also clarified that the bruise and cuts were obviously all made at the same time, so it was one hit that caused it. They made a note of all the information they gathered against Brock’s statement then thanked them for co-operating and left.

When they left, Bucky told Steve that Brock had fatter hands than him as they sat on the couch together, so his fist would be bigger. Steve took one of Bucky’s hands in his and smiled as he inspected them. His fingers were long, but they were thin, and so was his palm. He lifted Bucky’s hand and kissed his unscathed knuckles.

Becca cleared her throat loudly, but she didn’t look annoyed, she was smiling slightly. Bucky
reached out to cover her eyes with one hand then pulled Steve into a passionate kiss. Steve smiled in amusement as he kissed back and draped his arms over Bucky’s shoulder.

Becca whined in protest and pushed Bucky’s hand away, then made fake gagging noises. Bucky pushed Steve to lay across the couch and crawled on top of him as Steve laughed.

“Gross!” Becca shouted before getting up to leave the room.

Bucky broke the kiss as he laughed and helped Steve sit up again. “Becca, I’m sorry!”

Becca reluctantly stuck her head back into the room. “Are you two done?”

Steve laughed and nodded. “We’re done, don’t worry.”

Becca came back in and sat on the other side of the couch to Bucky so he was in the middle then got Netflix up on the TV to pick something to watch. They argued about what to watch for twenty minutes before settling on *Kingsman: The Secret Service*.

Steve and Becca both leaned against Bucky’s shoulders when he came back from getting popcorn and left the bowl on his lap so all three of them could reach it.

Steve didn’t eat any for the first half an hour of the film, but even though Bucky was immersed in the movie, he still noticed and held a piece up to Steve’s mouth every so often to feed him. Steve smiled and ate every piece he held up.

Becca and Bucky both ranted for ten minutes about how amazing the Church fight scene was and Steve smiled as he listened to them. They also ranted about Eggsy’s character development, but every time Valentine was on the screen Steve couldn’t think of anything except how much he looked like Nick Fury, the owner of the hardware store. He shook his head slightly to try to get rid of that thought and concentrate on the actual scene.

As soon as it finished, Bucky Googled whether there was going to be a second one. He happily announced that there would be, and he and Becca high-fived each other.

Steve got up to go change into the clothes he was wearing the day before so he wasn’t sat in his pyjamas, and Bucky told him he put the clothes in his wardrobe, but then he jumped up and pushed Steve back on the couch.

“I’ll go get them! Stay out of my wardrobe!” He quickly left the room and Steve frowned in confusion, wondering what Bucky could have in his closet.

Before he could ask, Becca told him. “That’s where he hides Christmas present.”

“Oh…” Steve sighed in relief and Becca laughed.

“What did you think he had in there? Do I want to know?”

Steve blushed but smirked and shook his head. Becca held her hands up to signal that she wasn’t going to ask, then offered Steve the last bit of popcorn. He took it and thanked her, then got up to go get dressed when Bucky came down and told him the clothes were on the bed. Bucky had changed into loose jeans (for the first time Steve had seen) and a baggy t-shirt. He also warned Steve that if he looked in the wardrobe, Bucky would know and he’d be pissed. Steve nodded and promised he wouldn’t look, then went upstairs to change.

The clothes laid out on the bed weren’t the clothes he came over in. He had been wearing his...
uniform, because Steve had come straight from work. But the clothes on the bed were new. A blue and black striped t-shirt and new jeans. They still had the tags on, so Bucky couldn’t just claim they were his but he outgrew them. His actual clothes were on the bed too, but they were in the corner on the pillow, in a bag. Steve was tempted to change into his uniform and tell Bucky he couldn’t accept more clothes from him, but he knew he’d lose that argument. Bucky would just claim he can’t return the clothes, so Steve may as well use them.

He reluctantly changed into the new clothes and put on his old sneakers. The t-shirt was softer than anything he owned, probably because they hadn’t been worn down already and made scratchy from repeatedly being washed. The jeans were a little stiff, but they fit perfectly, and he didn’t need a belt like he did with all his other trousers. Steve briefly wondered how Bucky knew his size, apparently better than Steve did.

He wasn’t sure what to do with the pyjamas, but when he opened the bag to make sure all of his uniform was in there, there was a note sat on top, written in Bucky’s neat, cursive handwriting.

“Take the PJs, they’re yours x”

Steve smiled slightly and put the pyjamas in the bag with his uniform. He glanced over at the cupboard and he suddenly felt like an excited child again. There was at least one present in there for him. He managed to persuade himself not to look, though. Bucky had been right, presents were supposed to be a surprise, and Steve was looking forward to the surprise as much as he was looking forward to getting a present.

Steve knew what he was getting Bucky. He had asked Peggy and Angie for advice, and their ideas were amazing. Angie had texted him a link to a “Wreck This Journal”, which was a notebook with blank pages and a basic cover. The idea was that someone can draw whatever they wanted on it, or write whatever they wanted. There was no need for it to be neat, or for there to be any structure at all in anything that went in it or on the covers. It seemed like something Bucky would like. He could write in it, and scribble bits out, or add bits into it, and it wouldn’t ruin it. He could scribble drawings on the cover. Bucky couldn’t draw, but he enjoyed doodling. He did it when he had nothing else to do with his hands, but he had too much unused energy to just sit and do nothing.

But that was just one thing, and Steve assumed Bucky had gotten him more than one thing. So, he also decided to draw him something. Bucky always loved Steve’s drawings, even when they were quick sketches. So he decided to draw himself, Becca, Bucky, and Natasha together. But he wanted the drawing to be perfect, so it was going to take him a lot longer than his drawings usually did. It’d be worth it though, hopefully. He also had his coloured pencils, so the picture wouldn’t just be a sketch.

He decided to get Becca and Natasha something too, but he honestly had no idea what to get them.

Steve came back downstairs and left the bag in Bucky’s bedroom. Becca and Bucky were looking through Netflix to find something else to watch. They asked Steve’s opinion, but Steve wasn’t much help. He had never heard of a lot of the stuff on there, so he couldn’t vouch for if they were good or not.

They eventually settled on a cliché comedy and Bucky made more popcorn. Steve didn’t really find it funny, it was kind of boring. But Bucky and Becca both laughed at it, so he smiled whenever either of them looked at him and decided to watch it to the end with them.

Once it finished, Bucky got up to make dinner. Bucky insisted that Steve stay for dinner, then he would drive him home.
Bucky told Becca he would lock the door behind them, and she nodded in relief. It was getting dark, so Bucky had to turn his headlights on as he drove Steve home. But, when they got to his apartment building, Bucky didn’t indicate to show that he was going to pull over, then drove straight past it. Steve frowned in confusion but, as they passed the building, Steve saw a man sat on the stone steps outside. Bucky must have deemed him a threat.

“I’ll circle the block, if he’s still there when I go back, I’ll walk you inside,”

Steve was about to mention that Bucky walked him inside all the time anyway, but instead he just nodded. He hoped the guy had nothing to do with them, and he was just waiting for a friend or something, then he’d be gone when they got back. But he wasn’t.

Bucky parked a few feet away from him and turned to Steve. He asked if he wanted to just come back to Bucky’s house, but Steve didn’t hear him properly. He was too busy staring at the man.

“He looks familiar…” He muttered, then he realised where he had seen him again. “He’s the guy that tried to grab me… When you were talking to Brock next to your car…”

Bucky leant forward slightly to see, then sat back in his chair, eyes wide.

“Do you know him?” Steve asked as he looked between Bucky and the other man.

“That’s Rollins…”

Steve tried to remember why that name sounded familiar, then he realised he was one of the other guys who started working on Bucky’s team at the same time as Rumlow.

“Are you sure he’s the one who grabbed you?” Bucky asked quietly then looked over at Steve. Steve nodded and Bucky sighed. “Great…”

Bucky put his keys back in the ignition and went to start the engine again. Before Steve could ask what he was doing and before he turned the key, they both looked up and saw that the man wasn’t in front of the building anymore. Then, the back door opened and Rollins got into the backseat of the car.

“Hey, Barnes!” He grinned and Bucky glared at him through the rear-view mirror. “Steve, don’t you want to go home?”

Steve turned to look at the man with a similar glare to Bucky’s. “No… I want to stay with Bucky…”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea…” Rollins smirked at him and, because Steve was looking directly at him whereas Bucky was looking at him in the mirror, he saw what Rollins was holding. It caught the light coming from the streetlights outside and glinted.

Steve realised it was a knife and he felt his whole body tense. He glanced at Bucky but he seemed completely unaware. He was mad, but he didn’t look particularly tense. There was no way Bucky could see the knife in the mirror, just Rollins’ face.

Steve didn’t think it would be a good idea to tell Bucky that Rollins had a knife, it might prompt him into using it. He was sat in the seat behind Bucky’s, so he would be the first target. He would have to reach over to hurt Steve with it, and Bucky would realise and probably stop him before Steve could get hurt.

The knife wasn’t very long. If he stabbed the back of Bucky’s chair, the blade wouldn’t get to him.
But he could reach around the seat to get to Bucky. Or it could stab him in the back of the neck, through the gap between the seat and the headrest. Or he could reach around and slit Bucky’s throat.

He could do any of this before Steve could stop him, and before Bucky even realised he had a weapon. Steve felt his heart speed up and knew he was seconds from hyperventilating.

**Bucky is in danger and he doesn’t even realise it…**

“Jack, get out of my fucking car and go home,” Bucky went to start the car again, but before he could touch the key, Rollins sat forward and put the knife to Bucky’s throat.

Steve felt his blood go cold as Bucky’s head moved back instinctively, exposing more of his neck. He appeared to have stopped breathing too.

“Steve, get out of the car.” Rollins told him, pressing the blade closer to Bucky’s throat.

Steve looked between Rollins and Bucky. He didn’t want to leave Bucky with this guy. If Bucky got hurt, it’d be his fault for leaving him, even if Steve couldn’t really do much to protect him. Steve was weak, he knew that. He used to get into fights when he was in school with bullies, but none of them ever had weapons. They were just stupid kids throwing their fists around, and Steve was still often the loser in that situation.

But if he refused to leave, Rollins might hurt Bucky to prove a point or to punish Steve for not co-operating.

Steve looked at Bucky’s face to see what he wanted Steve to do. Bucky looked scared, but he nodded at Steve to indicate for him to get out.

“Get out, now!” Rollins shouted and pressed the knife against Bucky’s throat hard enough to draw a line of blood. Bucky closed his eyes tight and Steve wanted to push the knife away from him, but it’d cause more trouble than it would help. He reluctantly got out of the car, and saw Rollins say something to Bucky before he started the car and drove away.

Steve quickly memorised Bucky’s licence plate then took his phone out to call the police. He told the operator everything and recited Bucky’s licence plate. They said they would dispatch people and try to find the car. They asked Steve where he was so someone could pick him up and take his official statement, and he gave them his address.

Steve paced outside the building, close to tears, as he waited.

Bucky could be dead already if Rollins decided he wanted him to be. He had to sit down on the steps after a minute, his chest felt tight and his airways felt restricted. Steve wrapped one arm around himself and covered his mouth with the other hand to try to stay quiet as he sobbed.

“Steve?”

His head shot up, fear filling his mind, but he saw that it was only Peggy and Angie. They both sat either side of him and touched one of his arms each as he buried his face in his hands to hide how much he was crying.

“Steve? What’s wrong?” Peggy sounded worried, and she and Angie both rubbed his arms.

Steve tried to keep it together, he really did. But when he had to repeat what had happened for the second time in barely five minutes, he couldn’t stop himself from sobbing between every other
word. His voice was muffled by his hands, but Peggy and Angie got the gist of it.

“Oh my god…” He heard Peggy mutter, and Angie quickly stood up.

“Steve, come on. Let’s go inside…”

Steve shook his head quickly. “The police will be here soon, I have to talk to them,”

“I’ll wait down here and bring them up,” Peggy announced as she stood up too and Angie immediately shook her head.

“Like hell you will! What if another of this creep’s friends show up?”

“I can handle it, Angie. Take Steve upstairs!”

The tone in her voice told them both that there was no room for argument, so Angie helped Steve up and took him inside. Steve let her lead him up the stairs to her’s and Peggy’s apartment. He sat down on the couch and she brought him a glass of water.

“Steve,” He vaguely heard her voice, but he couldn’t concentrate on it. “Steve, look at me…”

Steve eventually looked up and she smiled sympathetically. “The police will find them, Bucky will be fine…”

Steve nodded, hoping more than anything that she was right. But he couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen if she was wrong. If anything happened to Bucky, Steve would be devastated. Just the thought of it hurt his heart. If Bucky died, Steve’s heart would definitely break. It would be Steve’s fault that such an amazing, loving, generous person died at just nineteen.

Bucky doesn’t deserve this shit! Steve thought angrily. Bucky deserved nothing but happiness. He had never hurt anyone, all he did was help people.

Steve thought about all the ways Bucky had effected his life in the few months he had known him. How different it would be if Bucky was no longer in it. Natasha would be distraught too. And Becca, god, Becca would be inconsolable.

At fourteen she would have lost her parents and her big brother. As far as Steve knew, Bucky was all the family Becca had left. She’s too young to take care of herself. She’d definitely be sent into care. She’d either be put up for adoption or she’d be put into foster care until she became of age. Even then, she’d be alone.

Then, Steve realised Becca wasn’t even aware of what was happening. She was probably wondering why Bucky was taking so long. She didn’t know her brother was in mortal danger.

He took his phone out and scrolled through his contacts, feeling his chest tighten again as he saw Bucky’s name. He clicked Becca’s name and held it up to his ear. Steve realised his hands were shaking, but tried to ignore it.

“Hey Steve!” She sounded so happy.

“Becca…” Steve started, but he didn’t know how to say it. He had had to explain it twice already, but telling the police and the girls wasn’t even close to telling Bucky’s sister.

“What’s wrong…?” Becca sounded worried now, and Steve wished he could tell her everything was okay.
“One of Brock’s friends got in the car when we stopped… He held a knife to Bucky’s throat and told me to get out, then he and Bucky drove off…”

There was silence of the other end of the line, and Steve understood that there was little Becca could say to that. Then, he heard Becca cry. He wished he could be there to hug her, and hated that she was alone right now. He had Peggy and Angie, but Becca was in the house alone. Not only did she have no one to hug her, but she was also unprotected.

Steve suddenly felt the urge to run back to the Barnes house. He couldn’t protect Bucky, but he had the chance to protect Becca if she needed it. Bucky would be happy if Steve protected his sister for him when he was unable to.

Before Angie could stop him, he stood up and ran out of the apartment. Angie ran after him and shouted at Peggy to stop him as he got outside. Steve narrowly avoided Peggy’s arms and kept running. They ran after him for a bit, but they were still wearing the heels they had to wear for work, so he eventually lost them. He was still on the phone with Becca and told her that he was on his way over. Becca told him to be careful and Steve asked her to get his inhaler out of Bucky’s bedside table for when he got there, he figured he’d need it.

Bucky was the one who suggested Steve leave an inhaler at his house. He was worried about Steve’s breathing after they fooled around, and Steve had tried to assure him that he was fine. But he eventually did relent and agree to leave one in Bucky’s bedroom.

Steve knocked on the door and as soon as Becca opened the door she threw her arms around him. She was still crying, and Steve stepped inside to close and lock the door behind him. He moved Becca to the couch and sat down with her, hugging her tight as she handed over Steve’s inhaler.

Steve’s phone rang as he took a few breaths from the inhaler and he saw that it was Peggy. He was tempted to ignore it, but it could be news from the police about Bucky.

He held the phone up to his ear and listened to Peggy rant about how irresponsible it was of Steve to run out into the street alone when he could be in danger. He explained about Bucky’s sister and Peggy eventually agreed that that was an acceptable reason, but he still should have told them so they could have driven him. She told him the police were there, and they haven’t yet found Bucky’s car.

Peggy had given the police Steve’s number and they said they would call him when they knew anything. But the chances of them being able to find his car in such a big city any time soon were slim.

He repeated the information to Becca and she asked Steve to stay the night in their house again, and Steve agreed. Steve said he’d sleep in Bucky’s room, and took Becca up to bed. He waited with her until she fell asleep, then tucked her in the way he saw Bucky do.

Steve went to Bucky’s room and changed into the pyjamas Bucky bought for him then crawled into the bed. He could smell Bucky’s cologne and his natural scent and closed his eyes as he hugged Bucky’s pillow. He inhaled the smell of Bucky’s shampoo and tried so hard not to cry, but it was no use.

He buried his face against the pillow as sobs wracked his body. Eventually, he fell into an uneasy, nightmare-plagued sleep.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Bucky has been missing for a week and Natasha is done waiting for the police.
Commence Operation: Save Bucky Barnes

“Steve!” Bucky sobbed and reached out to him, but Steve couldn’t move.

Blood was pouring from Bucky’s nose, mouth, and gashes on his forehead. Rollins laughed and grabbed Bucky by his hair. He moved Bucky onto his back and straddled him, holding a knife.

There was nothing holding Steve still. He could, logically, run over and help Bucky. He could knock Rollins away from him. But Steve couldn’t force his legs to move, it felt like he was frozen in place.

All he could do was watch as Bucky tried to fight against Rollins. He pushed at him and tried to knock the knife out of his hand, but Bucky couldn’t see properly, the blood from his head was getting into his eyes and he had to screw them shut. The blood mixed with the tears were making it impossible for him to fight.

Steve tried to make himself move forward to them, Bucky’s cries wracking through him. But his body still wouldn’t listen to him.

Rollins managed to pin both of Bucky’s wrists above his head with one hand, and Bucky screamed as Rollins thrust the knife into his stomach. Rollins then let go of him and ran away, and Steve could finally move. He ran over to Bucky and dropped to his knees beside him, trying not to look at the pool of blood around Bucky’s torso and head.

“Bucky…?” Steve cupped Bucky’s face and prayed he would open his eyes.

He did, but when Steve saw the pain and fear in them, he almost wished he hadn’t. Tears slipped down Bucky’s face and over Steve’s thumb as he stared up at him.

“Why didn’t you save me?” He whispered and Steve sobbed as he stroked Bucky’s pale cheek.

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…”

Bucky’s eyes started to close and Steve screamed at him to stay awake, stay with him. Bucky raised one hand to Steve’s shoulder, but his touch was cold as opposed to his usual heated skin. Steve could feel it through his shirt like ice.

“You… Left me…” Bucky gritted out and Steve rested his head on Bucky’s chest. His own body was shaking from the force of his cries.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry…” He muttered over and over again, until he felt Bucky’s chest become still and his heartbeat fade…
Steve woke up screaming, still clutching Bucky’s pillow. He grabbed his inhaler and took several breaths from it, then buried his face in the pillow, but it didn’t smell like Bucky anymore. It smelt like Steve, and Steve felt tears soak into the material.

There was a knock at the bedroom door, then Becca stuck her head inside. “Steve…”

He put the pillow to the side and wiped his tears quickly. Steve was supposed to stay strong for Becca, he was supposed to be taking care of her.

She didn’t say anything as she walked into the room, and Steve saw her eyes cast to the side to look at the picture on Bucky’s wall of his friends and family. There were was a picture of Steve on there too, with Becca, Bucky and Natasha after Becca’s dance competition. Bucky kept bugging Steve to take more pictures with him to go on his wall, but Steve always hated how he looked in pictures, so he had always refused. Now, though, Steve wished he had more pictures with Bucky. He wished he had a whole photo album with pictures of him and Bucky together filling it. Even if they weren’t doing anything memorable in the picture, if it was just selfies of them watching TV together.

Becca sat on the bed with Steve, on Bucky’s side, and looked around the room.

“Feels weird…” She muttered, and Steve waited for her to elaborate. “The room feels wrong…”

Steve knew what she meant by that. Not just because Bucky wasn’t in there with them, Steve had been in this room without Bucky before and so had Becca. But there was something… cold about the room. Everything was exactly where it had been last time Bucky was in there, and that didn’t feel right. It shouldn’t be the same. It shouldn’t look as though nothing had changed.

Steve looked at Bucky’s bookshelf and frowned slightly. Bucky had put some of his books away in the wrong order. He usually did them alphabetically by author’s last name, then within the authors, the titles were alphabetised. Unless the books were a series, in which case they were chronologically organised, and put in the alphabetical position in relation to the other books by that author, based on the name of the series as a whole. There was a Ned Vizzini novel in the Stephen King section, and an Ernest Hemingway book with Charles Bukowski.

Steve knew that that would annoy Bucky, so he got up and went over to fix it. Becca didn’t say anything as she watched Steve pull a few books out and move them around. He skimmed the titles of them all to make sure everything was in its rightful place, then moved back to the bed. Becca smiled slightly at him and rested her head against his shoulder.

“What you think he’s okay?”

Steve didn’t know. He hoped so, but he didn’t know how likely that was. Becca obviously knew that Steve didn’t know, but she asked anyway because she needed to hear that her brother would be home and safe soon.

“Bucky’s a survivor, he’ll be fine.” Steve nodded with faux-confidence and Becca smiled again.

“Thank you… Do you mind if I sleep in here tonight with you?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t mind.”

They both laid down and Becca rested her head against Steve’s shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her and closed his eyes, but he waited until he was sure Becca was asleep before falling asleep himself.
The police couldn’t find his car, Brock wasn’t talking, and they had no leads. No one had seen Rollins waiting outside Steve’s apartment building, and no one had seen where Bucky’s car went. Becca had been given the week off school when they heard what happened, and Steve had been given two days off from work. Well, not really “off”. Sam covered his shifts at the hardware store. He had called Steve the day after Bucky had been taken and Sam had come over as soon as Steve started crying. He introduced him to Becca and then he and Sam sat in the living room, Steve crying on his shoulder.

He said he would come round as often as he could to make sure Steve and Becca were eating. Steve felt like a failure. He hadn’t even realised Becca hadn’t been eating until Sam asked. He had forgotten to make her anything and forgotten to make himself food too.

Steve had pretty much moved into Bucky’s room. It was easier being closer to Bucky’s things, and this way he could look after Becca as best he could.

Steve was glad it hadn’t snowed yet. Call it stupid sentiment, but Steve wanted to see the first snow of the year with Bucky.

There were no words to describe how furious Natasha was.

Becca had called her the day after Bucky was taken, and Steve could hear her screaming obscenities in a different language over the phone as she cursed her cousin. She came over as soon as she could and stayed moderately calm as Steve told her what happened. Then, she went into the basement, and Steve and Becca heard her screaming more foreign words, followed by things being smashed. Becca explained that they kept cheap plates down there and, when she or Bucky got particularly frustrated, they would go into the basement and throw the plates against the wall or the floor to smash them and relieve stress.

Natasha came back up, and said she was going to talk to Brock in the holding cells at the police station. Steve had insisted on going with her, and he locked the door behind them so Becca was safe in the house.

She had all but begged Brock to tell her where Rollins took Bucky, but he had just laughed and said there was only one way he would tell. And that’s if Natasha bailed him out. The police had interrogated him, but he claimed he didn’t even know Rollins, despite the fact that they both worked on the Stark building together.

She and Steve left the station to talk outside and Natasha asked Steve for his opinion. They agreed that Bucky would be safer with Brock locked up, even if it meant they’d have to wait for the police to find him. If they did bail him out, there was very little chance he’d actually tell them where Bucky was. He’d probably go to wherever Rollins was keeping him and hurt Bucky himself.

They couldn’t risk putting Bucky in more danger.

Sam offered to cover Steve’s shift for longer, but sitting in Bucky’s house all day wasn’t helping. He couldn’t stop thinking about all the horrible things they could be doing to Bucky. Steve needed something to distract himself, at least during the day.

After a week, Becca would have to go back to school. She hated the thought of it. Becca told Steve it would feel too normal, sitting in lessons and doing class work. But they both knew that sitting at home all day wasn’t doing her any good either, and Bucky would be pissed if she let her school work suffer because of him.

Steve had also had to call Tony Stark to tell him why Bucky and Brock wouldn’t be coming into
work. He sounded pissed, but not that he was understaffed, because something happened to Bucky. Steve was surprised by how much Stark seemed to care. The fact that he had answered the call himself instead of his PA, Jarvis, was a shock in itself. He assured Steve that if Jack Rollins came into work, he would be apprehended by security until the police could get there.

The next day, there was a knock at the door and Steve looked through the peephole to see who it was before answering it. It was Tony Stark, and Edmund Jarvis. Steve opened the door, a little surprised and, admittedly star-struck.

“Mr Stark…”

“Please, call me Tony,” He took his red-tinted sunglasses off and Jarvis held up a basket full of assorted items. “We brought some stuff to help while James is… Not around.”

Before Steve could invite him in, Stark stepped around the shorter man into the house. Jarvis looked apologetic as he followed his boss into the house, still holding the basket.

“Hey Becca!” Stark smiled, and she stood up and smiled back.

“Hi Tony…” Tony took the basket off Jarvis and handed it to her. There was fresh fruit, packaged food that could be microwaved easily, relaxation shower gel, and lots of chocolate. “Thank you!”

Stark nodded and turned to Steve. “So, you’re James’ boyfriend?”

Steve nodded and stepped forward to shake his and his PA’s hand. Stark’s carefree attitude disappeared as he pulled Steve closer by his hand. “How you dealing with all this?”

“Not greatly…”

Stark nodded and let go of him. “Understandable. If you need anything, give me a call. Oh, and James’ pay won’t stop while he’s not working. I’ll pay it directly to Becca’s bank account in full for as long as it takes for James to come back home. And, when he comes home, if he can’t or doesn’t want to do physical work for a while, don’t worry about it finance-wise. I got you covered.”

Steve nodded and smiled thankfully. That was one less thing to worry about now, and one less thing Bucky would have to worry about when he came home.

Steve invited him to stay for lunch, but Jarvis declined for Stark, saying they had important work to do. Stark whined but agreed. He wished Becca and Steve luck and repeated his offer to call him if they needed anything, then left.

Steve made some of the microwavable food Stark had brought over for lunch, then he and Becca watched a movie together. Becca had been having nightmares, like Steve, so she wasn’t sleeping properly. She fell asleep during the movie and Steve draped a blanket over her before going to clean the dishes.

Bucky had been missing for a week.

Steve and Becca had settled into something that resembled a routine. Steve would make Becca breakfast, then something that could be reheated for her lunch while Steve went to work. He came home, cooked her dinner, and they watched TV. Steve would call the police station every day on his break and get the same answer.
“No new information yet, but we’re still working on it. We’ll call you when we know something.”

Steve knew what that meant.

“We’ve got nothing, stop calling us until we call you.”

It didn’t stop him calling every day, though. Natasha would sometimes come over when Steve is at work, and she’d still be there when he came home. She and Becca would be curled up on the couch watching a movie, or playing a game, or talking about Bucky. It was getting harder and harder to talk about Bucky, though.

The longer he was gone, the worse condition he would be in when they found him.

It had been exactly one week since Bucky was taken.

Becca wasn’t there when Steve got home from work, but Natasha was. She was dressed in all black and pacing the living room, holding a framed picture of herself and Bucky. The picture was a few years old. They were in a school by the looks of the background, and they had their cheeks pressed together. Bucky had a lipstick mark on his other cheek that matched the colour of lipstick Natasha was wearing in the picture and they were both grinning widely.

Steve glanced around the living room to see where Becca was, but he didn’t see her.

“Natasha?”

Natasha stopped pacing and turned to face Steve. “Becca is with my aunt. She’s safe.”

“Okay… Good… What’s going on?”

“The longer we wait, the more danger Bucky is in. The police are useless, they’re not getting anywhere.”

Steve knew that. And he also knew what today was. He knew it was exactly a week since Bucky was kidnapped. He had been trying to ignore it all day by keeping himself busy, but he couldn’t ignore the persistent pain in his chest. Steve waited for Natasha to go on, not yet seeing where this was going.

“I’m going to find him myself, and if I do find him, I didn’t want Becca here. I don’t know what state Bucky is in, but I don’t want her to see.”

“How are you going to find him?” Steve frowned. If she knew how to find him, she should have told someone by now. She should have told the police to help them find him.

“Remember we said we shouldn’t bail Brock out because he won’t tell us where Bucky is, but he will go to where he’s being held and hurt him more than Rollins may have already done?”

Steve nodded, then he realised where she was going with this. “You’re going to bail him out?”

They agreed Brock was too dangerous. Bucky would be safer with Brock locked up.

“Then I’m going to follow him and beat the shit out of him and Rollins. Then get Bucky home… Or to the hospital… Whichever one he needs. Then the police can deal with those two. Now, you can either come with me and help, or I can take you to my house and you can stay with Becca and Aunt Mary until I’m done. Either way, you’re not going to stop me, so don’t even try,”
This is a stupid idea. Brock and Rollins are both bigger than Natasha and I. They'll probably have weapons. We could die. Steve knew all of that was true, and the rational part of his brain was telling him these things to persuade him not to go with Natasha. To stop her.

But, there was also the irrational part of his brain that would do anything if it meant that Bucky would be safe. Steve would jump on a grenade to protect Bucky.

It wasn’t exactly shocking which part Steve listened to.

“Should we bring weapons?”

Natasha seemed relieved and picked up two crowbars from off the couch. “Got it covered. I also have some knives in my car, but I figured if you came in and saw me holding them you might pass out.” She winked to show she was teasing and Steve laughed, slightly nervously.

“I also have a gun…” Natasha told Steve, and Steve’s eyes widened slightly. “I don’t think we’ll have to use it, but if we do, I’m prepared to pull the trigger if it means saving Bucky.”

“Okay…” Steve nodded and went upstairs to change. Natasha took the crowbars into her car and hid them while he did.

Steve decided to wear all black too, if they would have to sneakily follow Brock. He put on some dark jeans and borrowed one of Bucky’s t-shirt. He tried to rationalise that he only borrowed it because it’s black and, although it’s form fitting on Bucky, it’s loose enough on Steve for him to be able to move properly. But, really, it’s because it still smelled like Bucky and Steve needed that bit of comfort.

Natasha was waiting in the living room when Steve came back downstairs. “You can still back out, if you want. I’m willing to do this alone, if you’re not comfortable doing it.”

Steve shook his head. “Bucky is my boyfriend, I need to make sure he’s safe. I love him too much to not go through with this.”

That was the first time Steve had said he loves Bucky out loud. Natasha looked slightly surprised, but she recovered quickly and nodded as she led the way to her car.

The last time Steve had been in a car, his boyfriend almost got his throat slit then was taken away. Steve tried not to dwell on that as Natasha started the car.

“Can you drive?” Natasha asked and Steve shook his head. “Okay, here’s the plan. We’re going to park across the street from the station. I’ll go in and bail him out, then leave before he’s released, claiming I just don’t want to talk to him. If he comes out before me, tell me which way he went. He probably won’t, though. If he takes a cab, we’ll follow him in the car. If he walks, we’ll watch him for a bit then get out and follow him from a distance where he can’t see us. If he goes into a building, we’ll wait outside for a minute or so before going in, just to make sure he doesn’t know we’re following him. Hopefully he’ll have his guard down and we can catch him by surprise. I’ll fight while you get to Bucky. If Bucky isn’t in that room, you fight with me then we’ll find him when they’re both down.”

Steve nodded as he listened. This seemed very similar to the spy movies he and Natasha liked so much, but it was a little too close. He was scared, of course he was, but the thought of bringing Bucky home managed to quell that fear.

Natasha stopped across the street from the police station and made sure she had enough money in her purse before getting out. She locked Steve in the car, just in case, and Steve watched her cross
The road and go into the building.

There was a few minutes of no movement before Natasha left the building again. Brock was close behind her and she shook her head at whatever he was saying. She turned and yelled something at him, then stormed off down the road. Steve wasn’t sure where she was going, but he kept his eyes on Brock. Brock watched Natasha for a minute, then turned and went the other way to hail a cab.

Natasha was suddenly in the driver’s seat again and quickly explained that she didn’t want Brock to see her getting into her car. It was a new car, and she didn’t want Brock to recognise it if he saw it following him. Natasha took a black woolly had out of her glove compartment and explained that her hair was bright and she didn’t want Brock to be able to see it in the light. She started the car and pulled out as Brock got in a cab and they followed close behind his car.

Steve put the hood of his jacket up as they followed him. His heart was beating too fast and he briefly regretted not bringing his inhaler. But it was too late to turn back now.

The cab stopped outside a house and Natasha kept driving past it then parked down the street. She didn’t move as Brock went in, and watched through the rear view mirrors with her lips pursed.

Brock came out a few minutes later and got into the car in the drive way of the house, Steve assumed it was his own. Natasha looked down, urging Steve to do the same as Brock’s car passed them. After a few seconds, Natasha started the car and followed again.

This time, Brock drove out of town and over dirt roads. Steve tried to remember the way back, and hoped Natasha was doing the same. He had no idea where they were going but, if it was to Bucky, he didn’t care.

Brock eventually stopped outside an abandoned barn and Steve almost rolled his eyes it was so cliché. Then it hit him that Bucky could only be a few feet away. Natasha parked her car close to Brock’s, no longer being subtle.

Steve went to open his door, but Natasha put a hand on his arm to get his attention then shook her head as she stared at the barn.

“I should have known it was this place…” Natasha shook her head again, disappointed in herself.

Steve was curious, but he didn’t want to ask questions yet. He wanted to get to Bucky. Steve briefly dreaded what state Bucky would be in but he didn’t care enough for it to stop him going in there.

There was silence for a few seconds, then they heard a scream.

Even if Natasha had tried to stop Steve from jumping out of the car, she would have failed. Nothing could hold Steve back now. Thankfully, she seemed as eager as he did to get in there. They both ran out of the car, clutching the crowbars, and to the barn.

Natasha and Steve’s bodies both hit the barn door to put it open, but then it felt like Steve had hit an invisible wall. He was expecting a lot of hay and farm equipment, but the area had been completely hollowed out of anything resembling farming.

It was almost completely empty. Except for tools that lined the walls, but not tools for farming. They reminded Steve of torture equipment and he felt the urge to throw up. There was a metal table, like a medical examination table, in the middle of the area.

Bucky was pinned down to it by what looked like barbed wire wrapped around his chest and
stomach, binding him to the table. He had barbed wire around his wrists, up his arms, and up his legs, keeping them in place on the table. Bucky’s arms were above his head on another table that had been placed at Bucky’s head. He wasn’t wearing any clothes either, so there was no barrier between his skin and the barbed wire.

Brock was stood at Bucky’s head, cupping his face and grinning down at him when they came in, but he looked up when he saw them. Rollins was holding a knife a few feet away from Brock and Bucky, but further away from Steve and Natasha.

Steve was still in shock about the situation, but Natasha wasn’t. She ran forward and went to Rollins first to knock the knife out of his hand. Luckily, he hadn’t registered what was happening before she was in front of him and delivering a kick to his chest. Rollins hit the floor with a groan, then Natasha stepped on his wrist hard. He screamed and let go of the knife so she could lean down and pick it up. When he tried to get to his knees, Natasha swung the crowbar at his head and knocked him out.

As this happened, Brock went toward the rack of weapons and he picked up a large butcher’s knife. He didn’t even look at Steve and went straight for Natasha. That prompted Steve to look away from Bucky’s bloody form and run to Natasha. He was light on his feet, so Brock didn’t hear him coming. He was moving slowly towards Natasha, and that gave Steve time to get to him and hit him in the head with the crowbar. He must not have hit as hard as Natasha had hit Rollins, though, because Brock didn’t go down.

He stumbled slightly and grunted in pain, then turned to face Steve with murder in his eyes. The noises made Natasha aware of how close Brock was, though. She turned and cracked him over the head with the crowbar before he could hurt Steve.

As soon as he hit the floor, Natasha and Steve both ran over to Bucky.

He must have screamed when they cut into his chest, because there was a large, fresh, slash in his skin down the centre of his chest. It looked deep and Bucky was quickly losing consciousness. Steve tried to pull the barbed wire away from him but it was wrapped too tight, so all he succeeded in doing was cutting up his own hands and more of Bucky’s skin. He could vaguely hear himself sobbing, but it sounded distant as he repeated Bucky’s name over and over. There was blood covering every inch of Bucky’s skin. Some was dried, some was fresh. Bucky didn’t see awake enough to register what was going on around him. He didn’t know Steve was there, or Natasha.

Natasha called the police, then pulled Steve back from the table. It didn’t take much effort, but Steve still kicked and screamed at Natasha to let him go. He could feel her crying too from where his back was being pressed against her chest.

Natasha pulled Steve to the exit and panic washed over him.

“No! No! I can’t leave him again!” He screamed but she kept dragging him out.

“Steve! Stay here!” She pushed him onto the ground then went back into the barn. She must have put something in front of it or locked it somehow because Steve pushed at the door with all his might but it didn’t budge.

He didn’t know how long he was banging on that door before he heard the sirens, but it felt like forever. Steve ran to the road to stop the police and show them where Bucky is. They banged on the door and shouted that they’re the police, and Natasha opened the door. Several officers poured in, including some paramedics with a stretcher and Natasha came out to keep Steve outside. She hugged him and he buried his face in her shoulder as he cried. She cried too, and clung to the back
of his shirt. She must have knew it was Bucky’s, because Steve felt her inhale deeply and cry harder.

Natasha turned him so he couldn’t see Bucky being taken out of the barn on a stretcher to the ambulance, but he still saw a glimpse. Bucky was too pale, and one man was helping him breathe with a pump while another covered his chest with a gauge. They did all this while rushing him into the back of the ambulance and Natasha told the cop she would follow in her car.

Brock and Rollins were taken into another ambulance, but Steve was happy to see much less urgency in how they handled them. He also heard one of the cops shout to the paramedics not to take Rumlow and Rollins to the same hospital they were taking Bucky to. They nodded as they started driving.

The ambulance with Bucky in was going to the hospital closest to their current location, they were speeding, and the lights and sirens were on. The ambulance with Brock and Jack in was going somewhere much further away and they were travelling slower. No sirens or lights.

Steve knew that that was probably because they weren’t as badly injured as Bucky, so they didn’t need help as urgently, but he preferred to think it was just because no one gave a shit whether they died or not.

The sirens faded into the distance as some of the cop cars followed Bucky’s ambulance and some followed the other. As the silence returned to the night, Steve slowly started to calm down.

_Bucky is alive, and he’s free. There’s no way Brock Rumlow and Jack Rollins will get away with this._

But he didn’t know how long Bucky would be alive for… There was so much blood…

Natasha eventually released Steve from the hug, but kept one arm around him as she led him to her car. They sat inside for a few seconds in silence before Natasha started the car and drove in the opposite direction the ambulance had gone. Steve looked confused.

“Becca should know he’s safe.” She clarified and Steve nodded.

Natasha told Steve to wait in the car as she went into her house to get Becca. Steve still had blood on his hands, and he didn’t want to scare Becca sooner than necessary.

She came back out ten minutes later with her arm around Becca. Becca was crying, but she quickly got into the car and smiled at Steve through the tears. Steve knew how she felt. He hated that Bucky was hurt and in hospital, but he preferred him being in hospital than missing. At least they knew where he was now, and he could be helped.

Natasha told the receptionist who they were there for, and he asked Natasha to fill out a form as they waited for the doctor to come and talk to them. She wasn’t happy about it, but she took the clipboard and pen then went to sit with Steve and Becca in the waiting room. Becca was in the middle, and Steve wanted to put an arm around her, but he didn’t want to get blood on her. He wasn’t even sure how much of it was his own and how much was Bucky’s.

Steve stared down at his shaking hands as Natasha filled out the form about Bucky’s insurance and person details. She gave it back in, and the receptionist said the doctor would be with them shortly.

There was no clock, so there was no way of telling how much time had passed before a man came out to address them, but Steve knew it probably wasn’t as long as he thought it was.
The man was fairly short, and had tanned skin and curly dark hair. He took his glasses off after reading the clipboard the receptionist handed to him, then he looked at Natasha, Becca, and Steve.

“Are you here for James Barnes?”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Bucky’s condition.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve, Natasha, and Becca all stood up as soon as the doctor said Bucky’s name.

“Are any of you relatives?” He looked apologetic as he asked. “I can’t discuss his condition unless you’re his relatives…”

“I’m his sister,” Becca announced and raised her hand. The doctor looked at her, then at the other two and back to Becca.

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen…”

“And you two?”

Steve and Natasha both said nineteen and the doctor told them that Becca could choose for them to be with her when he tells her about James, if she wanted them to be and she nodded quickly. The doctor led them to his office so they could talk in private and closed the door behind them.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t even introduced myself yet. I’m Doctor Banner,” He held his hand out to shake Becca’s hand.

“I’m Becca.”

He turned to shake Steve’s and Natasha’s hands too then gestured for them all to sit in the plush chairs opposite his desk. Becca and Steve both sat down but Natasha shook her head and paced the room. Banner didn’t seem to mind.

“I’m afraid Mr Barnes was very instable when he was first brought it. He flat lined three times before we were able to stabilise him.”

Becca closed her eyes and covered her mouth. Again, Steve went to put his arm around her but remembered the blood. Thankfully, Natasha knelt by her chair and wrapped an arm around her instead as Banner handed him a pack of wet wipes, then gestured to the bin beside his desk. Becca leant into Natasha and Doctor Banner waited for her to calm slightly before continuing while Steve cleaned the blood from his hands.

“I’m afraid there’s more… Mr Barnes isn’t completely out of the woods yet. He’s severely malnourished and dehydrated, and he has lost a lot of blood.”

Steve wished Brock and Jack were here, just so he could make them suffer. He would prefer if they were tied down though, the way Bucky had been, by barbed wire. Steve clenched his fists to keep
them from shaking with anger.

“There’s something else…” Natasha pointed out and Banner looked down at the papers in front of him. He looked nervous or uncomfortable.

_He’s alive. He’s alive._ That’s all Steve could think. The only way he could stop himself from crying or screaming was to just keep telling himself that Bucky was alive.

“The barbed wires around his body were rusted. But there was one part that was particularly rusted. It caused an infection in his left arm, the infection was so severe and deep in his bloodstream that we had to amputate the arm. It was the only way to stop the rest of his blood from being poisoned.”

Steve wasn’t sure he had heard the man right. But when he heard Becca sob against Natasha’s chest, he knew he had. They amputated his arm. Bucky had lost his arm because of Rumlow and Rollins. He would have a lasting reminder of this terrible experience for the rest of his life.

Steve felt his chest tighten and tried to breathe through it, but it was too hard. He couldn’t get any air into his lungs no matter how hard he tried. He wanted to scream, but he couldn’t make a sound.

Steve could hear Natasha’s voice, but it was distant. Then, he felt something hard and plastic press against his parted lips and he quickly opened his mouth wider when he recognised it as an inhaler. He gratefully sucked in the chemicals which opened up his Airways, then took several deep breaths. When he was able to open his eyes again, he saw Doctor Banner kneeling in front of him holding an inhaler, worry in his brown eyes.

“Better?”

Steve nodded a little, but he felt tears fall from his eyes. There were a lot of them, but he couldn’t concentrate on anything besides Bucky. He must have been through so much in the past week, and he had lost a limb because of it.

Banner moved back to his desk and sat down. “Oh the plus side, with time, he will make a full recovery. He needs a blood transplant, but he has a pretty common blood type, so that won’t be a problem. His other injuries are fractures. A few ribs, and his right femur. As long as he stays off his feet for a few weeks, they’ll be no complications from his leg and his ribs will be fine as long as he takes it easy and doesn’t move around too much. He had a lot of other injuries, but most of them are cuts. Some are very deep, but all will heal.”

“Except his arm…” Becca muttered and closed her eyes, sobs racking through her body again.

Banner looked apologetic. “I’m afraid not. But with rehabilitation, he’ll learn to live without it. Or he could get a prosthetic, and will be able to live a full and unhindered life with that.”

“And how much is that going to cost us? A couple of thousand? Great! He can live a full life of debt!” Becca’s voice got louder the more she spoke. Natasha tried to calm her down, but she pushed her away and stood up. “Aren’t you supposed to ask the patient’s next of kin before going through with something like an _amputation_?!”

Banner looked remorseful again and fidgeted with his pen. “That’s usually the procedure, but I’m afraid there was very little time. If we didn’t go through with it as soon as possible, the infection may have spread further through his bloodstream.”

Becca looked angrier at that, but she didn’t know what to say to that, and Steve stood up and hugged her. She hugged back and cried against his shoulder.
“Anything else?” Natasha asked quietly.

Steve looked at her over Becca’s shoulder. She seemed calm, but Steve could tell she was barely keeping it together. He was struggling too, and he realised they were both struggling for the same reason.

She needed support, anchors, more than they did. Bucky was Natasha’s best friend, and Steve’s boyfriend, but he was Becca’s brother. The only family she had left, and the most important person in her life. Bucky was her support in every aspect of her life.

“One more thing…” Banner started, and Steve felt an overwhelming urge to hit him. He knew it wasn’t the doctor’s fault, but he was telling them so much it was getting hard to absorb all the information at once. “Mr Barnes also has signs of sexual assault…”

Again, Steve almost vomited. Objectively, he knew that worse things had happened to Bucky in that week than whatever Banner meant by sexual assault, but he still felt sick. Steve had to take several deep breaths to remain calm and he felt Becca do the same as she clung to him.

“We can’t know for sure unless we do a rape kit.” That word somehow made it worse and Steve heard Becca whimper against his chest and squeeze him harder. “To do that, we need either his consent or the consent of his next-of-kin if he’s unconscious or incapacitated in any way. He’s unconscious now, and to gather evidence that can be used in a court case, we would need to do the rape kit. We don’t know how long ago it happened, so to make sure we get the evidence needed, it needs to be as soon as possible.”

Becca nodded against Steve’s chest then pulled back and wiped her eyes. “If you do the… rape kit…” Steve saw her shudder, and he really couldn’t blame her. “The person who did this to him will definitely go to jail, right?”

Banner nodded and Becca took the sheet of paper he held out for her to sign. She read over it quickly, and Natasha and Steve read it too, over her shoulders. It was a legal document saying that she gave her consent for the hospital to perform an examination on James Buchanan Barnes using a rape kit. She wrote in her relationship with the patient on one line, then signed her name at the bottom before handing it back to him. Banner called a nurse in, and she took the paper to whoever needed to see it.

They sat in the office in silence for a moment before Banner asked if any of them had any questions. Natasha asked about Bucky’s insurance, and whether or not it would cover the cost of everything Bucky would need here. Banner looked over the paperwork in front of him and nodded as he told them Stark Medical Industries would cover every cent. Steve was a little surprised to hear “Stark”, but he was glad Bucky had medical insurance with a company like Tony’s. Or his father’s. Steve was a little hazy on what belonged to who.

The nurse came back ten minutes later and told them that the examination was done. She handed Banner the results sheet and he frowned as he read it. They all waited expectantly for him to tell them what it said. Thankfully, he confirmed that there was no clear evidence of rape, but Natasha still looked like she was seconds away from hunting down her cousin and his friend, and killing them herself.

“Can we see him?” Natasha asked the doctor.

“He isn’t awake, and I don’t predict he will be soon. But you can see him as long as you agree to not disturb him. From what I understand, he has been through a traumatic experience. He needs rest, so you can’t stay long.”
Natasha nodded and touched Becca’s shoulder. She pulled away from Steve to look at her, wiping her eyes. “You don’t have to see him if it’ll be too much for you. He won’t know if you’re there or not.”

Becca shook her head. “I haven’t seen my brother in a week. I didn’t know if I would ever see him alive again. I want to see him.”

Natasha nodded again in understanding and wrapped an arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Steve? Same to you, you don’t have to come in if you don’t think you can handle it.”

Steve shook his head with the same resolve as Becca. The last time he saw Bucky he was bleeding out on a metal table covered in barbed wire. He needed to see him, even if it was just to assure himself that Bucky was somewhere safe, and he was in a better condition than he had been last time Steve saw him.

Doctor Banner led them to Bucky’s private room (paid for by Stark Industries) and said he would leave them alone with him, and they could come back to the office and get him if they needed anything or if they had any other questions. He also gave each of them his business card for if they needed him later on or on another day.

As he left, they all turned to look at Bucky. He looked so much paler than he had in the barn, laying on crisp, white sheets. Bucky’s hair was messy, and the contrast between his dark hair and pale skin was even more striking than usual. He had cuts over his face, and some on his temple. Two on his temple had to be stitched up, as well as one on each of his cheeks, one on his jawline and one under his right eye along his eye socket. His eyes were closed and his dark lashes rested against the shadowy circles under his eyes.

The stitches were black and looked so unnatural against his pale skin.

There was a gauge on his neck, and bandages around his chest and stomach. His right arm was resting on her bed beside him with an IV in the back of his hand and a clip on his ring finger to monitor his heart beat. His left arm stopped just above the elbow, and there was a large amount of bandaging around it. One thing Steve could say he was pleased to see was the lack of blood. Some of the cuts were dark red and looked painful, but there was no red liquid.

They all stared for several minutes in silence, looking over every inch of Bucky’s body that they could see.

Steve stared at the slow rise and fall of his chest, finding comfort in that.

*He’s alive. He’s alive. He’s alive.*

Becca moved over to him slowly and sat in the chair by his bed, on his right side. She carefully took his hand in her’s and Steve saw her eyes flick over to his left arm, then back at his face. Steve turned to look at Natasha to see how she was doing, but she wasn’t in the room anymore. He looked around and poked his head out of the door, but he couldn’t see her. He couldn’t worry about that, though.

Steve walked over and placed his hands on the back of Becca’s chair, just for something to do with his hands more than anything else. Close up, Steve could see more cuts along Bucky’s shoulders and the parts of his chest that weren’t bandaged. He remembered the barbed wire and closed his eyes tight, trying to think of anything else.

The need to throw up was more persistent now, and Steve had to run out of the room to find a
Eventually, he stopped throwing up. His stomach and throat hurt, and so did his bony knees from kneeling on the hard tiles. As the weight of everything that had happened tonight finally hit Steve full force, he curled up on the floor beside the toilet and sobbed. In the back of his mind, he knew it wasn’t very sanitary to lay on the floor of a public bathroom, but he didn’t care. He wanted to be holding Bucky more than anything.

He wanted to wake up to Bucky kissing his cheek, and see Bucky smile at him sleepily. He wanted to hug Bucky, and to feel Bucky hug back with both his arms, enclosing Steve in his firm embrace.

He wanted to wake up and find out that this last week had just been one long nightmare…

When Steve finally got himself together enough to pull himself up off the floor, he flushed the toilet and scrubbed his hands clean, then splashed water in his face.

Steve started walking back to Bucky’s room, but on the way he ran into Natasha.

“Where have you been?” She asked and Steve felt the urge to return the question. She was holding a disposable cup of coffee and Steve tried to ignore the anger he felt at that.

Her best friend was unconscious, in hospital, and she went to get coffee. But, Steve managed to reel in his anger. It had been a long night, and she probably needed to caffeine boost.

“I threw up…” He muttered and she held out a stick of gum for him. Steve was slightly surprised, but he took it and murmured his thanks.

“What now?” Natasha asked calmly and Steve looked confused again.

“What do you mean?”

“Bucky can’t do manual work on a construction site unless he gets a prosthetic and learns how to use it. I don’t see that happening before the next time they need to buy groceries.” Natasha sighed and ran a hand over her face. She was definitely exhausted.

Steve hadn’t even thought about practical things like that. But we wasn’t particularly surprised. Natasha had been thinking more practically than anyone else all night. She had hatched the plan to save Bucky, she had called the ambulance while Steve screamed and cried over Bucky’s dying body, she had asked about Bucky’s insurance while Steve was trying his best not to throw up.

Bucky said he didn’t have any qualifications that would allow him to get a job as good as the one he had at HYDRA, and even if he could still work on construction, he wouldn’t be going back to work any time soon.

“Tony Stark said he’ll keep paying Bucky until he can come back to work, no matter how long that takes.”

“But he won’t be going back to work…”

“He might… If he gets a prosthetic…” Just saying it felt strange to Steve.
“Do you have any idea how much prosthetic limbs are?”

No, he didn’t. Steve shook his head and Natasha sighed again.

“A prosthetic arm can range from $3,000 to $30,000…”

Steve’s mouth gaped open in surprise. “That can’t be right! How do you know that?”

Natasha took out her phone and unlocked it, showing Steve the screen on her browser. She had Googled the prices of prosthetic arms, and she was right. Another example of her being practical while everyone else were losing their minds.

“An upper extremity device (arm) can range from $3,000.00 to $30,000.”

The only way Bucky would be able to afford that is if he took money from Becca’s college fund. Although Steve knew Becca would be willing to do that, Bucky wouldn’t be. He had promised Becca that she would get to go to college, and he wouldn’t break that promise for anything. Especially not to make his own life easier.

“Where’s Becca?” Natasha asked and Steve told her she was still in Bucky’s room last time he saw her. “You left her alone in a room with her unconscious, tortured brother?”

Steve winced slightly. He hadn’t even thought about how being in the room alone with him would affect Becca when he had left. All he could think of was that he really needed to get away. Steve went back to the room and Natasha followed him.

Becca was leaning forward so her head was resting on the bed near Bucky’s stomach and she was still holding his hand. They realised she was asleep, but Natasha muttered that it didn’t look very comfortable before going over to gently wake her.

“Maybe we should get her home…” Natasha whispered to Steve, and Steve nodded. But his eyes were on Bucky again, and he couldn’t pull them away. He didn’t want to leave him here alone.

“I can’t leave him again…” Steve muttered as he looked down at his boyfriend.

“Steve. We can’t stay much longer anyway, Doctor Banner said we can’t. Anyway, there’s nothing we can do for Bucky here. What we can do, is take care of his sister while he can’t.”

“I don’t care if they try to make us leave…” Steve was willing to fight anyone who tried to drag him away from Bucky. Because that’s what it would take. There’s no way Steve would leave Bucky’s side without being physically removed. But Natasha just sighed and placed a hand on Steve’s shoulder.

“No one of us want to leave him, but we have to… We need to get Becca home. Do you think Bucky would be happy if he found out we let her stay here and see him like this?”

Steve reluctantly shook his head and sighed, his shoulders sagging. “I’m coming back tomorrow…”

Natasha nodded in agreement and wrapped an arm around his shoulders and the other arm around Becca’s.

Steve glanced back at Bucky one last time before they left the room.
Banner had agreed he would call them if there were any changes in Bucky’s condition, or if he woke up.

Still, Steve couldn’t sleep. Natasha was sleeping with Becca in her room, and Steve was in Bucky’s room. It felt even worse being in here now than it had for the past week. Now, instead of Bucky being missing and unable to use this room, he was in a hospital bed instead of his own bed.

Steve looked over at Bucky’s side of the bed and realised if Bucky laid on his side as he usually did, facing Steve, he would be able to wrap his right arm around Steve, but what was left of his other arm would be underneath his side. That would be uncomfortable until it was completely healed.

Steve didn’t mind the thought of hugging Bucky or cuddling with him, despite his injuries. It didn’t change how he felt about him. He was still definitely in love with him.

That wasn’t what upset Steve the most. What upset him the most, was that Bucky wouldn’t be able to do a lot of things he enjoys. He doubted he would be able to do the same intricate dances he did before.

Steve had, thankfully, been able to see Bucky dance before all this. He and Natasha had done a dance together to show Steve. It was amazing, and beautiful. Bucky moved so perfectly and elegantly. He could lift and toss Natasha easily, and he looked so at ease as he moved and caught her again. Bucky was never worried that he’d miss her, and she was never worried about that either. Steve could tell they had danced together for many years. He could tell by how easily their bodies moved together, and the confidence in their movements.

He probably wouldn’t be able to work for HYDRA anymore. He wouldn’t be able to do physical labour with just one arm. Bucky would have to find a new job. Until then, Steve was willing to support him and Becca, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to for long. He could barely afford to support himself. He was thankful that Stark would still pay Bucky, but when he knew that Bucky wouldn’t be able to come back to work at all, he may stop paying him. Steve wouldn’t blame him. It’s not his fault all of this happened, and he didn’t know why Stark would bother paying a man who wouldn’t be working for him anymore.

Bucky and Becca may have to sell their childhood home and move somewhere smaller, then use the money to survive until Bucky could get a job.

Eventually, due to the pure exhaustion the night had caused, Steve fell asleep, but it wasn’t peaceful.

As soon as Steve woke up, he checked his phone for any contact from Banner, but there was nothing. He sighed and laid back down. That meant Bucky wasn’t awake yet.

He couldn’t keep waiting for news, though. Steve had to think practically, like Natasha had. He had to do something productive. Something that would help Bucky, or Becca. Something to ease the stress Bucky would be under when he got out of hospital.

Steve went through the phonebook that Bucky kept in his bedside drawer. Steve had teased him about it being old-fashioned, especially since Bucky had an iPhone with all his contacts in. Bucky had just shrugged, throwing him an easy smirk, then told him he preferred pen and paper sometimes.

“Technology isn’t flawless, Stevie. Phones break, and software malfunctions. Can’t accidentally
The memory of that smile hurt Steve’s chest, but he pushed through the feeling and went to ‘S’ in the book.

Steve typed Stark’s number into his phone and waited as it rang. An English voice greeted him, and he recognised it as Jarvis. Steve asked to talk to Tony, telling him it was about James, and Jarvis asked him to hold as he hunted him down. Eventually, Stark took the phone.

“Hey, Steve! What’s up? You got news about James?”

“We found him…”

“That’s great! Right…?” Stark seemed unsure, probably because of the tone of Steve’s voice.

“He’s… Not in a good condition.”

“Oh… Is he going to be okay?” Stark sounded genuinely worried.

“Yeah… But they had to amputate his arm… So…”

“Oh my god! Rollins and Rumlow have been arrested, right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He assured him. “But, obviously, Bucky won’t be able to keep working construction…”

“I don’t care about that, I can get another guy to head the team. But I should probably background check them more thoroughly before hiring anyone else. Rumlow and Rollins should be strung up by their balls.”

Steve didn’t want to ask whether Bucky’s pay would continue. He didn’t like asking for things, but he needed to know if Bucky would be financially okay. Before he could ask, though, Stark spoke again.

“I’ll see what jobs I have at the company that he can do when he’s better. Until then, I’ll keep paying him the construction salary. The arm that was amputated? Left or right? And James is right-handed, isn’t he?”

Steve didn’t know how to respond to that. He was shocked Stark was so willing to help without even needing to be asked. Bucky must have really made an impression on Stark while he was working with him. But, then again, Steve wasn’t surprised by that. Bucky was a very charismatic person and almost anyone who was in a room with him for more than five minutes can’t help but fall in love with him.

“Th-thank you, Mr Stark! You have no idea how much of a relief that is! And it was his left… And yeah, he’s right handed…”

“Don’t worry about it. And I told you to call me Tony. What hospital is James at?”

Steve told him, but Tony wouldn’t tell him why he wanted to know. Tony said he would talk to Steve some other time, then they both said goodbye and hung up. Steve checked the time, and to see if he had any missed calls while he was on the phone to Stark. Nothing.

Steve sighed and laid back in Bucky’s bed. He wondered how long it would be until Bucky would be home again, and also wondered if Steve would stay or go back to his apartment. If Bucky
wanted space, or if he and Becca just wanted to be alone together for a while, Steve would respect that and go home. But he did want to stay. He wanted to look after Bucky while he recovered...

Steve didn’t know how he would do that. He didn’t know how to look after a traumatised, amputee, torture victim. But he could offer support, and help Bucky do practical things he may not be able to do until he gets used to not having a left arm, like helping him get dressed or eat.

Steve picked up the picture of him and Bucky on Bucky’s bedside table. Bucky was holding the camera as he kissed Steve’s cheek and Steve tried to squirm away, blushing and grinning. He saw that Bucky’s lips were curled up slightly in a smile against Steve’s cheek and he smiled back at the picture.

He was so busy staring at the picture that he didn’t notice his phone ringing. When he eventually realised, he quickly answered it and held it to his ear.

“Mr Rogers? My name is Nurse Wanda, I’m calling about James Barnes?” Steve sat up as he heard the woman’s voice. She had a Russian accent, so Steve had to listen closely to understand everything she said.

“Yes? Is he okay?”

“His vitals are showing that he may wake up soon, would you and the patient’s sister like to be here when he does?”

Steve nodded quickly, then remembered she couldn’t see. “Yes! We’ll be right there!”

He thanked her and hung up before going to tell Becca and Natasha.

They took Natasha’s car and Steve was pretty sure she broke every speed limit on the way, but he was glad. He wanted to be there when Bucky woke up, he wanted to comfort him and let him know he’s safe. He wanted Becca to be assured that Bucky was okay. He wanted to see Bucky’s eyes.

Natasha’s parking job wasn’t the best one Steve had ever seen, but he didn’t bother saying anything about it as three of them rushed into the hospital. Doctor Banner was there waiting to greet them. He led them to Bucky’s room and explained that he was still unconscious, but his vitals were changing, showing that he could wake up any minute now.

He looked exactly the same as he had done when they left him the day before. Bucky was still too pale and the stitches still stood out too obviously against his skin.

Becca immediately sat in the chair beside Bucky and took his hand in both of hers. Steve and Natasha both stood behind her chair as Bucky’s heart rate sped up slightly. Banner wrote something on his clipboard and watched from a distance as Becca, Natasha, and Steve all held their breath. Bucky’s eyes flickered under his lids for a second before slowly opening.

There was a moment of silence as Bucky’s eyes remain unfocussed.

Then he started screaming.
By the way, I'm thinking about writing oneshots for this verse and posting them as a collection.

Let me know if you have any suggestions for oneshots you want to see. It can be things you wanted to see happen in the actual story, but didn't. Or it can be little things mentioned that you want elaborating on, like the memory Steve has of seeing Bucky dance. Comment with your suggestions and I'll write a oneshot about them. :)

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Bucky reacts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It happened so fast.

Bucky immediately tried to sit up, and when he realised one of his arms was missing, he screamed more. Banner quickly rushed forward and asked Becca, Steve, and Natasha to leave as nurses flooded into the room. Becca tried to refuse, but they were getting in the way and the staff couldn’t help Bucky with them there, so Natasha quickly dragged her and Steve out of the room.

Outside, they could still see through the large window as Bucky struggled against the nurses. Banner looked like he was trying to talk to Bucky, to calm him down with words, stood at the head of Bucky’s bed. When that didn’t work, a nurse took a syringe out and injected something into Bucky’s right arm whilst another nurse pinned his arm down to make it easier for her and Banner stepped back, looking slightly disappointed. Bucky’s screams slowly died down, and the room went silent. Becca was crying quietly, and Natasha and Steve both had an arm around her each. Steve could feel tears falling down his cheeks, and glanced over to see the same marks down Natasha’s face.

Once Bucky was unconscious, all the nurses left except one who stayed with Banner. They talked while Banner checked Bucky’s vitals and moved him a little so he was comfortably on the bed. While he had struggled, Bucky had knocked the covers off and seemed to have hit his head against the railing along the side of his bed. Banner checked the stitches on his head and must have deemed them unaffected because he nodded and left them alone.

The nurse reinserted the IV into the back of Bucky’s hand and made sure the heart monitor and all the other equipment around him was still working, then nodded to Banner and left. Once she was out of the room, Banner gestured for Steve, Natasha, and Becca to come back in.

“I’m sorry about that, it must have been unpleasant to see. It’s not unusual for trauma victims to wake up distraught. Especially if they’ve been held captive somewhere. He probably thought he was still with his attackers.”

Steve nodded a little as he watched Bucky’s lax face. The fluorescent, artificial lights of the room made him look even paler, and the stitches stood out more. There was some red around the stitches, but no blood, just irritation.

“Next time he wakes up, he should be a little more responsive to what’s going on around him. He’ll realise he’s somewhere safe, away from the men who did this,” Banner reassured them.

“When will that be?” Natasha asked quietly.

“The sedative we gave him was pretty light, so he should wake up again today. It should only be a
few hours. He may be drowsy when he wakes up, but that may be a good thing. It’ll give us time to
make sure he understands that he’s safe before he’s fully aware of exactly where he is… I’m sorry
being here now didn’t help, but it’ll probably be more helpful for you to be here next time. He
doesn’t know me, so he may not believe me if I tell him he’s safe. If someone he knows and trusts
tells him that, he may be more likely to believe it.”

They all nodded and he told them he’d call them when he showed signs of waking up again. Then,
again, he apologised for them having to come to the hospital to see that.

They all left the hospital together, but Becca didn’t want to go too far away in case Banner called
back and they didn’t get there in time for to be there when he woke up. Steve agreed, and Natasha
drove them to the mall a few blocks away. They didn’t plan on buying anything, they just went to
the food court to eat and wait.

It was silent at they ate.

No one knew what to say, and no one really felt like talking. They were all too wrapped up in their
thoughts. Becca and Steve struggled to eat. They picked at the things they had bought, but barely
any of it passed their lips. Natasha seemed to be eating normally, but she was staring off into space,
lost in thought.

“I got a call from my aunt last night. Not the one I live with. Brock’s mother, Ingrid.”

Becca and Steve both looked up in interest.

“She’s angry at me. For what I did to Brock.” Natasha looked angry. “Said what Brock did was
wrong, but I should have just asked him politely not to hurt my friend. Can you believe that?”

Steve thought he should have been shocked, but honestly, he wasn’t. No wonder Brock was such a
psycho. His father was always baling him out of bad situations, and it seemed his mother didn’t
think he could do anything wrong. Brock knew his parents would never think badly of him, so he
constantly did whatever he wanted without caring about or even considering the consequences.

“I told her that Bucky lost an arm because of him, and she said it’s his own fault for being so rude
to Brock when they were dating. Even if Bucky was rude to him, which he wasn’t, that’s no excuse
for what he did.”

Steve and Becca nodded in agreement, then Becca excused herself to go to the bathroom.

“She looks pale…” Steve commented and Natasha nodded.

“I’m worried about her. I don’t think she’ll be able to take care of Bucky. I mean, she’ll want to,
but it’s always been Bucky taking care of her. I don’t think she can handle the roles having to be
reversed, and I don’t think Bucky will handle it well either. He hates relying on other people, but
he’ll have to…”

They sat in silence and Natasha got a phone call not long after. It was Banner saying Bucky might
wake up again soon. Natasha went to go to the women’s bathroom to see what was taking Becca so
long while Steve cleared away their rubbish. He and Becca had hardly ate anything, but Steve
knew Becca wouldn’t want to stay and finish her food if there was a chance Bucky would be
waking up now. Steve knew he didn’t want to, so he threw it away.

The girls came back after Steve finished clearing up, and there were red circles around Becca’s
eyes, indicating she had been crying. He didn’t mention it as they went to Natasha’s car and drove
back to the hospital.
When they got there, Bucky was already awake. They all walked into the room and Steve could tell Becca was fighting the urge to cry again, as was he.

Bucky was lying on his back on the bed, the covers bunched at his waist. His eyes were half-lidded as he lolled his head to the side to look at Banner, who was speaking to him. The doctor stopped talking when they walked in, and he gestured for them to come closer. Bucky’s eyes were unfocussed as he looked over each of them, and Becca stepped closer to take his right hand. Steve saw Bucky’s hand squeeze her’s lightly.

“Do you know who these people are, James?” Banner asked and Bucky nodded.

“Becca…” He muttered. Bucky’s voice was gravelly, possibly from all the screaming he did earlier, and he sounded tired.

“And these two?” Banner gestured to Steve and Natasha and they both held their breath as they waited for his reply.

He nodded again. “Nat, and Steve…”

They both sighed in relief and smiled at him. Banner asked Bucky a few more questions to clarify that there was no memory loss, and Bucky answered them all correctly. He also assured Bucky that Brock and Jack were in custody, and couldn’t get to him. Banner took a few blood samples, then he asked Steve, Natasha, and Becca to step outside with him. He told them that he had explained Bucky’s injuries – including the amputation – to him, but he hadn’t really reacted. It was common for people not to quite grasp the gravity of the situation right away, and Banner told them he would leave them alone with him for a while, but they had to get someone if Bucky started to react, no matter how he reacted. He could start screaming again, or he could cry, or try to leave the hospital.

They agreed, and he went in to remind Bucky about the Help Button he could press if he needed anything, then left them with Bucky.

Becca sat in the seat next to Bucky’s bed, and took his hand again, while Steve and Natasha stood behind the chair. Bucky looked around the room with an indifferent expression.

“Bucky?” Becca whispered, and he glanced over at her, then back at the ceiling. “Bucky… How are you feeling?”

Bucky just shrugged, and Becca bit her lip as she squeezed his hand.

“I love you…” She whispered and Bucky ignored her.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Becca started crying again.

Steve placed a hand on Becca’s shoulder, not sure what else to do. Bucky’s attitude was unsettling. He was showing no expressions, and seemed to be uninterested in what had happened. He didn’t move, apart from blinking and breathing. Bucky’s breathing was slow, but every time he breathed in he made a slight wheezing noise, probably because of his fractured ribs. The only noises in the room were that, the beeping of the machines, and Becca’s quiet sobs. Steve had never seen Bucky look so indifferent, especially not when Becca was crying.

Natasha stepped around the chair to stand beside Bucky.

“James…” He didn’t look at her, but Natasha assumed he was listening. “Why haven’t you reacted yet? It’s healthy to react, you don’t have to keep it in...”
Bucky just shrugged and continued staring at the ceiling. His eyes looked glazed over, and his face remained emotionless. Steve didn’t think he would reply verbally, but after a few moments of silence, he did.

“How am I supposed to react?”

“Crying?” Natasha supplied and knelt down beside his hospital bed to be closer to his eye level, then ran a hand through his hair. Steve didn’t want to see Bucky cry, but it would be better than this. And crying may help Bucky let out his emotions.

“That won’t help…” Bucky whispered back, but there was finally some emotion in his voice. Helplessness.

“It might…” Natasha whispered back and touched his forearm with her other hand, still stroking his hair gently.

As soon as her hand touched his arm, he started crying. Steve didn’t know what to do, but neither did Becca. She just tightened her grip on his hand, and tried not to cry more herself. Steve tried to avoid crying too as he gripped the back of Becca’s chair.

It wasn’t his place to cry. Bucky had been through so much, and Becca was his sister. She would have to deal with the ramifications almost as much as Bucky would. Steve wouldn’t leave Bucky any time soon, so he would have to deal with this too, but it still wasn’t his place to cry.

He hadn’t been suffering as much as Bucky had in the past week, he hadn’t been permanently disfigured by the experience. He didn’t have a disability because of this past week. He wouldn’t have to relearn how to do things he’d been doing his whole life in order to do it with one hand. Steve didn’t have to learn how to live with one arm, or pay thousands of dollars for a prosthetic.

If Bucky did get a prosthetic, at least he would only have to get one, since Bucky was already fully grown, and therefore won’t outgrow a prosthetic arm. Hopefully, one day, he may be able to save up enough to buy one.

Steve remembered what Banner had said, and reached over to press the Help Button beside Bucky’s bed to tell him that Bucky was reacting. Banner came in barely a minute later, and stood at the door as he watched Natasha lean over the bed to hug Bucky. Bucky squeezed Becca’s hand a little harder and she leant down to kiss his knuckles, avoiding the cuts along his hands. They were already starting to heal, since they were only shallow, but they still looked painful.

Steve stepped back, not sure what to do, and went over to Banner.

“Was there anything specific that triggered the reaction?” Banner asked him quietly as he took a pen out of his top pocket.

“Natasha asked why he wasn’t reacting. He said it wouldn’t help, and Natasha said it might. Then he started crying.” Steve answered in a monotone. Just then, he realised how tired he was. He wasn’t able to sleep much the night before. The nightmares had woken Steve up every hour, and after waking up six times, he had given up.

Banner nodded as he jotted something down on the clipboard. “How long have you been with James?”

Steve thought about that for a minute before answering. “About two months… We met at the beginning of October, and started dating not long after that…”
Banner wrote that down too. “Are you planning on staying with him still?”

Steve initially thought he was referring to staying with him while he was in the hospital, then he realised what he really meant. He was asking if he was going to break up with Bucky. Steve glared at Banner and the doctor held his hands up a little.

“I need to know if James will suffer any more upset soon.”

Steve had never even considered leaving Bucky. He couldn’t. Steve was in love with him, and he couldn’t imagine being without him. Bucky was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

“I’ll never leave him.”


Becca and Bucky both fell asleep after a while, and Natasha and Steve left the room to talk about what they should do. They decided that, although Becca wouldn’t be happy about it, she needed to be taken home. She needed to rest, in her own bed, and not slumped against Bucky’s. Natasha said she would take Becca home and look after her, and agreed to let Steve stay with Bucky. They didn’t want to leave him completely alone, in case he woke up again and thought they had abandoned him.

Natasha made Steve promise to call her if anything happened, then they both went inside the room again to get Becca.

As expected, Becca was angry. She didn’t want to leave her brother, and she kept hold of his hand so Natasha couldn’t tug her out of the room, in case the movement woke Bucky up. Eventually, Natasha convinced her to come home with her, just to sleep and eat, then she would bring her back. Steve also promised her he would call if anything changed, and he thought he saw a flicker of anger in her eyes when she heard that Steve would be staying. But, she nodded and kissed Bucky’s forehead before allowing Natasha to lead her out of the room.

Once they were alone, Steve wasn’t sure what to do. It was hard to look at Bucky like this. Not because Steve thought he looked ugly or anything like that, just because he hated seeing Bucky hurt.

He sat in the chair Becca had occupied and took Bucky’s hand in his. His skin was colder than it usually was, and Steve covered his hand with both of his to try to warm his skin up.

“Bucky…” Steve whispered. “I know you can’t hear me… But I need to say this. I’m never going to leave you… I love you so much. I could never leave you, no matter what…”

He leant down and pressed his lips against Bucky’s knuckles, his eyes closed. Steve sat like that until his neck got tired then sat back in the chair, still holding Bucky’s hand.

“I love you too…”

Steve felt Bucky’s hand tighten in his, then opened his eyes to look at Bucky. His eyes were open too, and there was a small smile on his lips. Steve wasn’t sure he had heard him right and sat forward, his eyes widening slightly.

“W-what?” Steve stuttered.
“I love you too, Stevie…” Bucky whispered again and Steve felt tears spring to his eyes as he smiled back at Bucky.

Steve leant forward again to kiss Bucky’s knuckles again but Bucky pouted and tugged Steve’s hand closer to him. He realised what Bucky wanted and smiled as he stood to lean over the bed, pressing his lips to Bucky’s. Bucky stopped pouting then, and kissed Steve back just as softly.

Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand still grasped in his, and Steve cupped Bucky’s face with his other hand.

“You love me?” Steve asked quietly against Bucky’s lips. He needed to be sure, and he loved hearing Bucky say it.

Bucky nodded lightly and Steve pulled back a few inches to smile at him. “I love you, Stevie.”

“I love you too, Bucky.” Steve couldn’t stop himself from grinning. He saw Bucky’s left arm move slightly in his peripheral vision, then Bucky frowned. He must have tried to cup Steve’s face with his left hand, forgetting it was gone. Bucky sighed quietly and closed his eyes, but Steve kissed him again before he could get too sad. He kissed back half-heartedly, and Steve let go of his hand to cup his face with both.

“I wouldn’t blame you…” Bucky muttered against Steve’s lips, and Steve pulled back to frown slightly, not sure what Bucky meant. “If you left me… I wouldn’t blame you.”

Steve shook his head quickly. “I never will.”

Bucky tried to move his face to look away from Steve, but Steve kept his hands on Bucky’s cheeks to make him look at him. “I don’t care what happens, or what happened. Nothing will ever make me stop loving you. And nothing will ever make me leave you. I’m with you ‘till the end of the line, Bucky.”

Bucky’s eyes filled with tears as Steve spoke, but he smiled slightly. “I’m with you ‘till the end of the line… I like that.”

Steve smiled and kissed him again, and this time Bucky kissed back more enthusiastically. He guessed that it was one less thing Bucky had to worry about. And Steve swore that he would make sure Bucky never had to worry about Steve leaving him, ever again. Bucky moved his hand to the back of Steve’s head, and Steve rested his hand on his chest, but Bucky grunted slightly in pain. He remembered the cut down Bucky’s chest, under the gauge, and quickly moved his hand to Bucky’s left shoulder instead. He felt Bucky tense slightly, but Steve guessed it was because Bucky was still uncomfortable or unsure about how Steve would react to the amputation. Steve didn’t move his hand as he kept kissing Bucky, and Bucky moved his hand down to the small of Steve’s back.

“Can you lie down with me?” Bucky asked quietly and Steve looked around, not sure.

Bucky still had the IV in the back of his hand, and the heart monitor clipped to his ring finger, so there were wires and tubes over the part of the bed Bucky wasn’t lying on. He didn’t want to accidentally tug on anything and hurt him, but when he voiced this, Bucky shook his head.

“You won’t hurt me, don’t worry…” Bucky applied pressure to Steve’s back lightly, to encourage him to get onto the bed with him.

Steve stepped back out of Bucky’s grip, and Bucky looked momentarily hurt, until Steve told Bucky to hold his arm out. He did as Steve said, and Steve made sure the tubes and wires were all hanging off the bed before moving around them to get onto the bed. He lied down beside Bucky
and wrapped an arm around his stomach. His hand brushed the bandages around the bottom of Bucky’s arm, but Bucky didn’t show any signs of pain, so he didn’t move his hand. Bucky’s other arm wrapped around Steve’s shoulders and Steve felt the cold metal of the clip on his finger. If he closed his eyes, he could ignore the clip and concentrate on Bucky’s hand. He could pretend they were lying in Bucky’s bed, and none of this had happened.

He could pretend he had woken from the nightmare, and Bucky was okay.

Steve looked up after a few minutes and saw that Bucky had closed his eyes, but he wasn’t asleep. Maybe he was pretending everything was back to normal, too.

After an hour or so, Bucky started to fidget and Steve looked up to see if he was okay. Bucky’s face was contorted in pain, and he was biting his lip.

“Bucky?” Steve sat up and Bucky immediately moved his hand to the bandages around his left bicep.

“Hurts…” He muttered and Steve pressed the Help Button for him, then got out of the bed.

A nurse came in a few minutes later and introduced herself as “Alayah” before asking what was wrong. She was a petite blonde woman, her curly hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Bucky’s eyes were screwed tight, but some tears still slipped free and fell into his hairline. He didn’t seem to be able to speak, so Steve spoke for him.

“His arm hurts, where it was amputated…”

Nurse Alayah nodded and told them she would go get him some painkillers. When she returned, she explained that the pain was common and nothing to worry about as she replaced the bag of liquid connected to Bucky’s IV with something else. She explained that it was morphine, and she would start him off on a low amount, but if he was still in pain after a few minutes, he could adjust the dosage himself. She told him not to go over a certain amount, but showed him how to change the setting to allow more morphine into his blood.

Bucky wasn’t really paying attention, but Steve nodded along to what she was saying. She stayed in the room until Bucky started to relax and she smiled. Alayah told them if they needed anything else, to press the Help Button again, or if they weren’t sure how much more morphine Bucky needed.

When she left, Bucky reached out to take Steve’s hand again and tugged on it to gesture for Steve to lie down with him again. He did so, after making sure the tube was out of the way so he wouldn’t interrupt the flow of morphine.

Banner came in a few hours later and said he needed to check the site of amputation for swelling. He offered to call Steve back into the room when it was done, but Steve refused. He wanted to stay with Bucky, and Banner nodded as he started removing the bandage. Bucky gripped Steve’s hand as he looked away, his eyes closed.

Steve lifted Bucky’s hand to kiss his knuckles and tried not to cringe when the bandages were completely removed. There was swelling, and the area around the stitches was red and looking aggravated. Banner said he needed to insert a tube to drain away excess fluid from the area. He left to get the equipment he needed and Bucky let out a quiet whimper as soon as he was out of the room.
Steve knew Bucky was trying not to show weakness around Banner and frowned as he dropped to his knees beside Bucky. He pushed his hair away from his forehead to kiss his temple softly.

“It’s okay, Bucky…”

Bucky shook his head slightly, but Banner returned to the room before Steve could reply. He explained the procedure to Bucky, who nodded along, then injected a local anaesthetic to the area he was going to insert the tube into to numb it. He prepared the area just above where the skin was red and swollen.

Bucky didn’t look as Banner worked.

Natasha returned to the hospital a few hours after that, with Becca. Bucky hugged them both as best he could. He was more relaxed after he had adjusted the morphine settings, but he still didn’t smile as Becca took his hand in her’s.

Natasha insisted on Steve joining her outside so she could talk to him.

“You should get some rest. Go home, or back to Bucky’s,”

Steve shook his head. He couldn’t leave Bucky. There was no way she could persuade him to leave, but she seemed determined to try. Every time she tried to reason with him, Steve just kept shaking his head.

“Natasha. I’m not leaving him.”

She opened her mouth to argue again, but she stopped before saying anything, looking down the corridor with a look of confusion. Steve turned to see what she was looking at and saw Tony Stark and Edmund Jarvis talking to the receptionist. She pointed them down the hall and Tony smiled when he saw Steve and Natasha. He quickly came over while Jarvis thanked the receptionist and hurried after him. He was carrying what looked like a metal briefcase.

“Mr Stark, what’re you doing here?” Natasha frowned slightly in confusion.

“I’m here to see James, obviously. Can I?”

Natasha was about to refuse, and Steve assumed she was going to tell him that Bucky needed rest and he shouldn’t be having visitors, but Tony didn’t wait to hear what she had to say. He just went straight into Bucky’s hospital room.

They followed him in, and Stark greeted Becca and Bucky before gesturing for Jarvis to come in. He pressed the Help Button beside Bucky’s bed and took the suitcase Jarvis was carrying off him. Nurse Alayah came in, but Stark said he needed to speak to Bucky’s doctor directly.

She was a little confused, as was everyone else in the room, but she went to get Banner nonetheless.

When Banner came in, he was surprised to see Tony, but obviously knew who he was. They shook hands, and Stark said he needed to talk to him about a ‘surprise’ he had for Bucky.

Banner looked as confused as everyone else did as he led Tony to his office.
By the way, I'm thinking about writing oneshots for this verse and posting them as a collection.

Let me know if you have any suggestions for oneshots you want to see. It can be things you wanted to see happen in the actual story, but didn't. Or it can be little things mentioned that you want elaborating on, like the memory Steve has of seeing Bucky dance. Comment with your suggestions and I'll write a oneshot about them. :)
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Bucky has a problem with accepting help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve waited with the girls and Bucky while Stark talked to the doctor.

Bucky was as clueless as everyone else about what he brought with him in the metal briefcase, and they curiously awaited his return. Bucky was nervous at first, thinking Tony was here to regretfully fire him, but he said he appreciated the fact that he was coming to see him to deliver the news personally. Steve quickly reassured him that Stark had said he would still pay him, and mentioned that Stark had started looking into other jobs at the company for him.

“Wow… Really?” Bucky was still a little out of it from the painkillers, so he wasn’t absorbing information as well as he usually would.

“Yeah, he was more upset that you were hurt than that he was going to lose a worker. He said he’ll keep paying you until he can get you a new job.” Steve smiled as he stroked Bucky’s hair.

Stark came back in, smiling, followed by Jarvis. Banner wasn’t with him, and neither was the mysterious briefcase.

“How’re you feeling, James?” He asked as he sat in the chair. Becca was stood up and holding Bucky’s hand, and Natasha was stood near the open window.

“I can’t really feel anything, to be honest…” Bucky shrugged and laughed lightly.

“Maybe we should lower the morphine…” Natasha suggested.

When Bucky was emotionless and wrapped up in his thoughts, it was bad and hard to watch. But at least it was understandable. This was somehow worse. Bucky was way too relaxed now, and he kept smiling and laughing at weird things. It would have been good to see him smile, but this smile didn’t look right.

“No, morphine is good. Morphine helps.” Bucky disagreed, but Stark leant over and changed the settings on the morphine for him anyway. Bucky whined quietly in protest, but he didn’t move to stop him.

“How do you know how to do that?” Becca asked, referring to changing the morphine levels, and Stark just shrugged.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve been in hospital after getting drunk and doing something stupid? Morphine is my best friend.”

Jarvis nodded in agreement, and Steve could have sworn he saw a piece of the Brit die inside as he did.
“How long do you think you’ll be in here?” Stark sat back in the chair and put his feet up on Bucky’s bed, next to Bucky’s legs.

“Not a clue…” Bucky shrugged and closed his eyes.

“Well, just concentrate on getting better.” Stark took a pack of blueberries out of his suit pocket and held it out in offering to Bucky.

Bucky shrugged and took a few blueberries out of the packet and ate them as Stark offered the pack to the others in the room. They all shook their head, and he shrugged and poured the rest of the packet into his mouth.

“I think I might have got you a job, James.” He smiled proudly and Jarvis took a piece of paper out of his pocket, then handed it to Bucky.

Bucky squinted slightly and raised the paper closer to his face. “I can’t read this…”

Steve leant down slightly to read from the paper for Bucky. It was a list of jobs.

“Construction manager, design engineer, sales coordinator, energy balance engineer, engineering analyst, fuel analyst, equipment consultant, construction consultant, receptionist, interior design consultant, performance assurance consultant.”

“They’re all the jobs I’ve found so far at the company, but I’m still looking into some others.”

“Do I have to decide right now?” Bucky asked quietly and Stark shook his head.

“Take as much time as you need. And I would strongly suggest waiting until your body is clear of drugs before deciding.”

Bucky nodded and Jarvis regrettfully informed Stark that he had a meeting with his father in half an hour, so they would have to leave immediately. Tony sighed dramatically then nodded and pulled himself out of the chair.

“Call me if you need anything, buddy.” Stark patted Bucky’s right shoulder before turning to leave.

“Oh, wait.” Bucky stopped him and Tony turned back to face him. “What the hell was in that metal suitcase thing?”

Stark just smirked. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

With that, he and Jarvis left the room.

“Becca, you’re going back to school tomorrow. If you show up here between nine and four, I will start grounding you.” Bucky threatened. When he found out that Becca hadn’t gone to school the whole time he was missing, he was pissed.

“My brother was missing, and being tortured, how the hell was I supposed to concentrate in school?”

“Well, now I’m not missing and I’m not being… hurt. So you can go back to school.”

“You’re in hospital--”

“Where I’m getting help, and I’m being looked after. There’s nothing you can do here for me, but
going to school will give me peace of mind. You can’t spend all day, every day, in a hospital with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because, it’s depressing as fuck in here! And I don’t want you to have to see me like this any more than you have to.”

Becca clenched her jaw as Bucky raised his voice. “I don’t care how you look…”

“Well, I do. You’re going to school tomorrow, end of discussion.”

Becca pouted slightly, but she nodded. Steve and Natasha had been listening to the conversation, but neither of them wanted to take sides. They understood why Bucky didn’t want Becca here all the time, but they also understood why Becca wanted to be here all the time. Steve didn’t miss the slight hesitation when Becca said she didn’t care how Bucky looked, and a brief glance at Natasha confirmed that she saw it too.

But if Bucky wanted her to go to school, arguing was futile. She would go to school.

“You have to get good grades if you want to get into Juilliard.”

“Juilliard doesn’t even look at academic grades, dumbass. It looks at my dance record, now often I dance, and how long I’ve been dancing. It only matters if I graduate high school or not.”

“Well, you won’t graduate if you keep missing days.” Bucky shrugged and laid down properly in the bed instead of being propped up. Steve was still sat on the bed so, this way, Bucky’s head was near Steve’s hip. Steve continued stroking his hair, hoping it offered Bucky some kind of comfort.

“I’ll go to school tomorrow, if that’s what you really want.” She muttered and Bucky smiled slightly.

“Thank you.”

Banner came in not long after and took Bucky off morphine.

Natasha took Becca home to get her to bed, after Bucky asked her to. Becca reluctantly said goodnight to Bucky and kissed his forehead, then Natasha did the same, and they both left.

“You should go too…” Bucky muttered when they left, talking to Steve.

“Not happening.” Steve sat in the seat beside Bucky and took his hand in his.

Bucky reluctantly let Steve stay. A nurse brought Bucky some food – mashed potato, sausage, broccoli, and gravy – and he had to let go of Steve’s hand to hold the fork. Bucky spent three minutes trying to cut the sausage with one hand, and he started getting frustrated. Steve offered to help, but Bucky quickly shook his head.

“I can do it.” Bucky gritted out, but he still couldn’t manage it. He almost knocked the plate over in his attempts, but Steve managed to catch the edge first and moved it back into the centre of the tray. Bucky dropped the fork in annoyance and buried his face in his hand.

“Let me help…” Steve sat forward and picked up the knife and fork, but Bucky shook his head.

“’M not hungry.”
“Bucky, you have to eat…”

Bucky didn’t reply, and kept his face hidden in the hand. Steve felt his chest tighten as he watched Bucky. His shoulders started to shake slightly and Steve realised he was crying. He put the cutlery down and moved to sit on the edge of the bed again in order to wrap his arm around Bucky’s shoulders. He rested his other hand on Bucky’s right arm, rubbing comfortingly.

“It’s okay, Buck… Amputees always struggle at first, but you’ll get used to it and you’ll learn to do everything one-handed. You’ll get the hang of it.”

He didn’t miss how Bucky cringe at the word ‘amputee’ but he didn’t say anything. Bucky did lean his head against Steve’s shoulder, though, so Steve counted that as a small victory. At least Bucky was willing to accept some comfort from Steve, even if he wasn’t willing to accept his help.

“What’s the point?” Bucky muttered against his hand and Steve frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“What’s the point in trying to get the hang of it?” There was a pause as Steve waited for him to elaborate. “It’s going to take forever. I won’t be able to work for a long time, even if Stark can find me a job. Job vacancies need to be filled, other people will take the jobs before I’m well enough to take one. I don’t even know what half the jobs on that list are! I don’t know how much they pay, I don’t know what they involve, I don’t know if I’m qualified, I don’t know if any will be enough to support Becca… and I don’t know how long I’m going to be in this fucking hospital!”

Bucky was getting more and more frustrated the more he spoke, and Steve didn’t know what to say. But it always helped Bucky when he vented before, about work or his co-workers, so Steve just let him keep talking.

“How can I get used to having one arm? I can’t even cut my own food! And even if, by some miracle, I do get used to it… People are still always going to look at me like the nurses here do!”

Steve wasn’t sure what he meant by that at first. The nurses had all been polite and smiled at Bucky as they checked his vitals, changed his IVs or his bandages, and checked his cuts… But the more Steve thought about it, the more he realised what Bucky meant. The smiles were always laced with sympathy, and they always touched his right arm like they were trying to comfort him, even when he seemed to be fine.

“Even Becca looks at me like that…” Bucky’s voice was quiet now, and Steve almost missed it.

Becca did keep looking at Bucky’s left arm with sadness evident in her eyes. She cringed when Banner referred to the amputation, and she was never in the room when they had to change Bucky’s bandages. She always made excuses about going to get a drink, or calling a friend back.

Steve knew she wasn’t doing it to purposely hurt Bucky. She just didn’t know how to deal with this situation, which was understandable. Steve struggled sometimes, but he couldn’t stand the alternative. The alternative would be to leave the room, as Becca had, and he didn’t want to leave Bucky’s side. Natasha didn’t seem to be effected by the image of her best friend’s amputation site, and Steve envied her composure.

“She’ll get used to it… Everyone will.” Steve tried to reassure him, but Bucky just shook his head.

“No she won’t. I won’t.”

Steve leant down and brushed Bucky’s hair away from his forehead to kiss it softly. “I know it
doesn’t seem like it now, but it’ll all be okay.”

It felt like a lie, even as Steve said it. He knew, eventually, it’d be okay. Bucky would get used to having one arm, he would get a job at Stark Industries that he could do with his disability, Becca would get used to her brother being an amputee, Steve and Bucky would start going on dates again, and Bucky will go back to being carefree and always smiling. He’d be happy again.

But, that seemed so far away now. Banner didn’t know when Bucky would be able to leave the hospital yet, there was no way of knowing how much physiotherapy he would need, they didn’t know if there would need to be any adjustments made to Bucky’s home to accommodate his disability, they didn’t know which one of the list of jobs at Stark Industries Bucky would be able to do. They didn’t know how well the pay would be, as Bucky had said. The only time Bucky seemed moderately happy was when he was on morphine, but they knew he couldn’t stay on the drug all the time. Natasha told Steve that Becca had been crying every night when she got home.

Despite all the uncertainty, Steve had to try to persuade Bucky that it would all be okay. He had to be confident, and hopefully the confidence would rub off on Bucky. Then Bucky would start to believe that his life could be normal again.

“How can you know that?” Bucky muttered and Steve picked up the knife and fork to cut up Bucky’s food. This time, Bucky didn’t refuse his help.

“Because I know you. You’re an amazing person, Bucky. If you’ve survived everything that’s happened so far, you’ll survive the aftermath of it. You’ll adapt, and you’ll find a way around all the new obstacles this change presents you. You have a loving sister, a badass best friend, a dedicated boyfriend, and a surprisingly caring boss. We’re all here for you, and we’ll help you through this. You don’t have to worry about everything alone, Buck. Stark will find you a job that you can do, and he’ll make sure it pays enough for you and Becca to live comfortably. Becca, Nat, and I will all help you through physiotherapy. We’ll help you with anything you need.” Steve finished cutting up the food, which was starting to get cold, and made sure every bit was small enough so that Bucky to be able to eat with just his fork. Steve figured it’d be easier for Bucky to accept his help if Steve only had to help him once per meal, so he double checked everything was small enough before holding the fork up to Bucky.

Bucky was watching his face as Steve spoke, and Steve smiled at him with as much confidence as he could muster. “You’ll be okay, Bucky. We’ll make sure of that.”

Bucky stared at him in silence for a few more seconds before taking the fork.

Small victories.

Becca did as promised, and went back to school the next day. Natasha took another two days off work, then went back. She came to the hospital to see Bucky as much as she could before and after work, but Bucky could tell it was starting to wear her down. He told her she didn’t have to come see him every day, but she still did. Becca came straight from school every day. Sometimes Natasha would pick her up from school and drive her, sometimes she took the bus, and sometimes she walked. But, she hadn’t missed a day yet.

Despite how much Bucky had been hounding Natasha and Becca to go back to work and school, he was yet to say anything about Steve going back to work. Steve was glad of that. He didn’t plan on going back to work. Logically, he knew he should. He needed the money, but, he couldn’t bring himself to consider leaving Bucky. Without Becca and Natasha there during the day, it was just Steve with Bucky. If Steve went back to work, Bucky would be alone for hours.
Four days into Bucky’s stay in the hospital, Steve got a call from Sam. He stepped out of Bucky’s room to answer the phone.

“Hey, Steve. How’re you doing?” He sounded sympathetic. Steve had texted him the day before to explain why he hadn’t been coming to work. He told him that Bucky had been found and he was in hospital, and explained Bucky’s injuries.

“I’m fine.” Steve shrugged slightly and glanced into Bucky’s hospital room. A nurse had gone in before Steve had left, and she was asking him questions about his pain levels to decipher whether or not he should go back on morphine.

“How’s Bucky?”

“He’s… Okay, all things considered. He doesn’t like accepting help, which is a bit of a problem…”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and Steve could feel tension on Sam’s end. Something was wrong, but he didn’t know what. If Sam just wanted to know how he and Bucky were doing, he would have just texted Steve. The fact that he had called made Steve nervous.

“Listen…” Sam started, and Steve braced himself for what he was going to say. “Fury talked to me about you today…”

Steve felt his heart speed up slightly. Fury had been trying to get in contact with him, but Steve kept ignoring his calls. He didn’t want to talk about work, and he didn’t care what Fury had to say. Being with Bucky was more important. Fury was well-aware that, out of everyone in that store, Sam was the one he had most to do with.

“I explained what happened with Bucky… I told him everything, but he made his decision…”

“Made his decision about what?” Steve had a feeling he knew what was coming, but he hoped he was wrong.

“If you don’t come back to work tomorrow, he’s going to fire you,” Sam was clearly unhappy about having to deliver the news, and he was clearly angry at Fury.

Steve knew that was coming. He had missed too many days, and he hadn’t applied for vacation time. If he had, he could have had the time off and his job would have been safe. But Steve didn’t know they were going to find Bucky that night, and he didn’t know he’d be spending time with Bucky in hospital. He was angry, but the only excuses Fury accepted for not coming into work without notice were family emergencies or personal emergencies. Technically, this didn’t fall into either category. Bucky wasn’t his family, not by Fury’s standards, and Steve wasn’t the one who was in hospital.

The only thing Steve could do now was decide whether he was coming into work tomorrow or not. He glanced into Bucky’s room again and saw him flinch when the nurse bandaged his arm up again, then saw Bucky drop his head against the pillows. He looked annoyed, and the nurse gave him one of those sympathetic smiles before leaving the room.

“Tell Fury I’ll return my uniform sometime next week.”

Sam tried to talk Steve out of it, saying Bucky would be okay if he was alone for a few hours while Steve worked, but Steve didn’t care what he said. He couldn’t leave Bucky alone. Sam eventually gave up, and Steve assured him they would still be friends even if they didn’t work together anymore. Sam agreed and told Steve to call him some time soon, then hung up.
Steve forced a smile as he returned to Bucky’s room, and Bucky smiled back at him half-heartedly. He sat next to Bucky in the chair and immediately took his hand.

“What was that about?” Bucky asked quietly. The pain in the amputation site had come back, and they had to insert the tube again to drain excess fluid, so he had struggled to sleep the night before. Steve was sore from sleeping in the chair, but he had no regrets. The nurse had decided not to put Bucky back on morphine.

“It was just Sam asking if we were okay.” Technically, he wasn’t lying. But Bucky seemed to sense that there was more, because he looked sceptical.

“That’s it?”

Steve could see the suspicion in Bucky’s face, and sighed. He couldn’t lie to him.

“It was also about work, but nothing you need to worry about.” Steve smiled reassuringly, but Bucky wasn’t going to leave it there.

“What about work?”

“Just… Because I haven’t been in for a while.”

“And?”

“Bucky, don’t worry about it.” Steve shook his head with a smile and leant down to kiss Bucky’s knuckles.

“Steve…” Bucky waited for Steve to look up at him. “Please tell me…”

Steve sighed slightly. He knew Bucky would feel bad for Steve being fired because he wasn’t going to work in order to stay with him, and he knew Bucky would try to persuade him to go to work tomorrow. But Steve had made up his mind, and nothing Bucky could say can change that.

“I’ve missed too many days with no notice. Fury said if I don’t come into work tomorrow, I’m fired.”

As expected, Bucky immediately started trying to persuade Steve to go tomorrow, but Steve refused.

“I’m not leaving you, Buck. I hated that job anyway.”

“You need a job…” Bucky shook his head, looking disappointed.

“No, I need to be with you. Nothing else is important.” Steve leant over and took Bucky’s hand again, but Bucky quickly pulled it out of his grasp, to Steve’s surprise.

“I can’t support you too, Steve!” Bucky raised his voice slightly in frustration and Steve jumped in surprise.

“W-what? You think I want you to support me? Bucky, I don’t need your help. I’ll find a new job, when you’re better.”

“This is as good as I’m going to get! My arm isn’t going to grow back!”

“That’s not what I meant…” He tried to calm Bucky down. “I meant when you can take care of yourself…”
“You think I’m not capable of taking care of myself?” Bucky was starting to get more offended and upset, and Steve shook his head quickly.

“That’s not what I meant! I didn’t say you’re incapable…”

“Then what did you mean?” Bucky scowled at Steve and Steve sighed in frustration. Everything he said came out wrong and just upset Bucky more.

“I meant… I want to help you take care of yourself. I want to help take care of you.”

Bucky glared down at his bedsheets, refusing to meet Steve’s eyes, and remained silent.

“You don’t have to support me, I don’t expect you to… But I want to be with you as much as possible. I have savings that I can use to keep on top of my rent and buy myself food. Don’t worry about me, Buck.”

Bucky didn’t look up, a scowl still on his face, and Steve sighed.

“I’m sorry I upset you, I didn’t mean to make you think I don’t believe you can take care of yourself. I know you can… But, right now, you need help. That’s not a bad thing, Bucky. Everyone needs help sometimes. I want to help you, but you have to accept it… None of us can help you unless you let us.”

“I don’t need help.” Bucky gritted out and Steve tried to take his hand again, but Bucky moved it away again.

Steve understood that it must be difficult for him to accept help, after having to be independent since he was sixteen. After having another person rely on him since he was sixteen. But, right now, Bucky needed help. There was no way around it, no way for him to deal with this alone. No one should have to deal with something like this alone and, even if Bucky wanted to deal with it alone, Steve wouldn’t allow it. Neither would Natasha or Becca.

“You can yell at me, or scowl all you want, but I’m not leaving you alone. There are some things you have no say in. First, I’m not going to work tomorrow. I’ll use my savings and get a new job when I’m ready. Second, you have to accept help eventually. I know it’ll be hard for you, and I’m sorry. But no one can get through this without help. The sooner you realise that, and the sooner you accept our help, the sooner you’ll adjust and get better, and--”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Bucky spoke quietly, but the pain in his voice was loud enough to stop Steve before he could go any further.

“Saying what…?”

“’Better’… I’m not going to get better…”

“You will…” Steve dropped to his knees beside Bucky’s bed and reached out to take his hand again. This time, Bucky allowed him to take it, but he didn’t squeeze back.

“I told you, my arm isn’t going to grow back.” His voice trembled slightly at the end and Steve realised he was going to cry again.

Steve moved the wires and tubes out of the way so he could sit down on the edge of Bucky’s bed, against the head, and wrapped his arm around Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky’s head rested against Steve’s chest, but other than that, he didn’t react.
“It doesn’t matter. You can be better without your arm.” He could tell Bucky still didn’t believe him, so Steve pulled back a little and tilted Bucky’s head up to look at him. “How about we make a bet?”

Bucky looked confused, but also intrigued. “Go on…”

“If, in five year, you don’t think you’re better than you are right now… I’ll buy you some flowers and chocolates…”

“And if I do think I’m better?”

“You owe me a dance.”

Bucky smiled slightly and Steve could tell he was thinking of the last time they had tried to dance. Bucky had tried to teach Steve, but then compared him to a baby giraffe learning to walk. Steve had no natural rhythm, and he was too tense. He tried too hard to do well, and Bucky had tried to persuade Steve to relax, but Steve just kept getting frustrated whenever he accidentally stepped on Bucky’s foot or almost headbutted him in the chest because he was too busy looking down at his feet. Bucky had laughed and shrugged it off, telling Steve he didn’t care how much Steve messed up.

“You’ll get better, Stevie, don’t worry.”

Bucky gestured to his left arm. “I think you’ll finally be better than me…”

“Maybe you’ll have a prosthetic by then, or you’ll have learnt to dance without it. Who knows what could happen in five years?”

“You seem pretty sure that we’ll still be together…” Bucky smiled shyly at Steve, and Steve smiled back.

“That’s one thing I’m certain of.”

Bucky kept smiling at Steve for a few minutes before moving his right hand up in offering to Steve’s. “Deal…”

Steve beamed and shook Bucky’s hand. “Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I'm thinking about writing oneshots for this verse and posting them as a collection.

Let me know if you have any suggestions for oneshots you want to see. It can be things you wanted to see happen in the actual story, but didn’t. Or it can be little things mentioned that you want elaborating on, like the memory Steve has of seeing Bucky dance. Comment with your suggestions and I'll write a oneshot about them. :)
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Steve gets fired and Bucky has been on morphine too often

Steve woke up in the uncomfortable hospital chair, again, and immediately looked over at Bucky. He was still asleep, but he looked like he was in pain. Bucky’s face was screwed up slightly in a grimace and he kept fidgeting. Steve pressed the Help Button and a nurse came in. She decided to put him back on morphine while he was sleeping and made a note on the clipboard for Banner to look over when he came into work.

Steve was annoyed when she said “when Doctor Banner comes in”. It made him realise that Banner could go home at the end of the day. He could have dinner with his family, go to bed with his partner (if he had either of those), and distance himself from his patients. Steve couldn’t. Even if he did want to go home, he wouldn’t be able to relax knowing that Bucky was still in the hospital. Bucky couldn’t go home, Becca couldn’t have dinner with her family… It didn’t seem fair.

He knew he was being stupid, but he couldn’t help it.

Bucky woke up a little while later and asked Steve if he was going to work today, his voice thick with sleep and drugs. Steve shook his head and Bucky didn’t push it. He fell asleep again after a while and Steve let him sleep. He didn’t fidget this time, or look like he was in pain. Steve was starting to get a little worried about how often he was put on morphine, and how often the nurse needed to come in and drain fluid from his amputation site.

Natasha dropped by before she went to work and brought some books from Bucky’s bookcase. She stayed as long as she could, but Bucky still wasn’t awake. Natasha left the books on the bedside table and kissed Bucky’s forehead before saying goodbye to Steve and leaving the hospital quickly. Steve checked the time as she left and realised she only had three minutes to get to work. He silently wished her luck and sat back in the chair.

There wasn’t much to do until Bucky woke up. At least then Steve would have company and they could talk, even if it was about nothing in particular. But Bucky needed as much rest as he could get, so Steve didn’t complain.

He picked up one of the books from the pile Natasha had brought and read the blurb before opening it to the first page. Steve got six pages in when there was a knock at the door. He looked up and saw Sam stood there.

Steve didn’t know when his own shift for today was supposed to be, or when Sam’s was, so he didn’t know if he was there to try and persuade him to go into work or not.

“Hey…” Sam stepped into the room and his eyes darted to Bucky, then quickly back to Steve.

“Hi…” Steve put the book down to give Sam his full attention. He stood up and stretched, and Sam must have heard his joints crack because he cringed slightly. “What’re you doing here?”
“I ran into Bucky’s friend, the redhead… Natasha, at the store. Recognised her from the pictures of her and Bucky you showed us. She came in to buy hammers… I told her who I was and that I was worried about you and she told me where you’d be…”

“Why were you worried about me?” Steve frowned slightly.

“Dude, you’ve been terrified of losing that job since the day you got it. Now you just don’t give a shit if you get fired?”

Steve just shrugged and glanced down at Bucky’s motionless form. “I have more important things to worry about…”

Bucky was still asleep, but he looked more relaxed than he had that morning. Steve realised that, although he had friends, there was no one in his life he had ever put before work. If his mother was still alive, he would put her first. But when Sarah Rogers died, Steve didn’t think anyone else could be so important to him that they would become his whole world, and all other aspects of his life would fade in their importance. Work was nothing compared to Bucky. Money was nothing compared to Bucky. Steve’s own life was nothing compared to Bucky’s, in Steve’s mind.

Sam didn’t say anything for a while, then Steve heard paper crumpling, so he turned back to face him. Sam held out a piece of paper for Steve and he realised it was a redundancy notice.

“Figured you wouldn’t want to leave the hospital, so I brought this for you to sign so you don’t have to come into work. If you want, you can give me a key to your place and I’ll take your uniform in too.”

Steve took the piece of paper and read though it quickly before taking the pen Sam offered him. He turned to put the paper on the bedside table and signed it. Steve saw Bucky’s eyes start to open in his peripheral vision as he finished his signature, and he immediately dropped the pen to sit back down in the chair and take Bucky’s hand in his with a smile. Bucky smiled sleepily in return and Steve glanced at the morphine levels before looking back at him.

“Hey… How are you feeling?” Steve asked quietly and he felt Sam go still behind him as he realised Bucky was awake.

“Well rested, I guess… For the first time in a while…” Bucky smiled again, then Steve saw him look over Steve’s shoulder. He turned to where he was looking and Sam waved a little, not sure what else to do.

“This is Sam…” He introduced Bucky, and Sam stepped closer to him, standing next to Steve’s chair.

“Nice to meet you.” He held him hand out to Bucky, and Bucky looked at his own hand in Steve’s, then at what was left of his left arm.

Sam realised his mistake and instantly dropped his hand back to his side, looking sheepish.

“Sorry…”

“It’s okay.” Bucky shrugged. “Nice to meet you too, Sam. Sorry it’s under such shitty circumstances…”

Sam stood in an awkward silence for a few seconds, not sure how to reply to that, before rubbing the back of his neck. “I just came to give Steve his redundancy notice…”

Bucky’s expression showed slight disappointment as he looked at Steve. “So you really didn’t go?”
Steve shook his head. “I told you, I’m not leaving you.”

“Figured if I was asleep you’d consider the fact that I wouldn’t notice you were gone, and you’d go to work.” Bucky huffed a little in annoyance, but he didn’t pull his hand out of Steve’s light grip. There was another short silence before Sam cleared his throat.

“So, Steve, do you want me to take your uniform back for you?”

Steve nodded and took his keys out of his pocket with his free hand then held it out to Sam. “Thanks…”

“Anything else I can bring for you? From your apartment or elsewhere?”

It was then that Steve realised he hadn’t brushed his teeth, showered, or changed his clothes since Bucky woke up in hospital. He internally winced and hoped Bucky wasn’t repulsed by how badly he must smell.

“Could you bring my toothbrush and toothpaste? And deodorant? Oh, and a change of clothes, anything from my drawers…”

Sam nodded. “Anything else?”

Steve shook his head, but Bucky spoke up then. “What about your sketchpad? Must be boring sitting in that chair all day…”

“Oh… Yeah, my sketchpad and pencils. And an eraser, and pencil sharpener. They’re all on my bedside table.”

Steve had one of his old sketchpads at Bucky’s house, the one he did most of his rough work in. It was filled with doodles, or images he didn’t want to think of. When he had nightmares, he would sketch them out in that book to get them out of his head. He didn’t want that book, didn’t want to think about the awful things drawn in it, most of which revolved around Bucky getting hurt. The sketchbook he got from the museum on his and Bucky’s date was his favourite to draw in. But Steve hadn’t felt like drawing in the week Bucky had been missing, and whenever he did draw they came out nightmares, so he had left his good book at home when he moved into Bucky’s room to take care of Becca. Although there were still a lot of struggles to get through, Steve felt slightly better than he had during that week. Bucky having to be in the hospital and having to go through an amputation was horrible, but at least he was safe.

Steve felt like drawing again.

Sam made a quick note in his phone of the things Steve wanted and nodded, waiting to see if Steve wanted anything else.

“My phone charger too… and if Peggy and Angie are home, could you tell them where I am and why…?” Steve felt bad about asking all this of Sam. He didn’t want him to have to go through a lot of trouble for Steve, and he knew getting Sam to tell Peggy and Angie what happened was a little mean. He should tell them himself, but his phone was dead and he didn’t want to leave the hospital.

Sam assured him that it was fine, told Bucky is was nice to meet him again, took the redundancy letter, and left. Steve wanted to ask Bucky what he thought of Sam, but they had only met briefly and they hadn’t really spoken to each other, so he decided not to say anything.

“He seems nice.” Bucky said after a few minutes of silence following Sam’s departure.
“Really? You think so?” Steve was a little worried the handshake attempt might have upset or offended Bucky, but he didn’t seem bothered by it. And his voice was still a little deeper than usual, and groggy.

_Morphine._

“Yeah, he’s going out of his way to get you your shit because you won’t go home.”

Steve knew that was supposed to sound teasing, but it sounded more like Bucky was annoyed that Steve was always there. When he voiced this, Bucky quickly shook his head.

“It’s not that I’m annoyed you’re here… I’m glad you’re here… But your life shouldn’t be put on hold because of me.”

Steve raised Bucky’s hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles before answering. “It’s not on hold _because_ of you, it’s on hold _for_ you. I want it to be on hold for you. I want to be here, and keep you company when Nat and Becca can’t come see you.”

“I’ll be okay alone for a few hours…” Bucky shrugged his right shoulder.

“But I don’t want you to be alone.” Steve kissed Bucky’s knuckles again. “I love you.”

Steve hadn’t said that since he had told Bucky by accident, thinking he was asleep. He was a little worried at first that Bucky had only said it back because of the drugs in his system, but Steve quickly tried to dispel that thought.

“I love you too.” Bucky smiled and Steve kissed Bucky’s knuckles again, trying not to think about the fact that Bucky had the drugs in his system again. He wanted to lean down to kiss Bucky’s lips, but he remembered how long it had been since he brushed his teeth and stopped himself before he could move. He would have to settle for kissing Bucky’s knuckles until Sam brought him his things. Bucky had an en suite bathroom connected to his room, paid for by Stark Industries Medical, and it had a sink so all he had to do was wait for Sam and he could brush his teeth. He wouldn’t even have to leave Bucky alone, he could just leave the door open and keep talking to him.

Steve kissed each of Bucky’s knuckles individually then the back of his hand and down to Bucky’s wrist. He looked up and saw Bucky smiling at him, eyes half-lidded.

“Still tired, babe?” Steve cringed slightly as he heard his own words. He had heard Angie call Peggy that, and Patrick call Zoe that, but he had never called anyone ‘babe’ himself. Steve heard Bucky laugh lightly.

“Babe?” Bucky smirked mockingly at him and Steve blushed.

“I thought I’d give it a shot…” He muttered and hid his face against Bucky’s hand in embarrassment. Bucky just pats Steve’s cheek, still grinning. “You didn’t answer the question.”

Bucky seemed to think about that, trying to remember the question. “I’m still tired, but I think it’s just from sitting in bed all day, every day. I’m bored, being still for so long is what’s making me so tired!”

Steve could tell he was getting frustrated again, but not angry, so he smiled. “Want me to ask Doctor Banner if you can go for a walk or something?”

“Where?”
“The hospital has a garden… It’s closed off from the street so you won’t need any nurses or doctors watching over you.”

“In case I try to make a break for it?”

“That’s not what I meant, Buck.” Steve rolled his eyes.

Bucky just shrugged and leaned back against the bed. “I suppose it would be nice to go for a walk… But…” He gestured to the IV in the back of his hand, and the morphine drip injected into the crook of his elbow.

Steve frowned, trying to think of a way they could get around that. He had seen people on TV roll their IVs around beside them on vertical rails, but he wasn’t sure if that was actually a thing that happened or if it was just for convenience in the shows. He decided he would ask Banner about it. If not, Steve could wheel Bucky out in a wheelchair with the IVs attached to that. Bucky wouldn’t be able to walk around like he wanted to, but at least he would be able to get some fresh air from outside instead of through the small window that only opened a couple of inches. Banner had explained that, because the room was on the fifth floor, it couldn’t be opened anymore to stop people from trying to commit suicide. Steve didn’t think Bucky would do that, he hadn’t even considered it until Banner had said it, but he was glad that it wasn’t a possibility. He did wish Bucky could get more fresh air, though…

“We’ll figure it out.” Steve settled for, smiling. Bucky smiled back, and it was finally starting to look more genuine.

Some of Bucky’s friends from the construction site came in later on. Two men called Dum Dum and Monty. Steve vaguely remembered Bucky mentioning them every now and then, and he knew Bucky went out drinking with them sometimes. Dum Dum was a relatively tall, stocky man with a thick handlebar moustache. Monty was a shorter, skinnier man with a much thinner moustache. Dum Dum was wearing a bowler hat when he came in, but he took it off once he entered the room, holding it against his chest.

Bucky introduced them to Steve and he smiled as he shook their hands.

Monty immediately started talking about how much easier Howard Stark was to work with since he took over the project from Tony. At Bucky’s confused expression, he explained that Tony had been preoccupied with another project lately, so Howard had taken over again. He said they had no idea what the other project Tony was working on was, and no one else seemed to know either. They doubted whether or not even Howard knew.

Bucky nodded in understanding, but didn’t comment on that. Since he walked in, Dum Dum had only said a few brief words to Bucky in greeting, then had remained silent while Monty talked about work. Once Monty was done with his rant, Dum Dum seemed to lose his composure. His hands tightened on his hat, as if he was trying to stop himself from saying what he wanted to, but it failed.

“I’m going to kill Brock!”

Bucky flinched slightly at the volume, but Dum Dum didn’t notice.

“And Jack! What kind of sick fucks do HYDRA employ?! I hope they burn in hell, and I’ll be glad to send them there myself! How could they think they could do something like this and get away with it?! They are going to prison for this, right?!”
Bucky just shrugged. “No idea…”

“Well, if they get let out, God help them because I’ll fucking kill them! Sick fucks should be publicly flogged! Why you?!” Dum Dum gestured to Bucky. “You’re the nicest guy I’ve ever met! Why the fuck has Brock latched himself onto you like a fucking parasite?!”

“No idea.” Bucky muttered again, and Steve was about to step in to stop Dum Dum yelling anymore, but the man didn’t seem like he wanted to stop any time soon, and Monty gestured to Steve, shaking his head as if in warning.

“Well, you know how they get rid of parasites? Killing them! It’s the only way! You know how I’m going to do it?! Wrap them up in barbed wire, cut their arms off and let them bleed to death!”

“Dum, please stop…” Bucky only said it quietly, but it was enough to stop the other man. “I know you’re pissed and, trust me, I understand… But they’ll pay for what they did, don’t worry about that. I don’t want to hear about them anymore…”

Dum Dum looked like he felt guilty then, and Monty smacked his head. “I told you to keep quiet about them.”

“I’m sorry, Buck…” He stepped forward with a sigh and put his hat on the bedside table before placing his hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “I’m just really pissed that you’re in here…”

“Me too, but I’ll be fine… eventually.” He chuckled, but he sounded humourless. Dum Dum ruffled his hair and sat in the empty chair as they talked about other things. Steve could tell none of the three men were actually interested in what they were talking about, but it was just something to fill the silence.

Once the men left with a promise to come see Bucky next time they were able and pass on his affections to the other workers, Banner came in and asked Steve to step outside while they did a full examination of all of Bucky’s injuries, including his ribs.

Bucky hadn’t said anything about his ribs hurting, and his breathing was pretty much normal now, but Steve decided it would be good if they did check his ribs. They may have been hurting still, but Bucky hadn’t mentioned it because the pain in his amputation site was so much worse.

You wouldn’t complain about the DVD player being on fire if the rest of the room was also engulfed in flames.

When Banner came back out, he assured Steve that everything was okay. His ribs were healing fine, and the amputation wound was getting a lot better. He explained why they had to drain the fluid so regularly and told him it was normal, and soon it wouldn’t be necessary. Steve asked if Bucky could go for a walk in the hospital garden and Banner agreed it would be good for Bucky to get out of bed for something other than using the bathroom. The exercise, no matter how light, would help to keep the muscle tone in Bucky’s legs up and would mean one less thing the physiotherapist may have to work with him on. Banner told him he could put the IV on a portable rail and Bucky’s amputation site wouldn’t need any more precautions besides the bandages that were usually wrapped around it, as long as he didn’t need the fluid drained any time soon. Bucky would have to be taken off morphine to be able to walk around without Banner being worried that he would lose his balance and hurt himself, but he had already stopped Bucky’s morphine intake after the examination so that he wouldn’t get addicted to it. Banner seemed annoyed that Bucky had been put back on morphine by the nurse before he came into work. He said he would keep a close eye on Bucky for the rest of the day and, if there were no problems with the site or the lack
of morphine, Steve could accompany Bucky on a walk around the gardens the next day.

Bucky smiled as Steve relayed this information to him when he went back into the room.

“That’s great… Thanks for asking, Steve.” Bucky’s smile looked so much more genuine than it had done in the past week, and Steve smiled back.

“You’re welcome. The garden looks nice too, so I’m sure it’ll be good to see it closer.”

Bucky nodded in agreement, even though he had not seen the garden. Steve had seen it when he went to find Banner one day and passed a window overlooking the garden. There were paths winding through the green grass, and trees lining the outside and dotted through the middle, with flower gardens around the perimeter. Bucky hadn’t left this room since he got here, and he had come in an ambulance, unconscious.

Steve didn’t point any of this out, though, and let them both lapse into a comfortable silence. Bucky looked over at the books Natasha had brought him for the first time and his eyes lit up slightly. Steve noticed and pushed the pile a little closer to the edge nearest to Bucky so he could reach them. He moved three out of the way to get to the fourth book in the pile. *The Picture of Dorian Grey.*

Steve picked up the book he had started that morning as Bucky opened his book, but he didn’t pay attention to the words on the page. Bucky had put his book down in his lap to open it, but when he tried to turn the page he struggled slightly as the weight of the right side toppled over and made it close. He let out a huff of annoyance and Steve leant over to open it to the second page for him. Bucky didn’t look at him, but he did mutter a “thank you” as he started reading again. After a few more pages with Bucky attempting to do it himself, but Steve ending up turning it for him, he got the hang of doing it on his own. Steve still glanced up every time Bucky moved to turn the page though, in case he needed anymore help. But he saw that Bucky was starting to glare at the book in irritation whenever he felt Steve looking at him, so he concentrated on his own book.

They read in silence for an hour before Becca burst into the room. “School sucks!”

“Just give me the phone and get out of the room.” Bucky held his hand out to Becca and she reluctantly handed her phone over to him, then left to go get some food with Natasha.

Natasha had come into the room half way through Becca’s story but she was as pissed as Bucky was. While Becca had had time off from school, she had missed a few tests in various subjects, and no teachers were allowing her to sit them late. They weren’t exams, so it didn’t need to be cleared by any exam board, but they did count towards her grade. As it stood, she had two Incompletes per subject, and that would severely lower her final grade for each of them. Becca had told them she was willing to do them in her own time, with a teacher if they felt it was necessary to make sure she didn’t cheat, but they still refused. They said the teachers had more valuable uses of their time to be getting on with when they weren’t teaching lessons.

Steve insisted on staying in the room while Bucky called the school to explain the situation, in case they didn’t already know, and persuade them to just let Becca do the tests. They all knew the school knew the situation, because the police had written it out for Becca to give to the administrator when she returned to school to avoid this exact situation.

Bucky made sure that whoever he was talking to knew that he was calling them from the hospital at the beginning of the conversation. Steve figured it was to make sure they felt guilty about making him have to do this, and it seemed to work. Bucky was silent as he waited for the person to
get the principle for him to speak to. The conversation after that was short. Bucky told the man everything that had been written on the paper Becca had handed in about what happened to him, why he was in hospital, and why Becca was visiting him every day and was reluctant to return to school and leave Bucky alone. He clarified that they had no other family that were there for him, or who could take care of Becca while he was in the hospital recovering from an amputation. Bucky was sure to emphasize that word, just to make sure the man understood just how serious this situation was.

Steve could hear the man apologising profusely to Bucky for him having to call, and assured him that he hadn’t known what happened, hadn’t seen the letter Becca had given to Admin, and was not told Becca had even gotten any Incompletes. He also tried to reason with Bucky, telling him there were a lot of students, and he couldn’t keep track of each one of them individually himself. Bucky told him he understood that, but something should have been done when Becca started asking to be allowed to sit the tests. Steve heard the principle agree with Bucky, and tell him he will be having a strong word with his Admin team.

Bucky hung up a little while later and smiled as he told Steve that the principle would see to it that Becca was able to sit the tests with the same amount of time as the other pupils got, and it would be during a time block where Becca wasn’t in lesson, but her subject teacher was not teaching, so that they could sit in a room together while Becca did the test. That way, Becca would have the same opportunity for help that the other students got, and it wouldn’t bite into her free time that she could be spending with her brother, or her lunch hour.

He repeated this information when Becca came back in and she grinned as she hugged him.

“Thanks, Buck! You’re the best!” She kissed his cheek and he smiled at her as she sat down. Banner had brought two more chairs into the room so that when Natasha, Steve, and Becca were all there, two wouldn’t have to stay. All three on the chairs were on Bucky’s right, and Steve was a little irritated about that, but he supposed it was so no one knocked the amputation site and caused any problems or pain. It also meant that if no one was holding Bucky’s hand, it doesn’t matter which chair they were sat in, anyone could reach over and take it.

Steve still felt like he should be mildly annoyed that Banner had assumed no one would want to sit on Bucky’s left, but Bucky didn’t seem phased by it so Steve kept it to himself. He figured maybe Bucky hadn’t noticed, or hadn’t made the same assumptions Steve had, and if he pointed it out to him, Bucky might realise and get upset.

Becca sat in the chair closest to Bucky’s head, Natasha in the next one, and Steve at the end to he could lean over and rest his head on Bucky’s legs, wrapping an arm around them. Bucky smiled down at him occasionally as he and Natasha talked about Clint’s latest argument with a parent. Apparently, the mother had insisted on more make up being put on their daughter, but the father said there was already plenty. The woman had tried to complain to Clint, and the father had trailed in after her, trying to intervene.

Clint got a behaviour warning from the boss after telling the parents that there were obviously other issues within the marriage besides his “bomb-ass make-up job”, and they should probably seek couple’s counselling. Even when the parents looked scandalised, he went on to say that maybe they just needed to have sex more often, then went on a long rant about the scientifically-proven benefits of an active sex life in a relationship.

Bucky laughed as Natasha finished the story, and Steve smiled as he saw Bucky whole face light up with it. It was heart-warming to watch Bucky legitimately happy again, even if it was only for the time being, while his best friend told him a funny story.
Natasha told him that Clint would be coming to see him at the weekend, and Bucky nodded. He seemed happy about the prospect of seeing Clint, especially since Natasha didn’t look sympathetic when she said it. She told him that Clint had a bunch of funny memes on his phone that he needed to show Bucky before they stopped being funny. Natasha argued that that ship had already sailed.

As they left, Becca gave Bucky a hug, as did Natasha. Becca had brought Bucky’s phone, charged up, so he could text her if he needed anything when she wasn’t there. Bucky agreed to text her if he needed anything, but Steve was confident that everyone in the room knew he wouldn’t. If he wanted something, but couldn’t get it, he would just deal without it and not mention it.

As they left, Bucky sighed. “She does know I won’t ask her for anything, right?”

Steve shook his head. “I think she’s still hoping you might let us help more.”

“Don’t want to be a burden…”

Bucky seemed to think that whenever he asked favours recently, he was being a burden. Steve understood why he felt this way, but he didn’t mean he agreed with it. He tried to persuade Bucky that he would never be a burden, but Bucky had just shook his head and Steve could almost see him switch off his emotions and retreat behind a wall of indifference.

The carefree mask was starting to come back, but it wasn’t as comforting and familiar as Steve remembered.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets a lot of visitors and everyone is a bit pissed off about it.

Banner was annoyed, anyone could see that from looking at him the next day. Steve was about to ask him if Bucky could go for a walk the moment he walked into the room, but he stopped when he saw the doctor’s expression.

“Is something wrong?” Steve asked nervously. Bucky had just woken up, and he was in the bathroom brushing his teeth, so it was just the two on them.

“Yes. There are lawyers, police, social workers, and a bunch of other officials all coming in to talk to James. All of them decided that today was the day they should come in.”

“All of them? Won’t that be a little overwhelming?”

“That’s what I said, but they’re adamant that official business needs to be taken care of as soon as possible.”

Steve sighed in annoyance. Bucky was being more responsive and open lately than he had been when he was first taken to the hospital, so he understood why they hadn’t heard from anyone yet, but he thought they would have more time for Bucky to recover before they were bombarded with lawyers and the likes.

“What kind of official business?” Steve had a pretty good idea of what most of them would be here for. Lawyers would be here to talk about Brock and Jack being prosecuted, and police would need to get Bucky’s official statement – not just the one he had given to Banner when he first came in – and any medical information that could help. He wasn’t sure about the social worker, though. Maybe they were there to see what kind of help Bucky might need when discharged and to see if his house could be modified to fit those needs.

Banner confirmed his thoughts on why the lawyers and police would be there. One lawyer, from Stark, would be coming in to represent Bucky, so she would need all the information to make her case. That included Bucky’s account on what happened, and copies of the text messages on his phone from Brock threatening Bucky and Steve. The other lawyer was representing Rumlow and Rollins, and he was here to get Bucky’s statement too, since the statement was available to both the defendant’s and accused’s lawyers. There were other things that he could get from the hospital too, in hopes of building his own case against the accusations against his clients, but Banner said there was nothing here that could help those two; only hinder them.

Steve wasn’t worried about that. He knew they didn’t have a leg to stand on. Any idiot could see they were guilty. They had evidence that he had threatened them both through text – Bucky had kept the messages – and Becca was willing to write a statement on when she was attacked by Brock, so they had evidence that he wasn’t above following through on threats of violence. Steve would also tell Bucky’s lawyer, and the police, about when Rollins had tried to grab him in the parking lot after his and Bucky’s date. Bucky’s medical records showed that there were fingertip-shaped bruises around his neck when he first came in – evidence that at some point in the past
week, Jack had strangled Bucky – and the marks fit Rollins’ fingerprints perfectly. Rollins had been missing from work the entire week Bucky was being held captive, so he had no alibi. Not to mention the police arrested them at the scene, where Bucky was being tortured. Their fingerprints were all over the weapons used on Bucky, and inside the protective gloves Jack had used to tie Bucky in the barbed wire.

Not even the best lawyers in the world could persuade even the dumbest judge and jury that Brock Rumlow and Jack Rollins were innocent.

“I’ll try to persuade them that only one or two should come in per day, but I’ve been trying all afternoon and making no headway.” Banner sighed in defeat and Steve nodded a little.

“I’ll tell Bucky… He might take it better if it’s from me.”

Banner nodded in agreement and thanked Steve as Bucky came back into the room. The doctor reinserted the IV into his hand, then left to tend to his other patients.

Bucky didn’t take the news well. Understandably, he was pissed.

“Haven’t I been through enough to earn a leave-of-absence from the real world for a while?” Bucky wasn’t exactly shouting, but his voice was a little louder than usual and there was a harsh edge to his words. “I mean, why can’t they just leave me alone for another week or so? Would it really slow the process down that much if just one came at a time?”

“I don’t think so, and neither does Doctor Banner. He’s trying to persuade them to come on different days, but he’s not sure how effective his argument will be…”

“He’s my fucking doctor! If anyone knows what’s best for me, it’s him! If he doesn’t think it’d be good for me if a thousand people came in, all asking me the same questions over and over, making me relive that shit over and over, shouldn’t they fucking listen to him?!”

Now he was shouting, and Steve couldn’t find it within himself to try to calm him. He wanted to, but not because he was worried about disturbing other people or annoying the doctors or nurses, solely just to help Bucky. But he couldn’t. Everything Bucky was saying was true, and he had every right to be pissed off. He had every right to yell as much as he wanted, until someone listened to him.

The whole time he had been there, Banner was the only professional to actually ask Bucky’s opinion. He had asked him what kind of physiotherapy he would want, how long he thought he’d need it, and when he wanted to start it. Banner had obviously told Bucky what he thought would be best, and when Bucky said something completely different he asked him politely to reconsider what he had said. But if Bucky stuck to his first answer, he wrote it down and said that that’s what would happen. He never pushed Bucky to do anything he didn’t want to.

The nurses, on the other hand, weren’t as courteous. They did as they were told by Banner, or another doctor if Banner wasn’t there, mostly. But if they had no specific orders besides checking on Bucky or helping him, they did what they thought was best. They had kept putting him back on morphine whenever he showed the slightest hint of pain, even after Banner had written on Bucky’s chart not to put him on morphine anymore without the doctor’s express permission, or if Bucky was in danger of passing out from the pain. Steve didn’t like the idea of Bucky being in so much pain, but not quite enough to cause him to black out, and having to suffer through it… But he had read up on morphine addiction, and he didn’t want Bucky to get addicted and have that added to his list of problems. After sharing this information with Bucky, he agreed and allowed Banner to write the specifications on his chart.
When Bucky wasn’t feeling well, or he didn’t want to be around anyone except Steve, Natasha or Becca, Banner would respect that and only come into the room when it was strictly necessary. Even then, he would always knock and wait for Bucky to tell him he could come in, then Banner could apologise and explain why he needed to come in. He would then ask if it was okay, and only do his job after Bucky had given his consent.

The nurses didn’t even knock, most of the time. Alayah did. She did everything Banner did. But the other nurses just walked in whenever they wanted to, and did what they wanted to without even speaking to Bucky. They didn’t tell him what they were there for, what they were doing, or why they were doing it. They didn’t even greet Bucky, they just went straight to work. This was especially stressful when they were there to drain the fluid from Bucky’s amputation site or change his bandages. Steve could always see the discomfort in Bucky’s expression, and there was no way the nurses missed how his whole body would tense up and his eyes would be screwed shut the whole time they worked.

Bucky had told Steve that it made him feel like he was a machine being tampered with and experimented on, and that almost broke Steve’s heart. He was angry when Bucky said that. He was angry at the nurses for making him feel like that. They were supposed to be helping Bucky get better, not making him feel like an experiment.

When Banner did those jobs, he would smile and greet Bucky, as he did every time he came to see him. He would try to keep the sympathy off his face and out of his voice as he told Bucky what he had to do, then he would wait for Bucky to say it’s okay before talking him through what he was doing as he did it. When there was a silence, while Banner was doing something that only needed a few seconds to explain but a lot longer to actually do it, he was good at judging whether that time should remain silent or not. Sometimes he would just do what he needed to do as quickly and efficiently as possible so he could leave Bucky alone with Steve and whoever else happened to be visiting. Sometimes, he would talk about things he saw on the news, or the funny antics his young niece and nephew got up to.

Steve really liked Banner.

“They should listen to him, but…” Steve had already said Banner thought he would lose the debate. There was little else he could say. There was little he could say to make Bucky feel better. “I’ll be here the whole time, if that helps…”

Bucky seemed to relax slightly at that. It wasn’t really visible, his body was still tense and his fist was still clenched. But there was a tiny bit less tension in his shoulders, and he wasn’t gritting his teeth anymore.

“It does, yeah…” He managed to smile at Steve, and Steve placed his hand over Bucky’s fist.

“It’ll be okay, Buck. I promise.”

As predicted, Banner lost.

He did manage to persuade them to come at different times so that they wouldn’t be waiting outside Bucky’s room and going in one after the other.

The first to come was Bucky’s lawyer. She had been personally picked out by Stark, and when she heard Bucky’s case she had been more than willing to take the job. She was high in her field, so her services were expensive, but she assured Bucky that Stark would be footing the bill. Apparently he owed her money anyway.
Her name was Pepper Potts, and Steve genuinely thought she was kidding when she said that. She showed no signs of joking though, so he covered his laugh with a cough. Luckily, Ms Potts didn’t seem offended, and Bucky had to hide a smirk at Steve’s reaction.

Pepper was very nice, and she took a seat beside Bucky, immediately apologising for her having to come in today. She knew that Rumlow’s lawyer was coming in today, and she thought she needed to get to Bucky first to explain what the man would be doing and saying to try to twist this and make the two men who had hurt Bucky so much look like the victims. She asked what Bucky preferred to be called (“Mr Barnes? James? Jimmy?”) and showed genuine interest when Bucky told her. He explained that Buchanan was his middle name and she told him she loved the name “Bucky”.

“It’s original.” She had smiled.

Steve immediately liked her, and he could tell Bucky did too.

Bucky couldn’t stop himself from asking why her parents, who’s last names were “Potts”, would name their child “Pepper”. She had laughed and told them her first name was Virginia, but it reminded her too much of “Vagina”, so she used her middle name. Her father had put her middle name as Pepper as a joke without telling her mother, but Pepper liked it.

After the introductions and talk of their names, Pepper picked up the briefcase she had placed on the floor beside her chair when she came in. She was sat in the chair closest to Bucky, who was sat up in bed, and Steve was sat beside her, holding Bucky’s hand.

“Now, down to business…” She waited for Bucky to nod before continuing. “Honestly, we don’t really have anything to worry about. With your statement, your sister’s, Steve’s, and Stark’s account of what Rumlow was like at work, we have plenty of hard facts that can’t be disputed. Especially with the evidence at the scene, Rollins’ lack of an alibi, and the text messages. But, you should know what’s going to happen and what they’ll be charged with. As well as how long they’ll be in prison for.”

Bucky and Steve both nodded in agreement, very eager to know exactly how much punishment Brock and Jack would get.

“Obviously, the charges are…” She took some paper out of her briefcase. “Stalking, criminal menacing, kidnapping, grand theft auto, assault with a deadly weapon—”

“That’s what you call what they did to him?” Steve was upset about that. He wasn’t sure if she was referring to the knife wounds or the barbed wire but, either way, it should be worse than ‘assault’.

“Assault with a deadly weapon is a reference to when they held a knife to his throat in the car. We’re going chronological.” She clarified and Steve looked a little embarrassed, but Bucky just squeezed his hand and gestured for Pepper to continue. “The next crimes are while Bucky was held captive. Obviously, the main one is Grievous Bodily Harm…”

Steve had heard that phrase a lot, on TV and in movies, but he didn’t know exactly what it meant and wasn’t sure if it was accurate to what they did. Luckily, he didn’t have to voice his lack of understanding, because Bucky asked what it meant himself.

“Grievous Bodily Harm is serious physical injury inflicted on a person by the deliberate actions of another. Wounding or infliction Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent is split into three categories in the Offenses against the Person Act 1861, section eighteen. Category One is greater harm with serious injury and high culpability. That’s the one this comes under. The other two categories are
lesser injuries, but still bad ones, and lesser culpability.”

“What’s culpability mean?” Steve asked quietly.

“Responsibility or blame. There’s plenty of blame we can pin on them for this and they are one hundred percent responsible for what happened. The judge will determine culpability and the harm caused, or intended. You said in your statement to your doctor that Rollins said Rumlow was going to kill you?”

Steve’s head snapped round to look at Bucky in time to see him nod slightly, keeping his eyes trained on Pepper to avoid Steve’s look. Bucky hadn’t told him that…

“Said that his dad, Alexander Pierce, was going to get him out of jail and he’d come to where Jack had me, then he’d kill me himself. He said the only reason I was still alive was because Brock wanted to do it himself…”

Steve felt his blood boil and tightened his grip on Bucky’s hand without realising it. He felt Bucky squeeze back, and brought his hand up to kiss his knuckles, more for his own comfort than anything else. Bucky could have been killed before he and Natasha found him… He could have been killed in the car, with Steve right next to him, if Brock wasn’t so obsessed and had just decided he wanted Bucky dead full-stop.

Pepper wrote down what Bucky said in her notepad, then nodded. “There’s no way we can definitively prove that, but with all the other evidence we have, I don’t think it’d be much of a stretch for the Judge and Jury to believe that it’s true. The verdict will depend on how much of the things we can’t prove they believe. If they just believe the things we have solid evidence for, they’ll go to prison for sixteen years.”

Bucky and Steve both looked surprised at that. Steve hadn’t expected it to be that long, but he was glad it was. They deserved longer, but sixteen years was a good start.

“There are other factors the court has to consider, though, which could affect the prison time. If there was assistance, which in this case there was, there could be a reduction in time for Brock, since he wasn’t the one to personally carry out a lot of these crimes. Including the Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent. There would also be a reduction if they plead guilty. The reason they give for why they did this will be taken into account, but that’ll probably lead to more prison time, since the reason was because you ended a toxic relationship with him and entered a relationship with someone else over a year later.

“The factors effecting culpability include the degree of premeditation. Rollins knew what Rumlow wanted him to do with you and to you, even though his one phone call in prison was to his father and it was monitored. He didn’t say anything about you in the call, so there was no way his father passed a message about you on to Rollins. This means Rumlow had no way of contacting Rollins while he was being held in custody, and so he must have decided and told him what he wanted him to do before he was arrested. That’s a very substantial amount of premeditation.

“The use of a weapon also adds to culpability. He used a lot of weapons, so they’re screwed on that front. Also, intention to commit more serious harm than the actual offense is a factor. If we can prove that they intended to kill you, that’ll add to our case. Even if we can’t prove it, the jury will probably believe us after we’ve presented to hard evidence to the other offenses. With everything they did, and intended to do, we could have enough to sentence them to life imprisonment.”

There was a lot of information to take him, but Steve basically concluded that Jack and Brock are going to prison for a long time. It didn’t matter what the other lawyer did, there was no way they
could avoid that.

Pepper took Bucky’s statement about the night Jack got into his car, and what happened after that. Steve had to wait outside for the bit, to make sure he didn’t change his own story to fit what Bucky said. When Pepper invited him back in, he immediately took Bucky’s hand, and Pepper asked him to tell her what happened during the week Jack kept him in the barn.

Throughout the whole story, Steve kept Bucky’s hand tightly grasped in his. Pepper was recording the conversation on a voice recorder, so Steve had to remain silent until he finished and she turned the device off. As soon as it was off, Steve stood up to hug Bucky, and Bucky hugged back. He seemed a little surprised, but only for a second. Steve could tell he was trying his best not to show too much emotion around Pepper, since he didn’t know her very well, but as soon as Steve hugged him, Bucky buried his face against Steve’s shoulder to hide his tears.

Pepper quietly told them she would step outside and give them some privacy, and Steve smiled at her gratefully. Bucky didn’t react to her words, but Steve felt the tension leave his shoulders slightly when he heard the door close behind her. Steve was leant over, and the position wasn’t comfortable for his back, but he didn’t move. Bucky’s arm was wrapped around Steve’s back, and he seemed to be trying to curl in on himself, but Steve stopped him by keeping his arms tight around Bucky’s back. He knew that that was a defence position Bucky took up when he wanted to shut everyone out, but Steve wouldn’t let that happen. Not today.

He wanted to be there for Bucky, but he knew Bucky didn’t want to appear weak. Steve wished Bucky was more open to accepting help, but how he grew up didn’t allow it. Bucky always felt like he had to take care of his sister, even before his mother died. He had always felt the need to protect Becca. Because of this, Bucky always put his own needs aside and tried to pretend he was fine so he could concentrate on others. Being in hospital was hard for him, because he couldn’t pretend he was fine. Anyone could clearly see that he wasn’t. Everyone was focussed on him, and they had no problems that Bucky could concentrate on to downplay his own.

Eventually Bucky stopped trying to curl into himself and kept his forehead on Steve’s shoulder while he hugged him, his head resting close behind her. Steve was leant over, and the position wasn’t comfortable for his back, but he didn’t move. Bucky’s arm was wrapped around Steve’s back, and he seemed to be trying to curl in on himself, but Steve stopped him by keeping his arms tight around Bucky’s back. He knew that that was a defence position Bucky took up when he wanted to shut everyone out, but Steve wouldn’t let that happen. Not today.

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Bucky to call her and tell her.

The police were next, but they weren’t going to be there for another hour, so Steve went to talk to Banner about Bucky’s food. He didn’t tell Bucky that that’s what he was doing, because he knew Bucky would insist that he’s getting enough food and he was fine. Steve told him he was going to ask about when they could go for their walk. Technically, it wasn’t a lie, he was going to ask about that too.

Banner agreed that he had noticed Bucky’s weight was dropping, and asked if Bucky had been eating all the food they usually give them. Steve couldn’t recall Bucky refusing to eat, but he did realise Bucky had been leaving a lot on his plate and saying he just wasn’t hungry. Banner said that the morphine may have affected his appetite, as well as the trauma, and asked Steve to try to make sure Bucky ate more. If Bucky’s weight didn’t show any improvement, Banner would get a Nutritionist in to help him.

In regards to the walk, Banner said that they wouldn’t have a lot of time now to go on the walk before the police got there, so he said he would send some food to Bucky’s room so he could eat while they waited, then when the police left they could go for a walk. They would have three hours until the next official got there, and that would give them plenty of time to go walking. The police would be there at twelve, and the social worker would be there at three. Natasha would be coming by with Becca after school, at three thirty. Hopefully the fresh air will put Bucky in a better mood for when the girls came in.

Steve cut up Bucky’s food for him without Bucky arguing with him or trying to do it himself this time. He looked a little upset that he had to let Steve help, but at least he did let him. While Bucky ate, Sam came round with the things Steve had asked for, but he couldn’t stay long. He needed to go to work since they were one employee down and they hadn’t hired a replacement yet. Steve felt a little bad about that, but Sam just shrugged and said he could use the extra cash from doing more shifts anyway. He asked Bucky how he was doing, and Bucky get a non-committal shrug as he concentrated on his food. Sam didn’t seem to mind, and he left after telling Steve to call him if he needed anything. Again.

Bucky left over half the food, and Steve tried to persuade him to eat a little more. He tried to act like he wasn’t particularly bothered either way, to avoid Bucky realising he’s worried about him, but Bucky picked up on it.

“Why do you want me to eat so badly?”

Steve shrugged. “The food looks good, just don’t want it to go to waste.”

“It’s hospital food, Steve, it’s not that good. And if you don’t want it to go to waste, you eat it.” Bucky pushed the plate nearer the edge of his tray, closest to Steve, and Steve heard the challenge in his voice. Bucky knew why Steve was trying to persuade him to eat more, and it wasn’t because the food looked good.

“You’re getting too skinny, Buck. You need to eat more,” Steve could hear the begging tone in his own voice, but he didn’t care. If it got Bucky to eat, he’d get on his knees and beg properly. Screw dignity.

“No, I don’t. I’m getting skinny because the food sucks, and I’m not allowed to get out of bed and move around for anything except using the fucking toilet.” Bucky’s mood had suffered because of the visit from the lawyer, but he didn’t seem sad anymore, just annoyed at everything.

“But eating more will help…”
“No, it won’t. If I eat anymore I’m going to throw up.”

Steve didn’t want to push it after that, and just took Bucky’s hand in his. Bucky’s hand remained slack. “You know I’m only asking you to eat more because I want you to get better, right?”

Bucky nodded, but he didn’t look at him or the food, staring at a spot on the wall opposite him.

The police took Bucky’s official statement, and Bucky just repeated what he had told Pepper. This time, he didn’t get emotional. He said the whole thing with a monotone, and continued staring at the wall. The police asked a few questions to clarify certain points and Bucky answered them mechanically. Steve kept hold of his hand the whole time.

Once they left, Steve enthusiastically told Bucky they could go for their walk now, and Bucky smiled for the first time since Pepper had been there.

Banner came in and hooked the IV to a vertical rail with wheels that Bucky could drag alongside him, and told him and Steve the warning signs they had to look out for. If the amputation site started to hurt, if Bucky started to get dizzy, or if he started struggling to breathe, Bucky had to sit down while Steve went to get help. There would be nurses and doctors around the garden with other patients, and they were all qualified to help. Steve assured him that he would take care of Bucky, then Banner showed them to the exit that lead to the garden.

It was cold, so Bucky had been given a coat that belonged to one of the other doctors and was a little too big for him. Said doctor helped Bucky put it on over his amputation site and rolled that sleeve up so that it wouldn’t hurt the wound too much.

Once the coat was on, Banner reinserted the IV in Bucky’s hand. Bucky’s shoes were in the hospital from when the police had brought his things from where they were left in the barn, so he put them on and followed Steve outside, holding onto the rail with his IV on. Because of the rail, Steve couldn’t hold Bucky’s hand, but he didn’t mind. He linked his arm with his on the other side of the IV.

The garden was beautiful, even in the cold. Bucky was a little unsteady at first, but the more he walked around the more stable on his feet he appeared.

They didn’t talk for a while as they walked around the garden, but it was a comfortable silence. Eventually, Bucky asked Steve what he was going to do about work, and Steve shrugged.

“I’ll use my savings to survive until you get out of hospital, then I’ll look for a new one.”

“You don’t have to wait for me to get out of hospital…”

“You won’t be here for that long, Buck. I can wait.” Steve reassured him and squeezed his arm.

“I don’t want you to wait, or use up your savings… You obviously saved the money for something. What?”

Steve frowned a little. “It’s just in case I needed money and didn’t have a job,” Steve shrugged, but Bucky could tell he was lying.

“What’s the money for, Steve?”

He knew there was no point in lying to Bucky, he could always see right through it.
“I wanted to go to Paris one day, and visit the Louvre. See the Mona Lisa… Venus de Milo, Psyche Revived by the Kiss of Love, Oedipus and the Sphynx…”

Steve looked over at Bucky and saw the look of guilt on his face, then stopped himself from saying any more about Paris. “But it doesn’t matter. I’ll go one day.”

Bucky still didn’t look happy, but he didn’t say anything. Steve tried to distract him by pointing out the different flowers, but Bucky didn’t really react. He looked where Steve pointed, but he didn’t say anything and his expression remained indifferent.

After a while, Steve gave up trying to get Bucky out of his mood. Banner told his it was called dissociation, and it was common for people who have experienced traumatic events to go through dissociative periods. Banner had told him not to try to force Bucky out of these moods, and he would come out of them himself when he was ready. They kept walking around the garden, but Steve stayed quiet.

“You should draw them…” Bucky spoke so quietly Steve almost didn’t hear him. He looked up at Bucky and saw him staring at the flowers. Even in the cold, the English Daisies, Snapdragons, and Pansies still grew and survived. The Pansies were pink and the Snapdragons were different shades of purple.

Steve nodded slightly in agreement. “Yeah, I’d love to. I will next time we come out here.”

“Why next time?”

Steve really did want to draw the flowers, and Bucky seemed to know that. It was probably from Steve tapping his fingers against Bucky’s arm, itching to pick up a pencil and draw.

“We’d have to go in and get my sketchpad from your room, and I don’t like going in the lift any more than I have to.” They had to take the lift to go downstairs from the fifth floor that Bucky was on, because of the rail.

“So take the stairs.” Bucky shrugged.

“You can’t with the IV…”

“I didn’t say we should take the stairs,” Bucky turned to face Steve and cupped his face. “I’ll be fine on my own out here for five minutes, there’s a bench over there I can sit on and wait for you, and there’s doctors and nurses all over the place. If I collapse, they’ll notice and help me.” Bucky nodded his head towards the bench a few feet away and to the nurses walking around close by.

“Are you sure?” Steve didn’t want to leave Bucky, but he knew that rationally he would be safe.

Bucky just nodded, and walked over to the bench to sit down. He waited there and watched Steve as he debated whether to go sit down with Bucky or go get his sketchbook. After Bucky did a shooing motion at him, Steve went to get his sketchpad.

He checked his phone while he was there and saw that he had a text from Peggy.

“Sam told us what happened to Bucky. I’m so sorry this happened, and if either of you need anything Angie and I are here for you both. Don’t worry about the apartment or anything, if the landlord shows up asking for your rent we’ll pay it for you. Seriously, you or Bucky need anything let us know! Give Bucky our love!! Xxxx”

Steve smiled as he read the text, but didn’t reply. He was going to tell them he didn’t want them to
pay the landlord for him, and he could take care of that himself eventually, but Steve knew it was an argument he would lose. He grabbed his sketchpad, pencils, erasure, and sharpener, then went back to the garden to find Bucky.

Bucky was exactly where he was when Steve left, sat on the left side of the bench with the IV pushed a little out of the way, staring at the flowers.

Steve sat on the bench next to him and immediately opened the book to start drawing. Luckily, the picture he was working on for Bucky’s Christmas present wasn’t in this book. He had decided to draw that on a canvas so he could then paint it.

He sketched out the shape of the building behind the flowers, then the two inch wall around the bottom that gave a platform to the flowers. Steve felt Bucky glance down at his drawing every now and then, but he didn’t say anything and always returned his attention back to the flowers after a second of looking at the paper.

When Steve finished, he looked up at Bucky and smiled at him. Bucky smiled back as he looked between Steve and the drawing.

“It’d be better if I had my colours…”

“It looks amazing. All your drawings do.” He leant down and kissed Steve’s cheek.

Steve blushed slightly and leant up to kiss Bucky properly. Bucky was a little surprised, but he kissed back and wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders.

The social workers insisted on speaking to Bucky alone, so Steve waited outside the room for Becca and Natasha. They had drawn the blinds so that Steve couldn’t even see into the room either.

For the whole half an hour between when the social workers got there and when Natasha arrived with Becca, Steve sat on the floor outside the room. He couldn’t hear any noise coming from the inside of the room, and he was starting to wonder what they could be talking about for so long. Banner said he didn’t know, but they had official reasons and documents giving them the legal right to speak to Bucky in private if Bucky consented to it.

Steve stood up as Becca and Natasha approached.

“Hey, what’re you doing out here?” Natasha looked confused, but Becca immediately went to go into Bucky’s room before Steve stopped her.

“Some social workers are talking to him, and they want to talk to him alone.”

“Are they allowed to do that?” Becca looked annoyed and Steve could tell she was itching to go into the room.

“Apparently they have the legal documents that say they can.” Steve shrugged and sunk back to the floor in front of Bucky’s door.

Becca and Natasha both joined him, and Becca asked how Bucky had been today. Steve told them about the lawyer, and the police officers, then about the walk in the garden. He was tempted to leave out the dissociation, but Becca deserved to know.

Once Steve had recounted all that had happened that day, they all lapsed into silence. The silence was broken barely a minute later by Bucky screaming obscenities at the social workers and telling
them to leave. They all stood up and barged into the room to see what had happened. Bucky had tears in his eyes. They tried to refuse to leave, but Banner – who seemed to have materialised out of nowhere – said they could only legally be there as long as they didn’t cause any harm or distress to his patient, and insisted that they leave immediately.

While Banner tried to deal with the social workers, Steve and the girls instantly ran over to Bucky. He was still yelling, but he wasn’t really saying words anymore. He was just sobbing. Bucky grabbed Becca’s hand as soon as she was close enough and pulled her to his side. Becca hugged him and strokes his hair as he wrapped his arm around her and buried his face against her shoulder, furthest away from the social workers. Steve and Natasha both stood close by, alternating between watching the siblings nervously and glaring at the social workers.

Banner looked very angry as he waited for the men to leave the room. Once they did, Bucky stopped screaming, but he kept crying against Becca, keeping her close to him.

“Bucky?” Becca pulled back a little to look at her brother’s face. “What happened?”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Steve is an idiot.

It took twenty minutes to calm Bucky down, and three nurses came in at different times to ask Banner if he wanted them to get a sedative. Banner said no each time and, after the third, he was starting to get annoyed with them.

Bucky didn’t let go of Becca the whole time. She eventually managed to break the hug to look him in the eye, but he immediately took hold of her hand and didn’t let go of that until long after he had calmed. He eventually explained that Social Services wanted to take Becca into care for an undetermined amount of time. They said it would be just until Bucky was fully recovered, but Banner explained that their definition of ‘fully recovered’ could be a lot longer than Bucky’s or even Banner’s definitions. They would most likely take Becca away until she was of age, in four years. Bucky cringed when Banner said that and squeezed Becca’s hand harder.

Social Services claimed that Bucky wasn’t fit to take care of a teenager in his condition.

Becca was upset too, and she squeezed Bucky’s hand and placed her other hand on his forearm. Banner said he would do all he could by telling them how much progress Bucky had made already, but their best option was to contact Bucky’s lawyer. He left them alone after that, and Natasha started pacing the room, her arms crossed. Steve stayed near the door, not sure what to do.

No one said anything for a while, but Steve could feel the anger radiating off everyone in the room, including himself.

How could they do this? Bucky had been through so much already, and now they were trying to take away his last remaining relative? Bucky had enough to worry about, without worrying about having his little sister taken away from him. Social Services were supposed to help in these situations, but they were just making it worse. As the silence stretched on, Steve picked Pepper Potts’ business card up off the bedside table and held it out to Bucky. Bucky reluctantly let go of Becca’s hand and put the card on his lap so he could type the number into his phone and call her.

The conversation was swift. Bucky explained the situation, and smiled slightly as he listened to Pepper, then thanked her and hung up. He said she would look into it and get back to him when she had a plan, but she assured him that Becca wasn’t going anywhere.

Bucky rested his head against his sister’s shoulder, and she wrapped her arm around his shoulders to try to comfort him as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Although he was glad that Pepper was so confident in the thought that Becca wasn’t going anywhere, Steve was still nervous. He knew that the custody laws were flawed, and often unfair. There was a time when he was at risk of being taken away from his mother when she had gotten too ill to work or even get out of bed without assistance. She had had to spend a lot of time in hospital, and that left Steve in the apartment they shared, alone a lot of the time. One of the neighbours had called Social Services when they noticed Steve going in and out of the apartment every day for school, but not seeing his mother. Luckily, Steve was almost eighteen at the time,
and they hadn’t bothered trying to rehome him for the few months until he was of age and able to
return to his and his mother’s home.

Becca was a lot younger. They would have no problem finding a foster home or care home to put
her in for four years. Steve wanted to help, but there was very little he could do.

He stepped forward, wanting to comfort Bucky, but Natasha beat him to it and sat on the edge of
the bed with one leg tucked under her. Bucky rested his head against Becca’s shoulder again and
took Natasha’s hand at Becca rubbed his shoulders, promising she wasn’t going anywhere. There
was no more space on the bed without it being too crowded, so Steve stayed where he was near the
door.

Steve realised there was little he could do about anything, really. He couldn’t take care of Bucky,
he wasn’t qualified to. He couldn’t take care of Becca because he was in the hospital with Bucky
all the time. He couldn’t even persuade Bucky to eat.

Natasha, on the other hand, was helping. She took care of Becca when she got home and Natasha
was done with work, she took Becca to see her brother, she made her dinner when she took her
home from the hospital, and she knew to bring Bucky some books so that he wouldn’t be so bored
all the time. Steve would kill to be more like Natasha.

Speaking of the redhead, she spoke up after looking at something on her phone. Steve hadn’t even
seen her take it out or do anything on it.

“I just texted my aunt. She said if Social Services insist you can’t look after Becca, she’ll take
temporary custody of her until you’re better… That way Becca will still be close, and you can still
see her…”

Again, Natasha was helping while Steve stood off to the side being useless. Bucky didn’t look
happy about the prospect, but he nodded and asked Natasha to thank her for him. She nodded and
typed out a reply before pocketing the phone. Natasha patted his face and told him that they would
figure this out.

Steve knew he wasn’t any use here, and the gravity of that realisation was starting to get to him.
Bucky didn’t need him there. He needed his sister, and his helpful best friend. Steve knew he
would never be as important to Bucky as Becca, and he understood that. He also didn’t want to
push Natasha off the top part of Bucky’s priority list. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t sting when he
realised that Bucky didn’t need him. He didn’t doubt that Bucky loved him, he knew he did, or
Bucky would never have said it. He wouldn’t have led Steve on.

But Steve loved Cocoa Puffs when he was a kid, and when his mother stopped buying them
because she couldn’t afford it, he didn’t really miss them. He did just fine without them, and hardly
even noticed their absence.

Steve wished that Bucky needed him more, even if it was just for comfort. But, looking at them
now, Steve saw that Natasha and Becca were both doing a perfectly good job of comforting him.
Bucky didn’t look up at Steve, or acknowledge that Steve was even in the room, seemingly
forgetting he was even there.

Bucky seemed perfectly content with just Steve, when the girls weren’t there… But maybe he was
just making do with Steve’s company until he had better options. In the back of his mind, a voice
told Steve that he was being ridiculous. Bucky loved him, he enjoyed his company, and found
comfort in it…
But as he watched them, Steve knew that if he wasn’t there, there would be no difference to the scene in front of him. Bucky would still be just as upset as he is now, no more and no less, and they would still have the same amount of options as they did now. Steve figured he had become more like a permanent fixture in Bucky’s room that people didn’t really have to pay attention to in order to know it’s there, like a piece of furniture. It was nice to have there, but not particularly necessary.

As the girls talked over their options with Bucky, Steve stood off to the side, out of the way. He watched them for a few minutes before leaving the room, careful not to let the door make a noise as he closed it behind him. None of them called out to him to ask where he was going, and he could still faintly hear them talking inside the room, carrying on their conversation.

Steve wondered how long it would take for them to notice he’s gone, and checked his watch. They had two hours before Becca and Natasha had to leave, and Steve guessed that Bucky would only realise he wasn’t there when there was no one else in the room with him. To test this, Steve took out his phone and called Sam as he walked off down the hall, towards the exit.

Sam agreed to meet Steve outside the hospital, and they walked to a café nearby. He probably should have chosen to go home and shower. Steve hadn’t been out of the hospital since Bucky had woken up, so it would have been a good use of his time, but his apartment was too far away from the hospital to be able to get back quick enough if he needed to. And his Landlord would be there today to get his rent, and he didn’t want to deal with that right now. He only accepted rent money in cash, and Steve didn’t have any with him and he didn’t want to go to an ATM to break into his savings account already.

So, he settled on the café. The caffeine boost from the coffee he ordered would be greatly appreciated.

“So, let me get this straight… You’re pissed at the guy for being focussed on his sister shortly after finding out he might lose her?” Sam looked confused as he stared at Steve across the table, his coffee cup grasped in both hands to warm them from the chilly air around him.

“I’m not pissed at him… I just know he doesn’t need me there.”

“So you ditched him?”

“I didn’t ditch him!” Steve sighed. Honestly, when he looked back, he didn’t know why he decided to leave the hospital. Sam was right, Bucky had every right to be concentrating on Becca right now. “It’s just… I’m no use to him there…”

“So?” Sam frowned again. “Doesn’t mean he wouldn’t want your company.”

Steve explained the Cocoa Puffs metaphor he had thought up earlier to Sam, and Sam just closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead as if he was starting to get a headache, then looked back at Steve.

“Steve, you’re my best friend, and I love you…” He started, and Steve sensed that there was more. “But that is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Steve was a little surprised at how blunt Sam was, but he did appreciate the honesty. Before he could answer, Sam continued.

“You’re not a box of cereal! You probably ate Coca Puffs once a day, in the morning, then carried on with the next twenty four hours without even thinking about them until you woke up the next day and ate them again. Even if you ate them for every meal, it doesn’t make them anything more
than a box of cereal. Cereal tastes good, for ten minutes, then it’s not important. Bucky doesn’t only care about you for five minutes then forget about you for the rest of the day. You’re his boyfriend. He doesn’t keep you around because you taste good, or you’re good for his fucking digestive system or something! He keeps you around because he enjoys your company, and he cares about you… As a person! I can’t even begin to describe all the things wrong with you comparing yourself to a box of fucking cereal, but I’m pretty sure if you said that shit to Bucky he’d think it’s just as ridiculous as I do! And I don’t even know the guy that well!”

It was a good thing they opted to sit outside, or they probably would have been kicked out of the café by now.

“Okay! The cereal was a bad metaphor! I’m just saying, he needs me when there’s no one better around. That’s what I think, anyway. If he doesn’t try to get in contact with me before Becca and Natasha leave, I’ll know that’s true.”

“And what if he doesn’t call? The girls leave at six, right?” Steve nodded and Sam continued. “What if he calls you at ten minutes past six? Are you going to be pissed at him? Are you going to think he doesn’t appreciate you enough and break up with him?”

“No!” Steve would never break up with Bucky, he loved him way too much to leave him. And he couldn’t be mad at Bucky for no noticing he was gone until his sister was gone. He honestly wasn’t sure what he would do. It would hurt, but he’d have to understand and get over it. “I just want to be sure…”

“Well…” Sam sighed as he sat back in his chair. “At least if Bucky doesn’t really need you there when Becca is there, you have from half past three until six o’clock when you can leave Bucky and go home or something.”

Steve didn’t want to do that, but he supposed it was an option. Maybe Bucky would want some time away from Steve and alone with Becca and Natasha.

As Steve contemplated this, his phone rang in his pocket and Sam gave him a smile as Steve pulled it out of his pocket. But it wasn’t Bucky calling him, it was Natasha. Steve debated ignoring it, but he didn’t want to worry anyone, so he answered it.

“Where the hell are you?” Natasha sounded upset, but Steve immediately wanted to ask if Bucky had noticed his absence. Before he could, Natasha continued. “Bucky is freaking out! You have every right to leave if you want to but some fucking warning would be nice!”

Steve instantly felt bad. “What do you mean ‘freaking out’?”

“He started panicking, thinking someone took you away! I told him that that’s irrational thinking, but in case you haven’t noticed, he went through something quite traumatic recently. You know, something to do with him being kidnapped? Remember? When he was tortured? Just in case it slipped your mind, Bucky has been traumatised by the experience. Obviously. Who wouldn’t be? He’s not thinking clearly, and he thinks you’re in danger because you disappeared without a word! Where the fuck are you?!”

Steve bit his lip as he listened to Natasha. He should have thought more thoroughly about how Bucky would react. Of course he was still traumatised by what happened to him, and of course he would jump to the worst case scenario.

“I’m sorry… I’ll be there in ten minutes, tell Bucky I’m okay.”
He didn’t wait for her reply before ending the call. He knew Natasha was angry, and he understood that, but he didn’t want to have to explain himself. The truth would probably offend her, and make her even angrier at Steve for jumping to such a stupid conclusion. Steve knew it was stupid now. It may have been the lack of a good night sleep in a while that caused Steve’s insecurities to get the better of him. Bucky had been trying to persuade Steve to go home at night so he wouldn’t have to sleep cramped up in a chair, but Bucky would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night screaming from nightmares. Steve didn’t want him to have to deal with that alone.

Steve also hadn’t been eating much, just a sandwich a day while Bucky was napping.

He was trying to think of excuses to tell Bucky about why he decided leaving him would be the best course of action when he thought Bucky didn’t need him, but he knew it didn’t matter what he said. Bucky had every right to be mad at Steve for leaving without saying anything, and causing Bucky to worry about him and panic.

Sam had obviously heard what Steve said, and shook his head lightly with a sigh. “You really didn’t think Bucky would freak out?”

“I didn’t think he’d be that bothered…”

“Wow… You’re really stupid sometimes, Steve.”

Sam stood up and walked Steve back to the hospital. Usually, Steve struggled to keep up with Sam’s pace. Sam was taller and had longer legs than Steve, and he walked fast. But this time, Sam struggled to keep up with Steve because of how desperate he was to get back to Bucky and apologise.

When they got outside the hospital, Steve stopped briefly to say goodbye to Sam and apologised for dragging him into this mess. Sam waved it off, saying he was always happy to show Steve what an idiot he was being, and Steve went back into the hospital.

Steve had hoped that Bucky would be calm by the time he got back, when Natasha told him that Steve was okay. He knew it was selfish, but he didn’t want to see Bucky so upset because of him. But, he realised, he deserved to see Bucky upset. It was his fault he was in this state, he should have to suffer through seeing it.

Bucky was not calm when Steve rushed into the room.

Bucky was crying.

Natasha had her arms around Bucky’s shoulders and his face was turned against her shoulder, but Steve could hear the sobs and see them jolting his body. He was shaking, and clutching Natasha’s jacket as he gasped in short, shaky breaths.

Becca was stood near the door, biting her fingernails, and she glared at Steve when he looked over at her, then back at Bucky. Steve stepped forward so he was stood next to Natasha, near Bucky.

“Bucky…”

He must not have heard Steve come into the room, because when Bucky heard his voice, his head immediately shot up, eyes wide in shock.

“Steve!” Bucky let go of Natasha and she stepped back to allow Bucky to pull Steve into a hug. Steve immediately wrapped one arm around Bucky’s shoulder and rested his other hand on
Bucky’s hair, keeping his head against Steve’s shoulder.

“I’m so sorry…” He muttered at he pressed a kiss to Bucky’s hair.

Bucky just tightened his arm around Steve. His breathing slowly returned to normal, but he was still shaking, and Steve could feel tears soaking into the shoulder of his t-shirt.

“Where did you go?” Bucky mumbled quietly. Steve heard his voice break a little at the end as it shook, and Steve could have sworn his heart broke at the same time, hearing the fear in Bucky’s voice.

Steve also heard Natasha whisper something to Becca before they both left the room, presumably to give them some privacy as Steve explained his momentary lapse in judgement.

“I… went to a café…”

“Why did you sneak out?” Bucky’s voice was no more steady than it had been before, and it was slightly muffled by Steve’s shoulder. He could hear the hurt evident in Bucky’s voice.

“I didn’t sneak out, I just…” Steve didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to voice his insecurities while Bucky was clearly unstable himself, so instead, he pulled back a little to look at Bucky.

Bucky made a slightly whimpering sound as he did, and Steve kept his arm around Bucky’s shoulders so he wouldn’t think he was leaving him again, then moved his other hand from his hair to cup Bucky’s cheek. “I’m sorry, Bucky… But just relax, I’m okay…”

Tears still filled Bucky’s eyes and slipped down his cheeks, but he wasn’t shaking anymore, and Steve smiled slightly at him as Bucky took a few deep breaths.

“I thought Brock got you…” Bucky muttered and Steve frowned.

“Bucky, Brock is in police custody. He can’t get to me, you, Becca, or anyone else. Neither can Jack. We’re all safe.”

Bucky nodded a little and sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?”

He seemed calmer now, so Steve prepared himself to tell Bucky the truth. “I didn’t think you’d notice I was gone…”

Bucky frowned. “Why wouldn’t I notice?”

“I didn’t really think you needed me here…” Steve shrugged and looked down at the bedsheets between him and Bucky to avoid meeting his tear-filled eyes.

“I always need you, Stevie…” Bucky moved his hand from Steve’s back to his cheek to persuade him to look back up at him. “Why don’t you think I need you?”

Steve really didn’t want to explain that. He didn’t want to make Bucky feel bad about being close to his sister and his best friend, but he couldn’t think of a convincing lie that wouldn’t make Bucky feel bad. Steve decided it would be best to just tell the truth.

“You had Becca and Natasha looking after you… You didn’t need me.”

“I don’t mind if you want to go home, Steve… Just tell me when you leave…”
“I didn’t want to go home. And I still don’t. I just… Wanted to see if you’d notice.”

Bucky looked confused for a second, then he looked angry at that and dropped his hand from Steve’s face onto the bed. “So this was a test?”

Steve quickly shook his head. “No! Not really…”

“‘Not really’? So it was sort of a test? How long was the test for? How long were you going to disappear for?”

“Bucky, it’s not like that.” He tried to reason with him, but Bucky shook his head.

“Tell me how long.” He was getting angrier, and Steve knew he couldn’t get out of this without telling Bucky the truth.

“Two hours…”

Bucky seemed to think about that for a minute, probably trying to figure out why specifically two hours. Steve could see the exact moment he realised what Steve meant by that.

“Until Becca and Natasha left…”

Steve just nodded and looked down again, waiting for Bucky to start yelling at him. He knew he deserved it, but it didn’t make him dread it any less. But, the yelling never came. Steve looked up again to see why Bucky hadn’t said anything, and saw him glaring down at his lap.

“Bucky--” Steve started, but Bucky interrupted him before he could say anything else.

“Steve, maybe you should go home.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. Steve didn’t want to leave Bucky, especially not when he was clearly upset. But it was Steve’s fault he was upset, so Bucky had the right to not want to be around him right now. It didn’t mean Steve was willing to leave him, though. If they just talked about it, maybe they could work through it and Bucky would forgive him, then they could go back to how they were before Steve’s unreasonable test.

“Bucky, please listen to me… I’m sorry--”

Bucky interrupted him again. “What if I failed? What if I was too distraught over the thought of losing my little sister that I didn’t notice you sneak out?”

“You wouldn’t have failed…”

“Oh, so maybe a C minus? I’m sorry, I didn’t realise our relationship came with tests! Is there an extra credit option? Summer school, maybe?”

“Bucky, stop…” Steve felt the tears pricking his eyes, but he refused to let himself cry.

“Shouldn’t I have been given some notice before the test? So I had time to study for how I should react when my boyfriend ditches me during an emotionally difficult time involving my family?”

“I’m sorry! I wasn’t thinking straight!” Steve felt the tears fall down his cheeks now, both out of sorrow and frustration. He understood why Bucky was angry, but Steve was trying to explain himself and make things right, and Bucky wasn’t letting him.

“I wasn’t thinking straight either when you disappeared! I haven’t had a panic attack since I was
sixteen, but you’re gone for half an hour and my brain instantly jumps to the idea that you’re dead!”

“I didn’t mean to scare you…”

“You’ve been by my side every waking and sleeping moment since I got here, then you suddenly disappear without a word and you didn’t think I’d be scared?! You’ve been harping on this whole time about how you don’t want to leave me alone, and I’m not supposed to worry when you’re unexpectedly gone?!”

“I wasn’t thinking straight…”

“So you said!”

Steve didn’t know how to make this right, especially not when Bucky was this angry and wouldn’t listen to him.

“I’m insecure… I thought I was like Cocoa Puffs to you…” Steve realised how stupid that sounded as soon as he said it, and a glance up at Bucky’s face confirmed it.

“What the fuck does that even mean?!”

Steve shook his head. “Doesn’t matter… I thought you weren’t particularly bothered if I was here or not, if you had other people to talk to…”

“Maybe we should find out!” Bucky’s hand clenched the bedsheets in his fist as he spoke. “But with the proper variables this time. No confounding variables that could affect the results, such as, maybe, me thinking you’re in danger!”

“What are you saying…?” Steve was pretty sure he knew, but he didn’t want to believe it. His insecurities had always caused him so much trouble already, he couldn’t afford anymore misunderstandings.

“Go home, Steve.” Bucky’s voice was hard, and Steve winces slightly. That hurt more than the yelling did. Bucky didn’t sound hurt, or confused, he was just angry.

Steve shook his head quickly, and Bucky pressed the Help Button beside his bed. Barely a minute later, a nurse came in.

“I don’t want him here anymore, can you make him leave?” Bucky asked her and Steve felt more tears stain his cheeks, but he still didn’t get up out of the chair.

“Sir, if you don’t leave, I’ll have to call security…” The nurse warned him, and Steve looked up at Bucky. But Bucky wasn’t looking at him anymore. He was staring down at his covers with a scowl on his face and tears in his eyes.

Steve realised there was nothing he could do right now to make Bucky forgive him, and staying was just upsetting him more. He sighed and stood up.

“I’m sorry, Bucky… I love you.” He leant down to kiss Bucky’s cheek and expected him to pull away or stop him somehow, but he didn’t. Bucky did turn his head a little to make sure Steve’s lips connected with his cheek and not his own lips, though.

Steve then stood up and followed the nurse out of the room, then out of the hospital.
It was dark, and cold, and Steve had no money for the bus or a cab, so he started walking home. He didn’t suppose Natasha would be in the mood to give him a ride home either.

Steve did see her car still in the parking lot, and he checked his watch to see that it was only fifteen minutes past four, so she and Becca would still be in the hospital. He felt bad for cutting into Becca’s time with her brother and Natasha’s time with her best friend, but he felt even worse about putting Bucky in a bad mood. He hoped Becca and Natasha hadn’t heard the argument and remembered the glare Becca had sent him when Steve had come back into the room. It looked so much like the glare Bucky had given Steve when he told him to go home.

Steve tried to stop himself from crying on the way home. He didn’t want to cry in public, on the street where anyone could see, but it was no use. He had to stop a few times because the sobs that wracked through his body prevented him from walking, causing him to double over and clutch his stomach with one hand and cover his face with the other.

He eventually got back to his apartment block and tried to open the door, but the keys kept slipping from his hands. They were shaking, and Steve wasn’t sure if it was because of the crying or the cold.

“Steve…?”

He turned to see Angie stood in her doorway, wearing her work uniform, and looking concerned. When she saw the tearstains on his face, she immediately stepped out into the hall and hugged him without even asking why he was crying. He hugged back and, although he had managed to calm down to the point of just the odd tear falling down his face, he was now back to sobbing as he rested his head against her shoulder.

The noise must have alerted Peggy, because she came out shortly after, dressed in fluffy pyjamas and looking equally as concerned at Angie. Steve only looked up at her for a second before closing his eyes and resting his head against Angie again, but after a few seconds he felt Angie nod, so he knew some silent communication had happened between the two of them while Steve wasn’t looking.

Angie then carefully pulled away from Steve a little, just enough to lead him into their apartment and over to the couch. He gratefully sat down and accepted the glass of water Peggy offered him as the girls sat either side of him, rubbing his arms to try and get some warmth back into them, and waiting for Steve to speak first.

After a few gulps from the water, Steve whispered. “I really fucked up…”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve talk.

“Oh Steve…”

He could hear the disappointment in Peggy’s voice and recoiled slightly. After finishing the water he had been given and one more glass, then being wrapped in a blanket Angie had brought in for him, Steve was able to tell them the whole story. He hardly stopped to breathe, and his chest felt tight, screaming in protest, but Steve couldn’t bring himself to care.

“I know I messed up. It wasn’t fair on Bucky to do that, and now he won’t talk to me…”

“If you pulled something like that with me, I wouldn’t talk to you either…” Angie muttered.

“How do I fix this?” Steve asked and looked between the two of them, desperately awaiting an answer.

The girls both looked at each other with matching helpless expression, but it was Peggy who spoke first.

“I think you need to give Bucky a little space to calm down… But not so much that he thinks you don’t care enough to try to contact him… Maybe you shouldn’t go to the hospital until he says he wants you do. Don’t try to contact him tonight. But call him tomorrow…”

Steve nodded a little. He wanted to go back to the hospital right away, to beg for Bucky’s forgiveness, but he needed to respect Bucky’s decision. If he didn’t want Steve there, then Steve had no right to be there. Steve checked the charge on his phone to make sure he had enough to last until tomorrow. He had left his charger in the hospital, as well as his sketchpad. Luckily, Peggy used to have the same phone Steve has now, and she kept the charger for it, so if his phone did die, he could borrow the spare charger she had no other use for.

“What if he doesn’t want to be with me anymore?” Steve whispered, fear clear in his voice.

The only person he had ever really loved was his mother, and when she died it broke Steve’s heart. He couldn’t imagine ever loving someone with all his heart again, until he met Bucky. Steve had been worried about falling so deeply in love with Bucky, scared that he wouldn’t feel the same way and Bucky would reject him. But he couldn’t stop himself, and when Bucky said he loved him back, Steve didn’t think he’d have to worry about losing his loved one again. Bucky was safe, and he loved Steve. But maybe that didn’t mean that they would be together forever. Maybe Bucky didn’t love him anymore, or still he did, but he didn’t want to be with Steve after what he did.

“Steve.” Angie wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “One argument isn’t going to make Bucky leave you. Just give him some time, and explain your insecurities when he’s calm enough to listen. But don’t make excuses for your actions, just explain them. And apologise again.”

Steve nodded as he listened to her and rubbed his eyes, the exhaustion of the day finally hitting him. Peggy must have picked up on that, because she stood up and helped Steve stand.
“Come on, let’s get you to bed…”

Steve nodded and expected them to lead him out of the apartment to his own, but instead Peggy steered him towards her and Angie’s bedroom. He tried to protest, but Angie shushed him as she pulled the covers back for him to get into the bed. When he still didn’t get into the bed, Peggy pushed Steve to lie down. Steve stopped arguing then and closed his eyes as he rested back against the pillows. Their bed was a lot softer than Steve’s, and the pillows were much plumper. He fell asleep almost as soon as he felt Peggy pull the duvet over him, but it wasn’t as comfortable as it should be. Steve woke up barely an hour later and kept tossing and turning. He should have been glad to be sleeping in a proper bed, but it felt wrong. He ended up curled up at tight as he could, as if he was still in the chair beside Bucky’s bed.

Steve woke up in a comfortable bed to the smell of bacon and eggs, and he briefly thought he was at Bucky’s house, and Bucky was cooking breakfast. Then he remembered that Bucky hadn’t been home in weeks, and he wouldn’t be cooking breakfast any time soon. He then remembered his fight with Bucky and the events that led him into Peggy and Angie’s bed.

Steve sighed and got up to go into the living room. Angie and Peggy were in the kitchen laughing about something while Peggy made coffee and Angie made the food. They both stopped when they noticed Steve and their smiles turned sympathetic. He almost cringed at the sight, but he fought the urge. He knew they just wanted to help. Peggy pulled out a chair at the table for Steve to sit down in and placed a mug of coffee in his hands.

“How did you sleep?”

Steve could tell that his face answered that question for him. He could almost feel the dark circles under his eyes. Regardless, he shrugged and muttered, “Fine.”

The couple didn’t look convinced, obviously, but they nodded a little and accepted his answer.

“Do you think I could call Bucky now?” He asked quietly as Angie placed a plate of food in front of them. She and Peggy exchanged a look before Peggy answered him.

“Eat your breakfast first, then call him…”

Steve accepted that and picked up his cutlery. He was hungry, but he couldn’t bring himself to lift the fork up to his mouth, he just pushed the food around the plate. Steve could feel Peggy’s and Angie’s eyes on him, but he didn’t look up as he concentrated on the food. He didn’t want to answer their questions on how he was feeling, it was pretty obvious how he was feeling.

Steve was angry at himself for what he did, he was sad that he wasn’t with Bucky, he hated himself for making Bucky cry. And he was tired. So tired.

He managed to force himself to eat enough of the breakfast so that the girls would be satisfied and let him go call Bucky. The breakfast tasted good, but he just didn’t have any appetite, and he really wanted to call Bucky.

Steve took his phone into the bedroom and clicked on Bucky’s contact. His ID picture in Steve’s phone was a picture of them both smiling, Bucky’s arm around Steve’s shoulders. The picture usually made Steve smile, but this time he felt his chest constrict painfully. He clicked the Call button and held it up to his ear, praying Bucky would answer.

After six rings, the call went to voicemail. Steve left a message, apologising again and begging Bucky to call him back. He called Natasha too, but she didn’t answer. Becca did, though, when he
called her phone.

“Hey…”

“Hi Becca…” Steve wasn’t sure what to say now that someone had actually answered his calls. There was no point apologising to Becca. She may be angry at him, but she wasn’t the one Steve had wronged. He half expected Becca to tell Steve to stop trying to call Bucky, and to stay away from her brother after what he did.

“Bucky is here… He said he’ll talk to you.” Becca told him and Steve felt hope blossom in his chest. He didn’t need to say anything before he heard Becca hand the phone over to Bucky. He knew Bucky had the phone, but the brunet didn’t say anything.

“Bucky?” Steve had to make sure.

“Yeah.” Bucky answered briefly. Steve didn’t know what he was supposed to say. He had apologised, but Bucky hadn’t wanted to hear it the night before. Maybe he would be willing to listen to him now that Bucky had calmed down a little.

“How did you sleep?” Steve lost his nerve before he could say what he really wanted. He wanted to apologise again and beg Bucky for forgiveness, beg him to let Steve see him again…

“Not great. You?” Bucky sounded tired, his voice was thick with exhaustion, and Steve felt another wave of guilt. It was probably his fault Bucky hadn’t slept very well.

“Not great…” Steve admitted in return.

There was a few moments of silence, and Steve checked to make sure they hadn’t been disconnected. They hadn’t.

“Bucky, I’m so sorry…” Steve heard Bucky sigh on the other end of the phone, but he didn’t let that stop him. “I did something stupid, and I’m sorry. It was a momentary lapse of judgement, and I’m sorry I scared you.”

“It’s not that you scared me… It’s that you felt the need to pull some kind of experiment on me instead of just talking to me about how you feel.” Steve was glad that Bucky was at least talking to him in more than a few words at a time, but he knew he still had a lot of making up to do. “Why didn’t you just talk to me?”

“You have your own problems… I didn’t want you to have to worry about my stupid insecurities.”

“So you thought the best course of action was to trick me into thinking you left me?” Bucky didn’t even sound angry anymore. Just confused, and tired.

“I didn’t try to trick you, I just…” Steve sighed. “Please let me make it up to you?”

He held his breath as he waited for Bucky’s reply.

“How?” Steve smiled slightly as he heard the intrigue in his voice.

“I’ll find a way…” There was another silence, and Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky would accept that or not, then he heard him sigh over the phone.

“You better do… Are you coming to the hospital today? I have something I need to talk to you…”

Steve was worried about what Bucky wanted to talk to him about, but he couldn’t stop himself
from smiling at the fact that Bucky wanted him there, and he nodded, despite Bucky not being able to see him. “I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Peggy insisted on driving Steve to the hospital so he wouldn’t have to walk again and even stopped off at an ATM so Steve could get some money. He thanked her about six times on the way there and when she stopped the car to let him out. Each time, she said he was welcome.

In the car, it only took about ten minutes to get to the hospital, so he stopped off at the gift shop. He had plenty of time until Bucky would be expecting him, but he still wanted to show up a little earlier.

Steve looked around the store. There were a lot of Get Well Soon cards, stuffed animals, and balloons. None of them seemed right. He wasn’t expecting the present he was going to buy today would make up for what he did, but it’d be a start.

Eventually, he settled for a bouquet of white and yellow tulips. White tulips represented forgiveness and yellow represented being hopelessly in love. He hoped Bucky would get the message, but he doubted Bucky knew the meanings behind tulips. Even if he didn’t, they still looked nice, so at least the gesture wouldn’t be completely lost.

He checked the time before taking the stairs up to Bucky’s room, then knocked and waited. Banner came out of the room a few seconds later and gestured Steve inside as he left. Steve went inside and smiled nervously at Bucky. Steve knew he had a bad night’s sleep, but he wasn’t expecting Bucky to look as worn down as he did. His skin was paler than usual, slightly chalky, and he had dark circled under his eyes as well as a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. He smiled back at Steve, although it didn’t look very convincing.

Bucky’s eyes flicked to the flowers in Steve’s hand then back up to his face, and Steve looked down at the flowers too as he walked further into the room towards Bucky.

“I brought you some flowers… Thought the room could use some colour…”

He went to put the flowers in a vase next to Bucky’s bed, but Bucky held his hand out for them, so Steve handed them over.

“Thanks…” Bucky muttered as he smiled slightly at the flowers.

Steve couldn’t stop himself from smiling too when he saw Bucky’s lips twitch up. This smile was more convincing this time, even if it was small. Bucky lifted the flowers up a little to smell them, then kept looking at them while he spoke to Steve.

“What do they mean?”

Steve was confused at that and frowned slightly. “Huh?”

“You’re an artist… Surely you know the meanings behind flowers. White and yellow tulips seems kind of random unless you picked them for their specific meaning.”

Steve sometimes hated how observant Bucky was, but at least he was talking to him. He sat on the edge of Bucky’s bed with one leg tucked under him.

“You know, I don’t think I classify as an ‘artist’. I think you need to have at least one paid artistic job to be able to claim that title…”
“Would you say I was a dancer?” Bucky asked, seemingly at random, and Steve nodded. “I’ve never been paid to dance. You’re an artist, Steve. Fuck official definitions.”

Steve huffed out a laugh and tried not to blush.

“So what do they mean?” Bucky asked again, and Steve tried to feign innocence. He knew it wouldn’t work, though. That was evident from the look Bucky gave him.

“White tulips represent forgiveness…”

“Are you saying you forgive me?” Bucky asked and Steve quickly shook his head.

“No! No, you haven’t done or said anything that needs forgiving… I just thought they’d be appropriate…”

Bucky nodded a little as he looked down at the flowers again. “And yellow?”

“Hopelessly in love…” Steve felt a blush colour his cheeks and smiled a little when he saw some colour on Bucky’s too.

Bucky smiled as he put the flowers in the vase beside his bed. “Thank you…”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, neither of them sure what to say next. They had never argued before, not about something serious. They would sometimes bicker about what to watch on TV, or what music to listen to in the car, but it always ended with them both picking a suitable compromise and laughing together. Steve couldn’t think of any kind of compromise they could come to in order to excuse what Steve did. He didn’t even want excusing. He understood that what he did wasn’t right, and he acknowledged that. And he would take any punishment Bucky thought he deserved. If he had called him over here to tell Steve in person that he didn’t want to be with him anymore, Steve would be crushed, but he would respect Bucky’s decision. He just hoped that they could possibly be friends, even if they weren’t a couple. It’d hurt, seeing Bucky and knowing he’s not allowed to kiss him anymore, but if that’s what it took to just keep Bucky in his life then he would deal with it.

Steve realised he was getting ahead of himself. He didn’t know why Bucky had called him to come to the hospital, or if there was even a legitimate reason at all. Maybe he wanted to reconcile or at least talk about what happened.

The silence was starting to get unbearable, but before Steve could break it, Bucky beat him to it.

“Are you going to tell me what made you think I don’t need you?” His voice was quiet, but in the silence of the hospital room, Steve heard him clearly. Bucky was looking off to the side, at the flowers, not meeting Steve’s eyes.

He sighed quietly before speaking. “I just… You need Becca, obviously. She’s your family. And Natasha is always so helpful. I’m… neither of those things.”

“Why don’t you think you’re helpful?” Bucky looked away from the flowers and frowned at Steve, confusion evident in his expression.

“I’m not. Natasha always has a plan, or a way to solve problems. I don’t. I’m never first to think of anything, I never know what’ll help…”

“There are other ways to be helpful besides problem solving,” Bucky pointed out and Steve sighed as he looked down at the blanket over Bucky’s legs.
“Doesn’t feel like it…”

Bucky’s hand came out to hold Steve’s, and Steve gripped his in return. “Steve. If it wasn’t for you, I would have gone insane by now. I’d be here, alone, for most of the day. Becca has school and Natasha has work, then after school Becca has homework and Natasha is taking care of her. I’d get under three hours of company a day.”

Steve tried to smile, but Bucky’s words just solidified his idea that the only reason Bucky cared if he was there or not was because he had no other options. Bucky must have noticed, because he squeezed Steve’s hand a little tighter.

“You constantly being here is… grounding. And reassuring. No matter how shit I feel, you’re always here. No matter how hopeless I feel, you’re here. When I think there’s no way I’ll ever get through this, and certainly not with my sanity, you’re here. You always know what to say to make me smile, even if it’s only briefly…”

Steve knew Bucky was trying to make him feel better, and he wanted to believe that Bucky really did need him, but he still wasn’t convinced.

“Telling you to leave hurt me more than you can imagine. But I wasn’t upset that you felt this way, I was upset that your first thought was to set up a fucking test, and wasn’t to just talk to me about it… You can always talk to me, Steve, about anything. Don’t you believe that?”

He wanted to believe him, but he didn’t want to put anymore worries into Bucky’s head, or add to his already long list of problems. Steve didn’t want to burden Bucky more than he already did.

“Steve, talk to me…” Bucky insisted softly and Steve repeated his thoughts to him.

When he finished, he looked up and saw Bucky looking at him with a sorrowful expression. “Why don’t you ever believe me when I tell you that you’re not a burden? I swear, we’ve had this conversation a thousand times before.”

Steve could hear Bucky getting frustrated again, but he didn’t know how to communicate his thoughts properly without upsetting him more. No matter what Steve said, it always came out wrong and made Bucky feel worse.

“It doesn’t matter.” Steve shook his head and Bucky groaned in annoyance.

“Steve! If you don’t talk to me, I can’t help you!”

Steve winced slightly at the volume of Bucky’s words and shook his head again. “You don’t have to help me, you have enough to be worried about…”

“I want to help you! When are you going to get it through that thick skull of yours that I love you and I want to make you happy?!”

He couldn’t stop himself from folding when Bucky said that. “I know you’re going through a hard time right now, and I don’t expect it to get better any time soon. That’s why I don’t think I can talk to you about the things that are bothering me. I don’t want you to have to worry about that, I know you want to, but I don’t want you to. You have other things to concentrate on, more important things.”

“You’re important, Steve…”

“But you’re more important. And don’t fight me on this!” He stopped Bucky from interrupting.
“You’re the single most important thing in my life, and I want to help you be okay. My problems can wait.”

“Steve, your problems are my problems. Especially when they effect our relationship.”

“I won’t pull anything like what I did yesterday again, I promise. It won’t affect our relationship anymore.” Steve saw the muscle in Bucky’s cheek jump as he clenched his jaw. “I know you’re not happy about that. And I understand. But until you’re better, I refuse to unload my insecurities onto you. You might not think its fair, but as long as you’re in this hospital, you are top priority.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about…”

Steve remembered that Bucky had said he wanted to talk to him about something. Apparently, it wasn’t their relationship, as Steve had feared. “What do you mean?”

“Banner told me they’ve set a date for when I can leave, if I feel up to it… I can stay longer if I don’t feel like I should leave yet, but it’s an option.”

“When did he say you could leave?”

“Seven days…”

Steve’s face broke out in a wide grin. “Bucky, that’s great!”

He stood up and threw his arms around Bucky’s shoulders to hug him, and Bucky hugged back with an equally wide smile.

“Are you going to leave the hospital in seven days?” He asked and pulled back to look at Bucky’s face. It suddenly occurred to Steve that Bucky may not want to leave the hospital in seven days. It might seem too soon, he might not be ready.

“I don’t know… That’s what I wanted to talk to you about… What do you think?”

Steve sat back down on the bed, but beside Bucky this time so he could keep his arm around Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky rested his head against Steve’s shoulder as Steve thought about his answer.

“You’ve been doing really well. All of your injuries are pretty much healed, and you don’t have to get the fluid drained from your arm anymore. I don’t think, medically, there’s a problem with you leaving in a week. If there was a problem, Banner wouldn’t say you could leave so soon. The main thing to think about is how you feel. Do you feel ready to go home?”

“I don’t know…” Bucky shrugged slightly. “I want to go home, and sleep in my own bed, pick my own food, and clothes… But Becca…”

“You’re worried you’ll be a burden on her.” It wasn’t a question. Steve knew what Bucky was thinking, because Steve thought the same thing about himself all the time. He felt Bucky nod against his shoulder, and Steve rubbed his shoulder soothingly. “You won’t be a burden. She wants you home. She misses you so much.”

“Yeah, but it’s not going to go back to normal, it’s not like I’m coming home from a vacation. She’ll soon realise that I’ll just be in the way, or she won’t be able to look at me because of my arm…”

“Have you told Becca how you feel?” Steve asked and Bucky shook his head. “Why not?”
“I don’t want her to feel bad about my own insecurities…”

Steve laughed at the irony, and Bucky looked up at him in confusion. “I’m sorry, but… Now do you see why I don’t want to tell you my problems and worries?”

Bucky shook his head and sat up to look at Steve properly. “This is different. We’re both adults in a two-way relationship. Becca is my fourteen year old little sister… It might not even matter if she wants me home anyway. There’s still a chance she won’t be there by the time I go home.”

Steve remembered the social workers and bit his lip. “Has Pepper got in contact with you about that yet?”

As expected, Bucky shook his head. “Said she’ll get back to me as soon as she has something concrete. She spoke to the social services though, and she said she’s building a case against their accusation that I won’t be able to take care of my sister.”

“Can she mention that you won’t be out of work for that long? Tony Stark already has several jobs, waiting for you to pick one…”

“She said she’ll work it into the case…”

“Did I hear my name?” Tony Stark seemed to materialise out of nowhere, stood in front of the open door with a smirk on his face. “Speaking of me and ‘case’, I think it’s time you learnt what’s in that briefcase I brought over, since you should be getting out of here soon. Congrats, by the way.”

“How long have you been stood there?” Steve asked as Stark strode into the room.

“Long enough to know that you could use some good news. Sorry about what’s going on with your sister, James, but I do have good news. And it may even help you keep Becca.”

Bucky’s eyes lit up as Stark spoke. “What is it?”

Stark whistled and Banner walking into the room, glaring irritably at Tony as he did, holding the metal briefcase Tony had brought into the hospital last week.

“This--” Stark started as he took the case from Banner. “--is extremely experimental stuff. I’m not even legally allowed to give you it, technically, because it hasn’t been tested on humans before. It’s a prototype.”

“Prototype of what?” Bucky looked between Stark and the briefcase in confusion.

Tony took out an A4 envelope and passed it to Bucky. Bucky just glared at Stark when he saw that it was still sealed, and so Bucky couldn’t open it. Steve took it from his hand and broke the seal for him before handing it back to him. Bucky smiled at him gratefully and took the papers out of the envelope with only a little difficulty. The papers weren’t actually papers. They were photographs, but Steve couldn’t make out what they were photographs of. He could see that whatever the pieces of equipment he was looking at were, they were made of metal, and there were a lot of wires and circuit boards. All the equipment was spread out on a lab table, and Bucky skimmed over a few photographs before stopping on the last one.

It was an arm. A metal, prosthetic arm.

Steve and Bucky both stared at the picture with an equal amount of surprise and confusion in their expressions.
Stark eventually got bored of waiting, evidently, because he came over and put the briefcase on the bed next to Bucky’s legs.

“We’ve tested the mechanics and electronics in it on rats, dogs, and even horses who have lost limbs. This prosthetic has been in-the-making for about twenty years. The last time we had an actual problem with it that resulted in people thinking it would never work was ten years ago.”

“Why aren’t these being mass-produced?” Steve asked, confused as to why – if there was no problem with it – more people with similar injuries didn’t have access to them.

“The ones for the rats costed millions to make. The one for a human will cost billions. Not even Stark Industries has that much, and my dad refuses to accept that if we want these made he’s going to have to get someone to invest. He’s too proud. We’re looking into finding cheaper material than the metal to make it out of, and on making the circuits smaller or something so that we don’t have to spend so much on the inner workings, but this is the last design we’ve had that has worked properly; as we want it to, at least.”

“How does it work?” Bucky asked as he looked back at the first picture of all the wires and circuit boards.

“Well, basically it acts as an extension to your nerves. Like when you move your right arm, it’s because a signal is sent from you brain, down the nerves, and makes it move however you want it to. The prosthetic has little receptors at the top, which will be against the end of your metal arm, and will pick up the signals being sent from your brain to where your arm ends, the inner workings then interpret them, and make the prosthetic move how your brain wants it to. It works like a human arm and hand. I managed to persuade my dad and a bunch of other company shareholders that it’s safe to test on humans, and I said I had the perfect candidate. You.”

“So… It’ll be like I have a normal arm again?”

Tony nodded with a grin. “Pretty much. Except it’ll be made of metal. And possibly bullet-proof. My dad keeps fighting me on that one, though.”

Steve smiled at he looked at Bucky. He expected Bucky to be ecstatic, overjoyed… But he looked sad as he stared down at the pictures in his lap. Steve immediately wrapped an arm around his shoulders again and kissed the side of his head. He didn’t know why he was sad, this seemed like a great thing, but if Bucky needed comfort, Steve would comfort him.

“I can’t afford this, Tony… Thanks anyway.” Bucky gathered the pictures up in his hand as neatly as he could and held them out to Stark.

Tony looked confused. “What? I’m not saying you can buy it, I’m saying I’m giving you it. We need to do a human trial, it’s been in the pipework for too long now. All you have to do is fill in a questionnaire about how it’s working once a month, and let me interview you about it once every two months, and it’s yours.”

“What if it doesn’t work right?”

Tony smirked at that. “It works. I did the math, and my math is never wrong. I just need to prove it. And I need your help to do that. This is almost as much for me as it is for you.”

Bucky seemed to think about it for a minute, looking back down at the pictures. “It’s free? And it works?”

Tony nodded again, grinning. Steve could see Bucky slowly start to believe that maybe this was
real. He really had a chance at having an arm again. It was a prosthetic, but it seemed more like a real arm than any prosthetic Steve had seen. And he wouldn’t have to spend thousands of dollars on it. He could have a working arm, free of charge. Steve couldn’t stop himself from smiling, he was so happy for Bucky. Not everyone got opportunities like this. Bucky was so lucky to have a boss like Stark, and he could see that Bucky was starting to believe *that* too. Sure, Tony may be a pain in the ass to work with, but he cared about his employees, Steve couldn’t deny that.

“So? Will you be my human guinea pig?” Tony pressed, looking hopeful, and, after one more glance at the pictures, Bucky looked up and nodded at his boss with a smile.

“Thank you… I’ll do it.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets measured for his prosthetic.

Banner started talking about a load of medical jargon while Stark opened the case, rambling on about the implications this prosthetic could have if it worked as Tony insisted it did. Steve stopped listening to the doctor after he said that it was safe, and he was more interested in seeing exactly what was in the case. A quick glance at Bucky showed he was probably thinking the same thing.

The case didn’t have the actual prosthetic in, but it had all the equipment needed to measure Bucky for a prosthetic. Stark insisted on doing it himself instead of allowing Banner to do it, because he knew what measurements and other specifics needed gathering. The whole time they bickered about who should do it, Steve kept hold of Bucky’s right hand and rubbed circles over the back with his thumb. Bucky didn’t seem as excited as Steve had expected, but he supposed Bucky may not have realise that this was really happening yet. He might still think this is going to fail somehow, or it was a trick, or he was dreaming. Steve had already considered all of those options, and he still hadn’t quite processed it yet.

They needed to move to a different room so that, if Stark made a mess, it wouldn’t matter. Bucky was finally allowed the IV taken out of his hand, and he seemed happier about that than anything else that was happening today. Banner put a band aid over the hole the IV was in to make sure nothing got into the small cut and caused an infection. Bucky made a joke about having to have his right arm ‘hacked off’ if he got an infection in that one too and laughed. Banner and Steve shared an uneasy glance, and Stark chuckled quietly, but Steve hoped he was just laughing to make Bucky more comfortable, because the joke was a little disturbing.

The bandages around Bucky’s amputation site were removed and, although it had healed, there was still a large scar along where he had been stitched up. On the plus side, it wasn’t as red and irritated as Steve had expected. The only evidence that anything wasn’t as it used to be was the white scar.

Steve took Bucky’s hand as Banner asked if Bucky wanted a wheelchair or not. Bucky refused, saying he wanted to stretch his legs, and Banner accepted that. Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand as they walked to a secluded room in the basement of the hospital. The room they were in reminded Steve of a public pool changing room, but with less men walking around shirtless with towels around their waists. The floors and walls were all made of tile.

Steve wasn’t sure exactly what this room was used for, but he didn’t really want to find out. There were metal slabs around the room with sheets over them to try and make them look a little more inviting. It didn’t work. Steve shuddered slightly as he realised how much like a morgue it looked. There were no metal drawers lining the walls, filled with dead people, but besides that the resemblance was a little creepy.

Banner led Bucky over to one of the slabs and Steve saw Bucky tense slightly as he looked at it. Steve realised it looked exactly like the one he was tied to in the barn and immediately stepped between Bucky and the table, noticing Bucky’s breathing start to speed up slightly.
“Bucky?” Steve kept hold of Bucky’s hand and placed his other hand on Bucky’s left shoulder. “It’s okay, Buck, you’re safe…”

Bucky looked over Steve’s shoulder at the table then back at his face. Steve could see panic in his eyes, and reached up to cup his face as Bucky spoke. “Promise?”

His voice was barely a whisper, and Steve would have missed it if he wasn’t so completely focussed on just Bucky.

“I promise…” Steve tried to smile reassuringly, but he could feel his brows knitted together in worry. He hoped that didn’t throw Bucky off, and Steve sighed in relief when Bucky nodded a little.

Stark told them he needed a cast of Bucky’s arm to make a matching prosthetic one. He said he could just get a cast of Bucky’s right arm and flip the details on his computer so that it’ll be for his left. Steve wasn’t exactly sure how that’d work, but Stark seemed to know what he was doing, so he reluctantly let go of Bucky’s hand while Stark took out what looked like a can of paint.

“This stuff won’t bind to your skin, but it will bind to the plastic I’m going to put over it, then it hardens so it won’t lose the shape. I’m going to do this in three bits; your upper arm, forearm, and hand. Okay?”

Bucky still didn’t look particularly excited, but he nodded.

Stark started on Bucky’s hand first, so Bucky could get used to the feel of the blue paint-like substance before he had to have it all the way up his arm. All he had to do was dip his hand in the bucket, then keep his hand still for ten minutes. The liquid slowly started to look more solid, and Stark told Bucky to dip his hand into the bucket again to get another layer of the stuff over the first layer. When the new layer started to get sticky instead of watery, Stark got the moveable plastic out. It was like a thick role of masking tape, but when Tony pulled a strip off it reminded Steve of white cheese slices.

Because he couldn’t hold Bucky’s hand, Steve felt a little out of place stood in the room. Banner was looking over the plans Stark had handed over to him, and glancing up occasionally to make sure Bucky was doing okay.

Steve refused to let his insecurities resurface now. This was not a good time to start worrying that Bucky didn’t need him. This was an important moment, and Bucky needed to concentrate on keeping his hand still so that it didn’t mess up the cast being made. It must have been hard, because Bucky had to have his fingers stretched out and his whole hand was tense, but he managed to keep it still until the plastic hardened. Banner insisted on doing the next bit, because it involved using a small electric saw to cut the cast open on either side of Bucky’s hand so he could get his hand out.

Steve saw Bucky tense as Banner brought over the saw.

“You know I was kidding about cutting my arm off, right?” Bucky laughed lightly, and Banner smiled sympathetically.

“Don’t worry, James. I’ve done this plenty of times when removing casts from people. I know when to stop.”

Bucky nodded a little, but Steve saw that he still didn’t relax. He wanted to hold Bucky’s hand, but that wasn’t possible at that point. Instead, Steve moved behind the metal slab and stood behind
Bucky, then placed his hands on Bucky’s shoulders in what he hoped seemed more comforting to him than it felt to Steve. It felt to him like he was restraining Bucky, holding him down so Banner could do what he had to do. Thankfully, as Steve was about to move his hands away again, some of the tension in Bucky’s shoulders seemed to ease. He smiled a little and leant over to kiss the top of Bucky’s head.

Bucky turned his head to try to face Steve and Steve sat on the slab on the other side so that he could move to the middle and see Bucky. Steve smiled at Bucky, and Bucky tried to smile back as convincingly as he could, but once the sound of the saw being turned on filled the room, Steve saw the fear return to his blue eyes.

“It’s okay, Bucky. Just stay still, alright?”

Bucky nodded and closed his eyes, his whole body going motionless to minimalize the chances of Banner messing up and actually cutting Bucky’s hand off.

Steve wasn’t particularly worried about that. Banner was a professional, and he had said he did this loads of time before. He trusted that Banner knew what he was doing and when to stop to avoid cutting Bucky. But Bucky clearly wasn’t as sure as Steve was, so Steve tried to be as comforting as possible.

It barely took a minute, but when the saw stopped, Steve noticed Bucky let out a breath he didn’t even notice he was holding. Steve leant over to kiss Bucky as the saw started up again to cut the other side of the cast.

“You’re doing so well, Buck…” It felt a little patronising to say that, but Bucky seemed to appreciate it. He smiled as he kissed Steve again, still being careful to keep his hand still.

Banner finished and took the two halves of the cast away from Bucky’s hand to put them aside.

“Ready for the next bit, buddy?” Stark patted Bucky’s right shoulder and he nodded to him.

To get it onto Bucky’s forearm, Tony got a plastic spatula out of the case and started spreading the blue substance along the inside of Bucky’s forearm, staring at his wrist and going up to the crook of his elbow. Once that side was covered, Bucky had to lift his arm so Stark could do the other side without Bucky having to twist his arm and disrupt the stuff on the inside. Stark put two layers on again and Steve moved around to sit next to Bucky on the table while they waited for it to dry.

“How’s it feel?” Steve asked as they waited.

“Like PVA glue…” Bucky muttered back and shifted slightly, as if uncomfortable.

“Does it hurt?” Steve looked concerned and Bucky shook his head. “Then what’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” Bucky wasn’t meeting Steve’s gaze, and it was making Steve even more worried.

“You look uncomfortable…”

Bucky glanced over at him, then at his own left arm, and back to the blue on his right arm. Then Steve realised what it was that Bucky was uncomfortable with. Steve hadn’t sat on Bucky’s left side since the accident any more than once or twice, and those times it was only because there were no other options. It was so that he could hold Bucky’s hand, but Steve realised now that Bucky must have come to other conclusions. This was also the first time Steve had been on Bucky’s left side while the bandages had been off his arm. The only times they had been taken off
before was when the nurses or Banner needed to check the amputation site, and they would wrap new bandages around it when they were done. Steve always stayed on Bucky’s right side to stay out of the nurses or doctor’s way.

Steve wasn’t sure what he could do to make Bucky more comfortable. He could tell Bucky didn’t want to talk about his own insecurities in front of Banner and Stark, so Steve settles for leaning over to kiss him again, placing on hand on Bucky’s left arm. He wasn’t sure if the amputation site still hurt or not, so he didn’t touch too low, but close enough that he hoped Bucky would understand the message. Bucky’s skin was as soft as before, and Steve couldn’t really feel anything different in the part he was touching. Bucky kissed back and showed no hints of pain, though he did tense up, but Steve guessed that was because he wasn’t sure Steve was comfortable with it. Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky was comfortable with it either, but Bucky didn’t break the kiss to tell him to stop, so Steve didn’t move his hand away. He ran his fingers lightly down Bucky’s arm until his felt the scar along the bottom of his stump.

Steve hated thinking of it as that word. It sounded like it should be offensive, but while Bucky was sleeping one day, Steve had googled it to see what the official term was. It turned out that ‘stump’ was the official term and, although people have tried to find a different word for it, no other seemed to stick besides ‘residual limb’, and that was used very little.

Steve didn’t miss how Bucky tensed when he felt Steve’s fingers run across the scar, but he didn’t pull away or make any indication that it hurt, so Steve didn’t move his fingers away.

Stark cleared his throat then, and began putting the plastic over the sticky blue material on Bucky’s arm. They broke the kiss and Bucky quickly turned to watch Tony work, avoiding looking at Steve. Steve saw Tony’s hands hesitate slightly when he looked up at Bucky’s face, but he quickly recovered and kept working. Steve frowned slightly, wondering why Tony stopped, but when he heard Bucky sniff, he realised.

“Bucky?” Steve cupped his face to persuade him to look at him. He saw the tears in Bucky’s eyes when he eventually relented and looked at Steve. Bucky tried to smile reassuringly at Steve, but he wasn’t convinced.

Banner handed a tissue to Steve, since Bucky couldn’t move his hand, and Steve took it with a grateful smile. Bucky blinked and the tears slipped down his cheeks, so Steve quickly wiped them away, stroking his cheek with the thumb of his other hand as he did.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked quietly, worried he had upset Bucky by touching the amputation site without his permission.

“Nothing.” Bucky smiled, and it was the most convincing smile Steve had seen from Bucky all day. “Just glad you’re not completely repulsed by it…”

“I’m not at all repulsed by any part of you, Bucky.” Steve put the tissue down on the table to cup Bucky’s face with both hands. “I love every part of you.”

Stark had finished putting the plastic on Bucky’s arm, and now they just had to wait for it to harden, so Bucky had to stay still.

“I love you too…” Bucky smiled a little and pursed his lips, wanting another kiss but not being allowed to lean in and initiate it himself.

Steve chuckled lightly as he leant forward to close the distance and kiss Bucky.
Tony had done a cast for all the way up Bucky’s arm, as well as under his arm and over his shoulder. He said that the arm could be connected to Bucky so it wouldn’t be able to come off unless Bucky wanted it to. That way, he could wear it whenever he wanted, including to sleep or shower, and he wouldn’t have to fiddle with straps or worry about the connecting pieces breaking in the night. He also assured him that it would be waterproofed, so Bucky could wear it while he bathed, and he wouldn’t have to worry about rain or snow getting between the crooks and damaging the internal workings.

Once it was done and Bucky arm had been cleaned of any residual blue gunk, Banner let him and Steve take a walk in the garden again. Becca had apparently brought Bucky’s long black coat with her last time she visited, so Bucky could wear that while he walked. Steve helped him into it then linked arms with his right side.

“Steve?” Bucky spoke quietly after a few moments of silence in the garden.

“Yes?”

“I still haven’t completely forgiven you for what you did yesterday…”

Steve had expected that. What he did was awful, and he didn’t expect to be forgiven right away. But the fact that Bucky was speaking to him and allowing Steve to be close to him and kiss him, despite having not forgiven Steve, made it a little easier.

“I know… And I promise I will make it up to you. It’ll take a while, but I will make it up to you.” He looked up at Bucky as he spoke and, although Bucky was looking ahead instead of at him, Steve could see that Bucky seemed to believe him.

“I know you will…”

“Can we still be happy together, even if you haven’t forgiven me yet?” Steve wanted to be comfortable around Bucky, and for Bucky to be comfortable around him without the tension that Steve could still feel around them. He wanted to be able to talk to Bucky about pointless little things, just to pass the time, without it feeling like awkward small talk just to fill the silence.

Most of all, he wanted to see Bucky smile more.

“Yeah… We can still be happy.” Bucky looked down at Steve and gave him a reassuring smile, and Steve smiled back in relief. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Steve leant up to kiss Bucky’s cheek.

They descended into silence again, but that was okay. Bucky must have a lot on his mind, and Steve didn’t want to keep him from his thoughts. Steve concentrated on the flowers around them and shivered slightly, moving closer to Bucky, as a harsh breeze swept past them. Bucky immediately untangled his arm from Steve’s and wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders. He couldn’t help but smile as he burrowed against Bucky’s side. He wrapped his arm around Bucky’s back, under the coat, and felt his fingers brush against Bucky’s stump. Again, he felt Bucky tense, but Steve didn’t move his hand away right away.

“Does it hurt?” Steve asked softly, prepared to move his hand at the slightest indication from Bucky that it did.

After a second of hesitation, Bucky shook his head. “Just not used to anyone touching it for any reason other than a medical reason…”
“You’ll get used to it.” Steve nodded confidently.

“Will I?” Bucky didn’t sound so sure, and Steve stopped to turn and face Bucky.

“Yes, you will. Even if it’s from me alone, you’ll get used to being touched. I don’t know exactly why you don’t think you will get used to it, or you don’t think I’ll feel comfortable touching it, but I have a pretty good idea about how it feels. Do you remember when we were first… intimate?” Steve could feel the blush colouring his cheeks, but Bucky just nodded, as always he was completely at ease when discussing their sex life.

“I didn’t want you to see me shirtless, or naked… because I always felt like there was something wrong with my body. I’m too skinny, and short, and pale… But you didn’t care.”

Bucky nodded in agreement, but then shook his head. “This isn’t the same thing, Steve. You’ve been skinny, short, and pale the whole time I’ve known you and longer. I haven’t been a cripple the whole time you’ve known me. You might not…”

He stopped himself, and Steve frowned. “I might not what?”

Bucky sighed and looked anywhere but at Steve. “You might not get used to it. You might not look at me the same way…”

“Have I looked at you any differently so far?” Steve let a slightly challenging tone enter his voice, assuming that the answer was no, but Bucky nodded.

“You have… There’s always a hint of sympathy or worry on your face…”

“That’s because I feel sympathy and worry for you, because you’re in hospital. Once you’re out and fully recovered, those feelings will go away. Well… not completely, I’ll always worry about you, but not in a pitying way… I worried about you before the kidnapping… I’ve always worried about you. Because I love you.”

Bucky didn’t seem to want to argue that topic anymore. “It’s still not the same thing. Being skinny, short, and pale aren’t disabilities. They’re not deformities.”

“I know it’s not the same, Buck. But I thought of them as deformities. They were huge flaws in myself that I could never bring myself to believe anyone would overlook and love me in spite of. But you didn’t look disgusted when you first saw me naked. You didn’t see them as deformities. And, eventually, I started believing that maybe I don’t look so bad…”

“You don’t look bad, Stevie…”

“Neither do you. Any part of you. You might not believe it now, but you will…”

“Promise?” Bucky replied with a small smile playing on the corner of his lips.

“Promise.” Steve smiled back and leant up to kiss Bucky, one hand on his right elbow and the other on his left stump through the sleeve of his coat.

This time, Bucky didn’t tense as much.

Becca was a little surprised to see Steve there when she came to see Bucky after school. She had come to see Bucky in the morning, and that’s when she had let Steve speak to him. She must have heard Bucky ask Steve if he was coming to see him, but Steve assumed she didn’t think he’d stay.
But she did look happy to see him, and stepped forward to hug him after she got over the initial shock.

“I’m glad you’re back, Steve.” She kissed his cheek before breaking the hug.

Steve saw her eyes flick to Bucky’s left arm and notice the bandages were gone. She pointed at it with a small smile.

“That’s progress, right? You don’t need it bandaged up, that means it’s getting better?”

Bucky nodded and held his other arm out for a hug, which Becca happily gave him.

“I have good news.” Bucky smiled at his sister and Becca sat in the chair beside him as she waited. “You only have to live alone for one more week.”

Becca seemed confused then, and Steve saw a flash of fear in her expression. He realised she probably thought Social Services had found her a foster home or something, but Bucky saw the fear too and quickly shook his head.

“That came out wrong… I’m being discharged in a week.”

Becca’s face immediately broke out into a wide smile and she threw her arms around Bucky again. “That’s great, Buck!”

Bucky laughed as he hugged her back, resting his head against the side of hers.

Natasha came a little while later, apologising about not picking Becca up. Apparently there was a problem between two kids at the dance school that needed resolving after school, so she had to stay behind to do it. She acknowledged Steve as she finished explaining and told him she was glad he was back, but she was still pissed off at him. He understood that, and reassured her that he was going to make it up to Bucky. She seemed satisfied with that and turned to face her best friend, who was grinning.

“Why are you so happy? I’m glad you are, but why?”

Bucky told her he was getting discharged and Natasha came over to hug him too, telling him how happy she was for him.

Becca explained that, a few days ago, some housing officers came to the house to see if it needed to be modified in any way to accommodate Bucky’s disability. They had deemed the house pretty suitable, but they did add some rails on one side of the bath so that Bucky would be able to pull himself out with one hand. They gave Becca a business card for someone who could give Bucky tips and advice about how to do everyday things like cooking and cleaning, with one hand. She put the business card next to Pepper’s on the bedside table, but Bucky shook his head with a smile.

“That might not be necessary…”

Both the girls looked confused, and Bucky looked over at Steve before telling them about the prosthetic Stark was giving him. He told them how it worked, and Steve was a little surprised by how much Bucky had remembered, but then he remembered how much of a dork Bucky was when it came to science. Becca was a little sceptical at first, and Natasha asked a lot of questions about how much it would cost, what the possible complications were, and why Stark was just giving it to him.

Once they appeared to be satisfied with the answers Bucky gave, they both grinned and said they
were looking forward to seeing him with a metal arm. They made Terminator jokes, and Bucky and Steve laughed along with them.

When the girls had to leave, Bucky got out of the bed to hug them both better and Steve saw Becca close her eyes as she rested her head on Bucky’s chest, her arms around his middle. Natasha wrapped her arms around Bucky’s neck and Bucky wrapped his arm around her waist.

“I’m really glad something good is finally happening for you, Buck.” Natasha kissed Bucky’s cheek, leaving a red lipstick mark there, before leaving with Becca.

The lipstick was on Bucky’s left cheek, so he just left it as he walked around the room. Steve could tell he was getting restless from lying in bed all day, so he didn’t say anything about it as he sat in his usual chair.

Bucky walked over to him after looking out the window for a while and Steve was about to ask him if he was alright before Bucky’s lips connected with his own. Steve was surprised, but he kissed back and cupped Bucky’s cheeks, tilting his head back so Bucky wouldn’t have to lean down so much.

“Still mad at you…” Bucky muttered against Steve’s lips.

“I know…” Steve mumbled back as Bucky kissed him again.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Steve stood up so Bucky wasn’t bent over the chair, and wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist. He didn’t have to wear the hospital gown anymore, much to Bucky’s relief, and instead he was just wearing loose sweatpants. Bucky cupped Steve’s face as he sighed into the kiss, making Steve smile. Bucky seemed much more relaxed lately, and Steve was so happy to see bits of Bucky’s personality start to shine through again.

His sense of humour was a little darker, and so it still needed some work until it was back to how it used to be, but he’d get that back eventually.

Steve felt Bucky smiling against his lips and pressed his hand against the small of Bucky’s back to pull him closer to Steve’s body. Bucky seemed slightly surprised and dropped his hand to Steve’s shoulder, but he stepped closer to Steve and smiled more into the kiss. Steve couldn’t help but smile back. He understood that Bucky was still upset, but he was glad he and Bucky could still be happy while Bucky waited for Steve to make up for it.

He still wasn’t sure how he was going to make it up to him. But he had a few ideas. He thought about dates he could take Bucky on, presents he could buy him when he got the money, speeches he could give about how much he loves him.

Bucky was eventually the one to break the kiss.

“Do you think it’ll work?” Bucky whispered and Steve knew exactly what he was referring to.

“Stark seems pretty confident that it works… If it works on all the animals they tested it on, it should work for you too…”

“I’m really trying not to get excited…” Bucky sighed and rested his forehead against Steve’s.
“Why?”

Bucky let out a humourless laugh. “My luck hasn’t exactly been the best lately… I don’t want to get excited and then get let down when it doesn’t work, or I need to pay to keep it…”

“Stark said you don’t have to pay for it, he won’t change his mind. You can get excited, it’s okay. You deserve to be excited about this. It seems like the real deal…”

Bucky nodded a little and smiled at Steve. He could see the apprehension leave Bucky’s eyes, and excitement replace it. His blue eyes seemed even brighter with the intensity of it.

“I’m going to have two arms again…”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Social Services interview them about Becca's best interests.

Tony didn’t know how long it would take for the prosthetic to be made up for Bucky, but he said it’d be a week- minimum. It mostly depended on what else the scientists are working on that week, and when they could put aside enough time to assemble the arm with Bucky’s measurements.

The next thing they had to deal with was Social Services. They interviewed Becca about why she thought she should stay with her brother and why she didn’t think his recent disability would affect his ability to take care of her. She ranted for half an hour when she returned to the hospital room about how leading the Social Worker’s questions were. They pointed out that she had missed a lot of school lately, and asked if it was because of her bother. Becca had tried to explain why she had missed the days because of her brother – as if it wasn’t already obvious – and they had just asked the question again and refused to listen to her until she answered it simply, without excuses.

The Social Workers had also asked for an interview with Bucky, alone, and for three other people who they want to vouch for them.

“Natasha agreed to do it, so we just need two others. Becca is going to ask Mrs Harrison, her dance teacher. She’s known us for years and she’ll always harping on about how great I am with Becca, so I think she’ll be willing to do it. How about you?” Bucky asked Steve when they were alone.

“You want me to talk to the Social Workers?” Steve asked in surprise. He was awkward, and he didn’t really have a reassuring, insistent aura like Natasha or a teacher would have.

“Do you think I can still take care of Becca, despite my condition?” Steve nodded without hesitation and Bucky smiled. “Then I want you to talk to the Social Workers. But only if you want to.”

Steve smiled and nodded a little. “Sure, I’ll talk to them…”

Natasha’s interview was the day before Steve’s, Mrs Harrison had agreed to do the interview, and her’s was the day before Natasha’s. That meant that Steve was the last person the Social Workers would interview about Bucky’s ability to take care of his little sister, besides Bucky himself. Bucky’s interview was on the same day, but a few hours after Steve’s.

Natasha took the day off work so she could do the interview, and took half of the next day off so she could come in and talk to Steve about it. Bucky hardly spent much time in the bed anymore. He was always either sat in one of the chairs, pacing the room, or looking out of the window.

Today, he seemed to be in a pacing mood. Steve moved one of the chairs to face away from the bed so he could watch Bucky walk around the room. He seemed nervous, understandably so. Steve was nervous too, what he said today could determine whether Becca got taken away from Bucky, or whether they got to stay together as a family.
Steve’s interview was at eleven, and Natasha was coming in at ten to talk to Steve about what they said during her interview and what questions they asked so that Steve would be more prepared. Natasha could think on her feet and give long, articulate answers that expressed her point perfectly. Steve wasn’t as good at that. He stuttered and panicked when what he was talking about was important. And he usually said the wrong thing. The past few days were evidence of that.

He had managed to piss off the love of his life to the point where he was willing to call security on Steve just to get him out of the room because he couldn’t stand being around him, all in under five minutes.

Yeah, Steve was bad with words when it counted.

“They’re going to ask you stuff that seems innocent, but there’s actually some hidden meaning that they’ll pounce on you. For example, they asked me how Bucky was doing in hospital and how he was behaving. They asked if he ever got frustrated about not being able to do the things he used to be able to do, and when I said yes they asked if he was ever violent when frustrated.”

Steve didn’t miss how Bucky winced at the clear accusation in the question.

“Think before you speak, don’t just blurt out the first answer you think of. Try to think of every possible meaning they could find in your answer, even if they’d have to twist your words to get to that meaning. But don’t think for too long or they’ll think you’re trying to make up a lie.”

Steve nodded along to all the advice Natasha was giving him. It sounded like he was going in for a police interrogation, not an interview about the wellbeing of a fourteen year old.

“Basically, common sense is your best friend.” Natasha finished and stood up from her chair to go over to where Bucky was pacing in front of the window. She put her hands on his shoulders to stop him. “Bucky, relax. Everything will be okay, Becca isn’t going anywhere.”

Bucky nodded a little and accepted Natasha’s hug. Once they parted, Bucky went over to squat in front of Steve.

“Do you feel confident?” Bucky asked, and Steve was tempted to say yes, just to make Bucky feel more confident. But the truth was, Steve was terrified.

One wrong answer and that could be all they needed to take Becca away. Steve had no idea what social services classed as enough evidence. Maybe one wrong answer wasn’t enough to fuck everything up. With all the good answers they would have gotten from Natasha and Mrs Harrison, as well as Becca and Bucky, maybe Steve’s interview didn’t matter that much.

He couldn’t afford to think like that, though. If he did, he wouldn’t be as careful with his answers and, if he was wrong, he could be the reason Becca is taken away.

“No… But I’ll manage.”

Banner came in at five minutes to eleven and told them the Social Workers were waiting in a meeting room for Steve. Steve helped Bucky stand up and hugged him before following Banner to the meeting room.

The room was bright, lit by glaring artificial lights.

There were two Social Workers sat on one side of the desk and one chair available for Steve on the other side. He was outnumbered, and that made Steve a little uncomfortable. They shook his hand
and introduced themselves. They both looked like cliché government officials. They had crew cut hair, one was blond and the other had black hair. They were both thin, but healthy, and they both had a light tan.

The blond one introduced himself as Mr Walker, and the dark-haired man introduced himself as Mr Murphey.

“So, Mr Rogers. You’re Mr Barnes’…” Walker started and looked down at the papers in front of him. “Boyfriend?”

“Yes, sir, I am.” Steve nodded and shifted nervously in his chair. It was hard plastic as opposed to the cushioned ones in Bucky’s room.

“And how long have you been together?”

“Two months.”

“And how long did you know him before you were together?”

“About a month…”

The men exchanged a look as Walker moved the papers to bring another sheet to the top of the pile.

“And after knowing Mr Barnes for three months, you think you’re capable of determining whether or not he can give his sister the best care, given his… circumstances?”

“Yes.” Steve didn’t hesitate. He knew hesitating would affect his case.

They both looked at each other again and Murphey shrugged. Walker passed him a notebook and pen, then picked up a piece of paper.

“Alright, let’s officially start the interview.”

Steve nodded and waited for them to continue. So far, Steve could tell that Walker was the one in charge, and Murphey was just there to take the notes. He had already written how long Steve had known Bucky on the notepad in front of him, under Steve’s name and age.

“How did you and Mr Barnes meet?”

Steve smiled. This story was sure to earn points for Bucky. “I was working in a hardware store, and a man came in and started yelling at me because we were out of lawn mowers. He started getting personal, and James stepped in and stood up for me. I saw him a few minutes later waiting outside his car in the parking lot while Becca went to get some candy from another store and I started talking to him.”

He looked down at the paper as Murphey jotted something down under the writing he already had on there. Murphey had written ‘James Barnes’, ‘Steven Rogers’ and ‘Rebecca Barnes’ in three separate columns. He wrote ‘possibly reckless’ under Bucky’s name, and Steve frowned, not sure how the man had come to that conclusion. Before he could ask, Walker spoke again.

“You said Becca was getting candy while James waited outside the car? Where was the store?”

“The store Becca was getting the candy from? It was just across the street…”

“How busy was the road?”
Steve understood where they were going with that now. “It wasn’t busy.”

Murphy wrote ‘not busy road’ next to the notes on how Steve met Bucky. That had to be a point in Bucky’s favour or, if not, it wasn’t a point against him.

“A few weeks ago, Becca went to school with a bruise on the left side of her face, a split lip, and a cut on her forehead. Do you know how what happened?”

“I do.” Steve answered immediately. “Brock Rumlow cornered her after school and punched her in the face. You should know that, it’s in the police report. They proved it couldn’t have been James, his fists aren’t big enough to cause that damage.”

“We never said it was James.” Walker replied as Murphy wrote down ‘assumed we thought James punched Becca. Immediately jumped to that conclusion. Very defensive’ and Steve had to resist the urge to get more annoyed. It wouldn’t help to get angry now. He silently cursed himself. He should have stopped after telling them the facts, he shouldn’t have mentioned Bucky.

“That’s what you implied…”

Walker didn’t dispute that. “Are you aware what happened to their parents?”

“Yes.” Steve answered, but he didn’t elaborate. He had to be more careful what he said, and only give them the information they asked for, nothing more.

“What do you know about what happened?”

“Their father was abusive. He hit Bucky, their mother told Bucky to take Becca to Natasha’s house and when they came back a few hours later there were police at the house. His father killed his mother, and he was arrested before Bucky and Becca got home.”

The social workers exchange a look and Murphy writes ‘thinks he knows about parents. Is wrong’ next to Steve’s name. Steve frowned again. That’s what Bucky had told him. Bucky wouldn’t lie about that, not to Steve. He wracked his brain to try and remember the details Bucky had told him, and none of what Steve said was wrong according to what Bucky said.

*God, this interview was already a wreck and we’re only a few questions in.*

So far, Steve couldn’t see one thing on Murphy’s list that worked purely in Bucky’s favour.

“Before the accident, were there any moments where you doubted Mr Barnes’ ability to take care of his sister?”

“Not one.” A voice in Steve’s head told him to stop there, but he had to make his point. “Every day, James woke up at seven in the morning to make sure Becca ate breakfast and got ready for school. Then, he drove her to school. He didn’t have to work until later, but he spent his free time cleaning the house or talking to me or his other friends. Then, he worked from nine until half past four some days. His schedule alternated sometimes, depending on work details. But he’s usually home at five, and never any later. He’d start making Becca’s dinner at five-thirty. That means he had half an hour between getting home and starting cooking. Her dinner would be ready for six, and he always tried to cook her something different every day so that she got plenty of healthy variety. Then, he helped her with her homework and sent her to bed at a reasonable time on weekdays. James knows how to take care of his sister. He knows what’s best for her. Losing a limb isn’t going to change that. If he had some kind of head injury I’d understand why you’re looking into this, but he hasn’t. He’s the same person he was before, when Social Services decided to let a sixteen year old take care of an eleven year old. You people didn’t have a problem with leaving
James to take care of her then, when he was still in school and he didn’t have a job. But now that he’s older, and he has job opportunities, he’s not able to take care of his sister because he lost an arm? That makes no sense.”

Murphy wrote down Bucky schedule as Steve said it, in short notes under Bucky’s name, and Steve finally thought he had scored some points for Bucky. Surely if Bucky put that much effort into making sure his sister was taken care of before the incident, he could still take care of her despite his missing arm now.

“James worked in construction, is that right?” Walker changed the subject and Steve tried not to be annoyed about the swift change.

“Yes, but he’s looking into other jobs that he can do despite his disability.”

Murphy wrote that down with a small smile.

“With Stark?” Walker clarified and Steve nodded. “Do you think James would recover quicker if he didn’t have to worry about taking care of his little sister? If he could just worry about himself?”

“No.” Steve shook his head immediately. “If you took her away you wouldn’t be removing her as a worry from James’ life. You’d be causing more worry, because he wouldn’t know where she is or how she’s doing. That would be the worst thing for James.”

The men exchanged a look then both stood up. “Thank you, Mr Rogers, I think that’ll be all.”

Steve stood up too and shook their hands before leaving. As soon as he stepped out of the room he took a deep breath and leant against the wall for a few minutes before going back to Bucky’s room.

“How’d it go?”

“They only asked me about ten questions,” Steve shrugged and stepped closer to Bucky to hug him around his waist. Bucky automatically wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders.

“But how did those ten questions go?”

Steve just shrugged. “I tried my best…”

Steve didn’t think his best was good enough. There had been so many things written on that paper that could get Becca taken away from Bucky. He may have possibly fucked up Bucky’s life more than it already had been fucked up. He might have broken up a family. Steve closed his eyes as he hugged Bucky tighter, hoping his eyes didn’t well up with tears like they had been threatening to since he left the meeting room.

He felt Bucky tense in his arms and bit his lip, preparing for Bucky to get mad and yell at him. But he didn’t. He just hugged Steve a little tighter.

“It’s okay, Steve… As long as you did your best…”

“I did.” Steve repeated to make sure Bucky knew it and Bucky nodded as he kissed the top of his head.

“It’s okay.” Bucky kissed his head again and rocked Steve a little, swaying side to side.

Steve eventually calmed down as Bucky’s movements relaxed him and his hand rubbed Steve’s back. He eventually pulled back and leant up to kiss Bucky. Bucky kissed Steve back and cupped
his face.

“Do you think Becca will be taken into care?” Steve asked nervously and Bucky shrugged.

“There’s nothing else you can do, so don’t worry…” Bucky tried to reassure him.

“Do you remember my ‘I’m always worried about you because I love you’ speech? That applies to Becca too. I’m worried about both of you.”

“You love my sister? That’s so weird…” Bucky teased with a smirk and nudged Steve’s shoulder.

“You know what I mean, jerk.” Steve nudged him back with a light laugh.

Banner persuaded Bucky to get into bed while he set the food on the tray for him, but Bucky looked at the food distastefully. Steve immediately picked up the knife and fork to start cutting up the food for Bucky, but Bucky shook his head and reached out to take the cutlery off Steve.

Steve thought that Bucky was going to try to cut the food up himself, but he just put the cutlery on the tray next to the plate.

“Bucky…”

“Don’t start, Steve. I’m not hungry.” Bucky’s words sounded final, but Steve was just as stubborn.

“You need to eat if you’re going to get out of here at the end of the week. You need to stay healthy.” Bucky sighed and Steve saw his resolve start to waver, so he kept trying. “If you don’t eat, Banner is going to call a Nutritionist to come talk to you, and they might decide to make you stay longer until you start eating properly.”

Steve smiled slyly as Bucky picked up his knife and tried to cut up the food himself. Steve may be a complete sucker for Bucky, but he could still influence Bucky into doing what he wanted, especially when it was for Bucky’s own good. Bucky started getting annoyed when he couldn’t cut the food and Steve quickly wiped the smile off his face and leant forward to take the cutlery from him. He let Steve take his knife, then Steve picked up the fork and cut the food up for Bucky.

Bucky ate just about half of it before putting his cutlery down and refusing to eat anymore. Steve didn’t push it, deciding that half was better than none at all.

“Social workers are coming to interview me soon.” Bucky pointed out as he looked at the clock. “Anything they asked you about that I should be prepared for?”

Steve remembered what Murphey had written on the paper when Steve had told him what he knew of Bucky’s parents and debated whether or not to mention it.

“There is one thing…” Steve said and Bucky looked up at him, listening closely. “They asked me if I knew what happened to your parents…”

“What did you tell them?” Bucky looked nervous, and Steve frowned.

“I told them what you told me… But I have a feeling that’s not the truth…”

“What, specifically, did you tell them?” Bucky got out of the bed and started pacing the room, so Steve stood up too.

“I told them your dad was abusive, he punched you, your mother sent you and Becca out of the
house and when you came back a few hours later she was dead and your dad had been arrested. One of the Social Workers wrote on the paper that I thought I knew what happened, but I was wrong.”

Bucky sighed and ran his hand through his hair, tugging at the roots slightly as he paced the room with his eyes closed.

“Why did he write down that I was wrong? Did you lie to me about that?”

“I didn’t lie… I just… Avoided certain truths…”

“Why would you lie about something like that, Bucky?” Steve frowned. Bucky could phrase it however he wanted, but that didn’t change how awful it was that Bucky had lied about that kind of thing.

“I didn’t lie, Steve. My father really was abusive, and he really did punch me. And that is really when my mom decided to leave him. My dad did kill her when she sent us to Natasha’s… But I didn’t stay away for a few hours. I left Becca with Natasha and I went back to the house about half an hour later to get my mom to leave with us. I didn’t see him kill her, there were already police outside the house. I guess the neighbours called them or something. They wouldn’t let me past the police tape, because my dad was still in the house. An officer had been sent in to detain him, but my dad knocked him out and took his gun, so they wouldn’t let me or anyone else in, in case he shot me or them. My dad tried to escape out of the back and ran through the street, but I saw him and pointed it out to the police. So the police shot him. He died.”

“You saw them shoot him?” Steve asked after a moment of silence, and Bucky nodded.

“I didn’t want to tell you, in case you thought it had fucked me up too much. It was still pretty early in the relationship, and I wasn’t sure you’d stick around…”

Steve came over and wrapped his arms around Bucky to hug him tight. “You don’t have to hide anything from me…”

“I know that now. But back then it was a little more touch-and-go.”

“I love you… And I don’t think you’re fucked up.”

“I love you too.” Bucky smiled and kissed Steve.

Banner came in and asked if Bucky wanted to talk to the social workers in the meeting room or his own room. Bucky told him he wanted to talk to them in the meeting room, saying it might give off a better impression in regards to his capabilities. Steve told him he would wait in his room for him, and spent the next half an hour pacing the room nervously.

He knew Bucky got defensive when people brought up his abilities to take care of Becca, and the kinds of questions the Social Workers asked were exactly the kind of questions that would piss Bucky off. If Bucky lost his temper, it wouldn’t help his case. Steve just hoped Bucky stayed calm and answered the questions honestly.

Steve called Natasha and told her how it went, including the differences in his story and the truth in relation to Bucky’s parents. She told him it was okay. If they asked Bucky why he lied, it was pretty easy to explain away with the truth of why he didn’t tell Steve. Natasha knew the truth, and she had told them the truth when they asked her, so at least someone they interviewed knew what really happened and still believed Bucky could take care of Becca.
She apologised for not warning them that they might ask about that. If she had, Bucky could have told Steve the truth before he went into the interview. She said she didn’t think they would ask about that when she knew that he and Steve had only been together for a few months.

That made sense. This kind of thing usually didn’t come out so early in the relationship. But, then again, most relationships weren’t as natural as Bucky’s and Steve’s felt. It didn’t feel like they had to stick to traditional time stereo-types in relationships. Wait three days to call after getting the other person’s number, don’t make out until the third date, wait about six months before saying ‘I love you’, must be a Level 10 Boyfriend before unlocking tragic backstories... But it made sense. They had been through more trials against their relationship in the past two months than most people went through in a lifetime, it was understandable that they did things differently.

Again, Natasha told Steve to relax and said it sounded like he did okay. Steve thanked her and they both said their goodbyes. She was back at work now, so she had to go and actually work.

Steve only had to wait a little while longer until Bucky re-entered the room. His expression was grim, and Steve immediately thought the worst.

_The Social Workers pissed him off and he yelled at them. No, he took a swing at one, probably Walker. No, he tried to attack them and had to be restrained._

Bucky immediately wrapped his arm around Steve and rested his head against Steve’s shoulder. Steve hugged back, one hand on his back and the other in his hair.

“What happened?”

“I got annoyed with them… I yelled…”

Steve sighed and closed his eyes, hugging Bucky tighter. “Maybe your passion helped…? Maybe it showed how much Becca means to you…”

“God, I hope so.” Bucky’s voice was muffled against Steve’s shoulder.

“Do you know when you’ll find out?”

“They said they’ll call me with their decision tomorrow morning, no later than twelve… Whatever they choose is final, unless we get a lawyer involved. Pepper already spoke to them and they decided to wait until they made a decision before taking it to court, in the hopes that court could be avoided, if they make a decision I’m happy with.”

“The only decision you’ll be happy with is if they just back off…”

“Damn straight… Anything less than that and I’ll take them to court.”

“Good.” Steve nodded a little and kissed the side of Bucky’s head. “I really admire your dedication to your sister, Buck. It’d take a damn moron to think you’re not the best carer Becca could ever hope for.”

Steve felt Bucky smile against his shoulder, his back bent forward to allow him to rest against Steve’s much smaller frame. It looked a little painful, but Bucky didn’t shift or act like he wanted to change position any time soon.

“Thanks Steve, that means a lot… Let’s just hope Social Services aren’t made up of idiots.”

“There’s nothing else we can do but wait…” Steve pulled back a little to cup Bucky’s face and kiss
him.

*Bucky deserves something good. Just give him this. Give him his sister.*
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

The Social Workers make their decision.

That night was the worse night sleep Steve had had since Bucky woke up in the hospital.

The chair just didn’t cut it tonight. It had been fine before, despite Bucky’s insistence that it couldn’t have been comfortable. But tonight it may as well have been made of fire ants. The blanket Banner had given Steve was suddenly too rough, and it felt like it was scratching at his skin. Steve checked the time on his phone and groaned when he saw that it was two in the morning. He tried to turn in the chair to find a more comfortable position, but the chair seemed to have been smaller than he had thought, because he fell to the floor, flat on his face with a grunt of pain.

Steve heard a quiet laugh come from the bed and saw Bucky staring at him with a smile.

“You can’t sleep either, I take it.” Bucky muttered and Steve shook his head. The nights were off, but he could see Bucky’s face illuminated by the monitors around him. The monitors weren’t really needed anymore. Bucky didn’t need his heart monitoring, or his breathing, but a few were still switched on, though Steve didn’t know what they showed. “I told you that chair can’t be good to sleep in…”

“The chair is usually fine…” Steve pulled himself up off the floor and gathered up the blanket, but he didn’t sit back down in it. “It just seems to have it in for me tonight.”

Bucky chuckled again then sighed. “Are you unable to sleep because of the same reason I can’t sleep?”

Of course that was the reason. Steve was nervous about what the Social Workers would tell them in the morning. Within the next ten hours Bucky would know whether he got to keep his sister or not. Within the next ten hours, Bucky would be either ecstatic or crushed. Steve still couldn’t comprehend how anyone could think any other person on the planet could take better care of Becca than Bucky. That should have been a comfort. Bucky is the best person to care of Becca, so she won’t be taken away from him. But the fact that this had been investigated at all shook his confidence. If they found a reason to take her away, there’s no way Bucky was going to let that go. He would definitely follow through on his plan to take them to court. That, plus the Rollins and Rumlow court case, meant Bucky had a lot of legal stuff to deal with and he had no idea what he was doing. Thank god Tony Stark had delivered Pepper Potts to them.

“Yeah…”

“Want to get in bed with me?” Bucky sounded a little nervous as he asked, and Steve knew why. He thought Steve wouldn’t want to get into bed with him because of the amputation.

Steve just smiled and looked at the bed. “Is there enough space?”

“You’re only tiny, Steve, I think you can fit.” Bucky rolled his eyes and pulled back his blankets so
Steve could get in if he wanted to. Bucky’s body language was relaxed, but Steve could still see the anxiety in his eyes.

Bucky was holding the covers up on his right side, and Steve shook his head. “Can you lay on that side without it hurting?”

He pointed to his left side and Bucky nodded, so Steve went around the bed to that side. Bucky’s eyes followed him the whole time as he pulled back the covers and got into the bed beside Bucky. Steve could see Bucky’s body tense slightly as he did, but he pretended not to see it and laid down against the pillows, waiting for Bucky to do the same.

Bucky moved onto his side to face Steve with his stump tucked under his side, and Steve looked down with a frown.

“Is that comfortable?” He asked quietly and Bucky shook his head after a few seconds of hesitation. “Get comfortable, Bucky.”

Steve smiled as Bucky shifted so the stump was between him and Steve instead of under him. He moved closer to Bucky so that the stump was touching his chest and leant up to kiss him. Bucky was still tense, but he did kiss back softly. When Steve eventually broke it, he saw the tears in Bucky’s eyes shimmer in the low light. Steve knew now that this wasn’t a bad thing, it didn’t mean Bucky was sad or in pain, so he smiled and cupped Bucky’s face.

“You need to get some sleep, Bucky, or you might sleep through the whole morning and miss the call…”

Bucky nodded and draped his arm over Steve’s side to pull him a little closer, and Steve complied happily. He rested his head against Bucky’s bare chest and wrapped his arms around his waist.

“Goodnight, Stevie…”

“Goodnight Bucky.”

By the time Steve woke up, Bucky was already awake and sat up in bed. Steve’s head was in Bucky’s lap and Bucky was threading his fingers through his hair. Steve tried not to blush as he realised just how thin Bucky’s sweatpants were, and stretched a little before sitting it. This time, there were no loud cracks from his joints followed by aches and pains. He actually felt good.

Bucky dropped his hand away from Steve’s hair as Steve sat up and smiled at him.

“Good sleep?” Bucky asked and Steve nodded, then returned the question. Bucky just shrugged. “It was nice feeling you next to me again…”

Steve smiled again and leant up to kiss him so Bucky wouldn’t see the blush. He felt Bucky smile against his lips, so he assumed Bucky had seen it.

Bucky quickly broke the kiss when he phone rang, and snatched it up off the bedside table, but frowned when he saw the number on his screen. Or, more accurately, the name.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked with a frown.

Bucky held out the phone so Steve could see the name.

Alexander Pierce.
“Don’t answer it.” Steve told Bucky immediately, but Bucky didn’t listen. He pressed the answer button and held the phone up to his ear, though he didn’t say anything. Steve listened as best he could, hoping he’ll be able to hear Pierce.

Bucky’s expression remained grim and he pulled the phone away from his ear he whisper to Steve. “Get Banner.”

Steve almost leapt out of the bed and ran to Banner’s office. He gestures for Banner to follow him back to Bucky’s room and explained who was on the phone on the way there. When they rushed into the, Bucky was asking Alexander to repeat himself, claiming there was a bad signal. He then held the phone out to Banner, and the doctor frowned as he listened to whatever Alexander was saying while Steve got back onto the bed with Bucky. Bucky continued staring up at the doctor with a glare at his phone, but he quickly took Steve’s hand in his, squeezing it tight.

Steve didn’t want to speak in case Pierce heard him before he was done saying whatever it was Pierce was saying, so he rubbed his other hand over Bucky’s back, trying to be comforting.

“Thank you, Mr Pierce, this information was very helpful.” Banner spoke into the phone then pulled it away from his ear to hang up and hand it back to Bucky.

Steve could vaguely hear Pierce yelling before the call was ended, and Bucky thanked Banner.

“I’ll write that up in a report and tell the police.”

“Thank you.” Bucky muttered again and Banner patted Bucky’s shoulder before leaving to do just that.

“What did he say?” Steve asked once Banner was out of the room, and wrapped an arm around Bucky’s shoulders.

“It’s him. Of course it’s him. Why else would they be looking into this so much?”

“What? Bucky, you’re not making any sense. What’s clearly him?”

“Social Services… It’s Pierce. He told them that I struggled to take care of her before all this. Said I only let her eat once every other day to save money and I encouraged her to skip school whenever she could because I hated school when I was a kid… That’s why they asked me what I thought about school when I was in it…”

Barely ten minutes after waking up and Steve was already angry. They should have known. Pierce had been quiet for too long, hadn’t reacted against Bucky for Brock being arrested. They should have known he had something to do with this, and he was going to do everything he could be make Bucky’s life worse. It didn’t make Steve any less angry, though. He wished he could do more to help Bucky, to get back at Pierce somehow. The only comfort was that Steve knew Brock was going to prison. But that wasn’t enough against Pierce. He was acting unprofessionally for sure, there must be a way to screw up his life by getting him fired or something. Steve decided that he would ask Tony next time he came to visit.

“What did he say?” Steve managed to keep the anger out of his voice.

“Asked if Becca was still with me and said she wouldn’t be for long. Then he started telling me all the things he told social services I had been bragging about at work. Said that when Becca cried because she was so hungry I laughed at her and smacked her to shut her up…”

Steve shook his head and pulled Bucky into a hug. “No one who has ever been in the same room as
you or Becca for more than five minutes would believe that. Social services will figure out it’s a lie, especially now that Banner heard…”

Bucky nodded a little as he rested his head against Steve’s shoulder, his arm around Steve’s middle. “Hope so…”

Bucky didn’t even seem particularly angry, and that was the most worrying part. He just looked and sounded tired. Steve stroked his hair and kissed the side of his head to try and comfort him, rocking him a little, the way he had rocked Steve when he was upset.

He didn’t know what else he could say to make Bucky feel better. He could probably go on a twenty minute long rant about how much he hated Pierce’s whole bloodline and what Steve wanted to do to him and his son, but that wouldn’t help. Bucky didn’t need to be around anymore hostility. He needed gentle reassurance and kind words.

Bucky’s reactions were really worrying Steve lately. His reaction to Stark giving him a prosthetic was a lot more tamed than Steve had expected, his reaction to getting the IV taken out of his hand was much too intense, and his reaction to this was just unsettlingly vague. Obviously Bucky was upset, but he wasn’t surprised or scared, or even angry. It seemed as though he was done caring, but Steve knew that couldn’t be true. This was about Becca, there’s no way Bucky would just give up on caring about that. The jokes Bucky made were also a cause for concern, but they were less frequent than the other things. Bucky’s emotions weren’t coming out as anyone would expect them to in reaction to certain events.

Steve hoped that it was just because the trauma was so recent, and he was still coping and mentally healing. His emotions would go back to normal eventually, and so would his sense of humour. Eventually, Bucky would be Bucky again.

As Bucky’s phone rang, Bucky didn’t move. Steve expected him to grab the phone like he had before, but he just kept his head against Steve’s shoulder and his arm around Steve’s middle. It rang three times before Steve pulled back to look at Bucky in concern.

“Bucky? Are you going to answer the phone?” Steve wondered if maybe Bucky hadn’t heard, but Bucky just shrugged.

“Why bother? It’s just going to be more bad news. It’ll probably be Brock calling to let me know he broke out of jail and he’s on his way to kill me or some shit.”

Steve frowned and picked up Bucky’s phone. He knew Bucky still had Brock’s number saved in his phone, and there was no name on the screen, just a number. A business number, not a cell phone.

“What if he did get out of jail? Steve tried not to overreact. It was probably good news... Bucky was probably just surprised that he finally got some good news.

But what if it’s not good news? Steve tried to quiet the negative voice in his head yelling at him that something was wrong, someone was going to hurt Bucky again and there was nothing Steve could do to stop it. The voice started getting annoyed with Steve’s lack of productivity. He was just
staring at the Bucky listening to the person on the phone. The person could be upsetting Bucky. He didn’t look particularly upset, but Bucky’s emotions haven’t been showing properly lately. Whether it’s the Social Worker telling him they have to take Becca away, or someone threatening Bucky, his emotions wouldn’t show that. And Steve was doing nothing.

He should take the phone from Bucky and yell at whoever is on the other end, make sure Bucky didn’t have to listen to whatever was being said.

Still, Steve didn’t move. He tried to keep his expression neutral as he waited for Bucky to hang up, hoping the war going on inside his head didn’t show on his face.

“Okay… Thank you.” Bucky hung up the phone and Steve immediately perked up.

“Who was it? What did they say?”

Bucky said thank you, which meant that whatever the person said wasn’t bad. It wasn’t Brock, Jack, or Pierce. If it was the social workers telling him they were taking Becca away, Bucky wouldn’t have thanked them. He would have screamed at them to stay away from her, he would have refused to take that as an answer. He would have fought.

“Social Services… They said they don’t see any problem with how I took care of Becca before and they don’t think my recent disability is a cause for concern in relation to Becca’s wellbeing…”

Steve smiled brightly. That was great news! Bucky got to keep his sister! Becca got to stay with her brother and they got to remain a family unit. But…

Steve’s smile faded as he watched Bucky’s face. He didn’t seem as pleased. Steve didn’t see any emotion on his face, at all. Just like that, Steve was straight back to being worried. The way Bucky said it was strange too. The words he used sounded too official and articulate. Not that the way Bucky usually spoke made him sound inarticulate, he knew Bucky was smart. But he didn’t speak like that. It sounded like he was just repeating what they had told him.

“That’s good news…” Steve pointed out, and Bucky nodded.

“Yeah, it is…”

“Then what’s wrong?” Steve reached out to cup Bucky’s face as Bucky put his phone on the bedside table. He thought Becca would want to know right away and had assumed Bucky was going to text her, but he didn’t seem to want to.

“Pierce isn’t going to stop at one failed attempt to separate me from my sister.”

“It doesn’t matter. Banner heard all that, he’ll make sure the police know and they’ll protect you both…”

“Bang up job they did last time. They didn’t even find me, you and Nat did. The police are useless.”

“But the only way Pierce can get Becca taken away from you is through the police. If they really are useless, then they shouldn’t succeed,” Steve tried to reason with him, but Bucky just shrugged and looked down at his lap.

“Bucky.” Steve cupped his face with both hands to convince Bucky to look up at him. “Concentrate on here and now. You get to keep your sister, that’s good news!”
Bucky smiled a little then, and Steve sighed in relief. “I should tell Becca…”

“Yeah.” Steve kissed his cheek before letting go of his face so Bucky could turn away from him.

“Hey Becca… Yeah, I got the call… You’re not going anywhere, they said you can stay with me.” Steve could hear screaming on the other end of the phone and smiled as Bucky laughed. “Great, now I gotta add ‘deaf’ to my list of disabilities.”

*Another dark joke*, Steve mentally noted, but he didn’t dwell on it.

“Yeah, yeah… I’ll see you after school. Learn some shit… Bye, I love you too.” Bucky hung up and grinned at Steve as Steve smiled back at him.

Bucky leant forward on his one arm to kiss Steve with more passion than Steve remembered feeling in his kisses since before Bucky was kidnapped. He breathed in sharply through his nose in surprise but he didn’t try to back away. He had missed that passion.

Steve moved closer to him so Bucky wouldn’t have to lean over to reach him, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky’s arm encircled Steve’s waist and pressed him closer to his own body. He smiled against Bucky’s lips and sucked on his bottom lip lightly.

Bucky broke the kiss to lie back on the bed then tugged at Steve’s arm to get him to lie on top of him. Steve complied with a light chuckle, and kissed him again, his legs either side of Bucky’s waist.

It look Steve approximately fifteen seconds to remember that they were in a public hospital and any one of the nurses or doctors could walk in at any minute. Steve pulled away from Bucky, but leant down to kiss him again when he saw the hurt expression on Bucky’s face. After a few small, sweet kisses, Steve pulled back again.

“Someone could walk in…”

“Who gives a shit? We’re just kissing…”

“In a bed, with me on top of you. It’d be weird if someone came in.” Steve shook his head, the tone in his voice making the words sound final.

Bucky sighed and cupped Steve’s face to pull him down again. Steve was about to pull away, but the kiss was only a chaste one. “Okay, fine. But when I finally get released from here, you owe me a blowjob.”

Steve laughed lightly. He could tell by the small smile on Bucky’s lips that he was only kidding, and he didn’t actually expect anything from Steve. But Steve played alone anyway, letting out an exaggerated sigh.

“Alright, I suppose…”

Bucky chuckled and pulled Steve down for another kiss. Again, it was sweet and innocent.

“You look really good from this angle.” Bucky muttered against his lips, and Steve could tell where that was going.

“Bucky, no.”

Bucky had never pushed this much before, and it was starting to worry Steve in the same measures
as it annoyed him.

“I’m just saying you look good, I didn’t mean nothing by it.” Bucky tucked some of Steve’s hair behind his ear. “I’m sorry. We don’t have to do anything, I’m not trying to push you into it. I really was just saying you look good.”

Steve felt a little bad about assuming Bucky was trying to coerce him. As he said, Bucky had never done it before. He had no reason to assume that’s what Bucky was getting at. Bucky must have seen the guilt flash across Steve’s face, because he pulled him down for another kiss.

“It’s okay, Steve.” He muttered against Steve’s lips and Steve kissed him back, relaxing into it.

They heard a noise outside the room and Steve shot off Bucky like he had been electrocuted. Bucky laughed as they heard people pass the room and reached out to pull Steve back onto the bed, next to him this time. Steve huffed in annoyance when Bucky laughed at him, but it was nice to hear that noise, so he let it go and laid down beside Bucky on the bed.

“Seriously, though. When I get out of here, we’ve got a lot of stuff to catch up on in the bedroom.” Bucky winked at Steve and Steve shook his head as he rolled his eyes and smiled.

The infamous blush was back with a vengeance.

Natasha snuck a bottle of whiskey into the hospital when she brought Becca to visit them after school. She also brought cans of soda, disposable plastic cups, and some cheap party food.

Steve laughed as she set it all out on Bucky’s tray.

“We need to celebrate!” Natasha insisted when Bucky shook his head, and Bucky couldn’t resist smiling, although they could tell he tried.

Becca wrapped her arms around Bucky and, since he was stood up, she was able to burrow her face against Bucky’s chest and hug him tight. Bucky hugged her tight too and rested his cheek against her head.

“I knew you’d do it, Buck. I knew you wouldn’t let them take me away.”

“Technically,” Bucky broke the hug and turned her to face Steve and Natasha. “It was all thanks to these two… And your teacher, but you can just buy her some chocolate or something.”

Becca hugged both Natasha and Steve too, and thanked them both.

Natasha had brought party rings, chocolate buttons, Harribo, and several flavours of Pringles. Steve didn’t miss how all the food could be eaten one-handed once opened and briefly wondered if it was intentional. Knowing Natasha, it probably was.

She poured whiskey into a disposable cup for Bucky and handed it over, and Steve also didn’t miss how Bucky kept a hold of it to avoid eating any of the food. He couldn’t eat if his only hand had a cup in it.

Steve stood on his tip toes while Natasha and Becca talked and whispered in Bucky’s ear. “Please eat… I don’t want to have to tattle on you to Natasha, but you know she won’t be happy if she notices you’re not eating properly.”

Bucky looked a little annoyed, but Becca started talking to him about something that happened at
school then, so the look disappeared immediately. The look didn’t really bother Steve. He could deal with a few eye-rolls and sighs if he meant Bucky would eat. He glanced around to see that both girls were looking at Bucky as Becca spoke, and used that as an opportunity to hold the pack of party rings out to him. If he rejected them, both the girls would notice. Becca might be a little concerned, but Bucky could probably explain it away easily. Natasha, on the other hand, wouldn’t drop it so easily.

Steve could tell by the look Bucky shot him that he knew what Steve was doing. Thankfully, he didn’t look angry or betrayed. It was more of a ‘well played’ look. He put his cup down and took a few party rings, then put most of the ones he picked up down on the bedside table. Steve smiled as Bucky put the one he was still holding into his mouth, then picked up another to eat when he swallowed the first one.

Maybe it was nothing to worry about, and it was just the stress of dealing with the Social Workers lately that had caused Bucky to lose his appetite, even after being off morphine. But now that they were sure Becca wasn’t going to be taken away, Bucky could relax. He hardly waited to swallow the second before he was biting into the third, so maybe his appetite was coming back in full.

Steve laughed lightly when Becca commented on it and Bucky looked up at her, both his cheeks puffed out slightly. He looked like a startled chipmunk.

When he finally swallowed, Steve leant up to kiss his cheek, then whispered in his ear. “Thank you…”

Bucky smiled back as Steve pulled back to look at his face. “You're welcome... Now, pass me the chocolate buttons.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets to go home

Pepper called a few days later to let them know that she had finished building her case, and asked if Bucky wanted to see it. He declined, saying he wouldn’t know whether it was any good or not. If Pepper thought it’d put Brock and Jack away then that was good enough for him. She assured him there was no way they would get out of this.

Friday was the day Bucky could leave the hospital, so that Becca could have the next two days with him without having to miss school. Natasha would be there for Saturday, and Steve would be there for both Saturday and Sunday.

Becca had brought some clothes for Bucky to wear to leave the hospital, since the clothes he was wearing when Jack kidnapped him were ripped up in the corner of the barn. His shoes were okay, but that was it. Bucky wasn’t particularly bothered about the clothes he had been wearing. Steve remembered that it had been a baggy t-shirt and loose-fitted jeans. They weren’t the style Bucky usually wore, so Steve supposed they were only to wear around the house or when doing unimportant errands like driving Steve home or going to the store.

She brought him a red t-shirt – short sleeved, per Bucky’s request – and his black, skinny jeans. He was okay with wearing his converse out, and his black, felt coat, but Becca had insisted on bringing a scarf for him too and his beanie hat. She had also suggested having a Welcome Back party so all Bucky’s friends could come see him, but he declined, not to anyone’s surprise. Bucky said he’d prefer to just be able to relax in his own house again, with the three people he loved the most. Instead of the party, Natasha had bought some DVDs for them to watch together.

Steve wasn’t sure what he was going to do on Monday. He didn’t know whether to stay with Bucky longer, or go home and give Bucky some privacy and peace. Steve decided he would ask Bucky what he wanted Steve to do on Sunday night. If he wanted Steve to leave, he would leave, no hard feelings. He understood that Bucky might want some time to himself.

Banner gave Bucky a list of things that he had to call the hospital if he experienced, like pain in the amputation site, swelling, difficulties breathing, or any signs of infection in the amputation or any of the other cuts that had been particularly deep and therefore hadn’t healed completely yet. Banner had also given a copy of this list to Becca, Steve, and Natasha. He knew they would be with him for most of the weekend, and since Becca lived with him she’d be there for longer, and Bucky might be reluctant about returning to the hospital, so he may ignore some of the warning signs or brush them off as nothing. If they knew what to look out for, they can bring him in or call the hospital for him.

He told Bucky not to drive or operate machinery – as if Bucky was going to attempt that – and not to move around too much for the first few days, in case he aggravated his healing ribs. The doctor also gave Bucky some antiseptic cream to use on the amputation site for the first week of being out of hospital. After that, it wouldn’t be necessary but he encouraged Bucky to use it for as long as he felt he wanted to, and come back to him if he wanted more so Banner could write him a prescription.
Becca was waiting outside the room and Natasha was waiting with her car outside. She had gone out to it twenty minutes ago to turn the heating on so the inside of the car would be warm by the time Bucky was ready to leave. Bucky didn’t need any help getting his shirt on, but he couldn’t do his belt up with one hand, so Steve stepped forward to do it for him. Bucky didn’t even look annoyed or upset that he needed help, he just smirked at Steve and managed to make the smaller man blush from that alone.

“What’s the date?” Bucky asked and Steve frowned in confusion, but told him.

“Nineteenth of December…”

“Just under a week until Christmas.” Bucky pointed out with a smile as he let Steve drape the scarf around his neck.

Steve frowned when he realised how close Christmas was. He had already bought the Wreck This Journal for Bucky, and he had started the painting, but he was nowhere near finished. He also got Natasha a red beanie hat that would suit her orange hair, and matching gloves. For Becca, he got a CD she had been meaning to get, but couldn’t find. Steve had seen it online while he was waiting for Bucky to wake up one morning and instantly ordered it. He sent it to Peggy and Angie’s address after texting Peggy to make sure it was okay, and they signed for it.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky must have noticed Steve’s frown.

“Nothing…” Steve shook his head and tried to force a smile as he gestures for Bucky to lean down so he could put the hat on him. Bucky didn’t argue that he could do that himself, and ducked his head a little to let Steve put it on him.

“What is it, Steve?” Bucky insisted and Steve sighed. He knew Bucky wouldn’t just drop it, but he knew what Bucky would say if he told him what was bothering him. He’d say that it didn’t matter to him if Steve hadn’t gotten him the presents he had planned to. But it mattered to Steve.

There was no point in trying to get Bucky to drop it, though. He was too stubborn. Bucky wouldn’t stop until Steve told him what was bothering him.

“I just… had a plan for what to do for you for Christmas and I haven’t had time. I don’t think it’ll be ready by Christmas.”

As expected, Bucky shook his head with a smile. “It doesn’t matter, Steve. You’ve been here, with me, that’s more important to me. I don’t need presents, I need you.”

He took Steve’s hand in his to stop Steve playing with Bucky’s coat then leant down to kiss him, and Steve kissed back.

“I promise I’ll get it done as soon as I can. It might not be ready for Christmas day, but you can just have it a few days… or weeks later…”

Bucky chuckled and shook his head again. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind when I get it. Have you got everything you brought with you?”

Bucky looked around the room at the same time as Steve did, to make sure they didn’t leave anything. Bucky only had his phone and charger, and his keys that the police had found in the barn and returned to him. He didn’t miss how Bucky paled slightly when he realised that Jack had the keys to his home, where Becca and Steve were, the whole time. Natasha had already took the books home and put them back on Bucky’s shelf for him. Steve gathered up his phone, charger, sketchbook, and pencils, then nodded. He held the objects in his right hand so he could hold
Bucky’s hand as they left the room.

Before they left, Banner told Bucky he would let Stark know that he had gone home and he could call Bucky on his cell phone, or come to the house. Bucky thanked him for everything he had done and Banner gave him a bashful smile as he shrugged and said he was just doing his job. They shook hands, and Steve and Becca led Bucky out to Natasha’s waiting car.

“Home, sweet fucking home!” Bucky shouted as he entered the house, and the others all laughed.

Bucky immediately fell face-first on the couch and Natasha went to put his phone on charge across the room for him. Becca went to the kitchen to make popcorn for the movies, and Steve sat on the arm near where Bucky’s head was buried against the cushions. He ran his fingers through his hair as he smiled down at him. Bucky shifted slightly so he could breathe better and Steve could see his face, then Bucky smiled up at him.

“You haven’t redecorated my room, have you? Becca told me you’ve been staying here.”

Steve shook his head. He hadn’t dared move anything, unless it would be a good thing that it was moved, like when he reorganised Bucky’s books so they were in the right order. “Everything is exactly how you left it.”

Bucky nodded in acknowledgement then reluctantly pulled himself up off the couch. “I’m going to go take a shower before we start the movie.”

Natasha asked if he needed any help, but Bucky just laughed and said he’d manage just fine.

Becca returned to the living room and looked around with a frown. “Where’s Bucky?”

“He went to take a shower, he’ll be back in a little while.” Natasha informed her as she came over to take the bowl of popcorn off her, trading it for the stack of movies she had brought so Becca could look through them.

“Steve, could you go get Bucky’s duvet from upstairs so we can all snuggle under it and be really cliché?” Becca asked and Steve nodded with a smile as he stood up.

He could hear the shower as he went upstairs and into Bucky’s room. Bucky’s coat, scarf, and hat were on the bed, and one of his drawers were open. Steve smiled a little. The slight changes to the room were comforting, a sign that Bucky was back and going about his usual business. Steve could almost pretend nothing bad had happened, nothing had changed. But he knew that wasn’t true. Bucky was home, but that didn’t mean everything was the same. There were still a lot of challenges they had to overcome, and Bucky had some issues he had to work through, but he wouldn’t be working through them alone. He had Steve, Becca, and Natasha around him to help him. With their help, Steve was sure Bucky would be fine, in time.

Steve moved Bucky’s clothes off the bed and put them on the chair nearby. As he was about to pull the duvet off, he heard a loud bang come from the bathroom. He didn’t even register leaving bedroom, but he was suddenly in front of the bathroom door.

“Bucky?” Steve knocked on the door. He could still hear the shower running, but Bucky didn’t reply. “Bucky!”

Steve tried the door handle, but the bathroom was locked. He knew there was no way he’d be able to knock the door down to get in himself if he needed to. Natasha might be able to, but definitely not Steve. He knocked one more time, harder this time, his knuckles probably being bruised by the
force against the wood. Just as Steve was about to shout Natasha, Bucky spoke.

“I’m okay!” He called out, but there was something wrong with his voice. Nevertheless, Steve let out a relieved sigh.

“Are you sure?” He had to check.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Bucky’s voice sounded tight, and Steve frowned.

“Will you open the door?”

There was a moment of silence, and Steve knew for sure now that something was wrong, he just didn’t know exactly what it was. But he was going to find out.

“I’m fine…” He sounded less convincing this time.

“If you don’t open the door I’ll shout Natasha to come knock it down…” That wasn’t an empty threat. If Bucky was hurt but he just didn’t want to go back to the hospital, Steve couldn’t just let it go.

Bucky must have sensed that Steve wasn’t kidding, because after a few seconds Steve heard movement from inside the bathroom then a small click as Bucky unlocked the door. Steve immediately opened it as Bucky moved back over to the shower cubicle. His hair and skin was wet, and he was undressed, so whatever happened must have been when he was already in the shower. Shockingly, Steve didn’t blush this time. There were more important things to worry about than Bucky’s state of undress.

“I heard a bang, what happened?” Steve asked as his eyes scanned Bucky’s body for signs of injury. He couldn’t see any, but he wasn’t a doctor, he didn’t really know what he was looking for. Bucky’s eyes were a little red, but that could have just been from the steam in the bathroom.

“I just knocked some stuff over…”

Steve looked around the room and saw that the shampoo bottles that usually sat on the side of the bath were on the floor. One of them was open and some of the liquid inside had spilled out onto the tiles. He looked back at Bucky and noticed that his right arm looked tense, kept pressed against his side. On closer inspection, Steve noticed some bruises starting to form along Bucky’s side, and he was trying to hide it with his arm.

“What really happened?” Steve stepped closer to him and, after a bit of silent persuasion, got Bucky to move his arm out of the way so he could see. Luckily, it wasn’t on the side that had the broken ribs from before, so there was little risk of damaging them. The bruises were starting to look like dark ink stains and, although they looked painful, Steve didn’t think they were cause for concern.

“I fell…” Bucky muttered, and Steve looked up at him and noticed tears in his eyes. His eyes weren’t red from the steam. Bucky had been crying before he let Steve in. The bruises looked painful, sure, but Steve wasn’t expecting Bucky to be crying. He watched Bucky in silence as he waited for him to elaborate and Bucky sighed. “I forgot…”

“You forgot what?” Steve frowned in confusion.

“That I’m missing an arm. Banner called it Phantom Limbs. It’s where my brain believes I still have an arm so, even though I can see that I don’t, it sometimes tricks me into thinking I do. Like, sometimes, I can feel my left fingers and it feels like I’m clenching my fist or something when I
think about doing that, the same way I can feel my right fist clench when I think about it. I went to grab the shampoo and I usually lean out of the shower and put my left arm on the cubicle wall for balance, but obviously that didn’t go so well and I fell,”

Steve sighed quietly in sympathy and reached up to cup Bucky’s face, moving his fingers away from Bucky’s bruised side. “Does it hurt?”

“I can’t really feel it, to be honest. I’ll probably feel it tomorrow morning,” He let out a humourless laugh and Steve realised why Bucky had been crying then. He must be upset at having to relearn about his disability, or frustrated that he had forgotten in the first place.

Steve dropped to his knees and picked up the shampoo and conditioner, passing the bottles to Bucky. “Finish your shower, I’ll clean up this mess…”

Bucky glanced between Steve and the mess of product on the floor, then took both the bottles in his one hand and stepped back into the cubicle. Steve listened closely for any sign that Bucky was in pain, or crying. He didn’t hear any grunts of pain or irregular breathing over the sound of the running water by the time he finished cleaning the shampoo up off the floor.

“Bucky? Do you need anything else?”

Now Steve was blushing. He could see Bucky’s silhouette through the frosted glass of the shower walls, and tried to stop himself looking down the shape of Bucky’s back to less wholesome areas.

“I’m okay… Thanks Steve,” Bucky didn’t turn round, but Steve knew that was a silent dismissal.

“Any time, Buck… I’ll meet you downstairs…” He saw Bucky nod, and waited a few seconds before leaving the bathroom. Steve leant against the door and took a deep breath. He shouldn’t be thinking about how good Bucky looked wet. He should be worried about his boyfriends bruised side, especially after the damage to his ribs, not trying to fight back the memories of what Bucky’s mouth feels like on his cock.

Steve shook his head and tried to think of something else, anything else. Eventually, the feeling faded and he was able to go back to Bucky’s room and take the duvet downstairs.

Although Bucky didn’t ask him to keep quiet, Steve knew he wouldn’t want him to tell Becca and Natasha what happened. Bucky would come down wearing a t-shirt that covered the bruises, he’d smile and watch the movie, and he’d probably never mention the fall to either of them.

He put the duvet down on the couch when he got back to the living room and saw Natasha’s eye flick from his face to his knees, then back up with a smirk on her lips. Steve frowned in confusion then looked down and realised the knees of his jeans were wet. The water would have been on the floor from when Bucky fell, and Steve had been kneeling down to clean up the mess on the floor. But, he realised what it must look like to Natasha, especially if his face was as flushed as it felt from a mixture of the heat in the bathroom, the effort of bringing the duvet down, and the unsavoury thoughts that kept popping into his head.

“How’s Bucky?” She asked, a slight teasing tone to her voice.

“He’s fine… I’m going to go change.” Steve quickly excused himself and went back upstairs and into Bucky’s room to change into some of the clothes he had brought over when he was staying in Bucky’s room. He faintly heard Natasha laughing as he left the room.

When he returned, Natasha was sat on one end of the couch and Becca was sat next to her. Steve wasn’t sure what the seating arrangements were, since it was only a three-person sofa and there
were four of them. Before he could decide where to sit, Bucky came down wearing sweatpants and a baggy grey sweater. The left arm had been rolled up a little so the bottom of Bucky’s stump was just visible.

He sat down beside Becca on the couch and they all squished together to make enough space for Steve on the other side of Bucky. Bucky looked a little nervous, and Steve instantly recognised that it was because Steve would be on Bucky’s left. He brought over the popcorn and passed it to Becca, then threw the duvet over them all while Becca held the popcorn bowl up to protect it. She rested it on her lap and Bucky put his arm around her, his fingers grazing through Natasha’s hair as she rested her head on Becca’s shoulder. Steve sat on the other side of Bucky, and Bucky moved his arm behind Steve. The end of the stump rested on Steve’s furthest away shoulder, and Steve asked him quietly if it hurt when Steve leant back against it, referring to the bruises as well. Bucky shook his head so Steve leant back and tucked his shoulder under Bucky’s arm. Bucky tensed slightly, but he relaxed almost as quickly. Steve didn’t really pay attention to the movie they were watching. It just felt good to be with Bucky without the monitors around them, and the bright lights and crisp, antibiotic-scented sheets.

Steve rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder and closed his eyes half way through the first movie. Without meaning to, Steve fell asleep resting against him.

Steve woke up the next morning in Bucky’s bed, with Bucky sleeping soundly beside him. He didn’t know how he got to the bed, since Bucky couldn’t have carried him, and he didn’t know how many of the movies they got through before someone got Steve to bed, but he really didn’t care.

He immediately turned to cuddle up to Bucky’s side, burying his face against his chest sleepily. He felt Bucky’s breathing change as he woke up, and his right arm wrapped around Steve’s shoulders, his hand gripping his shoulder firmly. Steve felt Bucky press his lips against his head and smiled slightly.

“Morning…” Bucky muttered and Steve looked up at him.

“Good morning. I’m sorry I fell asleep last night,” He rested one hand on Bucky’s chest.

“It’s okay. Becca said I clocked out not long after you anyway.”

“How’d we get to bed?”

“Nat woke me up and I carried you,” Bucky shrugged and closed his eyes.

Steve was a little confused as to how, but he didn’t know whether to ask how he got Steve up to bed or not. He didn’t want to offend him. As always, Bucky knew what Steve was thinking anyway.

“You’re narrow. I put my right arm under your knees and put what’s left of my left arm on your back to keep you against my chest. It wasn’t that difficult.” Bucky shrugged and moved his arm from around Steve to rub his eyes.

“Oh… Clever,” Steve smiled and leant up to kiss him while Bucky wasn’t looking. He tensed slightly in surprise, and Steve felt his lips tug up in a smile before he kissed back. “How’s your side?”

“Hurts like a bitch, but not in the I-need-to-go-to-the-hospital way.” Bucky’s arm came back down to circle around Steve’s waist as he kissed him again.
There was a very loud knock at the door and Bucky groaned in annoyance against Steve’s lips. When Steve went to break the kiss, Bucky shook his head and kissed him again. “Leave it, Becca or Nat can open it.”

Steve chuckled lightly as he kissed him again, but it only took five seconds for Becca to shout to Bucky to ask him to get the door.

“Natasha went home last night and I just got out the shower! I’m not dressed yet!” They heard her shout out as an excuse and Bucky groaned again, making Steve laugh lightly.

“I need to take a shower anyway, it’s been a while,” Steve told him and kissed Bucky’s cheek before getting out of bed as whoever was at the door knocked again. “Answer the door.”

He saw Bucky drag himself off the bed before Steve took some of his clothes, left the room, and went into the bathroom, then heard Bucky start walking downstairs before Steve turned the water on, making sure the bathroom door was locked.

Steve sighed happily as he felt the water hit his skin. It definitely helped to relieve the stress he had been under lately.

He didn’t know how long he was in there, but his fingers were starting to wrinkle, so he decided it was time to get out after quickly washing his hair.

Steve dried his body and towelled his hair, then got dressed and went back into Bucky’s room, expecting him to have crawled back under the covers by now. Bucky wasn’t in there, though, and Steve frowned. He must have been in the shower a while, and Bucky wasn’t expecting anyone today, so the conversation with whoever was at the door shouldn’t have taken long. Then, Steve immediately started panicking, thinking whoever was at the door was one of Brock’s or Alexander’s friends, who had come to hurt Bucky on their behalf.

Steve started heading to the stairs, but he stopped at the top when he heard a familiar voice. It wasn’t Bucky, or Becca, and he had to hold his breath and concentrate to be able to make out why the voice sounded familiar.

When he finally realised, Steve’s face split into a grin.

Tony Stark.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets the prosthetic

As soon as Steve realised Stark was there, he rushed down the rest of the stairs and into the living room. Becca had come downstairs at some point while Steve was in the shower, wearing her pyjamas with wet hair, and she was now sat beside Bucky on the couch. Stark was sat in the arm chair near the couch, this time without Jarvis, and a bigger metal briefcase was sat on the coffee table.

Bucky looked up when Steve came into the room, seeming nervous, but he smiled at him. Steve smiled back and sat on the arm of the couch beside Bucky. The siblings both went to move up to Steve could sit on the couch beside Bucky, but he shook his head to gesture that he didn’t mind, so they stayed where they were.

Becca was holding Bucky’s hand in both of her’s, and Tony smiled half-heartedly at Steve as he sipped the drink one of them must have brought him.

“I was just telling Bucky that I got a call from Pierce, saying Bucky was stealing from HYDRA before the incident and asked me to make sure none of my stuff was missing.”

Steve shook his head in annoyance and placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “God, he’s pathetic.”

Stark nodded in agreement. “I had my people take inventory. Not because I had any doubt that he was lying, just so I had some hard evidence that nothing was missing. But, turns out a lot of the tools I supplied for the team are missing. None of the HYDRA tools are missing though. I looked at the security footage over the past month and saw who it was that was stealing. I’ll give you three guesses.”

Becca, Steve, and Bucky all said “Rumlow” at the same time and Tony nodded. “Correct.”

Tony finished his drink and put his cup down on the coffee table, beside the metal briefcase. He looked up before he could sit back in his chair and saw all three of the occupants of the couch staring at the case, then smirked at them.

“I’m assuming you’re all itching to see the finished product?”

Steve nodded quickly, and saw Becca and Bucky do the same in his peripheral vision. Tony turned the case around so when he opened it, it’ll be facing them, then lifted the lid. There was foam inside the case, with spaces for each of the components the arm was made out of, all laid out horizontally. The biggest part was the bicep and shoulder, and Steve honestly had no idea how it would attach to Bucky. It didn’t look like it had any buckles or clips. The bicep and the forearm were made up of shiny segments of metal, all in horizontal strips. The last part was the hand. It had the same separate strips of metal as the rest of the arm, but the ones on the fingers were small pieces, meaning the fingers would be able to move and bend as normal fingers would. Despite the fact that it was made of metal, it looked oddly realistic, like something from a sci-fi movie. There was also a red star on the shoulder, but Steve wasn’t sure why.
Steve broke his gaze away from the arm to Bucky’s face. He could see Becca looking at her brother too, but Bucky was still looking at the arm. His expression seemed guarded, and purposely indifferent.

“Do you like it?” Stark asked when Bucky didn’t speak after a while.

“It’s a little intimidating…” Bucky muttered.

“Nothing here is just for show. It has to be made of metal slats, and it has to look exactly how it does for it to work properly. Maybe if the board sees that it works for humans, when they see that it works for you, we’ll get more funding and time to work on it more and we can come up with other less intimidating materials to make it out of. Or we can come up with a cover that doesn’t compromise the workings or the flexibility of it. But, until then, it has to be like this,“

Bucky nodded as he listened to Stark, his eyes still on the arm. He let go of Becca’s hands and covers the stump with his hand as he seemed to be thinking about whether to accept the arm or not. Steve placed both his hands on Bucky’s shoulders and massaged them slowly to try and ease the tension he could feel there, and Bucky looked between him and Becca.

“What do you guys think?” He asked them, and Steve looked at Becca over Bucky’s head to wait for her to react first. She looked back at Steve, then at the arm.

“I know why you’re hesitating.” She started. “You think we’ll be uncomfortable with it, or we’ll think you look scary or something… Right?”

Bucky nodded and Steve frowned as he pressed his thumbs into Bucky’s shoulder blades, trying to work out the knots he felt there for something productive to do. Steve knew that Becca was right about what Bucky thought, but he couldn’t help thinking it was ridiculous. Bucky could be completely bionic and Steve still wouldn’t find him scary. Bucky could be standing over a pile of corpses, covered in their blood, with a blood stained knife in his hand, and all Steve would think about is how good Bucky looked in red.

“We will never be scared of you, Buck,” Steve started and Becca nodded in agreement. “I’m sure to people who piss you off you could be scary if you wanted to… But to us, you are the least intimidating person I’ve ever met. I saw you cry when you finally managed to watch Jurassic World all the way through,”

Becca laughed at that and Bucky blushed as Stark chuckled too.

“You’re adorable. Not scary. No matter what changes you go through.” He leant down and kissed Bucky’s cheek, and Bucky smiled.

“Are you sure?” Bucky looked between them both, and they both nodded. “Okay, Tony. Show me how to put it together.”

Everyone in the room smiled as Stark took the pieces out of the case, then sat on the coffee table so he was in front of Bucky. Bucky sat forward and Stark opened the shoulder of the prosthetic to put it on him. The metal had powerful magnets on either side of where it opened to be put on him, and a small button to turn the magnets on and off under a movable piece of metal at the top. The shoulder and bicep component stopped just as it reached the bottom of his stump, and there were more magnets and another concealed button to connect the next bit; the elbow and forearm.

Stark showed them that inside the next component there were little black, glass circles and explained that they were the sensors that were strong enough to pick up the electronic signals sent
from Bucky’s brain to the bottom of his arm, and they’d continue the signal and carry out the instruction given.

Bucky nodded along and watched in interest as Tony pressed the button on the end of the first part to make the magnets connect to the next part. Other than a nod every now and then, or moving to make it easier for Tony, Bucky didn’t move. He waited for Stark to attach the hand to the bottom of the prosthetic, and Steve was again surprised at how realistic it looked. It looked like it should work like any normal arm, and Steve really hoped it did.

“The strength control depends on your thoughts, so if you think about holding something lightly, you’ll hold it lightly. But you have to be careful with what you think, and remember it’s metal and mechanical so your strength limit in this arm is a lot higher than your other arm. I recommend practising with things you don’t mind breaking, until you get the hang of it. Don’t, like, masturbate with it before you get the hang of it or that’ll really hurt.”

Bucky let out a light laugh then, and Becca pretended to gag. Tony sat back on the coffee table and gestured at Bucky. “Try it.”

Steve kept his hand on Bucky’s right shoulder and leant over a little so he could look at the new arm, and Bucky and Becca stared down at it too. Nothing happened for a few seconds, and Steve was starting to get a little nervous. If it didn’t work, Bucky would be so upset…

Then, it turned so that the hand and forearm were facing up, the metal slats shifting as it did, and Bucky grinned.

Tony looked relieved and Becca had to cover her mouth to stop herself from screaming in excitement, hiding her wide smile. Steve tried not to get overexcited, but he was overjoyed that this worked for Bucky. The fingers moved too, and Steve played with the bottom of Bucky’s hair while he watched patiently as Bucky moved different parts of the arm and hand.

“How does it feel?” Tony asked, grinning proudly.

“Strange… But normal… That doesn’t make sense, does it?” Bucky chuckled, staring down at the arm.

“Not really, no…” Becca pointed out but Bucky didn’t bother elaborating and just kept moving the arm, looking at it in amazement.

“Let’s try the strength on it…” Tony picked up the plain, white mug he had been drinking out of. “You guys don’t have any sentimental attachment to this mug, do you?”

When Becca and Bucky both shook his head, he held the cup out to Bucky. Steve let go of Bucky’s shoulder so he could lean forward to take the cup. He went to get it with his right hand, but Stark moved it back and gestured to the metal arm. Bucky understood what he was getting at and reached out with the prosthetic. Stark let go of it once Bucky gripped it, but the mug immediately shattered into small shards. Bucky’s face fell, and he looked down at the hand in annoyance, then the pieces of porcelain in his lap.

“Don’t worry about that, you’ll get the hang of it,” Tony smiled and patted Bucky’s shoulder. “Just keep practising before you grab anything living. Any questions?”

“Can I take it off whenever?” Bucky asked quietly and Stark nodded.

“Yeah, just push the metal covers out of the way and press the buttons to cut off the magnets, then you can take the hand off and the forearm off, then the higher up magnets will release the shoulder...
and bicep from around your arm. The arm doesn’t need any daily maintenance, I can do the maintenance that needs doing when we have the face-to-face interview in two months. I’ll mail you the questionnaire in a month with a pre-paid return envelope. Fill it in and send it back as soon as possible, but don’t feel the need to rush it. Any other questions?"

“Are you sure I can shower with it?” Bucky asked and Tony nodded. “What if something happens and it stops working or something?”

“It shouldn’t. But if it does, just call me and I’ll either talk you through how to fix it or I’ll come over and fix it for you. Anything else?” Bucky shook his head. “Okay, I’ll leave the briefcase, in case you want to put it away properly when you take it off, but you don’t really need to if you don’t want to or if it’s too much effort. You can just leave it on the floor near your bed or something and it’ll be fine.”

Bucky stood up at the same time as Tony while they spoke, as did Becca and Steve. He didn’t seem to notice the pieces of the mug fall off his lap onto the carpet. The prosthetic was hanging by Bucky’s side, but Steve could see the fingers twitch every now and then, so Bucky was still thinking about it as he listened to the other man.

“I have a question, but it’s not related to the prosthetic…” Steve piped up and Stark nodded to him. “Ask away.”

“Have you heard why Becca’s wellbeing with Bucky was being investigated?” Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky had told Becca about the phone call from Pierce, but she had to know eventually and they had to ask Stark what he could do to help, so Steve figured now was as good a time as any. Bucky didn’t seem to disagree, because he didn’t try to stop Steve.

Tony frowned a little in thought and shook his head. “I know it’s because he’s been recently disabled, but other than that, no.”

“Alejandro Pierce called Social Services and told them that Bucky had been neglecting her, starving her, taunting her when she cried, and hitting her to shut her up.”

“What?!” Becca screeched in astonishment. Bucky definitely hadn’t told her, then.

Steve looked over at her and immediately recognised how furious she was. Bucky had had the same expression when he was angry about lawyers and other officials all coming into the hospital to talk to him on the same day.

“It’s okay, Bex. They obviously realised it was bullshit because they decided you’re safe with me.” Bucky pointed out and Becca relaxed, but only slightly.

“Is there anything you can do about Pierce? Doctor Banner heard the call if you want another witness, he can tell you what Pierce said…”

“What do you mean by something I can do?” Tony looked a little confused, but his expression and body language were open, showing that he wasn’t apprehensive about helping, he just didn’t know what Steve expected him to do.

“Can you… I don’t know, make him lose his job or something?”

Tony seemed to think hard about that for a minute. “I could fire the firm from the new Stark building project, but that’d be inconveniencing the workers more than Pierce…”
“Don’t do that… Please…” Bucky implored Tony. He was obviously worried about his friends losing the work and possibly being fired from HYDRA because of it.

“I won’t… But I know HYDRA is a board-based organisation. I could get in contact with the other owners of the business. Maybe they’re not as awful as Pierce is and if I tell them what he’s been doing they might have some conscience and vote the evil bastard off the board and out of his job….”

Steve smiled and Bucky sighed in relief.

“Thank you, Tony…” Bucky smiled slightly, and Tony smiled back as he held his hand out to Bucky.

“No problem, man. Enjoy the arm, don’t hesitate to call if you need anything, and I’ll get back to you on the Pierce thing.”

They shook hands, and Tony briefly said goodbye to Becca and Steve too before showing himself out.

Once they heard the door close, Bucky sat back down, staring down at the arm.

“Does it feel weird?” Becca asked as she sat down again beside him, and Steve sat on the arm. Becca had seemed to have railed in her anger from hearing what Pierce had accused her brother of doing to her, but Steve could still see irritation in her eyes. He briefly glanced down at the porcelain shards on the floor and saw that none of them were wearing shoes, then quietly left the room to get the dustpan and brush from under the sink in the kitchen.

When he came back in, Becca was leaning over Bucky to run her fingers between the metal of the arm and Bucky was shaking his head a little.

“I don’t think I can feel it… I feel something, but that could just be because I’m watching you do it so my brain is tricking me into thinking I can feel it…”

Steve knelt in front of Bucky and started sweeping up the broken mug, careful not to cut himself, and heard Bucky stop mid-sentence. He could tell Bucky would be looking at him, and glanced up with a smile.

“What’re you doing?” Bucky asked and tilted his head.

Steve moved back a little so Bucky could see the porcelain on the floor. “I’m cleaning the mess so no one cuts themselves.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Bucky shook his head, but Steve shook his head too.

“It’s okay. It’ll help and it’s practical… something I can do easily.”

Bucky seemed to register why Steve felt the need to do this then, and Steve saw a flash of realisation in his expression before he nodded. Steve smiled gratefully and went back to work clearing up the mess. The fact that Bucky understood why Steve needed to be doing something practical without Steve having to tell him made Steve irrationally happy. It was only a little thing, but it showed that Bucky understood him, especially after they talked about Steve’s insecurities after their fight.

He took the dustpan and poured the pieces of mug into the trash can, then put the dustpan and brush away. When he returned, Bucky was moving each finger individually and Becca was tapping
certain fingers, probably testing him. If she touched the index finger, the index finger would twitch a little, then she’d touch another. She was seeing if Bucky could move each finger individually at any given moment, without there being a pattern. It seemed to work just fine, and Bucky moved each finger that Becca touched.

“This is amazing…” She muttered and Steve smiled as he sat on the arm next to Bucky.

Steve dropped his hand to touch the metal shoulder and ran his fingertips between the grooves of metal. Bucky looked up at him, probably watching his face for any negative emotions, so Steve was sure to keep his face as neutral as possible besides a small smile. He knew Bucky would be worried that the metal arm would make Steve uncomfortable, or Steve wouldn’t like it, but the fact that Bucky had the use of two arms again was all Steve could think about. He was so happy for him, even if it would take a while until Bucky got the hang of using it. Bucky seemed to be able to move it just fine, but he still needed to learn how to control the strength of it before he could use it like a normal arm.

But Bucky was smart, and he learnt things quickly. That’s why he was so good at working construction; he could listen to someone explain how to use a piece of equipment for five minutes and he’d be a pro at it. If Bucky read a page on the internet about how to make a dish, it would taste like a trained chef had prepared it. It was probably why he was so good at dancing too. All it took was him watching someone do something and maybe have them talk him through it once or twice, and he’d nail it.

Steve knew that using a prosthetic arm was different, and it wasn’t as simple as all that, but he still didn’t doubt that Bucky would be able to use it perfectly in no time. Because of this, Stark will get positive reactions on the prosthetic when the board sees Bucky’s questionnaire answers and the answers to the interviews with Stark. The company may be able to get the funding needed to mass-produce them soon. So many disabled people, all around the world, would be able to have properly functioning prosthetics. Ones that actually worked as whatever limb they’re missing, instead of just being for show or very basic convenience.

He placed his hand in Bucky’s metal one and threaded his fingers between Bucky’s, just to see if he would be able to without his skin getting caught between the pieces of metal. Steve didn’t feel any uncomfortable pinching, he hardly felt the small gaps in the metal plates at all. Bucky seemed tense, and Steve looked up and saw Bucky’s eyes slightly wider, staring down at Steve’s hand on his metal one.

“Steve. Move your hand.” He spoke firmly. Bucky wasn’t asking or suggesting Steve move his hand, he was telling him to. Almost ordering him to.

Steve realised it was because he was worried the hand would close around Steve’s and crush it. He had seen what the prosthetic had done to the mug, but for some reason Steve wasn’t worried about that. It was probably because he knew Bucky would never hurt him, so he just couldn’t fathom the idea that something Bucky could do might cause Steve pain. Bucky would never hurt him. That hadn’t changed. But Bucky might hurt him, accidentally. If he closed his hand around Steve’s, it would no doubt break a lot of the bones in his hand. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to care and move his hand away. He could feel the metal warm up a little under his palm from his own body heat and looked up at Bucky.

“Maybe to control the strength of the grip you just need incentive. You didn’t care about the mug, so it didn’t matter if you broke it…”

Bucky quickly shook his head. “No. Steve, no. I’m not risking breaking your hand!”
“Just try it, if it hurts I’ll tell you and you can just open the hand again.”

“Tony said I have to be careful what I think. If I squeeze your hand too tight and I think of it crushing your bones, I won’t be able to keep my head clear enough to think about opening my hand!”

“You’re thinking about the fact that you could crush my hand right now, but the prosthetic hasn’t moved…” Steve looked down to prove his point, and Bucky gaze dropped to their hands too. The metal fingers were still spread out flat with Steve’s between them. “You don’t give your brain enough credit in how it can distinguish what you’re thinking you can do and what you actually want to do.”

Bucky continued looking down at their hands, then Steve saw him hold his breath as the fingers slowly curled up to hold Steve’s hand. Becca watched nervously too, and Steve tried to keep the anxiety off his face, since he could feel Bucky glance up at him every few seconds. Bucky’s prosthetic stopped moving when the cold metal fingers touched Steve’s skin, but Steve shook his head.

“That’s not holding my hand, that’s touching my hand. Keep going a little more.” Bucky looked as though he was about to refuse, but Steve just smiled reassuringly at him. “I’ll tell you if it starts to hurt.”

Bucky nodded a little and the fingers started to grip Steve’s hand a little firmer. It wasn’t uncomfortable; in fact, it felt nice. Even if the fingers were made of metal, Steve could still tell they were made from a cast of Bucky’s flesh fingers. They were the same length and almost as thin as Bucky’s. It felt familiar, and completely new, all at the same time.

The fingers started to squeeze Steve’s hand a little tighter than Bucky’s ever did, feeling uncomfortable, and Steve bit his lip lightly. He didn’t want Bucky to think he was hurting Steve – he wasn’t really, it was just a little uncomfortable – so he didn’t say anything. Eventually, the grip started to get painful.

“Oh, stop…” Steve spoke up and Bucky’s prosthetic immediately released Steve’s hand. “That was good, you just need to remember not to grip any harder than that and you’ll do fine.”

Steve smiled as he moved his hand off Bucky’s, and Bucky nodded. Steve could feel a dull ache in his right hand, but he didn’t look down at it. He knew if he did, Bucky would know something was wrong, he’d feel bad and probably refuse to try anything like that again. Steve could feel where on his knuckles Bucky’s fingers had been, and he suspected there may be a bruise there tomorrow. Steve hoped Bucky didn’t notice it or, if he did, he didn’t feel too badly about it.

Steve knew Bucky would never purposely hurt him.

Bucky insisted on trying to cook, and Steve insisted on being in the room the whole time in case Bucky needed any help. Becca sat in the living room watching TV and texting a friend who was particularly worried about Bucky. Becca said that her friend had a crush on Bucky, but Bucky shook his head and said that that wasn’t true. Steve suspected that it was true, and Bucky was just being modest.

Who wouldn’t have a crush on Bucky? Steve thought as he watched his boyfriend busy around the kitchen. He seemed to be in a much better mood, though he still wouldn’t pick anything up using his new left arm. That was understandable, and Steve estimated it would be a while until he used it more frequently, regardless of how quickly Bucky learnt to control it. The prosthetic remained
attached to him, but it hung by his side most of the time, like Bucky had forgotten it was there and therefore didn’t use it.

Steve held the bowl for him while he mixed some things together and Bucky must have noticed him looking at the arm every few minutes, because Bucky quickly grew quiet and uncomfortable.

“You don’t like it…” Bucky muttered as he stepped away from Steve, seemingly trying to hide the arm behind him, and Steve shook his head quickly.

“No, I do like it… It’ll just take some getting used to…”

“It’s scary…” Bucky muttered and Steve stepped closer to him to cup his face and make him look at him.

“No, it’s not. It’s just different, and I’m not used to seeing it yet. But I’ll get used to it.” He moved one hand to Bucky’s metal shoulder. “This is a part of you now. And as long as it’s a part of you, I’ll love it. That means if you decide after a while that you don’t want a prosthetic, or you don’t want this specific prosthetic, I won’t mind. If you have this prosthetic, I’ll love it. If you get a new prosthetic, I’ll love it. If you decide you don’t want a prosthetic at all, I won’t care. I’ll still love everything about you. And nothing about you will ever be scary.”

Steve saw Bucky’s lips tug up into a smile and smiled back at him.

“I love you, Stevie…”

“I love you too, Buck.” Steve stood on his tiptoes to kiss Bucky and placed his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky’s right arm encircled his waist and, after only a moment’s hesitation, his left arm came around to join it. He didn’t squeeze his left arm as much as his right, but Steve figured that was just because he still wasn’t sure of the strength, and not because of Bucky’s insecurities, so he didn’t bring it up.

Their kiss was interrupted by the bing of the oven telling them it was preheated, and Bucky stepped back to put the food into it. Steve watched him carefully as Bucky used his left arm to open the door to the oven. He didn’t even hold the handle, he just slotted his fingers into it and pulled his arm back. Bucky remembered to use an oven mitt, much to Steve’s relief, to slot the food into the oven, then kicked the door closed instead of using either of his hands.

“I’ll use it properly eventually, when I’ve had more practice.” Bucky said, and Steve realised he must have been staring, and apologised. “It’s okay, I keep staring at it too.”

Bucky smiled and Steve smiled back at him, glad he didn’t seem self-conscious about the arm in that moment.

“Did you put the cream on your arm this morning?” Steve asked and Bucky nodded.

“Yeah, I did it before Stark showed up while you were still sleeping.”

“Did you know he was coming round?” Steve didn’t think Bucky would have known and not mentioned it to him, and Bucky didn’t seem like he’d known that morning when he seemed reluctant to drag himself out of bed, but with how Bucky’s emotions were showing lately Steve couldn’t be too sure.

“No, I had no idea. But Tony isn’t exactly famous for planning things ahead of time or giving anyone warnings before he does stuff, so I’m not surprised he showed up unannounced.”
Steve nodded in agreement and sat back up on the counter, as was his usual position in the kitchen. It usually led to Bucky not being able to keep his hands off Steve and concentrate on the food he was preparing, but so far no accidents had been caused, so Steve didn’t plan on stopping any time soon.

Besides, he liked the attention.

“Good point. He’s a very unpredictable man.”

Bucky nodded and leant against the counter beside Steve’s legs. After a few minutes of silence, Bucky spoke again.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to get used to it?” His words were quiet, and Steve could hear the insecurity in his voice.

Steve immediately hopped off the counter and turned to face Bucky, standing in front of him to press him against the counter. He could feel the blush colouring his cheeks at the action. It felt out of character to him, but he needed Bucky to know that the arm didn’t stop Steve from wanting to be with him. Bucky looked surprised, and Steve smirked slightly as he saw Bucky’s pupils dilate. He cupped either side of Bucky’s neck while Steve pressed his body against his, and stood on his tiptoes to kiss him again. Steve could feel that Bucky was still surprised, but he only hesitated for a few seconds, then kissed Steve back. Bucky was still tense, though, so Steve kept kissing him softly and sweetly. Eventually, he felt the tension slowly start to melt away from Bucky’s muscles, so he pulled back to smile at him.

“I’m sure, Bucky. I wouldn’t care if you had two heads, I’d still learn to live with it.”

Bucky laughed lightly at that mental image, and the sound was music to Steve’s ears. He didn’t laugh nearly enough these days, and Steve was determined to hear that laugh more often. Steve was determined to see Bucky smile more, and relax more, and just be generally happy.

He deserved that.

Bucky deserved to finally be happy again. Steve hoped he could make Bucky as happy as he deserved to be.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Steve looks up PTSD and starts getting particularly protective of Bucky in the best way.

The food was cooked to perfection, and Becca and Steve almost cried because of how good it was. It had been a while since they had eaten anything decent that didn’t come from a can. Apparently the food Natasha made for Becca was good, but it wasn’t as good as Bucky’s cooking. Steve had been living off sandwiches from the small shop in the hospital for the past week, so really anything warm was a blessing to him.

Apparently, Bucky’s disability did not affect his cooking skills.

Thank god.

After dinner, Bucky insisted on Becca doing any homework she had so that they could relax for the rest of the weekend. She spread her books out on the dining room table, and Steve and Bucky sat in the living room to watch TV. If Bucky had sat in the corner of the couch, Steve would have sat whichever side he could, but Bucky decided to sit in the middle, presumably to give Steve the choice of which side he sat on. Steve could tell Bucky was still self-conscious about the arm, so he sat on Bucky’s left, more to prove a point than anything else. Steve could tell Bucky was still self-conscious about the arm, so he sat on Bucky’s left, more to prove a point than anything else. As before, Bucky was tense for a while, but he eventually seemed to relax while he watched the TV. Steve kept glancing sideways at Bucky, averting his eyes before Bucky noticed.

Steve was glad he was happy, but something about Bucky being happy so soon unnerved Steve. He wasn’t sure why. It’s not like his smile was the fake one Steve could usually pick up on, his laugh didn’t sound forced, but it just didn’t seem right. He felt bad thinking like that. He should be glad his boyfriend was happy, but he was almost wishing Bucky would cry, just so Steve knew he was actually processing situations and emotions properly. But, he did just get a new arm, so Steve supposed that was a good enough reason for Bucky to be happy.

An hour into the movie they were watching, Steve glanced over at Bucky again and noticed that Bucky’s eyes weren’t following the movements on the screen like they should. He didn’t laugh at the funny bits either. It was a pretty cliché comedy with cheap laughs, but Bucky usually found them amusing. Even if he didn’t laugh, there was usually at least a twitch of his lips to indicate that he thought it was funny. But his face was void of all emotion now, and he was staring in the general direction of the TV with unfocussed eyes.

“Bucky…?” Steve spoke quietly, not wanting to startle him. Bucky didn’t react, so Steve tried again, a little louder.

That time, Bucky jumped slightly and immediately moved away from Steve. Steve frowned, slightly hurt, but he understood that it was probably just a reflex reaction, and not a reflection of how Bucky actually feels about him.

“Are you okay?” He reaches out to cup Bucky’s cheek, but Bucky pulled away from him again. This time, it couldn’t have been shock. Steve had made sure to move his hand slowly so Bucky
wouldn’t be startled when he eventually touched him, but Bucky had still pulled away the second Steve’s fingertips touched his skin, almost against the arm on the other side of the couch now. From the brief touch he did feel, Steve could tell Bucky’s skin was cold, much colder than usual.

Bucky didn’t say anything for several long seconds before he blinked, his brow knitted in confusion. “What?”

“How you okay?” Steve repeated and Bucky blinked a few more times before glancing around the room, seemingly confused about his whereabouts.

“I’m fine… Right?”

Steve wasn’t sure how to answer that, or if the question was even directed at him or Bucky himself.

“I mean… I’m safe?”

Steve understood then, and nodded quickly. “Yeah, Buck. You’re safe.”

Bucky nodded lightly and looked around the room again, and Steve saw his eyes focus on each corner in turn before looking back at Steve.

Steve reached out again, slower, but before he could reach Bucky’s face at the pace he was going, Bucky leant forward a little to rest his cheek against Steve’s palm. He smiled, and Bucky smiled in return. Bucky looked more relaxed, and he closed his eyes as Steve stroked his cheek his with thumb.

Steve wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, but eventually they heard Becca walk into the room and Bucky blinked his eyes open before pulling away from Steve’s hand to look up at her. Becca usually made mocking noises of disgust when she saw Steve and Bucky doing anything remotely touchy, but she didn’t this time. She just smiled slightly and quietly declared she finished her homework. Bucky moved to the middle of the couch and gestured for her to come join them.

She sat beside Bucky and leant against his right arm while Steve linked arms with Bucky’s prosthetic. Again, Bucky tensed. But again, it only took a few minutes for him to relax. Whatever they had been watching before had finished, and there was another movie on, but it was a cop movie involving someone being kidnapped, so Steve quickly turned it over. Bucky rolled his eyes and said something about him not being *that* breakable, but Steve still felt the relief radiating from Bucky. He chose not to comment on it though. Pretending nothing was bothering him was clearly Bucky’s coping mechanism, and he didn’t want to ruin it unless he absolutely had to, like if Bucky’s coping mechanism stopped him from being able to recover properly.

But, for now, Bucky could pretend everything was normal if he wanted to.

Later on, Becca started talking about a card game her and Bucky made up when they were kids and asked Bucky if they could play. They explained it to Steve, but he didn’t understand, so Steve told them they could play while he watched. He didn’t watch, though.

Instead, he took his phone out to do some research on Post Traumatic Stress. That’s what Banner had said is most likely to be the cause of Bucky’s dissociative phases. On the website Steve found, there were three types of Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms; Re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoidance and numbing, and increased anxiety and emotional arousal.

He decided the just read from the top and work his way down, though he suspected that Bucky’s symptoms would be under ‘avoidance and numbing’.
Re-experiencing the traumatic event: Intrusive or upsetting memories of the event, flashbacks, nightmares, feelings of intense distress when reminded of the trauma, intense physical effects when reminded of the trauma (e.g. pounding heart, rapid breathing, nausea, muscle tension, sweating)

Bucky didn’t seem to be showing any of those symptoms. He occasionally had nightmares in the hospital, but he recovered from them relatively quickly, then he went straight back to sleep. Steve figured that the painkillers Bucky was on could have had a hand in making Bucky go back to sleep so fast, but he chose to believe it was just because the nightmares weren’t that bad. None of the others seemed to apply to Bucky, but Steve copied the list into his notes just in case he needed to come back to it.

‘Avoidance and Numbing’ seemed the most likely to apply to Bucky, based on what Steve had seen so far.

Avoidance and numbing: Avoiding things that remind you of the trauma (places, people, thoughts or feelings), inability to remember important aspects of trauma, loss of interest in activities or life in general, feeling detached from others and emotionally numb, sense of a limited lifespan.

Thankfully, none of these seemed to apply either. True, Bucky hadn’t really wanted to do much except walk, and he didn’t read as much in the hospital as they all expected him to, but that was probably just because it was annoying trying to keep the page open with one hand and turn the pages every minute. Bucky had been pretty much surrounded by reminders of what happened over the past few days, because of social workers and lawyers, as well as his missing arm. Even if he could avoid it, Steve didn’t think Bucky would have bothered. Steve had also heard Bucky relay what had happened several times, and the story never changed or lost detail, so he wasn’t struggling to remember parts.

Increased anxiety and emotional arousal: Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance (on constant ‘red alert’), feeling jumpy and easily startled.

Bucky had had a few outbursts of anger in the hospital, and maybe struggling with concentration was the reason he hadn’t read as much as usual. Bucky seemed a little jumpy earlier today when he dissociated, but he wasn’t jumpy all the time, or always on red alert.

There were a list of symptoms that didn’t particularly fit into any of the three categories under the previous lists, so Steve glanced up to make sure Bucky and Becca were still oblivious to what he was doing – too engrossed in their confusing game to notice – before reading the list.

Anger and irritability. Bucky got frustrated occasionally, but considering his disability and the fact that he has to learn how to live with one arm, Steve figured that was to be expected.

Guilt, shame, or self-blame. Steve frowned as he thought about that one. Bucky had been expressing shame, but not because of the traumatic event. He had no reason to be ashamed about that and Bucky knew that. But, Bucky did show shame in regards to his disability.

Substance abuse. Bucky had really wanted to keep taking the morphine, but Banner managed to persuade him it wasn’t best. Does that count as substance abuse?

Feelings of mistrust or betrayal. Steve had betrayed Bucky, that’s why Bucky had felt betrayed before, so Steve didn’t think that would count. Mistrust, on the other hand, Steve had just witnessed. Bucky had practically leapt away from Steve when he went to touch his face. He didn’t seem to trust Steve to touch him. He didn’t know if Bucky thought Steve was going to hurt him, or if it was just an automatic reaction, but either way there had definitely been mistrust then, as well
as when Steve said he was safe. Bucky still looked around the room to make sure.

“Depression or hopelessness.” Bucky was depressed before the traumatic event, but he hadn’t felt hopeless. Steve remembered when they had made their little deal. Bucky had been so convinced that he would never be ‘better’.

“Feeling alienated and alone.” That one was just impossible. There was no way Bucky could possibly feel isolated. Steve never left him alone, and Natasha and Becca were there as much as Bucky would allow them to be. Steve glanced up at them and saw Bucky laugh and Becca groan in annoyance, dropping her card. He instantly started gloating about his win as Becca demanded a rematch.

No, there’s no way Bucky could feel alienated or alone.

“Suicidal thoughts and feelings.” Steve could almost feel his blood go cold as he read that. He glanced up again to look at Bucky and Becca, then quickly shook his head. Bucky wasn’t suicidal. He was too stubborn to do something like that, and Becca needed him. He would never leave Becca.

“Physical aches and pains.” Bucky hadn’t mentioned any of those, and Steve hadn’t noticed any discomfort from him besides when Steve sat near the prosthetic.

Five out of eight. Steve frowned as he counted the miscellaneous common symptoms and how many he thought Bucky may have shown. He added all the symptoms on the page to his notes and put an exclamation mark next to each one he thought he had noticed, adding one per time he could remember. The frustration one had four beside it, and that was just the ones Steve could remember off the top of his head. Shame had six and, again, there may have been more occasions. Those things could both be argued to be because of his disability, and not related to PTSD, but he added them anyway. If he saw any other symptoms, he would add an exclamation mark.

When there became a worrying amount of question marks, Steve would talk to Bucky and see if he can persuade him to see Banner about it. Maybe he could prescribe him something or, if necessary, refer him to a therapist.

Steve was pulled from his thoughts by Becca’s yell of triumph, and he smiled when Bucky threw his cards down on the table and dropped his head onto his knees pulled up to his chest.

“Good job, Becca. His ego was getting a little too big.” Steve winked at Bucky when he looked up at him, and Bucky muttered something about betrayal.

Steve’s thoughts automatically went back to the list in his notes, knowing that feelings of betrayal was on there. He knew Bucky was just kidding now, though, so he didn’t feel the need to add another mark next to that one.

He still didn’t understand the game they were playing, even after Bucky tried to explain it two more times, so instead they played Chase the Ace.

After Becca dealt all the cards out, Steve looked through his card. He didn’t have the ace, and he looked up to see if he could see any Tells on Becca’s or Bucky’s face to see who had the ace. They didn’t show any signs that they either had it or didn’t, and as the person to the left of the dealer, it was Bucky’s turn first to take a card from Steve’s hand. Bucky held the cards in his right hand and put them down to take a card from Steve’s pack with the same hand, then picked up his cards again. He used his right hand the whole time and Steve wondered if he had forgotten about the prosthetic still attached to him, but Bucky ran the metal fingers through his hair a few seconds later
to push his bangs out of his face. He muttered something about a haircut, and Steve smiled a little
then took a card from Becca. It was a six of hearts.

Bucky’s hair was a little longer than he usually kept it, but it wasn’t really noticeable. It was close
to being long enough to get into his eyes, though, and it was annoying him.

Becca took a card from Bucky’s pack, and Steve saw her lips press a little thinner together when
she looked at the card. Steve figured that was her Tell, and she had the ace now. He looked at
Bucky to see if he showed any sign of relief, but his expression remained passive.

Bucky put his cards down to take a card with his right hand again. It took a lot longer than it would
have done if he had just used the prosthetic, but neither Steve nor Becca complained. He was
probably worried about damaging the flimsy playing cards by gripping them too hard.

Steve couldn’t keep track of who had the ace. Becca’s Tell didn’t give anything away, and Steve
couldn’t see any Tells on Bucky’s face. Eventually, he did find out. He took the ace from Becca
and tried hard not to react, but he saw Becca smirk slightly and a glance at Bucky confirmed that he
knew Steve had it. When it was Bucky’s turn to take a card from Steve, they could both feel the
tension. Steve pushed the ace up slightly higher than the other cards in the hopes that Bucky would
take that one. Bucky saw right through that, and took a different card with a smirk.

By the end of the game, Steve was still stuck with the ace, so he lost.

Becca stood up after the game and stretched before announcing she was going to bed. Bucky stood
up and hugged her with one arm, but Becca took the wrist of the metal arm in her hand and
wrapped it around her. Bucky didn’t look comfortable with that, probably worried he would hurt
her, but he didn’t pull the arm away.

Once Becca was gone, Steve and Bucky returned to sitting on the couch and Steve leant over to
kiss Bucky for no particular reason other than that he wanted to. Bucky didn’t seem to mind and
kissed back as soon as he felt Steve’s lips against his own. He had more stubble than usual, but
Steve didn’t mind. In fact, the slight scratching against his lips and chin felt good. Steve reached
up to cup Bucky’s face with a smile and Bucky’s right arm circled around his waist.

The position was a little uncomfortable for Steve, but he didn’t mind if it meant he could kiss
Bucky. Eventually, Bucky must have picked up on the discomfort, because he tightened his arm
around Steve’s waist to pull him closer to him, encouraging him to straddle Bucky. He did so
gladly, his knees either side of Bucky’s hips on the couch, and Bucky’s cupped Steve’s face with
his flesh hand. Steve wasn’t expecting Bucky to decide now to start using his prosthetic, so he was
a little surprised when he felt the other hand on his thigh, but he didn’t outwardly react to it. He
knew drawing attention to it would make Bucky uncomfortable, and probably make him stop using
it again, so Steve just kept both his hands on Bucky’s cheeks and kept kissing him softly.

He had missed this so much. They still kissed before, sure, but they were in a hospital or a hospital
garden. Now, they were home.

_Bucky is home._ Steve reminded himself. _This isn’t my home, its Bucky’s._

He mentally chastised himself for thinking of this place like that, but he didn’t let it affect how
much he enjoyed being there. There was something more comforting in the kiss now that Bucky
was home, and they were back in a setting they were so used to before the trauma. It felt like
nothing bad had happened, and they were still new to their relationship and Bucky was still
obsessed with Steve’s taste, and Steve’s biggest problem was when the next time he can kiss
Bucky is.
Steve took comfort in, judging by the way Bucky was kissing him, he was still obsessed with Steve’s taste. As if he could read his mind, Bucky broke the kiss momentarily to speak.

“I swear I’m addicted to how you taste…”

Steve bushed as he smiled at him, his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. “I’m addicted to everything about you…”

“I love you so much.” Bucky muttered as he connected his lips with Steve’s again, not giving him time to reply, but Steve hoped that the enthusiasm with which he returned the kiss was answer enough.

A memory flashed into Steve’s head then, causing him to break the kiss. Banner said there was signs of sexual assault, but the rape kit had come back negative. Bucky hadn’t mentioned anything sexual whenever Steve was in the room, when he was giving his account to the police or the lawyers.

“Bucky…?” He nudged Bucky’s shoulders when the brunet tried to lean forward and kiss him again.

“What?”

“Did Rollins… do anything to you?” Steve realised how stupidly vague that was as soon as he said it. Of course Rollins did something to him, that was clear. He needed to be more specific, and he saw one of Bucky’s eyebrows raise slightly as he waited for Steve to elaborate. “Anything sexual…?”

Steve felt the blush colour his cheeks as he spoke, but he needed to make sure nothing he did would trigger a memory for Bucky.

“What? No, why?”

Steve repeated what Banner had told them about the sexual assault, but that it wasn’t rape, and Bucky frowned in confusion as he thought about that, then realisation dawned on his expression.

“Oh… He masturbated near me, and some of his spunk got on my leg, but he didn’t touch me. Not in that way, anyway.”

The semen on his skin must have been what Banner had thought was a result of sexual assault, but Bucky didn’t seem phased by it, so Steve hoped it didn’t count. He knew that someone masturbating near them, or over them, while the person was tied down and in pain could definitely constitute as sexual assault, but it seemed that Bucky wasn’t bothered about it.

Steve sighed quietly in relief and leant forward to kiss Bucky again. “Good, because then I’d have to break into his holding cell and strangle him.”

Bucky smirked slightly against Steve’s lips then pulled back, amusement evident in his eyes. “Why? Getting protective?”

“Definitely.” Steve replied without hesitation. “No one’s allowed to touch you sexually except me.”

He probably should have been embarrassed by his own words, but he wasn’t. It was the truth. Bucky was his, and definitely not Rollins’ or Rumlow’s. Steve was also worried his reaction to the possibility of Bucky being sexually assaulted sounded insensitive; like he only cared about it
because Bucky was his. Which wasn’t true. There were so many other things Steve would be angry about other than his claim to Bucky, but Bucky didn’t look offended… In fact, his eyes darkened slightly in the way Steve was custom to seeing when they were both in his bed.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?” Bucky asked quietly, his voice slightly deeper. Steve knew exactly what Bucky was getting at, what he wanted Steve to say, and he was all too happy to oblige before he got too embarrassed to do so.

“Because you’re mine.” Steve answered, and definitely didn’t miss the way Bucky’s breath hitched slightly before Steve kissed him again, not giving Bucky time to reply.

Bucky’s answer to that was him reaching up with his flesh hand to cup Steve’s face again, keeping his lips against his own. Steve smiled against Bucky’s lips and opened his mouth slightly when he felt Bucky’s tongue run along his bottom lip, asking for entry. Steve felt more than heard Bucky’s moan, his hands on Bucky’s chest. He kept his eyes closed against the light of the living room and concentrated on Bucky. His tongue in Steve’s mouth, his lips against Steve’s, his hand on his face, his heartbeat under Steve’s fingers, his prosthetic on his thigh, Bucky’s thighs under Steve’s ass, Bucky’s hips bracketed by Steve’s knees. The one bit Steve tried not to focus on was his own crotch brushing against Bucky’s thighs. He knew the kissing was arousing him, and he really hoped Bucky couldn’t feel it.

But, as his mind wandered to that area without Steve being able to stop it, he realised he wasn’t the only one being effected by the kiss. He could feel Bucky’s erection against the inside of Steve’s thigh. The confidence from earlier hadn’t let faded, so Steve shifted in Bucky’s lap to rub against Bucky’s crotch, causing him to let out a quiet moan into Steve’s mouth. Steve was about to break the kiss to ask Bucky is what he did was okay, but then he felt the prosthetic leave his thigh and cup the other side of Steve’s face. The metal touch was gentle, and Steve knew that Bucky was only resting it there, not wanting to add any pressure to avoid hurting him. His flesh hand dropped between Steve’s legs, and Steve gasped as he felt Bucky’s hand press against the bulge in the front of his trousers.

Steve bunched the material of Bucky’s tshirt in one of his fists while the other moved up to cup Bucky’s face, then he grinded forward again, sending a spike of pleasure through his own body and causing Bucky’s breath to catch again.

“Been way too long…” Bucky muttered and Steve smiled against his lips.

Steve was about to say something about going up to Bucky’s room where Becca was less likely to walk in, but before he could say anything, both of Bucky’s arms wrapped around his middle and deposited Steve on his back across the couch. Before he could react, Bucky was on top of Steve between his legs, kissing him again.

It took about thirty seconds for Steve to realise Bucky had used to prosthetic to move him, and he smiled against Bucky’s lips. He hadn’t even felt the metal, meaning that Bucky didn’t grip him hard enough for it to hurt. Bucky was already starting to get the hang of the strength control. Progress.

Bucky didn’t notice why Steve was smiling, and he must have assumed it was just from the kissing, because he still didn’t notice that he was using the prosthetic, this time to run the fingers down Steve’s chest. Steve wasn’t sure Bucky could actually feel through the prosthetic, but he was too aroused to care at the moment. Steve already knew that he had no negative thoughts towards the metal arm, but he was surprised he realise that he anticipated the touch of metal against his body. It was through his shirt, so it just felt like hard fingers so far, but when Bucky pushed it under the hem of his tshirt to touch his stomach, Steve moaned into Bucky’s mouth before he
could stop himself.

The cold, hard metal against his heated skin felt amazing. Bucky pulled back and Steve lifted his head to try and chase his lips, but stopped and opened his eyes to watch Bucky’s expression. He was watching Steve in a mixture of curiosity and confusion. Steve hadn’t even realised he had moaned out loud until then, and he felt a blush colour his cheeks. Bucky moved the metal hand a little higher, and the little finger brushed against Steve’s nipple, causing him to jerk slightly at the pleasure shooting through his body. Surprisingly, the metal was still cold, despite being pressed against the heat of Steve’s stomach. He would usually complain when Bucky touched him with cold hands, but this was different, and Steve loved it. Steve saw realisation on Bucky’s face and prayed to every deity in existence that Bucky wouldn’t speak. He must have really pissed some higher power off, Steve decided when he saw Bucky’s lips pull up into a smirk and he sat up, keeping both his hands on Steve’s chest to keep him laid down.

“Stevie, did you just discover a new kink?”

He had, but Steve didn’t think it was what Bucky was thinking. Steve felt the blush cover his cheeks again and spread to his chest under Bucky’s hands. Other than the blush, Steve didn’t outwardly react to Bucky’s words, hoping if he didn’t then Bucky would just go back to kissing him. Again, Steve was out of luck.

“If it because it’s cold?” Bucky asked, and Steve debated just saying yes.

If Bucky thought Steve had a temperature kink at least it would stop Bucky talking about it and prying to find out what Steve had really just discovered about himself. He didn’t want to admit he had a kink for Bucky’s prosthetic. It was objectifying and sexualizing his disability.

Steve made his decision and nodded, making Bucky smirk again. He leant down to kiss Steve again as he ran the prosthetic up his chest then down to his abdomen, and Steve gasped against Bucky’s mouth. No matter how much the metal touched his skin, it never seemed to warm up, and the touch was starting to get overwhelming. Steve could feel his erection straining against his pyjama bottoms, making a noticeable tent in the fabric between them, his pre come leaving a damp spot on the trousers. He saw Bucky glance down at said spot and smirk, looking back up at Steve through his lashes. Steve was pretty sure that that was the second hottest thing he had ever seen. The first being Bucky completely naked, of course, but he couldn’t decide if Bucky naked under him was the hottest, or Bucky naked on top of him.

He seriously almost got so caught up trying to make his decision that he didn’t notice Bucky pull the waistband of his pyjama bottoms down low enough to expose Steve’s erection. He velocity of which he was snapped back to reality at the feel of the cool air touching his skin almost gave Steve mental whiplash.

“Should we go to the bedroom?” Steve asked, nervously glancing at the door to the living room. It was closed, but Becca had only been gone for fifteen minutes, there’s no way she was already asleep. She might come down to get something she forgot, or to get a drink and decide to come through the living room to see Bucky again before going back up to bed. The last thing she’d want to see was her brother on top of his boyfriend doing… Steve wasn’t even sure what Bucky was planning on doing to him but, whatever it was, Becca wouldn’t want to see it.

“If we go to the bedroom we’ll have to be super quiet so Becca doesn’t hear, and I want to hear you moan,” Bucky replied casually before lowering himself to kiss along Steve’s stomach.

Steve almost did moan at Bucky’s words alone. He supposed they were less likely to be walked in on in Bucky’s room, but they were less likely to be heard in the living room. It was a tough
decision, but Bucky made the decision for them. Steve gasped and covered his mouth with one hand as Bucky’s lips seal around the head of his cock.

“Jesus, Buck…” Steve breathed out as he ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair, watching his dark eyelashes settle against his cheeks when he closed his eyes.

Since the first time Bucky had given Steve a blowjob, his rules had loosened as Bucky said they would. He didn’t mind Steve touching his hair or head anymore, and he was fine with Steve gripping his hair. More accurately, Bucky loved Steve gripping his hair. Whenever Steve closed his fist around a tuft of his hair, Bucky would always moan around him, sending vibrations along his member. Steve had never used the grip on Bucky’s hair to control the other man’s movements though, he just held onto it while Bucky moved himself.

Bucky started slow, and Steve stared down at him as he bobbed his head slowly on Steve’s shaft, Bucky’s lips remaining tight around him and his cheeks hollowed.

1. Steve thought as he stared down at his boyfriend sucking his cock. This is definitely at the top of the Hottest Things I’ve Ever Seen List.

He briefly wondered if Bucky would be willing to let Steve sketch him like this, but he blushed at the thought of bringing it up. Instead, he decided, he would just commit it to memory and draw it later when he was alone. It wasn’t hard to commit this image to memory. It was already seared into his brain. If Steve still had a job, this image would probably pop into his head at random points of the day, forcing his to work with a hard-on and trying not to show it.

No, this is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen! Steve thought as he looked down and saw Bucky open his eyes to look up at him, taking Steve’s cock almost to the base. As he bobbed his head, Steve could see the shape of his own manhood through Bucky’s cheeks, and he stared at that for a long time, trying to pick just one snapshot of that for him to draw later. He just couldn’t decide what was hotter; seeing the outline of his shaft, or the outline of the head near the back of Bucky’s cheeks.

Steve kept his hand on the top of Bucky’s head, but instead of just running his fingers through Bucky’s hair, he gripped a handful of it, and almost came right away when Bucky moaned and closed his eyes in pleasure. He managed to stop himself, though, and gripped Bucky’s hair a little tighter from the effort.

Then, Bucky almost made Steve see stars. He took Steve to the base so his cock was down Bucky’s throat and his nose was against Steve’s skin, then stuck his tongue out to lick at Steve’s balls, his flesh hand coming up to cup them as he did, and his prosthetic holding him up slightly so he had control over when he pulled off. Steve covered his mouth with one hand to stifle the moans as he climax, shooting his load down Bucky’s throat. His other hand clutched Bucky’s dark hair hard enough that Steve was sure he had pulled out a few strands, but in that moment Steve was too blissed out to care. He’d remember and feel tremendously guilty in a few minutes.

In the back of his mind, Steve could feel Bucky kissing along his hip bone, but he couldn’t force himself to open his eyes as he let go of Bucky’s hair. He felt teeth too, and suction, but he was still too busy focussing on getting his breathing back in check. It had been too long since Steve had had an orgasm, and he was slightly embarrassed about how quickly he finished. But, his boyfriend had been kidnapped for a week, then he was in hospital for a few more. Steve hadn’t really been in the mood to bring himself off when he was scared Bucky could be dead, and then when Bucky was recovering. He hadn’t even realise how much he missed their sex life until today, when Bucky was home and safe, and willing to pick it up again. Probably because there were so many other things he missed more; Bucky’s smile, his laugh, his eyes, his hair, his scent, his humour…
As much as Steve loved what he and Bucky did in bed – or any other place they got intimate… like the couch – if he was forced to give up one thing about Bucky, he couldn’t think of anything else he could live without. He could handle never doing anything sexual with Bucky again, but he couldn’t imagine losing anything else that made Bucky ‘Bucky’.

Steve eventually forced himself to open his eyes when he felt a particularly harsh bite on his left hipbone, and looked down to see what exactly Bucky was doing to his skin. There were at least six live bites spanning over each of Steve’s hips, and his eyes widened slightly. They were a light purple and red colour, and Steve stared at them in shock.

*How did I not feel that?* Steve thought as he ran his fingers over them.

Bucky looked up when he saw Steve’s fingers enter his field of vision and briefly looked worried, probably having seen Steve’s look of shock.

“I got a little carried away…” He muttered sheepishly.

This wasn’t the first time Bucky had left little love bites on Steve, but they were usually smaller, and on his collar bone or something. Somewhere at risk of being seen, but at the same time easy to cover. And there were usually only one or two of them.

“Still hungry, Buck?” Steve asked with a light chuckle, and Bucky smirked up at him as he licked his lips, clearly relieved that Steve wasn’t mad.

There was no way Steve could ever be mad about how many love bites Bucky left, as long as he could cover them so he wouldn’t have to explain them to Peggy, Angie, or Sam. Or Becca. He knew Becca would *ask* about them, but he still didn’t want his boyfriend’s little sister seeing the marks left on him by her brother during sex. *That* would be awkward.

Steve noticed that there was still a tent in the fabric of Bucky’s trousers, and mentally cursed himself for forgetting. Of course Bucky would still be aroused, he always was when he gave Steve a blowjob. Steve could see the appeal, and on the rare occasions that Bucky allowed Steve to give him a blowjob, he did get aroused during the act. But never as much as Bucky, Bucky *really* loved giving blowjobs. Steve could argue that Bucky seemed to enjoy *giving* them more than *receiving* blowjobs.

That could have just been because the whole time Steve was giving blowjobs he was worrying about making sure he doesn’t catch Bucky with his teeth, or do something else wrong. Steve knew Bucky has experience with giving blowjobs from past relationships.

Steve suddenly realised something that made him drop his hand back to Bucky’s head and grip his hair again, not as hard as he had done when he orgasmed, but harder than he would if it was just an affectionate touch.

“You said before that you have experience giving blowjobs because you’ve done that for past boyfriends, right?”

Bucky looked a little confused, probably either trying to decide what had made Steve remember that, or trying to remember that conversation himself. “Yeah… Why?”

“Did you ever give Brock a blowjob?” Steve wouldn’t be mad if he had. Honestly, he would be surprised if Bucky said no. But he wanted to know nonetheless. If Bucky told him it was none of his business because it’s in the past, he would accept that too.

Bucky shifted slightly and Steve gripped his hair a little tighter, eliciting a quiet moan from Bucky.
“I… did.”

He seemed hesitant as he answered, and Steve loosened his grip on his hair a little, worried that the grip might make it seem like Steve would be mad.

“But you’re mine now, right?” He asked, and Bucky nodded quickly, as much as Steve hand in his hair would allow him.

“Yeah, of course…”

“Say it.” Steve honestly had no idea where this attitude had come from, but after what had happened, he felt much more protective of Bucky. He needed to know that Bucky was his, so Steve knew he was within his rights to protect Bucky and shield him from people like Brock.

He was worried Bucky would find how Steve was acting off-putting, and he would be mad that Steve seemed to feel so entitled to him. Steve didn’t feel entitled to him. He didn’t own Bucky in the sense that he decided what Bucky did or didn’t do, he would never want to control him like that. He just wanted to be able to say “Bucky is mine!” and to really be able to mean it.

“I’m yours.” Bucky said with complete conviction, and Steve leant down to kiss you passionately.

Again, Steve remembered Bucky’s arousal and dropped one hand to the waistband of the brunet’s sweatpants. He pushed them down, and kept kissing Bucky so that he couldn’t protest. Bucky always protested, saying Steve didn’t need to because he didn’t want Steve to feel obliged to return the favour.

They managed to switch their positions so that Bucky was laid across the couch and Steve was on top of him, without anyone falling off. That was a miracle in itself.

Steve broke the kiss and pressed his lips to Bucky’s collar bone, then worked his way down his body, the way Bucky had done before.

“Don’t try push yourself…” Bucky said that every time too, so Steve didn’t bother replying to it.

He took the blunt head into his mouth after noting how red it was, and when he sucked lightly he could taste the precome smeared along the tip from where it had rubbed against his trousers. Steve focused on the task-at-hand, but he heard Bucky’s breathing change above him, and took more into his mouth. He took about two inches in, then pulled back to suck on the head again. He knew from basic anatomy that the head and the first few inches were the most sensitive part of a penis, so he didn’t feel too bad about not being able to take more. To make up for it, however, he stroked the rest with one hand, following his lips with the movement.

Bucky moaned above him and Steve could feel pride bloom in his chest as he heard that. Bucky’s right hand tangled in Steve’s hair, but didn’t grip, and Steve tried not to dwell on the hint of disappointment he felt when he didn’t feel Bucky’s metal hand, and tried not to analyse why he felt the disappointment. If he did, he’s feel even worse about his sudden sexualisation of Bucky’s prosthetic.

He concentrated on Bucky’s cock in his mouth and the taste of it, then moved his other hand up to massage Bucky’s balls gently, then opened his eyes to look up to Bucky.

Steve moaned around Bucky’s shaft when he looked up at him, seeing the blissed-out look on Bucky’s face. Bucky’s head was resting on the arm of the couch so he could look down at Steve without craning his head and his eyes were closed, mouth hanging open slightly. His prosthetic was tucked behind Bucky’s head, and the muscles in his stomach were tensed and standing out
under his skin beautifully. Apparently the weight loss hadn’t effected Bucky’s defined physique. Steve almost hated him for that. *Almost.*

He kept his lips tight and closed his eyes as he concentrated on Bucky’s cock again. Steve ran his tongue along the slit in the top of Bucky’s head, and Bucky covered his mouth with his flesh hand to suppress his groans of pleasure.

Steve didn’t feel quite as bad about how quickly he finished when he noticed that Bucky’s orgasm was close, and he stilled his mouth as he stroked him. That way, when Bucky climaxed, his come went into Steve’s mouth so he could swallow it without choking on it being sent too far into the back of his mouth.

He kept sucking and stroking as Bucky whimpered in pleasure, waiting for Bucky’s cock to stop spurting ropes of his seed.

Once he was finished, Steve pulled back and smiled up at Bucky, but Bucky wasn’t looking at him. Bucky’s eyes were still closed, and he was breathing deeply. Steve chuckled quietly as he watched Bucky, and crawled up to kiss his lax lips. Bucky eventually kissed back and wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, his left hand substantially looser than his right. He didn’t mention it though, and just relaxed against Bucky’s chest for several minutes in silence, waiting for Bucky’s breathing to return to normal.

“Bucky? Do you want to go to bed now?”

Bucky nodded and waited for Steve to sit up before sitting up himself.

Steve took his hand after they both pulled their trousers up and led him up to Bucky’s room. They decided it was best to brush their teeth after their most recent activities before going to bed, and Steve rested his head on Bucky’s chest.

“Are you taking the prosthetic off for bed?” He asked quietly, and Bucky shook his head.

“Want to get used to it… Gonna keep it on.” Bucky muttered, his voice thick with exhaustion, and Steve smiled at how endearing he sounded like that.

“Okay. Goodnight, Bucky. I love you.”

“I love you too, Stevie.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Bd new

Steve woke up to an empty bed.

He frowned and felt around the mattress for Bucky, but he was met with cold sheets. It was still dark in the bedroom, so it was probably very early in the morning. A quick glance at the alarm clock beside Bucky’s bed confirmed it. “3:24am”.

Steve sat up and rubbed his eyes before turning on the bedside lamp, thinking maybe Bucky was just somewhere else in the room, but Steve was alone. He started to get worried as he pulled himself out of bed to go find Bucky. He wasn’t in the bathroom, or anywhere else upstairs, so Steve went down the wooden stairs to see if he was in the living room or kitchen. Downstairs was empty too, and Steve was starting to get more concerned now.

Then, he heard a smash coming from the basement and remembered the stack of cheap plates they kept down there to break when they were upset. Steve followed the sounds of porcelain shattering into the basement and stood near the bottom of the steps.

Bucky was throwing plates at the mirrors lining one wall.

Steve was a little worried he was going to break the mirror, but Bucky had previously told him the mirrors were reinforced. He didn’t notice Steve come down into the basement, and kept throwing plates from the pile resting in his prosthetic palm. Steve saw tear tracks down Bucky’s cheeks and walked down the last few steps to stand in the basement.

“Bucky?” He spoke quietly, and Bucky didn’t seem to have heard him. He just kept throwing the plates and watching them shatter against the mirror.

“Bucky!” He spoke a little louder, and Bucky’s arm faltered as he held another plate up but didn’t let go of it, holding it above his head.

Bucky only still for a few seconds, though, and Steve flinched when Bucky threw the next plate. There was definitely more force behind that than the others Steve had seen him throw.

“Go back to bed, Steve.” Bucky muttered as he took another plate in his flesh hand from the pile.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked, ignoring Bucky’s request.


Steve could hear the sarcasm dripping off Bucky’s words, and tried not to flinch at the harsh tone. “Talk to me…”

Bucky huffed out a humourless laugh. “Yeah, that’ll help.”
Steve tried not to be hurt by Bucky’s words. He knew Bucky just meant he didn’t think talking would help, but Steve’s mind automatically went to the thought that Bucky didn’t think talking to him would help. Bucky threw another plate at the wall then immediately grabbed another to follow it. He only had one plate left in his metal hand, and Steve waited for him to smash that one before trying to talk to him again. If he smashed all the plates first, he would have nothing to do but talk to Steve. Bucky didn’t take the next plate with his flesh hand, he just threw it with the prosthetic. The force behind it was a lot stronger, and the plate broke into tiny pieces and left a crack in the mirror.

Steve saw Bucky’s face fall when he noticed the crack in the mirror and he started walking towards it. Steve saw that there was broken porcelain all over the floor and Bucky was barefoot, so he stepped in front of Bucky to stop him getting any closer.

“Bucky…”

Instead of stopping like Steve had expected, Bucky just pushed Steve out of his way. The force of the shove made Steve fall over and hurt his wrists when they impacted on the concrete floor, as well as cause a sharp burst of pain to shoot up his side. He had used his prosthetic, so Steve was pretty sure Bucky hadn’t meant to push him that hard, but it still hurt. Steve looked up and watched Bucky stand in front of the mirror. The crack was level with his face, and he lifted his flesh hand to run the length of the flaw in the glass. He was stood in the broken porcelain and Steve could already see blood start to pool under him, but Bucky didn’t react.

Steve pushed himself to his feet and tried to manoeuvre around the pieces of porcelain to stand beside Bucky. He wouldn’t let Bucky’s attitude discourage him. He saw Bucky’s eyes well up with tears as he stared at his reflection in the mirror. Bucky’s hair was laying lank over his forehead, his stubble was more noticeable, and there were dark circles starting to develop under his eyes. Steve still thought Bucky was beautiful. He placed a hand on Bucky’s right shoulder and tried not to frown when he tensed.

“Let’s go back to bed… We can talk there, away from all this.” Steve gestured to the mess around them, and that’s when Bucky looked down and noticed what he was standing on. He winced as he lifted one leg and saw the blood on his foot and stepped back a few steps so he was away from the broken porcelain.

Steve followed and smiled in relief when Bucky looked up to make eye contact with him for the first time since Steve had found him down here. He gestured to the small bench in the corner of the basement. “Why don’t you sit down and I’ll get some bandages for your feet?”

Bucky nodded and wandered over to the bench. Steve noted that he limped slightly but otherwise didn’t seem to be bothered by the pain. He waited until Bucky was sat down before going up to get the first aid kit from the bathroom. After checking that there were bandages and disinfectant in the kit, he took that, a rag Bucky used to dust with, and a bottle of water downstairs to the basement after washing the rag.

Bucky was in the same position he was in when Steve felt, staring at the floor. Steve put the items he had brought with him on the bench next to Bucky then knelt down in front of him. He placed his hand on Bucky’s knee first to get his attention.

“I’ll need to clean the cuts first and make sure there’s nothing stuck in there, then I’ll bandage you up, okay?”

Bucky just nodded, so Steve lifted one of his feet and poured some of the water onto the rag. Thankfully, there was nothing stuck in the cuts, so once the excess blood was wiped away Steve could just bandage it up. At first, the wounds looked painful, but now that he had cleaned all the
blood away he saw that it was just lots of insignificant little cuts. He finished that foot and moved on to do the other. The whole time Bucky sat in silence, but he moved when Steve gestured for him to, so at least he hadn’t dissociated.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” Steve asked quietly as he packed the roll of bandaged back into the first aid kit.

“Nightmare…” Bucky muttered. It wasn’t exactly a descriptive answer, but at least he was answering him now.

Steve pushed himself up off the floor and tried not to wince at the pain in his wrists and his left side, where Bucky had pushed him. He could already tell there would be a bruise there, and Steve was already trying to think of ways to hide it from Bucky. He knew Bucky would overreact when he saw it and figured out that he had caused it, but it wasn’t really his fault. Bucky didn’t mean to hurt him, he just wanted Steve to move and he didn’t know how to control the power of his metal arm yet.

He held his hand out for Bucky, and the brunet took it with his flesh hand and let Steve pull him up. Steve led him out of the basement, and smiled a little as Bucky leant against him.

Bucky let Steve lead him up to the bedroom and immediately crawled under the covers once he was close enough to slump onto the bed. Steve joined him and wrapped his arms around Bucky as he rested his head on Steve’s chest.

“Want to talk about your nightmare?” Steve asked quietly, running his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

“Rumlow got out of prison…” Bucky muttered and Steve waited for him to elaborate. After a few moments of silence, Steve assumed Bucky wasn’t going to say anything else, but then he continued. “He got to you… I couldn’t help you…”

Steve definitely knew how that felt. Not only had he had nightmares about them hurting Bucky and Steve standing by uselessly, he had lived it. He had been there when Bucky was in danger, and he hadn’t been able to help him.

He didn’t mention this to Bucky, though. Pointing out how he had it worse was not going to help Bucky, it would just seem like he was trying to downplay the severity of Bucky’s own problems and nightmares. Instead, Steve just kept stroking his hair and muttered that he was okay, and told Bucky he didn’t have to worry about him. Bucky draped his right arm over Steve’s stomach and closed his eyes, as if he was going to sleep, and Steve kept stroking Bucky’s hair until his breathing evened out to indicate that he was asleep.

Steve’s side hurt when he next woke up. Bucky was still beside him this time, but he had moved his arm from over Steve’s stomach and his head from Steve’s chest, and curled up on himself just next to him.

Steve watched him for a few moments to make sure he was still asleep, timing his breathing and watching his closed eyelids, then carefully got out of bed to go to the bathroom. He locked the door behind him and pulled his shirt up to look at the damage done to his side. It wasn’t too serious, but there was a nasty bruise where his arm had been pushed into his ribs.

Bucky would definitely notice it if Steve took his shirt off. Whether he would remember how it happened or not, Steve wasn’t sure, but he didn’t want to find out. If Bucky did remember pushing
him, then saw the bruise, he’d be so upset with himself. If he saw it and asked Steve how it happened, which he would, Steve didn’t know what he would say. He didn’t want to lie to Bucky, but he didn’t want Bucky to be upset.

He decided to just keep the bruise covered until he was gone. Steve got bruises a lot, so he knew it would only take a few weeks for it to disappear completely. He could hide it for that long, he was sure.

Steve returned to Bucky’s bedroom and smiled when he saw that he was still sleeping, curled up in a ball under his duvet. He looked smaller than usual like that, his knees tucked up to his chest, and Steve couldn’t stop himself from running his fingers through Bucky’s hair as he got into bed next to him.

After a glance at the clock, Steve laid down beside him. It was seven in the morning; way too early to be awake on a Sunday. He was careful not to wake Bucky as he slipped back under the covers, but his mind went back to the mess in the basement and he frowned slightly before getting back out of the bed again. There was no way he’d be able to get back to sleep any time soon anyway, so he figured he might as well do something useful.

Steve found the dustpan and brush under the sink and grabbed the broom, then put his shoes on as an afterthought, before going into the basement. He swept up all the broken plates and collected them in the dustpan to bump them in the bin in the corner. It took him three trips to clean up all the porcelain in the small dustpan, but he eventually finished and frowned when he saw the bloodstains on the floor where Bucky had been stood. Becca came down here to dance a lot and Steve didn’t want her to see her brother’s blood all over the floor, so he went back upstairs to fill a bucket with water and stain remover, and brought that and another rag downstairs to clean up the blood.

There was still a slightly darker patch on the floor when he was done, but it was hardly noticeable to someone not staring directly at it and looking for blood, so he supposed it’d be okay. He couldn’t scrub at it anymore and expect to make any difference. He stood up and looked at the floor-to-ceiling mirror in front of him, frowning when he remembered the crack. There was nothing he could do about that, and he couldn’t hide it from Becca. She would want to know what happened, and it wasn’t Steve’s place to tell, but he doubted Bucky would tell her.

He sighed as he took the bucket back upstairs, then came back for the dustpan, brush, and broom. The water in the bucket was tinted slightly pink from wringing the rag out in it, and Steve had to look away as he poured it down the sink. He couldn’t look at it knowing it was Bucky’s blood.

“What’s that?”

Steve turned around as he heard Becca’s voice behind him, thick with sleep. She was stood in her pyjamas and rubbing her eyes, her hair sticking up in odd directions.

“Oh, it was… I spilled cranberry juice, I was just cleaning it up…” He quickly lied and Becca nodded a little as she walked past him to get a glass from the cupboard.

“What’re you doing up so early?” She asked as she filled the glass with water after Steve was done rinsing out the bucket.

Steve thought about the bruise on his side that had woken him up, but he couldn’t tell Becca about that. She’d want him to tell Bucky so that her brother could make up for it or be more careful with his prosthetic. Steve didn’t want to worry Bucky over that.
“I needed to go to the bathroom.” He lied as quickly as he could so that Becca wouldn’t notice his hesitation. Usually, she would have picked up on that and shot him a suspicious look, but luckily it seemed she wasn’t as perceptive when she was half-asleep. “What about you?”

“Bad dream.” She muttered in response before taking a drink of her water. “Had to go check on Bucky when I woke up… He’s still sleeping.”

Steve nodded, understanding why she had felt the need to check on Bucky after a bad dream. He probably played a very prominent role in the bad dream.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He offered, but Becca shook her head almost immediately.

“I think I’m just going to go back to bed for a little while…”

Steve nodded and smiled as Becca finished her drink and went back upstairs. Now that Steve was listening for it, he heard Becca’s footsteps go to Bucky’s room then stop for a few seconds, just inside the doorway, before going to her own room.

Since he couldn’t go back to sleep himself, Steve set out straightening up the rest of the house. He washed the dishes they had left in the sink the night before and put them all away, then dusted all the surfaces including the TV screen. Once that was done, he picked up Becca’s coat from on the floor in front of the door and hung it up next to Bucky’s on the coat rack, then looked around for something else to do. All there really was left was vacuuming, but he couldn’t do that without waking up Becca and Bucky, so instead he dug between the cushions of the couch to find his phone and texted Peggy, Angie, and Sam to tell them Bucky was home and he had the new prosthetic. He explained what it looked like and how it worked as best he could when Peggy showed a particular interest. She seemed excited, and she insisted that Steve and Bucky come to their’s for dinner one day when Bucky felt up for it. She also told him to bring Becca too when he mentioned that Bucky usually cooked dinner for her.

Three hours later, Steve had opted for watching TV with the volume turned down. That’s where Bucky found him when he finally came downstairs. His hair was more of a mess than Becca’s had been, and he looked confused.

“Time is it?” He muttered as he sat next to Steve on the couch.

“Ten-thirty,” Steve answered with a smile as he leant over to kiss Bucky softly. “Morning…”

Bucky kissed back with a small smile. “Morning… Sorry about last night. I kind of freaked out a little.”

Steve just smiled. “It’s okay, Buck. I understand.”

He really hoped Bucky didn’t remember pushing him. If Bucky asked if Steve was hurt, he wouldn’t be able to lie to him. Bucky would see right through it and demand to know where he was hurt, then he’d see the bruise.

Thankfully, Bucky didn’t mention it.

“Do you want some breakfast?” Bucky asked and Steve quickly stood up.

“I’ll make it. What do you want?”

Bucky looked surprised, but smiled and told him he just wanted a bowl of Chocolate Flakes. Steve
nodded and went into the kitchen to make the bowl of cereal for him. He debated making something for Becca too, but he didn’t know how long it would be before she woke up, so he decided he’d make her something when she came down.

When he returned to the living room, Bucky had the phone pressed to his ear and he was frowning as he listened to whoever was talking on the other end of the call. Steve placed the bowl on the coffee table then came over to rub Bucky’s back, hoping it would make Bucky feel better, whatever the other person was saying. He could hear that it was a woman, but he couldn’t place the voice.

Eventually, Bucky hung up and turned to bury his face in Steve’s shoulder, his arms hugging him tight. Bucky’s flesh arm was on Steve’s left, so it didn’t press against the bruise as much as the metal arm would, but he still had to fight the urge to wince so Bucky wouldn’t notice. He hugged him back, worry immediately invading his thoughts.

“Who was that…?” Steve asked quietly.

“Ms Potts.”

“Is something wrong?” Steve frowned, now even more worried.

“Brock’s dad pulled some strings and got him out on bail. He’s out until he’s convicted.” Bucky answered in a monotone and Steve hugged him tighter, one hand on Bucky’s head.

*How could anyone let that psycho out?!* Steve thought angrily, but he tried to stay calm for Bucky.

“One of the conditions of his bail is that he stays away from me, Becca, and you…”

“That’s good… As long as he sticks to that, you’ll be okay. If he doesn’t stick to that, it’ll hurt his case even more. He’d be stupid to break his bail conditions…”

Bucky nodded in agreement and squeezed Steve a little tighter. When he did, Steve couldn’t help but wince that time. Bucky noticed and pulled away with a frown.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asked, concern evident in his voice as he rests his hands on Steve’s hips.

“Nothing.” Steve answered quickly, his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. “It’s nothing.”

Bucky looked confused for a few seconds, searching Steve’s face for any hints, then Steve saw realisation dawn on his expression. “Did I hurt you last night when I shoved you?”

Steve sighed and shook his head, but he could tell by Bucky’s expression that he already knew that what he said was true, and there was no point in Steve lying about it. “It’s not that bad, Buck, don’t worry.”

“Let me see.”

The firmness in Bucky’s words left little space for argument, so Steve dropped his hands from Bucky’s shoulders to pull his shirt up a little, just enough to show a bit of the bruise on his side, hoping Bucky would think that that was it and believe Steve when he told him he was okay, but Bucky took Steve’s shirt in his hand and pulled it up higher to see his whole side. Steve cupped Bucky’s cheek when he saw the heartbroken expression on his boyfriend’s face as he looked at the bruise.

“It’s not that bad…” He repeated, but Bucky didn’t look convinced.
Bucky let go of Steve’s shirt and took a step back, staring down at his prosthetic with clear hatred. Steve had only seen that expression on Bucky’s face when he was talking about Rumlow or Rollins, and he hated seeing it. He brought his right hand up quickly and grabbed at the top of the metal arm on his shoulder, then started trying to pull it off.

“Bucky, stop! You’re going to hurt yourself!” Steve stepped forward to try to stop him, but Bucky just stepped back and continued trying to rip the prosthetic off himself.

“Bucky! Please stop!” Steve shouted desperately and stepped forward again, trying to pull Bucky’s right arm away from his left, but he wasn’t strong enough.

“What the hell is going on?”

They both stopped and turned to look at Becca, stood at the doorway of the living room with a horrified expression as she looked at the scene in front of her.

Bucky was the first to speak. “I don’t want the prosthetic anymore!”

Becca looked surprised, but she walked over to them with a small nod. “Okay. If you don’t want it, you can take it off, it’s okay. But you have to do it properly.”

Steve tried to interject, but Becca shot him a very clear “shut up” look and turned back to her brother. She moved the piece of metal out of the way to press the button and release the magnet keeping the prosthetic on Bucky. She made sure to catch the arm so it didn’t get damaged, and as soon as it was off him, Bucky fled the room and ran up the stairs. They both stood there in silence until they heard Bucky’s door slam shut.

“What was that about?”

Steve sighed and explained what had happened the night before, showed Becca the bruise, and explained Bucky’s reaction. She was holding the prosthetic the whole time, and looked down at it with a frown.

“He doesn’t know the strength of it yet, that’s all…” She muttered and Steve nodded in agreement. “But, if he wanted it off, you should have just let him take it off. He can always put it back on when he’s calmed down a little…”

Steve had to admit, she had a point there. Bucky was obviously distraught and not thinking clearly, but he should have helped him and just talked to him about it properly when he had calmed down.

“I should go talk to him…” Steve sighed and Becca nodded, putting the prosthetic on the coffee table.

“I’ll come with you.”

Steve nodded too and led the way upstairs and to Bucky’s room. He knocked before opening the door slowly, not wanting Bucky to be startled by them just barging in.

“Buck…” Steve opened the door a little wider when he didn’t see Bucky on his bed, where he had expected him to be. In fact, he wasn’t in the room at all.

Becca stepped around Steve and looked directly at the open window, then sighed. “He used to do this all the time when he was younger, and that was okay, I guess… He could take care of himself and he always stayed safe! But now? Really, James?!”
Becca sighed in annoyance then went across to her room to get her phone as Steve frowned in confusion. It only took him a few seconds to realise that had happened, though. Bucky had snuck out. He quickly went over to the window and looked out of it. They were on the second floor, and there was no tree or anything outside the window that Bucky could use to climb down. Steve was worried Bucky would be on the ground in front of the house, hurt, but he wasn’t. Bucky was nowhere in sight, and Steve was actually glad of that. It was better than him being hurt.

Becca came back into the bedroom with a frown, fiddling with her phone in her hand. “He usually goes to Natasha’s, but she said he isn’t there. She said she’d look for him, though, and told us to stay here in case he came back.”

Steve wasn’t happy about that idea, but there wasn’t much else he could do. He had no idea where Bucky would have gone, and he didn’t know where to start looking for him.

Then Steve remembered that Brock had been released on bail and tried to stop his mind from jumping to the worst case scenario, but he couldn’t help it. Bucky had had a nightmare that Brock had gotten out just the night before. If Bucky ran off somewhere and ran into Brock, he could be in serious danger, and Bucky was distraught and unstable, and he only had one arm again. He’s even less likely to be able to protect himself than he was when Rollins had took him.

Steve called Bucky’s phone with shaky fingers, but he heard it ring downstairs and remembered that Bucky had dropped his phone onto the couch after his conversation with Pepper.

Panic was really starting to settle in now.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Bucky panics and Steve reassures him.

Natasha came over an hour later, but she didn’t have any good news. She couldn’t find Bucky in his usual hide-out spots where he would run away to when his parents were still alive and he needed to get away from his abusive father. Becca had called Clint, but he hadn’t seen Bucky either.

Steve listened to Becca and Natasha brainstorm ideas for a few minutes, but he couldn’t stay focussed on their words. His mind was running wild with possibilities. It was getting cold, and it was supposed to snow that day. Bucky didn’t have a jacket, and Steve doubted he had bothered to change out of his pyjamas and into something warmer before bailing.

Speaking of bail, Brock was also a danger. Again.

Bucky could have ran into him and Brock could have hurt him. He could have kidnapped him like Rollins had done on his behalf. Brock could have been watching the house and followed Bucky when he ran out. Bucky could run into the road without looking and get hurt, or he could pass out somewhere, or…

Steve had to stop before thinking of anymore, or he was going to be sick. He still couldn’t listen to Becca and Natasha brainstorm either. Steve stood up and quickly left the house, grabbing Bucky’s coat as he went, just in case. He didn’t have a car, and he couldn’t drive even if he did have one, so he started walking in one particular direction, racking his brain for where Bucky could be.

He took his phone out and scrolled through his contacts with no particular idea in mind about who he was going to call. Stopping on Sam’s number, Steve got an idea. Sam had said that he knew some people who had lost limbs and developed PTSD as a result of being in the army. He knew it wasn’t the same thing, but he supposed Sam was the closest to knowing what Bucky would do now.

Sam answered on the second ring. As it rang, Steve contemplated what he was going to say. By the time Sam answered, he still had no idea, but as soon as Sam asked him what was wrong, the words poured out. He explained Bucky breaking the plates, and when he pushed Steve out of the way, he explained the bruise caused by the force of the prosthetic and quickly explained that it wasn’t Bucky’s fault. He didn’t mean to do it, he didn’t know the power of the prosthetic. Sam quickly reassured Steve that he didn’t think Bucky had meant to hurt him, and told Steve to go on with his story.

Once he was finished, Sam agreed to meet Steve in his car. He only used it when he needed to – for long drives to visit old friends – because of how expensive it was to fuel, but Sam reassured Steve that he didn’t mind using it now. Steve read out a street sign he was near and Sam hung up after telling him he’d be there in five minutes and to stay put.

“Everyone reacts differently to traumatic experience. No PTSD case is the same.” Sam told Steve with a sigh. “It depends on the person. Some people just break down and can’t function for
months, some people get violent, some people turn to substance abuse to deal with it…”

“How do I find him?” Steve asked in return, his eyes glued to the windscreen to look out for any sign of Bucky.

“You need to think about places that Bucky would want to be in when everywhere else feels unsafe. Probably somewhere with an emotional connection. Somewhere that he has only happy memories for.”

Bucky didn’t really go anywhere… Before the trauma, he went to work, went home, went to Becca’s school, and went on dates with Steve. Dates…

“Take a left.” Steve pointed to the street he wanted Sam to turn down, and Sam nodded as he turned his indicator on.

It was a long shot, but Steve didn’t have any other ideas. Steve looked up at the street signs and directed Sam to the Brooklyn Art Museum, where they had gone on their first official date. It was closed on a Sunday, but even from the distance the car was still from the museum, he could see a figure sat on the steps, curled up on themselves. The figure had a dark blue or black tshirt on and black sweatpants, and Steve remembered that that was what Bucky was wearing when he left.

Steve sighed in relief and thanked Sam before quickly getting out of the car. In the back of his mind, he registered that Sam turned the engine of the car off instead of driving away, but he couldn’t understand what Sam was waiting for and he couldn’t focus on that right now. Right now, he needed to get to Bucky. As he got closer, he was certain that it was Bucky. He had his head on his knees, and his arm wrapped around it and covering his stump. He didn’t react as Steve got closer, and Steve heard him crying quietly against his knees. The blond looked down at him sadly, then moved around him to drape Bucky’s coat over his shoulders.

Bucky only just registered that Steve was there, and he tensed slightly, but Steve didn’t let that deter him. He sat beside Bucky, on his left, and rested his head on his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around Bucky. Steve rubbed Bucky’s shoulder through his jacket to try and get some warmth back into his boyfriend’s cold body. Thankfully, Bucky didn’t pull away. In fact, he leant his head against Steve’s shoulder with a sigh.

“I’m so sorry… I didn’t mean to hurt you, Stevie…” He muttered quietly, and Steve kissed the side of his head.

“I know, Buck. I don’t blame you.” Steve tried to reassure him as he played with his hair. “Why did you leave? We were worried…”

“Felt bad… Panicked.” Bucky sighed against Steve’s shoulder again and shuddered slightly, so Steve tugged to coat tighter around him.

“It wasn’t your fault, Bucky.”

They sat in silence for almost half an hour before Steve mentioned that Becca and Natasha would still be worried, and Bucky agreed to come home. Steve helped Bucky stand up, then put the coat on him properly. Bucky tried to persuade Steve to take the coat when Steve started shivering, but he managed to persuade Bucky to keep it on himself. As they walked down the steps and in the direction of the pavement, Steve noticed Sam’s car still parked on the road a few feet away. He didn’t want to have to drag Bucky over to talk to someone in the state he was on, so Steve took his phone out to call him instead.
“Sam? What’re you still doing here?”

“I’m waiting to give you and Bucky a ride home.” Sam answered plainly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Like Steve had expected him to wait.

“You don’t have to do that… We can walk, it’s okay…”

“Just hurry up and get in the car.”

Steve smiled a little. He could tell by Sam’s tone that there was no point in arguing anymore. Sam wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Especially since Sam hung up as soon as he was done talking, not giving Steve time to argue.

“Bucky… My friend, Sam, wants to give us a ride home.” Steve told him carefully as he gestured to Sam’s car, worried about Bucky’s reaction.

“Home? Does that mean he’s taking you home?” Bucky looked like he was on the verge of panicking again, so Steve quickly shook his head.

“No, no… I meant your place. He’s taking up both to your place.”

Bucky nodded a little, clearly relieved, and looked over at the car Steve had gestured to. “Is he okay with that?”

“Yeah, he’s not taking no for an answer… Come on.” Steve took Bucky’s hand in his and led him over to the car.

Bucky went with him willingly, and Steve opened the door to the backseat for him. He only hesitated for a second before climbing into the back of the SUV. Steve wasn’t sure whether to get in the back with Bucky, or to get in the front with Sam. He decided it would be rude to ignore Sam, so he closed the door to the backseat and went to the passenger seat to get in beside his friend. Sam looked at Bucky in the rearview mirror and smiled a little before starting the car.

“Seatbelts.” Sam reminded them both, and Steve glanced back to see Bucky reach for his seatbelt. He waited until Bucky’s seatbelt was on before doing his own, in case Bucky needed any help.

Sam pulled away from the museum and started heading in the direction of Bucky’s address. Steve thanked Sam again, and Sam brushed it off. The rest of the journey was silent until they got to Bucky’s house. Sam stopped the car and killed the engine, but no one moved.

“Thank you, again.”

“Stop thanking me, it’s okay, Steve.”

“Thank you…” They heard Bucky mutter from the backseat, and they both turned to look at him with a smile.

“No problem, man.” Sam replied to him with a slight nod, and Steve unbuckled his seatbelt and leant over to give Sam a hug before getting out of the car. Bucky joined him shortly after.

They waited on the curb until Sam drove away, and Steve waved goodbye to him before they both went into the house.

As soon as they entered the house, Becca and Natasha were both on them.

“Where the hell have you been?! Do you have any idea how worried we were?!” Becca screamed
at Bucky, and Bucky winced slightly. Natasha stepped closer and placed a hand on Becca’s arm in an attempt to calm her.

“I’m sorry…” Bucky spoke so quietly, Steve almost didn’t hear him despite being right next to him.

“Damn right you’re sorry!” Becca shouted again, and Natasha tugged her away from Bucky a little and stepped forward in her place.

“Where did you go?” She asked him, speaking quietly.

“Brooklyn Art Museum…”

Natasha didn’t ask him why. She just nodded and stepped forward to wrap her arms around his neck to hug him, and Bucky hugged back, resting his head on her shoulder.

Everyone was silent for a few seconds, then Natasha pulled back and Becca took her place to hug her brother. “I’m sorry I yelled at you…”

“It’s okay, I deserved it.” Bucky’s voice was a little muffled by Becca’s shoulder and, before she had a chance to reply, Bucky pulled back. “I’m going to go back to bed for a little while.”

“Oh… Okay.” Becca leant up to kiss his cheek. “Sleep tight, Big Bro.”

Bucky smiled a little and nodded before going upstairs to his bedroom. Steve wasn’t sure whether Bucky wanted some privacy, so he decided to stay downstairs with the girls unless Bucky came to ask him to do otherwise. Bucky didn’t even glance back as he went upstairs, so Steve figured it would be best to stay away for a little while, give him some space.

Steve had been watching TV with Becca and Natasha for an hour before he got a text from Bucky. He was a little confused when he saw Bucky’s name come up on his screen, and automatically angled the screen away so Becca couldn’t see when the couch beside the armchair he was seated it, just in case Bucky was texting because he didn’t want Becca to hear what he wanted to say.

“You busy?”

Steve glanced up to see if either Becca or Natasha had noticed him on his phone, then looked back down to type out a reply.

“No, why?”

It only took a few seconds for Bucky to reply. “Need to talk to you. About why I freaked out and bailed.”

Steve put his phone back in his pocket and stood to leave the room. He wasn’t sure whether Bucky wanted Becca and Natasha to know that he wanted to talk to Steve, so he started trying to come up with an excuse in case they asked, but neither of them even glanced up from the screen as he left.

He went up to Bucky’s room and knocked quietly, then entered when Bucky called out for him to. Bucky was laid in bed, curled up on his side with the covers bunched up around him, and Steve smiled a little at how cute he looked like that. He sat beside Bucky on the bed and ran his fingers through his dark hair.
“Hey…” Steve smiled a little, just glad to see Bucky safe.

“Hi…” Bucky smiled back, but it wasn’t very convincing. He was laid on his left, and he moved back so Steve could lay down beside him, automatically lifting the covers and wrapping them around Steve’s slim figure when he did.

“Please don’t apologise again.” Steve shook his head slightly as he laid back against the pillows, his face level with Bucky’s.

“It was an accident the first time he hurt her…”

Steve frowned a little in confusion. He didn’t understand who Bucky was referring to, or what that had to do with what happened today… then it dawned on him. Bucky was talking about his parents. He thought that what happened today could be the start of an abusive relationship. Steve remembered what Bucky had asked him when he first told Steve about his parents; ‘Do you think crazy is hereditary?’

“When your dad hurt your mom…” Bucky nodded to confirm Steve’s suspicions, and Steve cupped Bucky’s face to stop him from avoiding Steve’s gaze. “This isn’t the same thing, Buck…”

“Isn’t it?”

“Well, what happened? The first time your dad hurt your mom… were you there?”

Bucky nodded and closed his eyes before he started talking, keeping them closed the whole time. “He was pissed off that he couldn’t find a new job, Mom was complaining about the house being so messy since Dad started being home all day. They got into an argument about Dad not being able to pick up after himself; Mom said that was probably why he couldn’t get a job; because he was useless on his own. Dad backhanded her. They were both in shock for a few seconds, then Dad started crying and apologising. He begged her to forgive him, and she did.”

Steve remained silent for a few seconds, not wanting to seem like he was completely dismissing what Bucky had told him happened with his parents. But, honestly, he couldn’t see the resemblances in the situations. Bucky moved Steve out of his way with a little more force than he meant to, Bucky’s dad intentionally hit his mom.

“It’s not the same, Bucky. I know you’d never hurt me intentionally.”

Steve saw Bucky wince when he said that and move his head away from Steve’s hands. “That’s what Mom said when she forgave him…”

“Bucky, stop.”

“I don’t want to end up like him…” Bucky’s voice broke as he tried to fight back a sob, and Steve frowned as he moved closer to hug him properly.

“You won’t end up like him, Bucky.” He played with the strands of hair at the nape of Bucky’s neck and kissed the side of his head. “I can take care of myself. If you were ever abusive, I’d know it and I’d stop it…”

“Stop it? How?” Bucky looked up at him then. “Would you leave me?”

Steve had expected to see fear in his eyes, but he saw hope instead, and that confused him more. Does Bucky want me to say I’ll leave him?
He had to really think about his answer. Steve could never imagine Bucky would be abusive, but if he was, Steve would have to leave. There’s no way he would stay with someone who would intentionally hurt him, because that would mean Bucky wouldn’t love him anymore. No one should hurt someone they love. If anyone intentionally caused someone else pain, they didn’t love them enough.

“I’d have to…” Steve whispered.

Bucky sighed in relief before kissing Steve. Steve was a little surprised at the kiss, but kissed back anyway. He guessed that Bucky was worried he would become like his father, and Steve would stay with him no matter how much Bucky might hurt him, just like Bucky’s mother did. Hearing that Steve wouldn’t let it get that far was probably a relief to Bucky. But Steve knew it would never get that far. Bucky didn’t mean to hurt him, it was an accident, he was just so terrified of being like his father and hurting someone he loved that his mind had blew the whole thing out of proportion.

“Bucky…” Steve started once they broke the kiss, a little hesitant. He wasn’t sure how Bucky would react when Steve told him what he was thinking, but he didn’t know when the next time he would have the courage to bring it up would be. Banner had suggested this, but Bucky had refused it when Banner offered it. The doctor had told Steve and Becca about it, and asked them to keep it in mind, hoping they might be able to persuade Bucky to go for it.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been thinking… and it’s completely up to you, but... Have you thought about… therapy?”

Bucky tensed slightly in Steve’s arms, but it was only momentarily. Steve’s mind immediately went into overdrive, thinking Bucky might believe Steve thought he was insane. He started doubting that now was the best time to bring it up, right after Bucky talked about his crazy father. It did seem a little accusing.

“I don’t know… maybe?”

Steve nodded a little and kissed the top of Bucky’s head as Bucky rested his head on Steve’s chest. His ear pressed against the left side of Steve’s chest, and he could tell Bucky was listening to his heartbeat. Steve smiled a little and kissed the top of his head again as he pushed his hair back.

“Whatever you decide is best, I’ll support you.”

“I know.”

They didn’t speak again, and soon both fell asleep.

Steve woke up first, but he didn’t move besides playing with Bucky’s hair. He didn’t want to wake him up, Bucky needed as much sleep as he could get.

He checked his phone, and saw that there was a 93% chance of snow today, and smiled a little. Steve hoped Bucky would be awake by then. There was something Steve had always felt was special about the first fall of snow, even if it didn’t stick to the ground, and the snowflakes disappeared as soon as they landed. Sometimes that was more special, because that meant that whoever saw them land were the last people to see those little bits of snow before they were gone forever.

It was three days until Christmas, and there were still no decorations around the house. Steve
hadn’t finished the present he planned to give Bucky. He wasn’t even sure if Bucky would be up for celebrating this year. No one would blame him if he let the twenty fifth pass like any other day. His wounds were still fresh – literally – and Bucky didn’t seem to have even noticed that it was Christmas soon. If he had, he hadn’t said anything about it.

Bucky mumbled slightly, and Steve smiled as he looked down at Bucky and noticed him starting to wake up. It was three in the afternoon, and Steve was starting to get hungry, but he was willing to stay in bed longer if that’s what Bucky wanted.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty,” Steve muttered and leant down to kiss Bucky as Bucky smiled a little.

“G’morning, Prince Charming,” Bucky replied with a smirk. “You know, you’re supposed to kiss me before I wake up, not right after. That’s not how the curse works.”

“Sorry, my bad, my fairy tale logic is a little rusty.”

Bucky chuckled and moved his hand from Steve’s chest to rub his eyes. “Don’t worry, I know enough for both of us. Becca went through a Disney Princess phase not so long ago, so most of the information I retained to be able to actually have a conversation with her is still pretty fresh.”

“Oh good,” Steve laughed and ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair again, careful not to tug at any knots.

Bucky closed his eyes again and, for a second, Steve thought he was going back to sleep, but Bucky opened his eyes again and smiled up at him. “You look great.”

“I just woke up, and I can tell my hair is a mess. I don’t look great.” Steve shook his head in disagreement, blushing slightly.

“I really wish you could see yourself as I see you…” Bucky’s tone took on a slightly sad edge, and Steve couldn’t help but smile down at him.

“I wish you could see yourself as I see you too.”

They both had self-esteem issues. Bucky’s were new, but they were still there, and they were still real.

Steve could tell Bucky hadn’t really had to worry about his appearance before. From the pictures Steve had seen, he could tell Bucky was always cute, until he got to the age where it was uncool to be cute, then he got handsome, and as he got older, he got hotter. Steve had never seen a picture of Bucky where he didn’t look perfect for his age. At no point in Bucky’s life did he look too skinny, or too short, or too pale…

Steve had had to deal with that his whole life. The first girl to ever take a romantic interest in him had only been flirting with him as part of a dare from some other girls in the class. He always hated how he looked, even how he smiled. He never understood how anyone could find him anything but repulsive, which is why he had been so apprehensive when Bucky talked about how beautiful Steve was. But, if Bucky’s issues were the same principle, Steve finally understood.

Bucky thought Steve would be repulsed by the amputation. Steve thought Bucky would be repulsed by his concaved stomach and pasty skin. Bucky was determined to get Steve to see that he was perfect how he was, and now Steve was determined to do the same for Bucky.

As he got lost in thought, Steve glanced up at the window as a particularly cold gust of wind came
through. It was still open, and so were the curtains. Steve suddenly sat bolt-upright in bed, throwing Bucky off him in the process.

“What the fuck?” Bucky whined as he sat up too.

“It’s snowing!” Steve beamed and pointed out of the window, where the first few snowflakes were falling.

“So?” Bucky huffed and laid back down again, pulling a pillow over his head.

Steve frowned, slightly hurt that Bucky had brushed it off so quickly. Snow always made Steve excited, and he was hoping to share that with him, but Bucky didn’t seem to care. He supposed it didn’t really matter, Bucky indulged in enough of the things Steve was interested in but Bucky himself didn’t really care about...

“Oh, fine. Let’s go see the damn snow.” Bucky grumbled, and Steve looked down to see that Bucky had been watching him from under the pillow before he pulled it off his head and pushed himself to sit up.

“We don’t have to, it’s okay. It doesn’t really matter.” Steve shook his head quickly, not wanting to bother Bucky with something so trivial.

“It matters to you, I can tell. Now get up.”

Bucky was already out of bed before Steve could argue, and he looked away quickly with a blush when Bucky pushed his sweatpants off. He had seen Bucky naked before, but Steve still felt like he should look away. Steve heard Bucky chuckle slightly, then looked back up as Bucky struggled to do his belt up. He quickly stood up and went over to help Bucky.

“Help me with my shirt?”

Steve nodded and grabbed a long-sleeved top for Bucky to wear. He wasn’t sure which one Bucky wanted to wear, but if they were going out in the snow, he was going to wear something warm.

“Coat too. And scarf. And gloves.” Steve stated, and Bucky raised an eyebrow. He wasn’t sure what he was looking at him like that for, then he realised what he said.

Gloves. Plural.

“I meant glove... Just one... Because...” He gestured to Bucky’s left arm, then blushed and immediately started trying to apologise, but Bucky shook his head with a laugh.

“Don’t worry about it, Steve. Come on.”

They went downstairs, and Steve smiled as he helped Bucky into his coat and wrapped his scarf around his neck. Becca and Natasha came over, and after Bucky explained that they were going to see the snow, they asked if they could join. Steve and Bucky both nodded with a smile, and they all went outside.

The snow was starting to settle, and it looked beautiful.
Chapter 34

Bucky didn’t feel like playing in the snow. He was still in recovery for malnutrition and dehydration, and after what else had happened today, they decided it was best for him to just sit and watch. That way he was less likely to take a bad turn and get sick. Steve couldn’t really play in the snow too long either, or he’d get sick too, so he sat on the porch with Bucky and watched Natasha and Becca play.

“You don’t have to sit here with me, you know… You can go play with them if you want, I don’t mind.” Bucky spoke quietly as he nudged Steve’s shoulder. Bucky didn’t want to put his prosthetic back on yet, and Steve respected that and didn’t push it anymore.

“If I do, I’ll get sick. We have enough to deal with without me adding to that.” Steve smiled and leant up to kiss Bucky’s cheek.

“Why did you get so excited about the snow if you don’t want to play in it?” Bucky frowned in confusion and Steve couldn’t help but smile at him. He looked so adorable when we was confused. Bucky brow creased slightly and he looked almost like he was pouting. Steve briefly wondered if Bucky ever looked like that in school, in a particularly difficult math class…

“I just like how it looks, and smells…” Steve knew if probably sounded stupid, but the time he had spent staring at Bucky hadn’t left him much time to think of a more sane reason without Bucky noticing his hesitation.

He wasn’t lying. Steve had always loved how snow looked, even if he had bad memories of asthma attacks and developing pneumonia in it. After the few times he had gotten ill from it, his mother had been reluctant to let him out in it for too long. He would usually just sit with her on the steps to their building with a cup of cocoa and watch the snowflakes fall. The city always looked so much prettier covered by the purifying white of the snow.

Bucky smiled a little and ran his fingers through Steve’s hair. “It makes sense, don’t worry.”

He would never not be amazed that Bucky could see right into Steve’s mind. Steve didn’t even realise they were staring at each other until Bucky broke the eye contact to look out into the yard.

“It’s really beautiful.”

Steve nodded as he followed Bucky’s gaze to look at the snow covering the grass.

“Second most beautiful thing in the immediate vicinity.” Bucky continued and Steve chuckled quietly. He could tell where this was going.

“I wonder what the first one is…” He decided to play along.

“You.”

*Of course.* Steve smiled as he looked up at Bucky, trying not to blush. Bucky smiled too and leant
down slightly, so Steve met him half way for a kiss. The extra stubble felt odd, but Steve wouldn’t say he didn’t like it. It was different, but it was still Bucky, so he had no negative feelings towards it. If Bucky decided he wanted to keep having more stubble, Steve wouldn’t care. It’s very possible that he could really like it. He thought about the friction burns he could get from it and already felt his chin and lips starting to get a little irritated. Then he started imagining the other places he could get friction burn from Bucky’s stubble, and Steve had to fight to keep his breathing slow and regular. It would feel amazing on his chest, around his nipples, and on his hips, his pelvic bone… Steve had never thought about rimming before, but now he couldn’t stop himself. Having beard burn on his ass and around his hole sounded too appealing, but he didn’t want to say this to Bucky. He was still recovering, and Steve didn’t think he would be in the mood to do anything sexual for a while. Steve respected that, like Bucky had respected him when they first started dating and Steve wasn’t ready.

They eventually broke the kiss, and Steve smiled up at Bucky as Bucky smiled at him. They didn’t say anything as the moments passed, until they heard Becca scream. Bucky immediately grabbed Steve’s hand tight as they looked out at the girls, and there was fear evident in his eyes. But there was no danger. Just Natasha laughing as Becca ran around trying to get snow from down the back of her coat.

Bucky seemed to relax slightly, and Steve squeezed his hand when he felt Bucky’s grip lessen.

“You okay?” He asked him quietly, and Bucky nodded but didn’t meet Steve’s gaze again. Steve guessed that he was embarrassed about the panic, so he leant up to kiss his cheek. “Everything’s fine, Buck.”

Bucky nodded again and rested his head against Steve’s shoulder. After a few minutes of silently observing the girls having fun, Bucky spoke again.

“It doesn’t look very Christmassy around here…”

“We weren’t sure you’d be in the mood to celebrate, so we didn’t put decorations up… Also, when Becca said you usually put the decorations up you were still… Missing.”

Bucky nodded a little. Steve wasn’t sure if he was nodding to show he understood why they didn’t want to put decorations up while he was gone, or if he was nodding to say he wasn’t in a celebrating mood. He didn’t want to have to ask Bucky to clarify for him, so he just waited, hoping Bucky would clear it up himself in his own time.

“We should put the decorations up…” Bucky spoke quietly, and Steve smiled up at him. He was surprised, but he was happy that Bucky was willing to do it. It showed that he was in a better mood, surely.

“After cocoa.” Steve nodded and Bucky chuckled lightly as he nodded, looking back out at Becca and Natasha playing.

“They’re going to be freezing…” He commented with a small affectionate smile on his lips, and Steve nodded in agreement. Luckily, Becca and Natasha had stronger immune systems than Steve, so they probably wouldn’t get sick from it.

Steve glanced up at Bucky and watched him as he looked at his sister and best friend playing. They were currently engaged in a very intense snowball fight, and judging by the amount of snow covering Becca, Natasha was winning. She eventually called a truce, and Natasha reluctantly dropped the snowball she had raised in attack. They came over to join Bucky and Steve on the porch, Becca next to Bucky and Natasha next to Steve. There was only two seconds of silence,
though, before Becca put her cold hands on Bucky’s neck and Natasha did the same to Steve. They both yelped and flinched away from the girls, and ended up banging their heads together in their attempt to escape their cold hands. Natasha and Becca immediately started fretting over them, but they both just laughed as they rubbed their heads and assured them they were fine.

All four of them went back inside and Steve put the kettle on to make everyone a cup of cocoa each. As he spooned the mix into the mugs, he felt two arms wrap around his waist. At first he thought it was Bucky, but when he realised there were two arms, he tensed slightly and turned, expecting to see Natasha messing with him or something. Which is why he was even more surprised when he saw Bucky smiling at him. He looked down and saw that he had his prosthetic back on, and smiled up at Bucky.

“You decided to put it back on then?” He commented as he put the spoon down and covered Bucky’s hands with his own.

“Yeah, I didn’t like not being able to hug you properly.” Bucky leant down and kissed Steve neck lightly, making Steve squirm and chuckle.

Once the kettle was boiled, Bucky let go of Steve for safety reasons while Steve poured the hot water into the cups. He helped Steve carry them to the living room, each carrying two each, and Bucky passed his to Becca and Natasha, then took one of the ones Steve was holding for himself. He held it with his metal hand, and Steve winced a little, thinking he was going to burn himself when he grabbed the actual mug instead of the handle. Then he remembered that it was biologically impossible for Bucky to hurt himself through his prosthetic.

Natasha had taken her place in the armchair and Becca was sat on the right side of the couch, so Bucky sat in the middle and Steve sat beside him. Bucky announced his desire to put up the decorations, and Becca’s face immediately lit up – ironically – like a Christmas tree. They decided to finish their cocoa first so Becca and Natasha could warm up, and they both changed out of their wet clothes. Natasha had several outfits stored in the spare room of Bucky’s house for occasions where she stayed over and needed to go to work the next morning. She would leave the clothes she was wearing the night before in the spare room and Bucky would wash them for her to pick them up either after work, the next day, or he would put them back in the drawer of the spare room for her to use when she next came to stay.

They finished their drinks, and Bucky and Becca went to the attic to get the decorations. While they waited, Steve gathered the courage to talk to Natasha about something he had felt guilty about since Bucky had gone missing.

“Natasha? Can I talk to you?” He asked quietly, and although Natasha looked a little confused, she nodded and sat beside him on the couch where Bucky had been.

“Go ahead.”

“Well…” Steve started, a little uncomfortable. “I wanted to apologise. I remember that you told me about your streak…”

Natasha furrowed her brow as she thought, probably either trying to decide what ‘streak’ he was referring to, or what he could be getting at. Then, realisation seemed to have dawned. “Oh… That.”

“I’m sorry I broke your streak. I know you warned Bucky off the last three people he dated, and you were right each time. And you told Bucky that it would be good to be with me… I’m sorry I proved you wrong. Bucky wasn’t safe with me, and because of being with me he might have Post Traumatic Stress, and he lost his arm, and he has nightmares and breakdowns, and he’s always at
least a little on edge, and he can’t do his job anymore…” He blurted it all out at once, having to take a deep breath once he was done. Steve braced himself to hear Natasha tell him he was right, and it was all his fault. If Bucky wasn’t with Steve, Brock wouldn’t have come after him, and Bucky would have been fine.

After a few seconds of silence, Steve eventually forced himself to look up at Natasha. He expected her to look angry, or annoyed, but she looked… Sympathetic.

“Steve. This isn’t your fault. No matter who Bucky dated, Brock would have come after him anyway. He’s an entitled sadist. He thought he had some kind of claim over Bucky, even after they broke up. And who knows how the other person would have reacted to that. Other people might not be as supportive as you. The minute they realised there was an intimidating, stalking ex in the picture, they might have bailed. And after Bucky had been taken and disfigured by Brock, the other guy might not have had the commitment or strength to stick with Bucky through this.”

Steve thought about that with a small frown. He couldn’t imagine leaving Bucky, especially not because of an ex, and definitely not because he had a disability now. But he supposed Natasha was right. Not everyone would have realised how amazing Bucky was, and wouldn’t appreciate how much better their lives are with Bucky in it. They would have let him go without a thought.

They heard banging coming from the corridor leading to the living room, meaning there was no time to continue talking about this without Bucky overhearing, so Steve just smiled and muttered a quick ‘thank you’ to the red-head.

Becca entered the room first, carrying half of a big cardboard box with a picture of a washing machine on the side, and she was walking backwards. After she entered, Bucky was shown carrying the other end. Becca seemed to be struggling slightly, but Bucky looked as though he was just carrying paper. Steve could see the muscles in his right arm tensed under his skin, and he tried to hide how attractive he found that, but he looked up at Bucky’s face and saw that he had caught him staring. Steve blushed and quickly averted his eyes when Bucky winked at him.

The siblings dropped the box in the middle of the living room and Becca prised it open. The content of the box was a mess of tinsel and baubles on top of the plastic Christmas tree dismantled inside. There were also lights in a tangled mess too. But judging by Natasha’s casual reaction, this wasn’t unusual. They all knelt on the floor and started taking out the different decorations and tried to untangle them as they did. Becca decided that the best course of action was to get the tree out and put up first, that way they could get to all the other items without it being in the way, and they all agreed. Steve noted that everything seemed to have at least a few pieces of glitter on it, but he decided not to comment on it. Maybe the culprit would become clear once they got everything out.

Bucky set up the base and stayed knelt in the corner of the room beside it, whilst Steve stood just in arms-length to him, and passed Bucky the different parts of the tree as Becca handed them to Steve, like a conveyor belt. As they were doing that, Natasha set about trying to untangle the wires, arguing that she had the most patience for things like this. Apparently three years ago was the last time Bucky was allowed to untangle the lights, because he had gotten so frustrated with them that he had managed to get a big pair of scissors from the kitchen without anyone realising, and just cut through them, threw the pieces at the girls, yelled ‘Done!’ and stormed out of the room to make himself a cup of tea. Steve laughed at the story and Bucky just shook his head, muttering about ‘uncooperative pieces of Christmassy hell’.

They managed to get the tree put together and straightened out with expert efficiency and, by the time they were done, Natasha had untangled the wired.

“Without the help of sharp objects.” She announced with a pointed look at Bucky, who just
shrugged and checked the tree was balanced one last time.

“Since Steve is the smallest, he should do the bottom bit of the tree,” Becca decided and Steve looked at her in confusion.

“You’re shorter than me, Becca.”

She forced him to stand up next to her, and Steve sighed but smiled slightly as he complied. Natasha and Bucky both confirmed that Steve was in fact a few inches taller than Becca, and she mumbled in annoyance as she got on the floor and pulled the box with the baubles and tinsel closer to her. Natasha picked the back to do, since she was the only one who believed the back – that was facing the wall and therefore out of sight – was just important as the rest of the tree and needed to be decorated too. Steve and Bucky stood side by side as Steve concentrated on the middle and Bucky decorated nearer the top, where Steve couldn’t reach.

Steve noticed how Bucky only held the baubles in his right hand, and only used the prosthetic to steady the branch, but he didn’t comment on it and made sure Bucky didn’t notice Steve watching him.

*Deck The Halls* started playing, and they all looked down to see Becca on YouTube on her phone. She put it down again once the music started and continued decorating the tree. Steve saw Bucky and Natasha both roll their eyes at the music, but they didn’t object, and Steve thought he could hear Natasha quietly humming along. And Bucky was definitely mouthing the words, even if no sound was coming out.

A piece of tinsel poked out from between the branches, and Steve jumped slightly in surprise, then looked up to see Natasha through the branches smirking slightly. He blushed, but luckily Natasha didn’t point out how he had just gotten scared by a piece of tinsel. Steve took the end Natasha was passing to him and finished threading it around the branches on his side as she had done at the back. Becca passed baubles up to Bucky so he wouldn’t have to keep bending down and standing up again, and Steve noticed quite a few were handmade, and most likely done by children in school. Bucky or Becca in school.

“What’s that?” Steve pointed to a hand shaped piece of paper Becca passed up to her brother, and Bucky turned it around to show him. It was a turkey fingerpainting, and Steve smiled slightly.

“Who’s is it?”

“Mine.” Bucky smiled a little and held his hand up to the handprint for comparison. Luckily, the handprint was of his right hand, or the mood might have dropped considerably. “I made it when I was seven.”

The handprint was barely a third of the size Bucky’s hands were now, and Steve couldn’t imagine Bucky having fingers as short and stumpy as the little turkey painting. “Did you do it as school?”

“Yeah, my art teacher had pretty much given up on trying to teach seven year olds about perspective, so she just gave us some bullshit task to do every week while she drank from a coffee mug that smelt suspiciously like my dad’s liquor cabinet. Christmas was her favourite time of the year, purely because there was always something she could make us do that didn’t involve us actually having to pay attention to anything.” Bucky chuckled lightly as he hung the thin card on the tree, then hung another Becca passed up beside it. This one was slightly smaller.

“Becca’s?” Steve asked and looked down at the girl. Becca looked up and nodded with a grin.

“Same teacher, just a few years later. Still given up on life, and still drinking something that
definitely was not coffee.”

Steve laughed again and hung a red bauble with ‘Merry Christmas, Barnes Family’ written along it in white. He guessed that one was either from a really dedicated teacher, another family member (maybe a distant relative), or from a friend of the family. He didn’t ask though, assuming they might get annoyed if he questioned every piece. He just hoped there wasn’t any particular place any of the pieces he was putting on were supposed to go, as per tradition or something.

The other pieces he hung were little angels, red and green baubles, and tiny Santas.

Once they were finished, they all stepped back to admire the tree, then Becca held up the lights to Bucky. Without a word, he took them and wrapped them around the tree, then plugged them into the wall behind the tree and turned them on. He fiddled about with the settings for a minute before rejoining them. The lights flicked between red, green, and blue, and despite only being small they were very bright. They alternated a few times, then flashed and went off, before starting the cycle again.

“Looks good.” Becca smiled, and the others all nodded in agreement.

Although the tree was the only festive thing in the room, it was already starting to feel a lot more Christmassy in there.

Next was the wall decorations. Bucky took a box of pins out of the cardboard box and asked Steve and Becca to hold one end of the line of reindeers each while Natasha held a point in the middle so it went in a ‘w’ shape instead of sagging into a ‘u’ shape. While they held it in position, Bucky pushed a pin into the tinselly material of the decoration to keep it in place and they stepped back to make sure it was straight before moving onto the next task.

Becca took out some angel ornaments and placed them along the mantelpiece, between the pictures of herself and Bucky as kids that were permanently there.

Bucky got a chair from the living room and stood on top of it as he took some pins from the box and put them between his lips so he would have both his hands free, and Natasha did the same on the other side of the light in the centre of the room’s ceiling. Becca then passed something else blue and tinselly up to Natasha, and Bucky gestured for Steve to do the same for him with the other blue piece. Steve passed one end up and Bucky held it against the ceiling close to the light with his metal hand and took a pin from between his lips with his other hand to push it into the ceiling and secure the decoration. Natasha finished doing the same on her side at the same time, and they both climbed of their chairs and moved them to the middle of their section almost in sync. They climbed back up on the chairs and Steve and Becca followed them to pass up the middle of the decoration for them to pin against the ceiling, again so it drooped slightly until it got to the middle, and repeated the actions to secure the end of the decoration in the corner of the room.

They moved their chairs to the other sides of the light and they all did the same thing for the next two corners of the room. Between the pieces of tinsel, they hung more things Becca and Bucky had made in school. A Santa head made of cardboard, with cotton wool to make the white lining of his hat and his beard, and googly eyes. A cardboard Christmas tree with pipe cleaners for tinsel. A 2D present with ribbon stapled to the card. And a gold star, also made of cardboard, and with glitter sprinkled over it.

*That explains why there’s glitter on everything.*

Bucky went to the mantelpiece and took down a picture in the middle of the shelf of Bucky holding baby Becca, and Steve frowned slightly in confusion as he placed it carefully in the cardboard box.
the decorations had been in, and stepped forward curiously as he replaced it with another picture. When he took it out of the box, Steve saw that the frame looked like it had been decorated by a child, with blotching green paint and messy red swirls, but he couldn’t see what the actual picture was because Bucky was still blocking it.

Once Bucky stepped away, Steve stepped forward to look at it and had to cover his mouth to try and stop himself from laughing out loud, but it did little to stifle his laughter. Natasha laughed too, but Steve noted that she wasn’t looking at the picture, so she must have seen it before and known exactly why Steve was laughing.

The picture was of one-year-old Becca and six-year-old Bucky, each sat on one of Santa’s knees each. That would have just been cute, and not at all funny, if it hadn’t been for the fact that they were both red faced and clearly screaming with tears streaking down their faces. The Santa in the picture looked very uncomfortable as he smiled at the camera for the picture, despite the screaming children.

“What did Santa ever do to you two?!” Steve managed to wheeze out, and Becca and Bucky laughed at him.

“He gave me coal the year before and I was still pissed at him.” Bucky told him with a completely serious expression, and Steve just laughed more.

“Wow… For a six year old, you could really hold a grudge for a long time.” Steve went along with it, and Bucky smiled and shrugged with a faux humble expression.

Becca set up a miniature Christmas tree on the island in the kitchen, in her room, the spare room, and in Bucky’s room, and Natasha hung wreaths on every door in the house, including the bedrooms.

Once that was all done, there was nothing left but to put the star on the top of the tree. Bucky had the honours of doing that – mostly because he was the tallest – and they all cheered and clapped once it was balanced on the top branch. Bucky took a dramatic bow, then pulled Steve to him and dipped the smaller man before kissing him, much to Steve’s surprise and embarrassed delight. He kissed Bucky back, and the girls both cheered louder. Steve was leant back against Bucky’s metal arm and he thought it should have been uncomfortable, but it wasn’t. He didn’t even notice it was metal until he felt Bucky’s flesh hand against the side of his face and figured it out through the process of elimination. As the kiss continued and started to get a little more heated, Becca started pretending to gag, and Natasha yelled, “Think of the children!”

Steve guessed she was covering Becca’s eyes, and he smiled a little against Bucky’s lips. A few months ago, doing this in front of his boyfriend’s little sister and best friend, or any audience at all for that matter, would have been unthinkable to Steve. But he was so comfortable with Bucky, Becca, and Natasha that he just couldn’t bring himself to care. Kissing Bucky was way worth the embarrassment of doing it in front of other people.

Bucky eventually let Steve back up, then bowed again and Steve laughed as he bowed too.

They returned to the couch after that, all four of them squeezing on together this time with Natasha at the end on the right, Becca next to her, then Bucky and finally Steve.

Since they were all in a Christmassy mood, Natasha got Netflix up on TV and signed into Bucky’s account before searching for Christmas movies. They settled on The Grinch, and Bucky pulled the afghan off the back of the couch to wrap around them all. It was starting to get a little chilly in the house without the heating on, but none of them could be bothered to get up and turn it on, so this
would have to do.

Steve curled up against Bucky’s side and rested his head on his metal shoulder, until Bucky wrapped his arm around his shoulders, and Steve moved to rest against Bucky’s chest instead. Becca was doing the same on Bucky’s other side, and his flesh fingers were running through Natasha’s hair and playing with odd strands of it, twirling the loose red curls around his fingers as Natasha rested against Becca’s shoulder.

Steve was the only one who stayed awake long enough to see the Grinch’s heard grown three sizes, but he didn’t want to get up, and the others all looked so peaceful where they were sleeping. So he left the credits rolling and closed his eyes as closed his eyes and relaxed against Bucky, using his boyfriend’s heartbeat as a lullaby to help him sleep.

He was sound asleep before the end of the song.
Chapter 35

Steve woke up several hours later, still on the couch, still resting against Bucky. The sun was up, but it wasn’t shining directly onto them, just on the floor in front of them, so that couldn’t have been the thing that awoke him. It took him several more seconds of disorientation before he realised it was the sound of his phone ringing in his pocket.

Bucky mumbled slightly in his sleep, his frown furrowed and his lips forming a pout. Steve smiled adoringly at him before he snuck out from under Bucky’s arm to answer the phone in another room.

“Steve! I’ve been trying you for hours, where have you been?” Angie demanded to know as soon as Steve accepted the call.

“Sorry, I was sleeping. What’s wrong?”

“The landlord showed up to speak to you. He’s pissed. Peg is trying to talk some reason into him, but it’s not going well.”

Steve closed his eyes with a frown. His rent was still late, and he hadn’t been home in a while and therefore hadn’t had time to speak to his landlord.

Said landlord, Mr Katler, was a jerk.

Whenever someone complained or even put in a comment about the many, many faults with the electricity and heating, Mr Katler would threaten to evict them if they didn’t like it there and claim there were plenty of other people who wanted to live in his building. He was lying, of course. There was a reason it was one of the cheapest apartment blocks in Brooklyn.

Mr Katler had always hated Steve, since he and his mother had first moved in almost four years before. Mr Katler was a fat, balding man with thick glasses, who always seemed sweaty, even though he hardly moved. Whilst Steve and Sarah Rogers were moving in, Mr Katler had been getting way too close to a young girl who used to live on the same floor as them. Her name was Belle, and she was a cute, dark-haired, blue-eyed Australian girl who lived there with her ill father who needed caring for, though he was still forced to work to support himself and his daughter. She was ten years older than Steve, making her twenty four at the time. Mr Katler was leant against the doorframe, blocking her in against the locked door of her own apartment. Steve later learnt that Mr Katler had only given her father one key, so he kept it and she would wait outside the apartment whenever she got home from work before he did. Steve had watched them with caution, worried for the girl, then Mr Katler leant forward to try and kiss her. Belle had pushed him away, and Mr Katler got mad and said that if she didn’t ‘give him a chance’, he would evict her and her father. Steve couldn’t let that go on anymore, so he broke away from his mother’s side to yell at Mr Katler. He was aware that he couldn’t evict anyone without just cause, and if Mr Katler did evict Belle and her father, they could sue him.

Belle had thanked Steve profusely, then turned to his mother – who had now came to his side with a look of shock – and told Sarah about how well she had raised Steve, and that he was a great boy. Sarah had initially been mad at Steve, he could tell, but that was when she hadn’t known what was happening down the hall. She had been too busy frantically searching for the apartment key she was worried she had already lost. But when she had heard Steve yelling at the man, calling him a manipulative pervert, she was almost beaming with pride. She asked Belle if she was alright, and invited the girl to stay in their apartment until her father got home.
Unfortunately, Mr Katler didn’t seem to care for the law, and there was an eviction notice pinned to Belle’s door a week later. By that time, she had been coming to their apartment after work every day until her father was home, and Sarah and Steve had both welcomed her with open arms. Steve could hear her crying in her apartment from his own, and her father trying to console her. That was the first time Steve had ever regretted sticking up for someone, but his regret was short-lived.

Sarah referred Belle to a Scottish lawyer she knew through the hospital. He had been a patient a few years ago when he got into a bad car accident, leaving him with a limp as a result of the damage done to the nerves around his spinal column. It could have been worse, he was close to being paralysed when he was first brought in, but Sarah had been the one to prevent that.

It was Sarah Rogers who spotted the slight inconsistency in his spine on the x-ray and told the doctors so they could get him to surgery to correct it.

The lawyer, Mr Gold, had said to Sarah that she was the best nurse he had ever had the pleasure of being under the care of – and then clarified that he had been a very sickly and clumsy child and therefore had been in a lot of hospitals under the care of a lot of nurses – and offered Sarah a favour. She still had his phone number tucked away for a rainy day.

Last Steve heard from Belle, she and her father were living in a much better building, equipped to make her father’s disability easier to deal with too, and Belle was dating Mr Gold.

Mr Katler still gives Steve dirty looks whenever he sees him. Mr Gold had won the court case for Belle and her father, and the compensation for their troubles – which Mr Katler had to pay to them – almost bankrupted the creep. He wouldn’t dare try to evict Steve and his mother right away. He was aware that Gold was a friend of Sarah’s, and although it had been a year since she died, Katler still wasn’t sure if the friendship between Sarah and Gold extended to Sarah’s son. Steve wasn’t sure either.

“Steve? Hello?” He heard Angie call out to him, and quickly snapped back to the present.

“Sorry… I’ll come home today and talk to him. Thanks for letting me know, and tell Peggy to leave it, I don’t want you two to get in trouble because of me.”

“If you’re sure… Good luck, Steve.”

They said their goodbyes, and hung up, then Steve tried to smooth out his clothes as best he could to look more presentable. He left a note for when Bucky woke up, saying his landlord wanted to speak to him, and he’d be back as soon as possible.

“Mr Katler? Angie said you wanted to speak to me?” Steve tried to sound humble and innocent, but he didn’t want to jeopardise his dignity too much in the process. His apartment wasn’t worth that much.

“Yeah, come in Rogers.” Mr Katler only glanced up from his papers for a second, then kicked the plastic chair opposite him out for Steve to sit down.

Steve could tell the pages were blank, and he had a video paused on his computer, which was turned away from Steve. But he didn’t point any of this out. No need to push his luck.

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, Katler looked up from the blank pages and at Steve. “Where’s your rent?”

Steve hadn’t expected him to be so blunt. He expected Katler to gloat about it, or taunt Steve
before getting to that. “I don’t have it yet…”

“You’re three weeks late.”

He was almost certain that that was an over exaggeration. It couldn’t have been three weeks since he last paid it. But there was no benefits to pointing it out. So he just went along with it, in the hopes of getting this other with. He would either have to pay extra, or he would be evicted. Katler had reason to evict him, unlike he did with Belle.

“You have three hours to get your shit out.”

“Three hours?!” Steve exclaimed.

He must have misheard him. There’s no way he expected Steve to move out within three hours. That wasn’t enough time to make other arrangements, hire a car or van to move his things, and pack it all up.

“Three hours.” The landlord repeated, looking at Steve over his glasses. “Or I call the police. Now get out of my office.”

He went back to staring at the blank papers in front of him, and Steve continued to stare at the man in shocked silence for a few minutes. The Katler reached for him phone, presumably to call the police, and that prompted Steve to stand and leave the cramped office.

*Three hours…*

Steve climbed the stairs up to his apartment and unlocked it, then looked around the room. It was pretty bare anyway, he didn’t have a lot of stuff. It wouldn’t really take very long to pack everything up. But he had to get boxes first. He only had one suitcase, and it was just an overnight bag.

He wasn’t angry, he wasn’t upset… He wasn’t even disappointed. After everything that had happened lately, getting evicted seemed pretty low on the “*what’s the worst that could happen?*” list.

Steve turned and took the few steps across the hall to Peggy and Angie’s apartment. They were both stood there as the door opened.

“So you guys have any boxes?”

Steve decided that he wasn’t going to tell Bucky what happened. Bucky would want Steve to move in with him, but he didn’t want to be more of a burden than he already was. He had moved all his things to Peggy’s and Angie’s apartment, and everything was piled up in one corner of the room. It made the room look rather messy, but Angie and Peggy assured him that it was fine. It was mostly just clothes, with a few photo albums and his art supplies. The mattress and couch, Katler could scrap them if he wanted to. They were barely usable anyway.

“So what’re you going to tell him?” Angie asked as he passed Steve a cup of tea.

He had heard her and Peggy whispering in the kitchen. They had though he hadn’t heard them, or he wasn’t paying attention, but he was. Ready to tune into any sounds of them complaining about him being a burden so he could leave without annoying them too much. Instead, he heard concern. Peggy was worried that Steve hadn’t really reacted to the news, but Angie was right in contemplating that it was most likely just the least of Steve’s worries of the past few weeks. He
also heard Peggy suggest sending something to Bucky as a ‘get well’ thing. It was a nice thought, and Steve fully expected Bucky to receive some sort of quirky but thoughtful gift in the not-too-distant future.

“Nothing.” Steve didn’t want to invite himself to stay with the girls, but they had already offered for him to stay with them until he found a new place. “When I have to go home, he’ll probably insist on walking me home. He doesn’t have his car anymore. Told the police to just sell it and give him the money for it after they got all the evidence they needed from it. He didn’t want it, because it reminded him of what happened. He’s getting a new one after Christmas, in time for when Becca has to go back to school so she won’t have to walk every day… It’s about a forty-five minute walk. I’ll tell him to just walk me to the building, then go home, and I’ll just come up here. Until I get a new place. Then I’ll just tell him I didn’t like that apartment, and I wanted a new one.”

“So… You’re going to lie to him?” Peggy frowned, clearly not keen on that idea. Not because she minded Steve staying with them. She didn’t. But she was a strong believer in not lying to the people you love. Even if lying is the best option – at least in Steve’s mind.

“I’m doing what’s best for him. Bucky doesn’t need more to worry about.”

“Shouldn’t you let Bucky decide what’s best for himself?” Angie pointed out, and Steve shook his head a little.

“He’s a sacrificer. He’d do anything to help the people he loves, even if it means he’ll suffer from it.”

Steve’s phone rang then, and he took it out of his pocket and frowned when he saw Bucky’s name on his screen. He would have woken up by now, and he’s have read the note and would want to know what his landlord had wanted. Bucky would be worried, and he would want to know that everything was alright. But it wasn’t.

So he didn’t answer it.

Steve declined the call, and put his phone back in his pocket. He instantly felt bad about it, remembering how Bucky had had a panic attack when Steve left while he was in hospital with no explanation. But Steve had given an explanation in the note, and Bucky may just assume he was still in the meeting with his landlord. He wouldn’t panic or worry about Steve this time.

Angie and Peggy both looked confused. They had seen Bucky’s name, and his picture on Steve’s screen, and they saw him decline the call. Steve could tell they were confused about why he would decline Bucky’s call instead of just speaking to him, but Steve wasn’t sure he if he was quite ready to lie directly to Bucky yet.

Becca answered the door when Steve knocked, two hours later. She was wearing a hideous Christmas sweater with reindeers on it and smiling widely.

“Hi Steve! How was your meeting with your landlord?” She stepped aside to allow Steve entrance to the house. “Merry Christmas Eve-Eve, by the way.”

Steve forced a smile at that. One more thing he hadn’t gotten; Christmas presents. The Wreck This Journal for Bucky had arrived and was tucked away safely with his photo albums and sketchbooks at Peggy and Angie’s, but he hadn’t had time to finish the pictures, or get Natasha and Becca anything. “Merry Christmas Eve-Eve to you too. And it was okay, he just wanted to know when I was paying rent.”
It was a lot easier to lie to Becca than he had expected. Bucky would be harder, but he might be able to manage it... He hoped he would be able to manage it.

“Can you pay it?” Becca looked concerned as she closed and locked the door behind Steve. A habit she had picked up recently.

“Yeah, I paid it then and there.” He smiled, and she smiled back in relief.

“Good! Do you want some cocoa? The kettle has just boiled.”

“Sure,” Steve followed Becca into the kitchen where Bucky and Natasha were stood beside the open back door, smoking and chatting.

Bucky smiled brightly when he saw Steve, but he stopped himself from going over to him while he had the cigarette in his hand. “Hey Steve! Everything okay?”

Steve nodded as he got a mug out of the cupboard, and tried to avoid meeting Bucky’s gaze. If Bucky asked, he could claim it was some of the smoke that had been blown into the house that caused him to look away.

He heard the hiss of something hot touching cold liquid and looked up to see Bucky dipping his cigarette in the snow. Bucky put the butt into the bin and turned to walk over to Steve, stopping in front of him.

“Is everything okay?” He asked again, and Steve instantly knew he had been busted. Nevertheless, he kept trying.

“Yeah, everything’s fine, Buck.” Steve smiled and leant up to kiss Bucky’s cheek. He smelt of smoke, but it didn’t bother Steve as much as he used to. He did wish Bucky would quit smoking, though. Not because the smell bothered Steve, but for the sake of Bucky’s health.

Bucky leant down to kiss Steve’s cheek in return, and used it as an opportunity to whisper in Steve’s ear without the others hearing. “Liar. We’ll talk about it later.”

He pulled back before Steve could reply, and nudged the shorter man out of the way so that he could make Steve’s cocoa himself. Bucky put just the right amount of mix and milk in, and Steve smiled as Bucky held the mug out for him, holding it in his metal hand so that Steve could take the handle.

Bucky had gotten a lot better with controlling the strength of the arm, and he hardly ever broke anything with it now.

Becca insisted on playing Mortal Kombat against Bucky, saying that she may finally be able to beat him. Natasha had suggested that maybe something with that much blood and violence was a bad idea, but Bucky assured her that he could tell the difference between his own blood and red pixels on a screen.

Becca was wrong.

She lost all of the five games she insisted on playing.

As Natasha and Becca played, Bucky tapped Steve’s shoulder and gestured for him to follow him upstairs and to Bucky’s bedroom. Steve contemplated pretending not to have noticed the signal, but Bucky had made sure Steve saw before he stood and left the room.
Steve sighed as he followed shortly after Bucky. There was no way he’d be able to lie so blatantly to Bucky face-to-face and with nothing to distract himself.

Bucky closed the door behind Steve and took his hand in his own flesh one to lead him over to the bed. They both sat down, and Bucky ran his thumb along the back of Steve’s hand. “You going to tell me what happened? You’re upset, I can tell.”

Steve shook his head stubbornly. “It’s fine, Buck. Everything’s fine. Don’t worry.”

He smiled as convincingly as he could, but Bucky just rolled his eyes. He could see though Steve’s fake smile the same way Steve could see through Bucky’s.

“Do you need help paying your rent?”

Steve just sighed and shook his head. He didn’t want Bucky’s pity, and he certainly didn’t want to take more of Bucky’s money than he already did. “Bucky, I can take care of myself. I don’t need you to support me.”

“I don’t mind helping you out of you need it. Stark is still paying me my usual wage, so I have plenty of money, and I got the money from my car. It sold for eight grand, I can afford to give you a couple of hundred for your rent.” Bucky’s tone of voice and expression was so honest, Steve had to look away.

He really would be okay with paying Steve’s rent for him. In fact, he’d probably want to pay his rent for Steve. That way, he would be able to help, and that’s all Bucky ever wanted to do. Bucky was always trying to help any way he could, even if someone didn’t want his help, like Steve. Steve didn’t want to rely on Bucky, he didn’t want to have to ask his boyfriend for a couple of hundred dollars to pay his rent. Boyfriends aren’t supposed to be cash machines you can kiss.

“I don’t need your help, Bucky!”

Bucky flinched when Steve rose his voice, and jumped back slightly. It immediately made Steve feel terribly and he reached over to take Bucky’s flesh hand in his, about to apologise, but Bucky pulled his hand out of his grip before he could.

“I just want to help…” Bucky whispered as he stared down at the carpet, and Steve moved a little closer to try and take his hand again. Thankfully, Bucky didn’t pull away this time.

“I know, Buck… I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell at you… I just hate taking your money all the time…”

“I have a hundred dollars I usually put away from every paycheck for fuel to get to and from work and I always have plenty of money without that hundred to support myself and Becca. Obviously, I don’t need it since I don’t have a car yet. So you can have it, and it’ll make no difference to me or Becca…”

Steve shook his head again. Bucky’s logic was sound, but the thought of taking that much from Bucky was still uncomfortable. Especially since Bucky would think it’s for rent, but Steve doesn’t have an apartment to pay rent on anymore. He supposed he could give it to Peggy and Angie as rent, but he knew they wouldn’t accept it. He couldn’t use the money to buy the Christmas presents he hadn’t yet bought either. Buying Bucky, Bucky’s sister, and Bucky’s best friend presents using Bucky’s money didn’t seem right, even if Steve intended to pay it all back.

And he definitely intended to pay it all back. No matter how long it took, Steve would pay Bucky back for everything he owed him, even if Bucky didn’t believe Steve owed him anything. It was
still unlikely Steve would ever become a famous artist, but he could do other things involving his passion. He could illustrate children’s books or something.

“Thanks Buck, but I can get by on my own.” Steve let go of Bucky’s hand so he could stand up and leave the room, hopefully to end to conversation. But Bucky’s hand just moved to Steve’s shoulder to keep him in place, then he ducked his head slightly so Steve was looking at him even with his eyes cast down.

“Thing is… You don’t have to.” He placed a metal finger under Steve’s chin to tilt his head up to look at him. “‘Cause I’m with you ‘till the end of the line, pal…”

Steve smiled a little and leant forward to kiss Bucky. He appreciated the sentiment, he really did. But he had to learn to be self-sufficient. Steve couldn’t rely on others all the time. He was already relying on Peggy and Angie for a place to stay at the minute. Steve had no reason to take Bucky’s money and add to that debt.

“I love you, Bucky.” Steve smiled when he pulled back from the kiss, and Bucky opened his eyes to smile back.

“I love you too, Stevie.”

Steve couldn’t help but beam at the nickname, and Bucky chuckled lightly as he leant forward to kiss him again.

Steve wasn’t entirely sure where Bucky wanted that kiss to lead, but he himself had expected it to remind sweet and chaste. But it quickly developed into something much more heated and passionate. Steve still felt bad about startling Bucky, so he tried to pour all his apologies into the kiss, and it seemed as though Bucky was pouring his forgiveness into it too, because when they pulled back, Steve felt less guilty about it as if he had heard Bucky forgive him.

The silent forgiveness wasn’t quite enough, though, so he offered to make Bucky some cocoa when they went back downstairs as a peace offering. Not that there was a lack of peace in the air, but he still felt he needed to do something for him. Bucky agreed to the offer and took his hand on his right one before leading him downstairs. As they walked, Bucky ran his metal fingers through his hair.

“Is my hair getting a little too long?”

Steve looked up at him. It hadn’t grown much since before this whole ordeal, but at that time Bucky was almost due for a haircut anyway. It was a little floppier than usual, and almost hung in his eyes. It reminded Steve of the picture on Bucky’s bedroom wall of him and Becca after winning a dance competition when he was about fourteen, by Steve’s guess.

“It makes you look younger. It’s cute.” Steve smiled and Bucky pouted.

“I’m not cute!”

“You are cute!” Steve argued back as he laughed and led Bucky into the kitchen, past the girls who were both too engrossed in their latest Mortal Kombat battle to realise they had returned.

Steve wouldn’t be surprised if neither of them had even noticed them leave in the first place.

He busied himself making the drink as Bucky sat at the island. They remained in a comfortable silence for a few minutes before Bucky spoke up again.
“You’d tell me if something was wrong, wouldn’t you? Like, with your apartment or something?”
He asked quietly and seriously.

Steve hesitated for barely a second before turning to face him with a smile. He carried two mugs over and placed one in front of Bucky and left one in front of himself before answering. “Of course.”

Despite Bucky’s smile, Steve felt terrible. Bucky had just given Steve the perfect opportunity to just come clean and tell him what happened, and that he’s practically homeless now, living with his friends. But his pride refused to allow him to just tell his boyfriend the truth.

Steve could tell that was going to come back and bite him in the ass sooner or later.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Christmas Eve.

The whole of “Christmas Eve-Eve” – as Becca called it – was spent making Christmas themed cookies. Natasha mixed the batter, since she knew exactly how much of everything to put in without the need of a recipe. Bucky was in charge of making sure they didn’t burn, since he could put them in and out of the oven without the risk of burning himself as long as he used the prosthetic. That left Steve and Becca in charge of decoration. Becca insisted that Steve was the best at decorating, what with being the artist and all, but Becca had more experiences decorating cookies. It took three attempts for Steve to realise that he should wait for the cookies to cool before attempting to add the frosting if he wanted it to look like anything besides a gloopy mess.

Bucky had stopped asking Steve about what his landlord wanted, and Steve tried to distract himself from dwelling on what had happened, and the implications his lie may come with. But as long as he found a new place quickly, Bucky would never have to know.

After the fifth batch, the smell of melting caramel and cooking cookie batter was starting to make everyone in the kitchen start to feel sick. They put all the decorated cookies in Tupperware containers in the fridge, then Natasha, Steve, and Bucky had a glass of wine each while Becca drank blackcurrant from a wine glass.

Natasha had to go home then, and help her Aunt cook for the meal the family would all come round for the next day. Bucky went to walk her out, then returned fifteen minutes later with a small smile on his face and a smudge of Natasha’s lipstick on his cheek.

Steve stayed for another half an hour, then announced that he had to go home too. He needed to look for apartments. Of course he didn’t verbalise this, instead he just said he was going to see Peggy, Angie, and Sam, before Christmas.

As expected, Bucky offered to walk Steve home and ignored Steve’s protests that it wasn’t necessary. Bucky locked the door with Becca inside the house as he left, and kept his left hand in his pocket, presumably around his keys.

Steve smiled as he linked arms with Bucky whilst they walked. They remained mostly in a comfortable silence as they walked, but this gave Steve time to really think about his deception. If Bucky ever found out, how would he react? Steve hoped he’d understand why he felt the need to lie about it.

He pushed the thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on the here and now. Bucky was glancing around the streets, looking down every alley as they passed it, and Steve noticed that he tensed slightly whenever a car raced past them. He squeezed Bucky’s arm a little tighter, hoping to provide some comfort, and smiled when Bucky looked at him.

“Everything’s okay, Buck…”

Bucky nodded a little and pulled his arm out of Steve’s grip to wrap it around his shoulders instead,
to pull him against his side. They eventually reached Steve’s building, and he stopped, pulling Bucky to a stop too before he could get to the door of the building.

“This is okay, you can go home now, Bucky.” He smiled, trying not to look too anxious.

Bucky looked between Steve and the door, clearly a little confused. “I can walk you to your apartment if you want…”

“It’s okay.” Steve shook his head and quickly tried to think up an excuse. “Becca will want you back as soon as possible, she’s still a little paranoid and I can tell you are too. You want to be home, and with your sister, as soon as possible.”

Bucky nodded a little and wrapped both arms around Steve’s waist to tug him a little closer. He leant down a little and Steve smiled as he leant up to meet Bucky half way for a kiss. The kiss was soft and sweet, and it only lasted a few seconds. Once they pulled back, Bucky immediately looked around them as if looking for someone who could pose a threat to them. He had had his eyes closed for the few seconds that the kiss lasted for, so Steve guessed he was just uncomfortable with not being able to pay attention to his surroundings, even for a small amount of time.

Steve cupped his cheek to nudge Bucky to look at him, then smiled at him comfortingly. “I love you, Bucky.”

“I love you too, Steve.” Bucky smiled back and kissed Steve again, quicker this time, then reluctantly let go of his waist to step back. “I won’t walk you up but I’m not leaving until you’re inside.”

Steve laughed lightly, and Bucky grinned in return, but he still didn’t walk away and Steve realised he wasn’t kidding. He was really going to stand there until Steve was inside.

He blushed a little and stepped away from Bucky and up the few stairs to the door of the building. After a quick glance inside to make sure the landlord wasn’t in sight, Steve looked back at Bucky, smiled, and went into the building.

He watched through the window as Bucky looked around him before he started walking back in the direction they had come, both his hands shoved in his pockets and his head low.

Steve sighed and began to climb the stairs up to his temporary residence.

After a quick check of his bank details, Steve realised he only had about two thousand dollars he could afford to spend on a new apartment. He really had to get a new job.

Peggy and Angie suggested getting a new job before looking for a new apartment, so he could save up more in the meantime, and Steve agreed that it was probably his best option.

“Put the paper down, Steve, and come have some dinner.” Angie called over.

He looked up from the couch to where Peggy and Angie were setting the table, then set the newspaper aside to join them. Steve sighed as he sat down at the table and smiled when Peggy poured him a glass of wine with a smile of her own.

“How’s the search going?” Angie asked as she sat opposite him beside Peggy.

Steve shrugged as he put his napkin over his lap. The job search wasn’t going very well. Most of the jobs that would pay enough for him to get a better apartment required more qualifications that
Steve had. The only jobs in anything to do with art required some form of official art education or past experience in the field. Steve was grateful that neither of the girls pushed for a verbal answer.

As always, the food looked and smelt amazing. It tasted just as perfect. While they ate, Peggy and Angie told Steve stories of the terrible people they had to deal with at the diner, and recounted a tale of when a man slapped Angie’s ass and Peggy almost got fired for threatening to stab him and losing the diner a regular customer. But, on the plus side, the manager working that day was close to doing the same when he saw how the customer was treating his staff, so he vouched for Peggy and she was able to keep her job.

Angie then jumped up with a small screech and dragged Peggy out of the room. Steve initially thought there was some kind of insect in the room that Angie was afraid of, but a quick scan around showed nothing. He heard them talking in the other room, and Steve just assumed it was a private conversation and kept eating his curry.

They were only gone for a few seconds, and when they returned they were both grinning at him, which made Steve a little uncomfortable.

“What…? Do I have something on my face?” Steve immediately wiped around his mouth with his napkin to wipe away any curry sauce that might be there, but the girls shook their heads.

“You can work with us!” Angie blurted out and Peggy slapped her arm lightly.

“Ang! You said we were going to build up to it!”

“Sorry English!”

Steve looked between them in confusion. “What’re you talking about?”

“David, who works on the tills mostly but does some waitering too, but honestly he is the worst waiter I’ve ever met. He messes up every order and no one can read what he writes on the notepad to send orders through to the kitchen, so the cook always ends up cooking the wrong thing and then the customers get mad and no one is really sure who’s fault it is, because it’s technically David’s fault for not writing it clearly, but he argues it’s the cook’s fault for not reading it right-”

“Angie, get to the point, dear.” Peggy cut in to prompt her. It wasn’t unusual for Angie to get a little side-tracked when it came to news she was excited about. She went off on tangents a lot because all the information would get muddled up in her mind and she finds it hard deciding which bits are most important and which bits are irrelevant to the point she is trying to make. It was endearing though, and never annoying.

“Right! Anyway! David got sick of everyone blaming him for getting things wrong, and his father just started his own business, so he’s leaving to go help his father. He gave in his two weeks’ notice about a week and a half ago and they haven’t had anyone apply to take his place yet, mostly because the managers keep forgetting to post the vacancy online. So! We can get you an interview, you already have experience in working with the public. Your experience is in retail but you know how to work tills and if you take David’s job you’ll be mostly managing the till anyway, and I’m sure you’ll do fine with being a waiter, your handwriting is beautiful and easy to read…”

“Basically, you’d be perfect for the job.” Peggy finished for her with a matching smile on her lips.

“You think so?” Steve asked, a little nervous. It would be fun working with Angie and Peggy, and he did have pretty eligible handwriting…

“I know so!” Angie answered, and Steve’s smile grew to match the girls’.
“Okay… If you can get me an interview I’ll try my best. Do you need my résumé?”

They both shook their heads as they sat down to continue eating, and Peggy explained. “You’ll need to bring it with you to the interview, but we can vouch for you enough to get you to that point. And we can provide character references if the manager that interviews you requires some. Some do, some don’t bother.”

Steve nodded with a smile and picked up his fork again. “Thank you…”

“You’re welcome!”

“Happy to help!”

Never doubt Peggy Carter and Angie Martinelli.

They went to their shifts at five in the afternoon and returned at ten with word that he had an interview set up for the twenty seventh of December.

Steve had made them some food for when they got in, as a way of trying to be the best houseguest they had ever had so he wasn’t imposing as much. They told him that it was no problem getting him the interview, and so soon, but Steve suspected that Angie probably followed the on-duty manager around for a while bugging them before Peggy stepped in with her amazing negotiation skills.

They girls went to bed not long after that, but Steve could hear that they weren’t sleeping. What he could hear made his face heat up, and he felt like he was intruding on something, so he put his earphones in and pulled his sketchbook onto his lap. He wouldn’t be able to do the big pictures he had intended to give to Natasha, Bucky, Becca, Sam, Peggy, and Angie, but he could do some little ones so he could still give them something at Christmas.

For Natasha, he drew her from memory in the costume she had worn for Halloween. She had looked like an assassin or spy, so he drew her crouched on a rooftop with a handgun on her hip and a sniper in her hands, her hair blowing out in the wind behind her. He made most of the picture dark, colouring the sky a dark grey except for the area around Natasha, which he left white as if she was glowing. The buildings were light grey, and inside the windows were black. He got a metallic silver and a darker shade of the same colour to do the gun, making the details a little darker. The skin-tight jumpsuit was coloured black with a silver outline to her body and silver shadows to make the suit look like the leather she had worn to the Halloween party of Bucky’s. The whole picture was in dark colours except her hair, which he did a shocking red, and her one open eye, which he coloured bright green. The other eyes was closed as she concentrated into the sight of the sniper on the tripod in front of her.

It took a few hours, but the finished project was worth it.

Next, he did Sam’s. He got a picture up on his phone of Sam and Riley, his co-pilot from when he was in the army. He had died in the field, and Sam only had a few pictures with him. The one Steve had was one Sam had sent him a while ago when Steve asked who Riley was. He had heard Sam mention him to his mother on the phone. The picture was of them both in their army uniforms with their arms around each other. Sam was laughing at something Riley said, and Riley had a proud grin on his face.

Steve drew then both in their uniforms, and got a picture up on his ancient laptop of the cockpit of the type of plane Sam and Riley would fly so that he could draw them both in the pilot and co-pilot
seats, laughing with each other. He did as much detail as he could in the cockpit and tried to colour Riley as well as he could from the one picture he had. He wanted Riley to look as realistic as possible, and the finished project was pretty good, in Steve’s opinion.

He just hoped the picture wouldn’t upset Sam.

For Angie and Peggy, he drew a picture of them kissing. It was just their heads and shoulders, so the bottom faded out, and drew a wreath of roses and lilacs around them like a frame. He put extra detail into their hair to make it look as complex and accurate as possible. He even matched their lipstick as accurately to what they would usually wear as possible. Peggy’s was a bright shade of red, and Angie’s was a more subtle peach colour.

For Becca, he drew a large stage and coloured most of the page, only pressing down lightly with the black pencil to make it a little lighter and tried not to let it streak. It probably would have been easier to use black paper, but he didn’t have any on hand, and he didn’t want to impose on Bucky and Becca on Christmas day, so he would give them their presents tomorrow on Christmas Eve. He drew a spotlight and rubbed out the black within the light to change that part of the paper back to while, then smudged around it so it looked less blocky and more like an actual light. He rubbed out a few shapes outside the light too, and got pictures up on his laptop of famous dancers to draw them like ghosts along the stage, either side of the spotlight. He drew them in just enough detail that Becca would be able to tell who they are, but kept them all mostly vague so it would be clear that they were just in the background. The main star, Steve drew in the spotlight.

He drew Becca in her dance leotard and skirt, making the red stand out against the black of the rest of the costume as much as possible. He drew her in an Arabesque dance position, facing one side of the stage, and drew on red lips. He made her eyes bright blue and her eyeliner dark to accentuate them. He wasn’t sure how to draw her hair at first. When performing, she usually had it up in a bun or a ponytail, but she preferred it down. He compromised by drawing it in a ponytail high on her head, but so that her hair fell over the shoulder closest to the viewer, so that the picture still showed that it was long and wavy. He coloured it brown and added streaks of lighter brown and some very light brown where the light would reflect off it.

Steve glanced up at the clock when he was finished and saw that it was nearly five in the morning. He took his earphones out and couldn’t hear Angie or Peggy anymore, so he figured they would definitely be asleep by now.

The only one he had left to do was Bucky, and he honestly had no idea how to draw that. He wasn’t sure if he should draw him with or without the metal arm either.

Steve thought back to a time when Bucky had fallen asleep with his head on Steve’s chest and smiled a little. He had had his right arm slung over Steve and his left arm tucked under himself, and it was before the incident. But Steve had drawn pictures of Bucky asleep before, and Bucky had seen them. That would be nothing new.

Instead, he thought about their first official date, at the museum.

He smiled when he remembered Bucky’s face as he watched Steve draw, and flicked through his book to find the drawing of the sunset he had done to use it as a reference.

He drew the sunset again, but this time he added colour to it as best as he could remember. He added pinks and oranges with a smile, then drew the pillars to the museum either side of the page and the steps. On the steps, he drew Bucky and himself from behind, heads both turned to kiss each other. He drew his own hand on Bucky’s waist, and Bucky’s on Steve’s shoulders, making sure to include the slight upturn of Bucky’s lips as he smiled, and the same for his own. Bucky’s hair was
blown back a little by the wind, making it stick up a bit more than his usual dishevelled look made it, and Steve’s hair was across his forehead, almost in Bucky’s eyes.

After adding a slight blush to his own lips, and colouring Bucky’s hair the same colour as Becca’s with the same subtle highlights, Steve smiled at the finished product.

After putting his sketchbook carefully into the drawer beside the couch that Peggy and Angie had cleared for him to use, Steve decided it was time for bed. He’d decide in the morning, with an unclouded mind, whether the pictures were good enough.

In the morning, Steve showed Peggy and Angie all the pictures he had drawn the night before, besides the one he was going to give to them.

Peggy was particularly blown away by Natasha’s gift, and Angie commented that if that was accurate to how Natasha looked, she may have to leave Peggy for her. Steve expected Peggy to at least pretend to be offended, but she just agreed that she’d leave Angie for her too. After showing them some pictures of Natasha that he had on his phone, and they realised how accurate the drawing was (besides the clothes, of course) they demanded to meet her one day, and Steve agreed to introduce them with a laugh.

They said that they all looked amazing, and Angie particularly loved the one of Steve and Bucky in front of the museum.

“Are you going to put them in frames? So you can wrap them?”

Steve hadn’t really thought about how he was going to present them. “That’s a good idea, but isn’t it a little late to go shopping? It’s Christmas Eve…”

Both girls laughed at him. “Oh hon! We’re going shopping in an hour, come with us!”

Steve didn’t particularly like the idea of going shopping that day, there would be so many people around… But if all he got his friends and his boyfriend was a drawing, he supposed he could risk the bitter cold and even more bitter last-minute shoppers for them.

They were all dressed and ready to go within an hour, and Peggy leant Steve a blue scarf she didn’t wear, since he had little to fend off the cold.

Peggy drove, and spent twenty minutes just looking for a parking space. Eventually, they managed to get into the mall, and Angie insisted on her and Peggy each linking arms with Steve so they didn’t lose him in the sea of shoppers. Steve rolled his eyes but allowed them to link up either side of him. He wasn’t used to girls linking arms with him, so he wasn’t sure what to do with his hands. He couldn’t leave them at his side, the girls’ arms around slip off him or look like they were escorting him to a jail cell. He couldn’t keep them up because his arms would start aching. Steve settled for putting his hands in his jacket pockets, which meant his elbows were slightly bent.

Since it was freezing, Peggy insisted they go to Starbucks first. And it was early in the morning and they could all use the caffeine boost if they were going to have to put up with people barging past them, elbowing their ways through the stores, and all the noise around them.

Steve never realised just how many people waited until last minute to do their shopping before. But, in all fairness, Steve never had to buy for more than one two people before.

After they bought their drinks – which Peggy paid for – they first went to a hunting store so Peggy could buy her father some new fishing gear to send to him back in England. Steve was mildly
alarmed by pretty much everything in that store.

Angie bought her mother some perfume and her father some headphones and Peggy bought her mother a beautiful sundress to wear during summer.

They bought books from another store for various friends, then led Steve to a homeware store and to the decoration section.

There were so many more photo frames than Steve ever thought there would be. He didn’t understand how someone could need this much variety, until he started looking specifically for each person, then realised that some just didn’t go with the pictures they needed to hold.

For Peggy and Angie, he picked a light pink frame with green vines along the edges, and ladybirds along the bottom, with a dove on one corner. As soon as he picked it up, Angie commented on how beautiful it was, and Steve tried not to give them the chance to guess it was for them, but he sensed they already knew. It was the perfect size for the paper too.

For Sam, he picked a light and dark green one, with camouflage colours around the frame. He figured it was appropriate. For Natasha he picked a thick wooden frame that had been painted black and had raised roses carved into it, with (fake) rubies in the centre of the bigger ones. The black and red suited the picture well.

The one he picked for Becca was a metallic blue that seemed lighter when the light hit it, and for Bucky’s, he picked a teal frame with dark blue fault lines painted underneath the varnished finish to make it look aged and vintage. The colour would go well in his blue room too. Becca’s, Bucky’s, and Angie and Peggy’s were all landscape, and Sam’s and Natasha’s were portrait.

He paid for it all and followed Angie and Peggy to a jewellery shop, so they could buy a few things for their friends at the diner. It was relatively cheap in there, and Steve did a few mental calculations, and decided he could afford to spend a little extra.

Steve persuaded Angie and Peggy to pick something each for him to buy for them, since he wasn’t sure what they would want. Since they were there, Steve figured he may just get them to pick something themselves, that way he knows they’ll like it. They refused at first, saying whatever he drew for them was enough, but Steve insisted it was okay.

Angie picked a silver necklace that had a silver oval hanging from it with a light blue stone in it, which Peggy pointed out matched her eyes. He wasn’t that expensive, but Angie continuously asked if the price was okay, and if it was too much she would pick something else. Steve shook his head with a smile and picked up the box with the necklace in. Peggy picked a silver bracelet in the shape of a thick chain, with red stones between the links, and Steve bought them both, had them gift-wrapped, and refused to give them the items until tomorrow.

Whilst he was there, he bought Sam a watch with a leather strap and gold face, a silver necklace with a delicate chain and a solid silver star hanging from it for Becca, a black rope bracelet with charms hanging off it for Natasha, and a gold (fake gold, obviously) ring with a fake ruby held in the centre by a gold circle for Bucky. The gold band was thick, so Steve hoped Bucky didn’t think it was too feminine.

Steve had seen Mr Gold wear rings like that before (although his ring had a silver band), and it never looked too feminine on him. Or, more accurately, Mr Gold didn’t particularly care whether or not it looked feminine. He liked the ring – Steve vaguely remembered hearing him tell Sarah that it was his mother’s once – and so he wore it. Steve didn’t suppose Bucky would care either, but he wasn’t 100% sure, since Bucky’s self-esteem had been taking some major hits lately.
As Peggy drove them home, Steve took out the ring to look at it again, and Angie made a light-hearted comment about it looking a bit like an engagement ring. Steve laughed along, then turned his attention back to it.

No. If he were to propose one day, it wouldn’t be with a $20, fake-gold, fake-jewelled ring from the mall. It would be expensive, and beautiful. Maybe Steve would work with a jeweller to create a unique ring specifically for Bucky, which suited his personality, his style, and his tastes. Something Bucky would be proud to wear. Something Bucky deserved.

Then Steve realised, Bucky might not even be able to wear an engagement ring, or a wedding ring. Traditionally, they went on the left ring finger. If Bucky put a ring on his metal fingers it would simply slip off… Steve supposed he could just wear it on his right hand, but Bucky was already sensitive about the limitations he now had to live with, the idea of that might upset him.

Hopefully, if Steve and Bucky ever got married, Bucky would be more comfortable with what happened by then and would accept that he’d have to change the tradition slightly, with little or no sadness.

Peggy and Angie had taken all the presents into their bedroom, including some things for Steve that he didn’t notice them buy. They were good at being sneaky. If Natasha were really a spy, Peggy and Angie would be her perfect partners.

Steve kept his things in the drawer with his sketchbook and made Angie promise not to look in there. Peggy took little persuasion, but Steve had to bribe Angie with chocolate to make her agree.

They went into their room to sort their presents and Steve used it as an opportunity to sort the pictures out and put them into frames. He used a pair of scissors to cut the papers out of his book so he wouldn’t risk ripping the page, then superglued each piece to some thin card to make the paper more durable, being careful not to leave any air bubbles between the paper and the card.

It ended up looking okay, so he smiled and set about putting each picture into its designated frame, carefully cutting paper and card to resize the pieces to fit. Luckily, the pages he had to resize were just cutting off blank paper or basic scenery from around the edges and the actual art wasn’t effected.

Peggy had left some wrapping paper beside Steve in case he wanted to use it, as well as some tissue paper. He used the tissue paper to pad the around the frames with bumps and wrapped extra around the small bird on the edge of Peggy and Angie’s so that it wouldn’t break off. Once they were all wrapped, most of them looked a little puffy, like it could be clothes, but at least they wouldn’t be able to guess what it was from looking at it alone.

He also wrapped the jewellery boxes carefully to make sure everything was neat, then delicately piled them in the drawer, ordering them so that none would be damaged by the weight of the others.

Peggy and Angie announced that they were going to Angie’s parent’s house for dinner, so Steve had the apartment to himself while they were gone. They wouldn’t be back until later, unless they decided to just spend the night. They always said they would only stay for a few hours, but Angie’s mother always convinced them to stay the night regardless. That would probably lead to them spending Christmas day there too, so Steve agreed to give them their presents now so they would have them before Boxing Day.

He handed them the jewellery first, which they both made a show of being surprised by, even
though they had picked it, and Steve laughed at their over dramatics.

Steve warned them to be very careful with the next one, so they didn’t break it, and Angie took that responsibility. Angie had a tendency of tearing the paper to shreds to get to her presents. As soon as they saw it, they both gasped in unison.

“Steve, this is amazing!”

“It’s so adorable! Is that what we look like when we kiss?” Angie asked and Peggy laughed.

“Yeah, Ang, when we kiss a wreath of roses and lilies appear around us,”

“He knows what I mean!”

Steve chuckled and nodded. “Pretty much. Besides the flowers, of course. It’s usually a wreath of guys thinking it’s hot when two girls make out.”

They both laughed at that and pulled him into a hug as thanks, then Angie rushed out of the room to get the presents for Steve.

They had each gotten him one each. Peggy’s present was a blue t-shirt with Van Gogh’s Starry Night on it. It was amazing, and she insisted that Steve put it on right away. It was a perfect fit too, but Steve wasn’t particularly surprised by that. Peggy was always great at guessing measurements. She guessed Angie’s bra size after their first encounter, although she never told Steve this, because she was too sweet to reveal something like that. Angie had told him a few months after they had started dating.

Angie’s gift was a new hat. It was a Trapper hat, with the ear flaps on both side and soft fur inside. Steve laughed as Angie tore it out of his hands to put it on him. It was a little big, but it was cosy, and it would definitely keep him warm.

He hugged them both as thanks, and they thanked him again for the picture, then apologised as they said they had to go wrap presents before they had to be at Angie’s parents.

Steve waved off their apology and smiled.

While the girls were wrapping presents, Steve called Sam to wish him Merry Christmas Eve and to ask when they could hang out so Steve could give him his present.

“I was just about to call you to ask the same thing!” Sam exclaimed down the phone and laughed. “Are you free today?”

“Yeah, I can come over to yours today.” Steve smiled and they arranged a time, then said their farewells and hung up.

Angie and Peggy left shortly after, with a shout of “Merry Christmas” and Peggy tossing Steve a spare key. He had about an hour and a half before he needed to be at Sam’s, which gave him about an hour before he had to set off.

He kept the watch and the photo frame out, since he would be giving them to Sam soon. He still had a while to wait, so he decided to make himself a sandwich. Angie and Peggy insisted he could eat whatever he wanted. He watched an episode of a TV show that was only half an hour long, then washed and put away his plate and the knife he used for the butter. By then, it was about time to leave. There was still a little time, but Steve could just take a slow stroll.
He put the presents in his backpack and wrapped his coat and new scarf – courtesy of Peggy – around himself, then set off towards Sam’s home.

Steve was a little early, but Sam insisted he wasn’t doing anything anyway as he ushered Steve inside. Sam’s house was warm, and very comforting in comparison to the freezing cold, snowy environment outside.

Sam brought Steve a glass of orange juice as Steve took his coat and scarf off to hang it up, then immediately went to sit in front of the artificial fireplace. It had fake flames on a screen and fake coal made of painted-black rocks, and it was extremely inviting.

Instead of suggesting they sit on the couch, Sam just joined him on the floor, holding three wrapped presents himself as Steve took his out.

“This one is a gag gift more than anything. I just thought it’d be funny.” Sam chuckled as he handed Steve the first item. It felt like a book.

Steve opened it and rolled his eyes when he read the title. “Grow Taller Secrets.”

“Hilarious. Thanks. I’ll study it religiously.” He spoke in a monotone.

“I was going to get you a step ladder, but I couldn’t wrap it.” Sam laughed again before handing him another present. “This one’s not a joke.”

It felt like a DVD, and he unwrapped it then smiled brightly. It was a copy of The Wizard of Oz, one of Steve’s favourite films growing up.

“Thanks Sam,” He leant over and pulled his friend into a hug.

Sam hugged back, then held the other one up to Steve. “This is your main gift.”

“I have a ‘main gift’? I feel like a kid again.” He smiled as he took the present. It was a lot bigger than the others, and it looked like a shoebox from the outside. It was a shoe box, and inside was a pair of Kamik NationPlus winter boots. Steve knew for a fact that these boots were top quality, and he knew they were expensive.

He looked up at Sam in surprise, then back at the boots. They weren’t second hand. There was still paper in the box and inside the boots to keep the shape, and they weren’t Sam’s size, they were Steve’s.

“How much were these?”

“You’re not supposed to know the price of you presents. And it’s rude to ask.” He winked, then gestured down at Steve’s shoes with a shrug. “Besides, you need them.”

Steve looked down at his shoes with a small frown. That was true, he did need some new shoes. The only shoes he had were dress shoes and converse, and his converse were starting to fall apart. There was a hole somewhere on the bottom of one that made his sock wet when he walked in the snow or rain. Which, at this time of year, was pretty much unavoidable.

“You didn’t need to spend this much, Sam…”

Sam rolled his eyes. “You don’t know how much I spent.”

“I could just google it. I’m connected to your wifi, it’d only take a few seconds.”
“Well, don’t. Just appreciate it.”

Steve sighed, but then smiled and put the box aside to pull Sam into a hug again, tighter this time. “Thank you…”

“You’re welcome, Steve.”

They eventually pulled away and Sam took the shoes out of the box. “Try them on.”

Steve remembered that he had stood in a particularly deep pile of snow on the way over and shook his head. “My socks are wet, I don’t want to get them soggy right away.”

Apparently Sam had thought of everything. He reached into one of the boots and took out a pack of new thermal socks.

With no other excuses, Steve took his converse and socks off and put them in the shoe box, then put the new socks and winter boots on. They were a perfect fit, and Steve was surprised at how comfortable they were. Since they were thick and build to withstand the elements, he expected them to be bulky and uncomfortable, although practical. But the lining inside made them very comfy, and they were close fitted so he could walk comfortably, but not tight enough for it to hurt.

Once Sam finished making him walk around the apartment, Steve sat back down and handed Sam the first present. The watch.

Sam grinned and ranted about how he had needed to get himself a watch for months, and Steve laughed when he asked if it was real gold. Sam obviously knew it wasn’t real gold, but he didn’t mean it in a taunting way, so Steve took the joke with no offense.

When Sam unwrapped the photo frame, his smile dropped. He recognised that the other man was supposed to be Riley, and Steve immediately worried that it was too personal, or too upsetting and he had overstepped some kind of boundary.

As he was about to apologise, Sam put the frame aside carefully, then pulled Steve into a tight hug. They remained like that for a few minutes, then he whispered “thank you” into Steve’s ear. Steve smiled and patted Sam’s back as he told him it was no problem.

Steve stayed for an extra hour, then told Sam he would have to head home soon. Sam insisted on walking him back, claiming it was just so he could make sure the boots worked when it counted.

Steve hadn’t told Sam about losing his apartment or having to move in with Peggy and Angie. There was no point. He didn’t need Sam’s sympathy, especially not this close to the holidays. It would just bring Sam down.

They stopped outside the apartment, and Steve thanked Sam again for the boots, the box with his converse in tucked into his backpack. Sam thanked Steve for the picture of him and Riley, and commented on how much it looked like him and how talented Steve was.

Steve quickly brushed that off before they said their goodbyes and Sam left to walk home again.

“Merry Christmas Eve!” Steve had to rip the phone away from his ear as Becca, Bucky, and Natasha all screamed the greeting down the phone at him, barely a second after he answered.

“Wow, deafness! What I always wanted! How did you guys know?” Steve joked when he moved the phone back to himself, and heard all three of them laugh on the other end.
“Are you coming over today?” Becca asked excitedly, and he heard the sound of skin lightly hitting skin as Bucky spoke.

“Becca! Don’t sound too eager, we don’t want him to know we’re that into him!”

Steve laughed as a blushed coloured his cheeks. “Aren’t you busy? Don’t you have traditional family stuff to do?”

“Natasha’s here.” Bucky reasoned and there was another – much harder – sound of skin-on-skin, followed by Bucky’s yelp.

“Bitch I am family!” She declared and there was another laugh before Bucky spoke again.

“We’d be glad to have you over, Steve! You can stay the night too if you want, and spend Christmas morning with us? Or all of Christmas day! Unless you have other plans… Which is fine!”

Steve heard Becca and Natasha sniggering in the background, followed by Bucky shushing them both, and smiled again. “I don’t really have any plans. I can come over today.”

“Great! Want me to meet you?” Bucky asked and Steve shook his head a little before answering verbally.

“It’s okay, stay inside! I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay, see you soon!” They all shouted in unison, then Steve hung up with a laugh.

He pulled on his hat, scarf, coat, and boots, and set off to Bucky’s.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Pre-Christmas gift exchange

By the time he had gotten to Bucky’s, Steve had pretty much gotten used to the cold weather, and the frigid air didn’t hurt his lungs as much as it had done. He had Bucky, Becca, and Natasha’s gifts safely tucked in his backpack, and reached behind himself to make sure it was still there after knocking on the door. Natasha opened the door a moment later and smiled as she beckoned Steve inside. As soon as Steve stepped into the house, he let out a breath he wasn’t even aware he was struggling with.

Maybe the cold had affected him more than he originally thought.

She informed him that Becca and Bucky were in the kitchen, and Steve followed her through the door. The house was the perfect temperature to contrast the outside, it was warm enough to be comfortable, but not too hot.

The smell that met him in the kitchen was heavenly. Becca was stirring some vegetables boiling on the stove, while Bucky mashed up some potato. He was holding the pot with his right hand and the masher with his prosthetic. They both looked up and Becca smiled at Steve whilst Bucky dropped the masher and came over to give Steve a hug. Steve hugged back with a wide smile and pressed a kiss to the side of Bucky’s neck before they both pulled back. He noted that Bucky still didn’t use the prosthetic properly when hugging him. It was touching his side, and the hand was against his back, but not in a proper hug. But he didn’t mention it.

“You like chicken, right?” Bucky asked and Steve laughed a little at the sudden question as he nodded.

Once he confirmed it, Bucky nodded back and spun round to go back to mashing the potato.

“Are we having Christmas dinner today? I thought it was traditionally supposed to be had on Christmas day?”

“This isn’t technically Christmas dinner, we’re having chicken today and turkey tomorrow. I just really wanted to cook a bunch today.” Bucky smiled a little shyly, and Steve back smiled as he walked over to him.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Becca and I have pretty much got it covered, you and Nat go chill out in the living room. And no presents yet!”

Natasha rolled her eyes as she linked arms with Steve and led him back into the living room. He was about to protest and insist on helping with something, then Natasha leant in to whisper in his ear.

“I’m glad you came over. Perfect timing.”
He wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but she held a finger to her lips to signal for him to be quiet until they were out of the kitchen and the door between there and the living room was closed.

“I need your help. I’m planning a surprise for Bucky, and I need an artist’s insight.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Are you going to help?”

Even though he had no idea what he was getting himself into – and with Natasha, it could be anything – Steve nodded. If it was something for Bucky, he was more than willing to help.

“Great,” Natasha grinned and took Steve’s hand to pull him out of the room.

She grabbed an overnight bag from the corridor in front of the front door, then dragged Steve up the stairs and into Bucky’s bedroom.

Steve had never registered the lock on Bucky’s bedroom door before, but Natasha pulled a key out of her pocket and slotted it into the keyhole in the handle to lock it.

“Don’t ask how I got this key. And don’t worry, it’ll be returned to its rightful place before Bucky notices it’s missing.”

The more he was around Natasha, the more Steve was both intrigued and a little scared by her.

“So what is it you need help with?” Steve asked as he automatically sat down on Bucky’s bed.

Natasha unzipped her overnight bag and took out a notepad and a canvas, as well as a pack of coloured pens. The canvas was about A3 sized, and had a photographed glued to the centre of it. The picture was of Bucky, Natasha, Clint and a group of other people Steve didn’t recognise. They looked a few years younger, and Natasha had a full fringe instead of the side parting she has in her shorter hair she had now. Bucky’s hair was a dishevelled as it always was, but it was a little longer and less artfully messy, more just messy. Everyone in the picture was wearing something blue each. Clint wore a blue tie around his head, Bucky wore a blue tishrt, and Natasha wore a blue and black sundress.

One guy in the picture had his face painted blue and one cheek pressed against Bucky’s.

“This is the dance class we used to be in. That was taken on the day of our graduation. The class still meet up, every year, at Christmas. This year, I didn’t go because it was during the time Bucky was missing and when Bucky was found, I called them up to tell them what had happened. I’ve been meeting up with them individually in secret since Bucky woke up in the hospital, and they all wrote down nice messages for him. I want to put all the messages around the picture like quotes, with who said it written underneath each one. But I don’t want it to look messy or cluttered, so I need your help to make it look nice. And you have really nice handwriting too.”

She handed Steve the notepad, and there were four pages of quotes from the people in the dance class all written in Natasha’s slightly messy scrawl. Steve read over a few with a smile.

“You’re the strongest guy I’ve ever met, you’ll get through this just fine Buck! J’”-Steph

“Good luck, pal! Can’t wait to see you! I still owe you that drink!” – Danielle

“Can’t believe all this shit keeps happening to you and you keep bouncing back. Never stop fighting, bro!” – Christopher
“So proud of everything you’ve fought through, can’t wait to dance with you again. Promise I won’t headbutt you this time! Hit me up! Xo” – Sepia

“Have we really not spoken in a year? Dude, I know you’ve been busy but this is bordering on neglect now! Get better soon so we can hang out asap!” – Bedalia

Steve’s smile widened slightly as he read the words of encouragement from old friends of Bucky’s. He didn’t know how much any of them knew about Bucky’s condition or what he had been through, but the kind words were all touching, and he knew Bucky would appreciate them.

“Captain Hook only had one hand and he still managed to cause some trouble ;)”-Clint

He definitely knew what had happened, and Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky would find that one funny, encouraging, or slightly offensive.

They started off by deciding which quote would go where. Some of the longer ones that were a few lines long would go in the corners, so that way there was plenty of space for them, and they wouldn’t get in the way of the shorter ones that could just go around the picture in the centre.

They split the quotes in half and Natasha wrote one half on the left of the canvas, and Steve wrote the rest on the right of the canvas. They used a different coloured pen for each one and wrote as neatly as they could.

It took almost an hour to finish it, and they waited for the ink to dry before putting it back into Natasha’s overnight bag to give to Bucky in the morning.

Bucky and Becca hadn’t noticed they were gone. When they returned to the living room, they were both still in the kitchen cooking.

Once dinner was finished, Natasha and Steve set the table for them all and helped to bring everything into the dining room. They had made twice as much as necessary so the rest could be used tomorrow without much cooking actually being done. Bucky sat at the head of the table, with Steve and Becca on either side of him, and Natasha next to Becca.

Everything was in bowls or on small plates so everyone could get what they wanted to put on their own plates. Bucky rolled his eyes at the small amount Steve took, then took his plate from him to fill it more. Steve didn’t bother arguing and just smiled a little, then thanked him when Bucky gave him his plate back.

They ate mostly in silence at first, with just Becca telling Natasha about a new TV show she had heard of called Peaky Blinders. While the girls spoke, Bucky leant over to speak to Steve.

“Did you bring presents?”

Steve chuckled lightly and nodded. “Yeah, why?”

“I got Becca, Nat, and you more than one thing each, and I think Nat and Becca have done the same, so I was thinking after food we could give one gift each? Just a pre-Christmas thing. If you only got us one thing each, that’s fine, you can give us them tomorrow.”

Steve smiled a little, glad he had gotten more than was expected of him. It made him feel as though he had gone above and beyond, even if he hadn’t really spent much money in doing so.
“I got you three things and the girls two things. I can give out one each tonight and still have something to give tomorrow as well… But thanks for making sure.”

The fact that Bucky had thought to ask to avoid Steve feeling uncomfortable or being caught off-guard was touching, and Steve couldn’t help but smile and lean over to kiss him. Bucky was a little surprised, but he kissed back with a similar smile.

“I’m trying to eat!”

Steve and Bucky pulled back when they heard Becca exclaim and both laughed as she pretended to gag. Even after all this time, Steve still blushed a little as he remembered there were other people in the room around them. With Bucky, everything else seemed to fade out of existence. He was the only thing Steve could focus on, and the only thing that mattered.

Steve shook his head a little to clear it and bring his mind back to the present, and the space around him besides just Bucky. Besides the odd bit of small talk every now and then, they finished their food mostly in silence. Bucky’s appetite was definitely back in full force since he got back from the hospital. He was the first to finish, and he had much more on his plate than anyone else did. Natasha made a comment about him being like a vacuum cleaner, and Bucky just smiled around his fork and kept eating.

Steve finished a little after Bucky, and they took all the empty plates and bowls into the kitchen while the girls finished.

“I can’t remember… Are you allowed to get that wet? Or will water damage it?” Steve asked as he gestured to Bucky’s prosthetic. As soon as he asked, he regretted it.

He wasn’t sure if Bucky would be offended Steve didn’t remember, or it would send him into a dystopian state to have it pointed out and to remind him of it. But luckily, Bucky just smiled and nodded. “I can get it wet, the outer case protects the mechanics inside.”

Steve nodded a little in relief and picked up a cloth to dry the pots Bucky washed. Bucky’s smile was a more convincing smile than the usual fake tight-lipped one, but it still wasn’t quite convincing enough to fool Steve into thinking Bucky was completely okay with it, which was understandable. Again, he chose not to mention it.

The girls came in and leant around Bucky to put their plates in the sink, then Bucky shooed them both away to go relax in the living room, assuring them that he and Steve had it covered. Once everything was dried, Bucky had to help Steve put some things away since the shelves they belonged on were too high for Steve to reach. To Bucky’s credit, he only made about three jokes about Steve’s height, then only sung a little bit of the munchkin song from Wizard of Oz before he dropped it.

They joined the girls in the living room in time to see a young Taylor Momsen encountering the Grinch for the first time in the mail room.

“We watched this the other day…” Steve pointed out, but all three of them shrugged. He decided not to elaborate and sat down in one of the armchairs.

They only watched it for another few minutes before Becca seemed to burst, grabbed the remote, switched it off, then turned to Bucky with wide and pleading eyes.

“Please can we give gifts now?”

“Gifts? Plural? No, no, no… One gift each.” Bucky shook his head with a small smile.
When Becca heard the no, she deflated slightly, but as Bucky continued her grin grew again. As soon as he had finished his sentence, she jumped out of her seat and ran upstairs, presumably to get her chosen pre-Christmas presents for the others.

Natasha got up too and went upstairs to get her’s, as did Bucky. Becca returned moments after they left. They were waiting for Natasha a little longer than anyone else, and Steve couldn’t take his eyes away from the presents in Bucky and Becca’s hands. One of Becca’s was book-shaped and the other two were wide, long, and only an inch or so thick, most likely containing clothes.

Bucky had two gifts on his lap, both small box shapes, and a much larger box shape on the floor by his feet. Steve couldn’t stop trying to figure out which were for who. He couldn’t tell just by looking at the two small boxes what were in them, nor could he tell what was in the big box, then Bucky caught his eye and covered them with both flesh and metal hands as if Steve would be able to tell what’s in them. The only way he could is if he had x-ray vision. Or the deduction powers of Sherlock Holmes.

Unfortunately, he had neither. And the longer they had to wait for Natasha, the more not knowing was starting to make Steve shift impatiently.

Eventually, she came back down and Steve realised what had taken her so long. She had wrapped the canvas in the same paper Bucky’s and Becca’s gifts were wrapped in so she must have had to wait for Bucky to leave his room to be able to get the wrapping paper from his closet.

The other two gifts she had were wrapped in different paper, so she must have done those at her own house, since she had to wait for Steve to be able to help her with Bucky’s. Both of said gifts looked soft, like wrapped clothes. She sat on the floor in front of the couch, and Steve immediately stood.

“Do you want to sit here?” He offered.

Natasha smiled a little as she shook her head. “It’s okay, I like sitting down here.”

He didn’t understand why she would, but Steve shrugged and sat back down either way.

“Thanks anyway.” She finished, and Steve smiled and shrugged the gratitude off.

“Shut up so we can exchange presents!” Becca snapped, and they all laughed.

Just like at Halloween, it was apparent that the holidays were a big deal in the Barnes home.

“Okay, okay, keep your shit together.” Bucky shook his head, then pointed at Natasha.

Steve didn’t know what the pointing meant, but Becca groaned whereas Natasha’s face lit up. Bucky handed her one of the little boxes, and Becca handed her a much larger, flatter box. Steve understood then that they were all giving one person their presents, then moving onto the next person, and handed over one of the jewellery boxes that he had wrapped and written ‘Natasha’ on the paper of.

She thanked them all, then started with the biggest – Becca’s – tearing the wrapping paper off a little more aggressively than was completely necessary. The box beneath the paper was a powder blue colour, and Natasha was careful as she lifted the lid, so as not to damage what was inside. She gasped when she saw it and lifted out a dress. The top half was red satin and Steve assumed that the black strap went around the back of the neck and held the front of it up that way. The bottom half of the dress looked like a mid-thigh pencil skirt sewn to the bottom, also made of satin, but this time black. Steve could tell it would look beautiful on Natasha, especially with her hair colour and
general style.

“It’s beautiful! Thanks Bex!” She leant over and Becca giggled and leant down to meet her half-way for a hug. They ended up leaning across Bucky’s lap, and Bucky just rolled his eyes as he sat back to get out of their way, a small smile on his lips as he waited for them to finish hugging. She opened Steve’s next, the bracelet he had bought her. She smiled brightly when she opened it and commented on the different charms and how beautiful they were. Then, she stood and walked over to hug Steve. Steve stood with her and hugged her back with his chin on her shoulder and a wide smile. She thanked him, then moved to open her gift from Bucky. It was a necklace made of rope, with a silver spider pendant hanging from it as though from a web.

“Did you two plan this? The bracelet Steve got me and this necklace go together perfectly!” She held her wrist out for Becca to put the bracelet on her, then turned so she could put the necklace on her too, and Steve and Bucky laughed as they shook their heads.

“No, we didn’t. We’re just that in-synch.” Bucky answered. Though he was talking to Natasha, he was looking at Steve with a smile, and Steve smiled back before looking down at his lap with a blush.

“They’ll go really well with the dress too… I finally have something to wear to Christmas dinner tomorrow. It’s just me and my Aunt, but she always insist I dress nice—“ She stopped then and looked up at Bucky. “Speaking of which… I have to talk to you about something later…”

Bucky’s smile faltered, but he just nodded then pointed to Becca. Steve wasn’t sure whether that was to get the attention off him, or just so no one had time to ask Natasha what it was about, but Steve could guess. She probably knew something about Brock. He wasn’t sure if it had made it on the news, since he had been avoiding TV just in case, but as Brock’s family, Natasha is likely to know what’s happening in regards to his trial.

Becca hesitated for a second, watching Bucky’s expression, but then he flashed her that smile that fooled everyone but his boyfriend and she smiled and turned to take the present from Natasha’s hand. She was careful with the paper, since whatever Natasha had wrapped was loose, and held up a new leotard. It was a similar design to her usual red and black one, but this one was a little bigger so it would fit her better and had long sleeves. The base colour was red, and there was black around the bottom like a sleeping dragon. Down one side, the dragon’s tail encircled the arm, and down the other arm was a billow of black smoke from the dragon’s nose. Becca let out a shriek then threw herself over her brother and into Natasha’s arms who, thankfully, caught her before she could knock them both over. Natasha’s head was worryingly close to the corner of the coffee table.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!” Becca repeated in a chant, and Steve glanced at Bucky, glad to see a much more sincere smile on his face again. Whatever discomfort he had experienced from Natasha’s words seemed to have disappeared.

Becca grinned when she opened Steve’s and leant over to hug him too as she thanked him, then insisted he put it on her.

“I picked it to remind you you’re going to be a star one day, so you should stop worrying about your weight or your height or talents…” Steve admitted a little embarrassingly as she held her hair out of the way and he fiddled with the clasp.

Becca had mentioned several times in the past that she thought she was too fat, or that she hated how tall she was getting. She was about the same height as Steve, but complained that Bucky didn’t stop growing until recently, and she was only fourteen so she was probably going to get taller. Becca doubted her skills too, especially given how much her teachers were already talking
about college, in her case Julliard. They only accept the best of the best, and Becca simply didn’t believe that she was. Bucky always called her a star, and she always lit up when he did.

When he finally got the clasp done, Becca dropped her hair and turned to hug him again, much tighter. Steve was a little surprised, but he hugged back nonetheless.

“Thank you so much, Steve… This really means a lot…”

“You’re welcome.” Steve smiled, his face heating up with a blush.

Becca’s present from Bucky was a necklace with a locket pendant. She started to comment on how pretty it was, then she opened it and her words seemed to have caught in her throat. Becca covered her mouth as she looked at the picture inside, and Steve grew concerned when he noticed tears well up in her eyes. Everyone was silent for a few seconds, and although Steve and Natasha both looked worried, Bucky looked completely relaxed as though he had expected that reaction. He was even still smiling a little.

“I thought it looked familiar…”

Natasha was the first to ask quietly. “What is it?”

Becca turned it so Natasha could see the picture inside, and the lines of confusion immediately smoothed out from her face, replaced with a sad smile. She showed it to Steve too, and Steve recognised the picture of the two children inside to be Bucky and Becca. The image shown was from when Becca was about two and Bucky was six, and they were both smiling wide. Becca only had a few teeth, and Bucky had all but one or two from what Steve could see. The picture itself was aged, and there were creases of white in the thin card, none of which compromised the image though. It looked as though it had been folded and unfolded a lot before being put into the locket which, now that Steve could see closer, was covered in tiny scratches. Not enough to make the locket any less beautiful – which it was, pure silver in the shape of an oval, with roses etched into the front and around the edges, hanging from a delicate chain – but made it obvious that it was second-hand.

“Who’s was it?” Steve was pretty sure he could guess. Not to sound sexist, but Steve could tell it was a woman’s piece of jewellery. If it were their father’s picture, he would likely have just kept the picture of his children in his wallet, not in a silver locket.

“Our mother’s…” Becca whispered, then turned and lifted her hair so Bucky could put up on her alongside the star Steve got bought her.

Bucky reached forward to do it, but before he could touch it he stopped and looked down at his prosthetic. He shook his head quickly, more like he was trying to shake away a thought than that he was saying no, and looked at Natasha. There was a slight desperation in his expression, and Steve could tell Natasha picked up on it too, because she knelt up and tapped Becca’s shoulder to get her to turn her back to her instead of Bucky, then took the chain from her. Before doing the clasp, she leant over and patted Bucky’s knee. A brief display of comfort before she got back to the task at hand.

Steve could see that Bucky was clearly relieved that Natasha had taken over for him and hadn’t made a big deal of it. A quick comforting touch was fine, but if she had started asking what was wrong or trying to persuade him to just do it himself, it may not have gone so well. Steve watched Bucky’s metal fist clench and unclench on his lap, and guessed that Bucky was worried about damaging the clearly sentimentally precious item.
Once it was on, Becca moved the locket under the star, so that it rested just above the tiny roses etched into the silver, and smile down at it.

“Steve’s turn.” Bucky announced, and Steve was about the protest and insist Bucky goes next, but he could tell Bucky needed another minute to compose himself after his moment of fear, so he just smiled and accepted the gift Becca held out to him.

It was the book shape, and Steve smiled as he unwrapped it. It was a first edition of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde.

“How did you…?”

“Bucky told me it was your favourite.” Becca interrupted with a wide smile. “And my friend’s dad works in an antique bookstore so I asked him to keep an eye out for it for me.”

“How much did this cost?”

Becca rolled her eyes at that and shook her head. “You can’t ask how much you gifts cost, just enjoy it.”

He smiled at that and leant over to hug her. “Well, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Bucky seemed to have composed himself now, and he was smiling as he watched Becca and Steve talk. Steve could have sworn he saw a slight blush in Bucky’s cheeks when Becca said Bucky had told her Steve’s favourite book. He could tell by that alone that Bucky probably talked about him a lot, and he tried so hard not to think about what Bucky may say about him to avoid blushing more than his boyfriend was.

Natasha gave Steve his present, a wrapped box similar to the one Natasha’s dress had come in. Inside was a black blazer, dark blue satin shirt, and black slacks with a red tie the same colour as Natasha’s dress. They seemed the exact right size for Steve.

“How did you afford this?”

“Bitch, what did I just say?!” Becca interrupted and shook her head in mock disappointment.

Steve laughed, but he still expected Natasha to answer him. But she didn’t, and just tapped her nose with a wink. “Just say thank you.”

“Thank you.” Steve chuckled and they hugged.

Next was Bucky’s, and Steve would finally find out what was in the box Bucky had left by his feet.

It was a big box, as well as heavy, and Steve was a little surprised by the weight of it. He suddenly thought back to when he was a kid. Presents always seemed so much bigger back then, and felt the familiar rush of excitement he would feel whenever his mother handed him another meticulously wrapped box.

He ripped the paper off, then lifted the lid of the thick wooden box revealed. If he had actually looked at the box properly, he may not have been as surprised by what was inside, but he didn’t bother taking the extra second to register the familiar logo on the bottom left hand corner of the front.
When he opened the lid two compartments lifted up from both side and the front fell down too. It was an art box, and there were compartments of various sizes filling the box. Spaces for pens and pencils, paintbrushes, tubes of paint, and a watercolour paint pallet already built into the centre with a range of blues, greens, reds, oranges and every other colour he could name. The whole thing was carved from sturdy wood and there were intricate designs around the edges.

Steve was speechless.

He had to fight the urge to ask how much it had costed Bucky, but he knew he would just get the same answer he had gotten form the girls. Steve looked up at Bucky, but he still wasn’t sure what he was going to say. Bucky was grinning, and Steve carefully placed the box aside to stand up and lean over to hug Bucky. The angle was a little awkward, and Bucky only used his flesh arm again, but Steve stilled smiled against his shoulder and felt Bucky do the same.

“Thank you…”

“No problem, Stevie.” If Steve had any doubt that Bucky was smiling, after hearing his words he was now sure of it.

They stayed like that until Steve’s back began to protest a little too loudly for him to ignore, then he kissed Bucky’s cheek and stood again.

“You didn’t see the front.” Bucky pointed out and gestured to the box.

Steve sat in his chair again and carefully picked up the box so he wouldn’t break any of the compartments off, then lifted the front back into place.

To close it, he had to lift the front back into its rightful position, then close the lid to make the side pieces slide back inside. On the front, there was a thin, gold plague. It was about two inches tall and four inches in width, and ‘Steven Grant Rogers – Artist’ was engraved into it in cursive writing.

“How did you know my middle name?” Steve asked as he breathed out a laugh. He kept staring at the words, but they were starting to get a little blurry as his vision swam with tears.

“When you signed in to visit me in hospital and then never signed back out again, one of the nurses asked me who ‘Steven Grant Rogers’ was and why he hadn’t signed out when he left. I assumed it was you since I don’t know any other Steve Rogers’ and gestured to where you were sleeping in a chair. She didn’t ask questions after that.” Bucky chucked, and Steve smiled as he remembered. He never signed out again because he had signed in to see a specific patient, and then hadn’t left again until he was leaving with said patient. Except for that one time when he had left for no reason other than his own irrational insecurities and caused Bucky to have a panic attack. But Steve wasn’t thinking straight then so he wasn’t in the right mind to remember to sign out. He didn’t like thinking of that at all, remembering how Bucky had looked sobbing and shaking against Natasha’s shoulder, struggling to breathe properly, all because of Steve. He quickly pushed that thought away and looked up at Bucky again.

He was okay. Bucky wasn’t crying, or shaking, and his breathing was normal and regular. He was smiling and calm.

Steve quickly blinked away his tears, now not entirely sure if they were from gratitude for the present or from the memory of the hurt he had caused his boyfriend. But he smiled nonetheless and focussed on the positive.
“Thank you… Again.”

Bucky smiled back and shrugged. “No biggie.”

“No biggie? You’re such a dork.” Becca rolled her eyes and she spoke and Bucky threw a pillow at her form across the couch.

“Stop being mean to me, it’s my turn.” Bucky stuck his tongue out at her then held his flesh hand out for someone to put a present in it.

Becca reacted first and placed a large flat box on top of his hand. Apparently it was heavier than Bucky had expected because he grunted slightly and raised his other hand to steady it as he put it on his lap and tore open the paper.

It was the same box Natasha’s had come in, and before opening it Bucky stopped and looked at where the dress was still in its box beside the redhead. “I appreciate the thought, Bex, but I don’t think I have the hips to pull off a dress.”

She rolled her eyes and pointedly looked back down at the box as Natasha and Steve laughed. Before Bucky could open it, Natasha leant over to Steve so it was like she was only speaking to him, but she spoke loud enough for them all to hear.

“Bet you disagree with that, right? He has the hips to pull off anything,” She wriggled her eyebrows suggestively and Steve laughed as he felt heat rise from his collar and over his whole face.

Bucky winked at her in reply, then turned his attention back to the box to open it. Inside was a zipped up clothes cover on a hanger. Bucky stood to hold it up and unzip it, and revealed a black suit with a dark red, satin shirt and a black skinny tie. It looked as though it was tailored to fit Bucky, and Bucky’s eyes widened slightly as he looked over it. The shirt was the same colour as Steve’s tie and the top half of Natasha’s dress.

“Is this tailored? How the hell did you afford this?”

“Okay, I am now banning that question from this house!” Becca declared and stood up to take the hanger from Bucky’s hand and hold it up beside him so she could see how it would look. “God I have good style.” She muttered to herself, and Steve had to agree.

Bucky had lost a little weight since he had been in hospital, but there wasn’t really much to lose to start with, so it wouldn’t make much of a difference when the measurements the suit was tailored to where taken. Bucky clearly had no idea Becca was buying him a suit, so he couldn’t have gone with her to get measured. Maybe Natasha had guessed, Steve remembered her saying she was good at guessing people’s measurements. If that was the case, she must have some kind of super power because the accuracy looked incredible.

“I can’t wait to see you wear it…” Steve meant to think, but accidentally said out loud, causing him to blush again.

Bucky smirked at him and leant down to press a kiss to Steve’s heated cheek. “Tomorrow.”

He turned back to his sister and thanked her, then gave her a hug before zipping the suit back up to put it in the box and safe.

Steve handed over his present next, since he knew Bucky would want to read what’s on Natasha’s and it was the most heartfelt so it would be best to save until last.
He held out the small jewellery box with the ring in it and instead of taking the box, Bucky caught his wrist and brought his hand up to kiss the back of it. The smirk on Bucky’s face showed that he was probably doing it just to make Steve blush harder. He succeeded, then took the box.

The wrapping wasn’t great, Steve’s long fingers were perfectly precise with a pencil or a brush, but not so much scissors and way-too-sticky tape. Bucky didn’t comment on it, though, and smiled slightly as he unwrapped it then opened the box.

“Is that an engagement ring?!” Becca cried out, not being able to see the actual ring.

Steve quickly shook his head as Bucky’s head shot up, his eyes wide. “No! No! It’s just a ring!”

Bucky sighed in relief, then smiled again as he took the ring out of the box. Becca leant over to look at it, as did Natasha, and both commented on how beautiful it was as Bucky slipped it onto his right ring finger. Steve could tell he was being very careful as he held it with his metal hand as to not break it. Bucky looked down at his hand, with the small smile still on his face, and Steve waited anxiously for the smile that looked genuine to slip into one of his fake ones. He remembered his worries about Bucky thinking it was too feminine, and as the silence went on – punctuated by Becca and Natasha talking positively about the ring – and Steve’s mind went into overdrive trying to figure out if Bucky really liked it or not.

Before he could ask, Bucky stood up and practically threw himself at Steve to kiss him. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky to catch him and kissed back immediately with a wide smile, confident now that Bucky had liked it. The kiss lasted no longer than ten seconds, but they both heard Becca and Natasha pretending to gag behind them. Bucky was the first to reluctantly break the kiss, since Steve’s head was against the back of his chair and there was nowhere for him to move.

“The ring is beautiful. Thank you.” He kissed Steve again, more chaste this time, then backed off to return to his seat.

Next was Natasha’s turn and it was the first time Steve had ever seen her genuinely nervous. Bucky looked a little surprised when she took it out of her bag, and he was very careful as he took it from her then unwrapped it. He smiled as he saw the picture in the middle, and there was silence as he and Becca read the words written around it. His smile faded, and tears welled up in his eyes, but he didn’t look particularly sad. Steve and Natasha shared several uncomfortable glances as they waited for Bucky to read all the encouraging messages from old friends. Eventually, Bucky put the canvas aside and stood to walk over to Natasha. She stood as he approached and he pulled her into a hug. She hugged back immediately, and Steve noticed a slight shake in Bucky’s shoulders. He and Becca both remained silent as they hugged.

“Thank you…” They heard him whisper, and they all smiled as Natasha kissed his cheek.

They cleared away all the wrapping paper they had used, Bucky, Becca and Natasha took their things up to their rooms – the spare room in Natasha’s case – and Steve followed Bucky to put his things in his room.

Steve sat on the bed as Bucky hung up his own and Steve’s new clothes in his closet. “So, you really like the ring?”

“I love it, Steve.” He smiled and came over to kiss Steve once the closet was closed. Steve caught
a quick glimpse of the other presents piled up inside.

Steve kissed back as he smiled against his lips and wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders, then fell back against the bed to pull Bucky down with him. Bucky wasn’t even surprised, and climbed onto the bed after Steve with his prosthetic propping him up, and his other hand cupping the side of Steve’s face.

They continued to kiss unhurriedly and uninterrupted for about a minute before there was a knock at the door. Bucky pulled back just barely as he listened to Becca say her and Natasha both going to bed. He called out a ‘goodnight’, then returned to kissing Steve.

Steve smiled against his lips as he draped his arms over Bucky’s shoulders again. He pulled Bucky down on him properly, so he wasn’t propped up a few inches above him and instead was pressed against him, and Bucky grunted slightly against Steve’s lips in surprise, but he didn’t protest or try to pull away. Not that he would have to try hard, but it was still nice to feel him completely relaxed against Steve.

At first, Steve kept the kiss as light as Bucky was, but then he felt Bucky squirm slightly on top of him and felt something poke against his thigh. It wasn’t hard to figure out what it was (no pun intended). He didn’t really hesitate before opening his legs to allow Bucky to settle between them, and Bucky smiled a little against his lips as he did. His metal hand propped him up a little without breaking the kiss and his other hand ran down Steve’s side lightly. Bucky pushed Steve’s shirt up a little and pressed his warm hand against Steve’s cool skin. He felt a little bloated from all the food Bucky had persuaded him to eat, but logically Steve knew that it wouldn’t have affected him physically. Steve’s metabolism had always been way too fast, meaning he never put on much weight. His stomach was probably still as flat as always. Bucky seemed to confirm this as he ran his fingers over the protruding shapes of Steve’s ribs. It tickled a little and Steve squirmed slightly, but tightened his arms around Bucky’s shoulders to keep him from pulling away to see why Steve moved.

As the kiss continued uninterrupted, Steve got a little more courageous and dropped one hand down to push the hem of Bucky’s shirt up, mostly just copying what Bucky had done a moment earlier. Steve thought about how different the things each of them were feeling was. They were doing the same thing, but Bucky would be feeling cool, pale flesh and the outline of bone. Steve could feel warm skin and relaxed but still firm muscle. He always wished he could be stronger and fitter, mostly just so he could protect himself and others from bullies, but Steve found himself caring about that less and less nowadays. He didn’t want to do the whole cliché “I-found-someone-who-loves-me-for-who-I-am-so-now-I-love-me” thing, and maybe it wasn’t that. Sure, Bucky had definitely been a big part in that. But so had Becca, Natasha, Sam, Peggy and Angie, and even his mother despite the fact that she was gone. Maybe he didn’t have the stereotypical perfect body, or even the medically perfect body. But despite his flaws, Bucky loved him, and so did his friends.

Steve hadn’t even realised the kiss had stopped, but he did register that he had been staring up at Bucky’s slightly flushed face for several seconds. “What?”

Bucky chuckled lightly. “I said: Are you okay? You spaced out…”

“I’m okay.” He smiled up at him and leant up to kiss him again, but this time more chaste. “Bucky…?”

“Yeah?”

“Tomorrow…”
As expected, Bucky looked confused. “Christmas?”

Steve nodded and pressed his hand a little more firmly against Bucky’s skin, but not to push him away, just to feel it beneath his fingers. He felt the muscle their twitch slightly.

“Remember when I said I wasn’t ready to have sex yet?”

The confusion faded from Bucky’s expression as he nodded, probably having connected the dots himself. Regardless, Steve continued. “I want to… Tomorrow. Consider it another Christmas present…”

Bucky frowned at that and shook his head a little, instantly sending Steve into a whirl of mental panic. Maybe Bucky didn’t want to have sex, or he wasn’t ready yet. Or he wanted Steve with a little more meat on his bones first. Or just the thought of having sex with Steve repulsed him. Before he could start to unravel the newfound acceptance of himself, Bucky explained.

“I don’t want you to think of it as you giving me a present… I want it to be because you want to, and you’re ready.”

“Maybe that came out wrong.” Steve chuckled a little, mostly out of relief. “I want to… I’m ready.”

Bucky smiled, relief evident in his expression, then leant down to kiss Steve again, muttering against his lips. “Tomorrow…”

Steve nodded again, and they kissed once more before Bucky rolled off him to lay beside him, and Steve curled up against his side as Bucky turned the lamp off and tugged him a little closer. Steve felt the band of the ring he had bought Bucky against his shoulder and smiled a little when he realised Bucky hadn’t taken it off when he got ready for bed.

“Night, Stevie.”

“Night, Buck. I love you.”

“I love you too.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Merry Christmas, have some smut as an early present

“IT’s three in the morning, go back to bed or I’m cancelling Christmas.”

Steve frowned a little in confusion as he heard Bucky’s groggy voice, but he didn’t open his eyes or otherwise react. He was still tired, and the room was still dark, so there wasn’t any reason to be awake. Then he heard a girl whine and realised who it was.

“It’s already Christmas now.” Becca argued back, and Steve felt Bucky shift slightly under him to face where Becca must have been stood at his side of the bed.

“Go back to sleep. You’re not allowed to leave your room under seven, at the earliest. If you come out before then, I swear to god I will take all your presents back and set fire to the tree. Do not test me.”

There was another groan, then a muttered ‘fine’ before Steve heard Becca leave the room and quietly close the door behind her.

“If she gets Christmas cancelled, do I still get my presents?” Steve muttered and felt more than heard Bucky chuckle lightly.

“As long as you don’t wake me up before seven, sure.”

“Great.” Steve smiled and nuzzled against Bucky’s chest as he drifted back off to sleep, feeling Bucky’s arm tighten around him slightly.

“It’s seven! It’s seven! It’s seven!”

Steve groaned at he lifted a hand to rub his eyes. He looked up at Bucky and saw that he had his eyes covered by his metal hand, his other arm under Steve, and Becca was pushing at his side to wake him up. He was awake, but refusing to react to his hyperactive sister, at least for the moment.

“It’s seven! It’s seven! It’s seven!”

The movements made the bed rock a little and Steve sat up with a light laugh as he watched Becca continue pushing at Bucky to get a reaction.

She did.

Once Bucky’s flesh arm was freed from under Steve, he sat up and reached over quickly to grab Becca’s arm and stop her pushing him again. “Yes! Okay! I get it, it’s seven! Go downstairs and wait!”

Becca wasn’t discouraged by Bucky’s outburst and just laughed as she pulled her arm out of Bucky’s grip and ran downstairs. She left the door wide open and Bucky groaned as he laid back
down on the bed, this time with both hands covering his eyes.

Steve smiled down at him and leant down to kiss his cheek, next to his hand, then over his knuckles. Once his lips reached the back of Bucky’s hand, where his lips would be, Bucky pulled his hand from his face and cupped Steve’s cheek to kiss him. Steve kissed back and rested his hand on Bucky’s chest, feeling his warm skin through the soft, thin cotton of his t-shirt.

“Merry Christmas…” Steve muttered against his boyfriend’s lips, and felt the edges tug up slightly in a smile as Bucky muttered the sentiment back.

They kissed for a few minutes until they heard someone clear their throat from the doorway. Both of them looked up and saw Natasha leaning against the doorframe. She was wearing the dress she had gotten yesterday, her hair was curled around her head, and she had matching red lipstick on, as well as the necklace Bucky had gotten her handing from her throat, Steve’s bracelet on one wrist, and a black watch on the other wrist. The look was completed by a pair of black heeled wedge ankle boots.

Bucky sat up with a smile. “You look great, Nat.”

“Yeah, the dress really suits you.” Steve added with a matching smile, and Natasha smiled back.

“Thanks boys, I know. Are you two coming down or am I going to have to go stop Becca peeling off the wallpaper while you exchange some gifts of your own?”

The second she said it, memories of the conversation they had had last night flashed through Steve’s mind, and suddenly he felt his face turn the colour of Natasha’s hair. He briefly wondered if Natasha knew about the conversation, but realised that they were talking quietly and Becca said that she and Natasha had gone to bed long before that conversation happened. There’s no way Natasha would have heard it.

But, then again, she did seem to know everything all the time.

Bucky didn’t really react to that, seemingly not the least bit worried whether or not Natasha knew, and instead just pushed the covers off himself to stand up. “Alright, fine, we’re coming.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Natasha joked, and Steve blushed again as Bucky just laughed and went to his closet to pick some clothes.

“Nat, I know you’re in love with me and all, but this isn’t a peep show. Stop trying to watch me change and go keep Becca under control for me. We’ll be down in five minutes, tops.”

Natasha just rolled her eyes as she closed the bedroom door for them and went downstairs.

“Do we have to dress up for this?” Steve asked as he stood up to go over to where Bucky was looking in the closet, and Bucky shook his head.

“No, Natasha is going home after the presents are all given out, so she dresses up here so she doesn’t have to do it at home with her aunt nagging her every few minutes that what Natasha picks to wear is too slutty.”

“She doesn’t look slutty.” Steve protested with a frown. In all the months he had known Natasha, he couldn’t think of anything she had worn that would class as ‘slutty’.

“She never does. Her aunt is just real picky.” Bucky shrugged and took out a pair of jeans and a green and red t-shirt.
“Christmassy.” Steve commented as he took out a pair of jeans of his own and a blue t-shirt he had left there a few months ago.

“More than that.” Bucky gestured to the clothes Steve had picked, and the blond just shrugged.

He didn’t have anything Christmassy here, or at all for that matter. Steve had never really seen the point in buying clothes he could only wear for a few days a year, so he never bothered buying things like Christmas sweaters or t-shirts with reindeer on it.

“You know Becca will kill you if you go down dressed like that, right?” Bucky pointed out as Steve took his pyjama top off and picked up the t-shirt. “She always makes everyone wear something Christmassy or they’re not allowed in the living room.”

“I don’t have anything Christmassy…”

“Not even at home?”

Steve tried not to outwardly react to that, and give away that fact that he doesn’t technically have a home at the minute. Instead, he just shook his head. Bucky turned back to the closet and started rummaging around in the back of it, then turned round to throw something to Steve. He yelped in surprise and caught the mass of green and red thrown at him, then held it up to see properly. It was a green sweater with reindeers running diagonally up the chest, dragging Santa’s sleigh, with red balls of cotton for the noses. It looked a little too big for him, but he chuckled and put it on over his t-shirt anyway. As expected, the sleeves covered most of his hands, and the hem reached just past the top of the thigh gap in his jeans.

“Perfect.” Bucky smirked at he came over to wrap his arms around Steve. He could feel the flesh arm against his back, but only the slightest of pressure from the metal one. Not enough.

Steve decided he had kept quiet about this long enough, and reached behind him to take the metal wrist in his hand as he watched Bucky’s expression. At first, Bucky looked a little worried, like Steve didn’t want the prosthetic touching him, but when Steve pressed it a little harder against his lower back, Bucky got the point and relaxed a little.

“Sorry… I just don’t want to hurt you…”

“If it hurts I’ll tell you. If I don’t tell you, you can squeeze a little tighter, I’m not going to break.” Steve smiled reassuringly and stood on his tip toes to kiss Bucky, and this time both Bucky’s arms tightened around him a little to keep him up and close.

They broke the kiss eventually, and Steve expected Bucky to mention that it had been five minutes and Becca was going to flip if they didn’t get downstairs soon, but he didn’t. He didn’t say anything, just kept his eyes closed and rested his forehead against Steve’s with a quiet sigh of content.

Both of them remained like that for a while, and Bucky’s arms tightened again. It wasn’t enough to hurt though. In fact, it felt more like how Bucky used to hug him. This was quite possibly the worst time for Steve’s first seasonal sniffle, because as soon as it happened, Bucky let go of him and stepped away, immediately starting to apologise.

Steve shook his head quickly and stepped forward to put his hand over Bucky’s mouth and stop him from talking. Bucky stilled and watched Steve, checking his face for any signs of discomfort.

“It’s probably just a cold, I always get them this time of year. I’m not hurt, I wasn’t about to cry. You didn’t hurt me.” He reassured him as best he could, and after staring at Steve for several more
moments, trying to decipher whether or not he was telling the truth, Bucky nodded a little and Steve moved his hand from off his mouth to Bucky’s cheek. Bucky didn’t hug him again, though he did place his hands on Steve’s hips.

“Becca’s going to come up here with a meat cleaver in a minute…”

Steve chuckled and nodded as he moved back to finish getting dressed and allow Bucky to do the same. Bucky produced another Christmas sweater from the closet, this one was red with a giant Santa face with cotton wool as his beard on the front. Steve tried not to laugh when Bucky put it on and Bucky sent him a mock-glare before gesturing for Steve to follow him downstairs. On the way out, Bucky grabbed a large trash bag from his closet with all the presents in and Steve brought his backpack down with his own presents in.

As expected, Becca was pacing the living room with a scowl, wearing a red and green sweater with snowmen on it, when they eventually got downstairs, but one look at the bag in Bucky’s hand transformed it into a wide smile. Steve expected her to snatch it from Bucky, but she didn’t. Instead, Becca waiting near the couch where Natasha’s was sat while Bucky took the presents out of the bag and put them under the tree. Steve joined Natasha on the couch while they waited, and as soon as he stood up Becca was on the floor in front of the tree.

Bucky chuckled and stepped back as Becca started tearing the paper off the first present she got her hands on. He sat on the arm of the couch beside Steve, and Steve rested a hand on Bucky’s thigh. Becca squealed in joy when she unwrapped a stack of new CDs, going through them all and checking each track listing.

There were still a few presents in the bottom of the bag Bucky had them all in, and he reached in to hand one to Natasha and one to Steve.

Natasha grinned as she took it and ripped open the paper. It was a boxset of a TV show Steve had never heard of before, but Natasha clearly loved, because he jumped up and pulled Bucky into a tight hug as she muttered ‘thank you’s over and over again. Bucky chuckled as he hugged her back, then she returned to her seat. Becca was happily opening the rest of her presents, and Bucky gestured to the box in Steve’s hand, wrapped neatly.

“Open it…”

Steve looked down and ripped the paper off carefully. The box inside was small, about the size of the box Bucky’s ring had come in. He lifted the lid and stared down at the contents. It was a key. It wasn’t difficult to figure out what the key was for.

“You’re always here anyway… And this way I don’t have to get up to let you in, you can just let yourself in… I’m not asking you to move in or anything, it’s just so you can come over whenever. Even if me or Becca aren’t home, so you have somewhere warm to go when your heating screws up again…”

Steve looked up at Bucky as he continued to ramble, he was clearly nervous, and that made him smile a little, then he reached over to pull Bucky into a hug. Bucky gladly hugged back and Steve felt him bury his face against Steve’s shoulder. He knew Bucky was still paranoid, that was evident from the fact that he locked the doors, even when they were home, so he knew the key wasn’t just for convenience. It was a symbol, a sign that he trusted Steve and he was giving Steve round-the-clock access to his house to show this. He knew Steve wouldn’t do anything to put him or Becca in any danger.

“Thank you, Buck…” Steve muttered against Bucky’s shoulder and felt Bucky smile.
“No problem, Stevie…”

Once Becca had finished opening all her presents from Bucky, Natasha handed over a box with some new shoes in. Becca loved them. Then Steve handed her the wrapped drawing he had done and Becca gasped when she opened it.

“Is that me?”

Steve nodded.

“Is that Anna Pavlova?”

He nodded again.

“Is that Gregory Hines?”

He nodded again, and Bucky rolled his eyes a little as Becca continued to ask about each person in the picture. Eventually, she had named everyone, and she threw her arms around Steve in a hug, then ran upstairs to put it in her room.

Steve gave Natasha her’s next, and though she was smiling when she was opening it, the smile grew wider when she saw the picture. “My dream job.” She chuckled lightly.

She was trying to act casual about it, but Steve could see her eyes scanning every detail of the picture. She frowned a little, and Steve immediately started worrying he had gotten something wrong.

Then she asked, “This is what I wore to the Halloween party…”

Steve relaxed at that and nodded. “You looked really cool, and the whole spy-secret-agent thing kind of suited you…”

She pulled him into a hug, then kissed the side of his head. “This is amazing, Steve. Seriously, how are you not famous yet?”

Steve shook his head and he was about to say that he wasn’t that good, but Bucky spoke first. “I’m working on it.”

He looked at Bucky in confusion, but the brunet just winked at him and leant over to drink some of the cocoa Natasha had made for everyone. Before Steve could ask for him to explain, Bucky asked where his was.

Steve handed over the final present in the bag and Bucky’s eyes lit up when he unwrapped it. “She’s right, Stevie, you should be famous. This is awesome!”

He couldn’t help but blush at the words of praise, and tried to hide it by drinking some of his own drink, but he was sure Bucky had spotted the colour in his cheeks. Natasha and Becca probably had too.

Once all the presents were opened and wrapping paper cleared away, Becca sat playing on her new Nintendo DS while Bucky started making dinner. Natasha followed him into the kitchen and gestured for Becca to stay in there when she got up to follow her. Steve remembered what she had said the night before, about her family, and guessed she was telling him whatever she needed to tell him, most likely about Brock. He watched the door to the kitchen the whole time, only looking
away to listen to Becca showing him her new presents, what they were and what they did. A few of these presents were technology-based, and one or two looked expensive, but most were moderately cheap. Becca wasn’t bothered by that, Steve could tell. With only one source of income in the house, coming from a newly handicapped nineteen year old, Becca was smart enough not to expect a new laptop or TV, and she clearly appreciated everything she had gotten.

Bucky and Natasha eventually both came back about, and thankfully Bucky didn’t look too upset. Natasha announced that she had to leave then.

Bucky helped her put everything in her bag without damaging anything, then helped her into her coat and kissed her cheek as she hugged him. They hugged for a few seconds, then Natasha hugged Becca and Steve, kissed all three of them on the cheek (leaving them all with matching red lipstick marks on their cheeks) and said goodbye as she started walking home. They all watched her until she was out of view, because Bucky showed no indication of moving and none of them wanted him to realise he was being paranoid. It made sense, given what he had been through.

Once she was out of sight, Becca bent down to pick up a handful of snow, then shoved it down the collar of Bucky’s sweater. He yelped and jumped away from her, trying to shake the snow out of his clothes, and Becca and Steve both laughed.

Bucky glared at Becca. “You’re aware you just started a war, right?”

Becca laughed again, then ran out of the doorway and into the snow. Thankfully she already had shoes on, and Bucky followed her with a handful of snow after quickly tugging on his boots. They fought for a while but Bucky kept getting frustrated because whenever he tried to make a snowball, he accidentally crushed it with his metal hand. So he recruited help.

They built barriers out of snow on either side of the yard, just big enough for them to hide behind if they crouched down low enough. Becca was on one side and Bucky and Steve were on the other side. Steve wasn’t very good at throwing snowballs, but he could make them. Bucky couldn’t make them, but god he was good at throwing them. He used his flesh arm to throw them, and had perfect aim and hand-eye coordination. Every snowball he threw hit its target.

It wasn’t just mindlessly throwing them and hoping for the best. Steve made the snowball, then handed it to Bucky while he made another. Bucky would keep hold of it for a few seconds and look just over the top of the barrier, waiting patiently for the perfect opportunity. Becca’s head was only above her own barrier for half a second, but he still managed to hit her. She screamed as snow fell under her clothes, and Bucky laughed as he ducked behind the barrier again and took the next one from Steve.

Eventually, Steve couldn’t feel his hands or fingers anymore. He looked down and noticed they were shaking slightly, and they were red. He sniffled again and figured he should probably tell Bucky he’s going to get sick if he doesn’t go back inside and warm up soon. But it was too much fun, working on a team with Bucky. They had a good system going, and they were perfectly in synch. As soon as Bucky hand was empty, Steve had a snowball ready.

The next time Bucky held his hand out, Steve took extra notice of the condition Bucky’s hand was in. His was red too, and he was shivering a little. But he didn’t look like he wanted to stop anytime soon. Steve didn’t want to ruin the fun, so he kept quiet and kept making snowballs. He looked up at Bucky as he prepared to throw the snowballs and couldn’t help but smile at the look on Bucky’s face. This was possibly the most relaxed he had seen Bucky in a while, his cheeks and the tips of his ears and nose flushed pink from the cold. He focussed on committing every detail to memory so he could draw it later.
Becca made an attempt to dash towards the house, but Bucky managed to hit her right where her hair was blown back away from her neck. She screamed again and held both her hands up to show she was unarmed.

“I surrender!”

Bucky laughed as he stood up and held his hand out for Steve. Because Steve couldn’t feel his hands, he may have gripped Bucky’s a little too tight in an attempt to actually feel where their skin connected, because Bucky frowned a little as he looked down at their hands, then up at Steve’s face.

“You okay?”

Steve was shivering, but he nodded anyway, a wide smile on his face.

Bucky didn’t look convinced, but he nodded a little anyway. He let go of Steve’s hand and draped his arm around his shoulders to pull him close to his side as they walked back into the house, rubbing Steve’s arm through the sweater.

All three of them were covered in snow, and all of them were shivering. Bucky suggested they all change, have cocoa, then dinner would be ready. They all agreed, and Steve and Bucky went into Bucky’s bedroom.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Bucky asked once the door was closed off. He stripped off his sweater and t-shirt, and Steve did the same as he nodded.

“I’m okay, I promise.”

Steve knew his skin was a little paler than usual, and he could see his chest was flushed pink from where Becca had managed to hit him once when he had attempted to throw the snowballs, before he found his true calling at the snowball maker. Bucky noticed this too, and still didn’t look convinced as he handed Steve another sweater. This one wasn’t a Christmas one. It was just dark blue, but it was soft and thick, and it looked warm. Steve smiled as he thanked him a put it on. It was one of Bucky’s, so it was a bit too big for him again, but it just made it more comfortable. This feeling was reinforced by the fact that it smelled like Bucky.

Bucky picked up another sweater and winced slightly when his metal arm touched his side, before he put the sweater on. “Fuck… I forgot metal gets cold.”

He chuckled a little and Steve smiled in return as he changed into some pyjama bottoms Bucky ‘grew out of’ but never bothered to take the tags off, showing that they were actually brand new. Steve didn’t bother arguing about that, and for the first time he didn’t feel like he was mooching off him or taking charity. It was just Bucky’s way of taking care of him and Steve really did appreciate it. He briefly wondered when Bucky had gone out and bought them, since the only time he had left the house was to walk Steve home or to meet the man who delivered from the supermarket when he ordered groceries online. Steve wondered if maybe Natasha bought them on Bucky’s behalf, and smiled slightly at the thought. He didn’t like the idea of Bucky spending money on him, or Natasha having to waste time shopping for him. But he did like the idea of Bucky caring that much.

But Steve might have to have a word with him when Stark stops paying Bucky for work he’s not doing. On the plus side, Tony seemed to have been serious when he said he would pay Bucky until he got another job that paid enough, either at his company or elsewhere.
Bucky changed into pyjama bottoms too, and Steve smiled a little when Bucky stood up. He was 5’11”, with a metal arm and stubble, and he was wearing an oversized, fluffy red sweater, and blue pyjama bottoms with little cupcakes on them. He really did try not to laugh.

Bucky didn’t seem to mind when he failed, though, and just rolled his eyes. “Fuck you, I look stylish as hell.”

Steve laughed louder at that, and Bucky silenced him with a sudden and rough kiss. It seemed to have gone on forever, Steve was so lost in the feeling of Bucky’s lips and tongue against his own that time seemed completely irrelevant. It could have been a few seconds, or it could have been a few days for all he knew. Steve didn’t particularly care either way.

“Oh…” Steve breathed out once the kiss was over. “I’ll admit you always look pretty great…”

“Damn straight.” Bucky smirked and kissed Steve softer this time.

By the time they went back downstairs, dinner was ready.

They ate dinner and pulled crackers, wore the stupid paper hats and groaned at the stupid jokes, then Becca insisted they watch The Grinch one more time. They reluctantly agreed, then watched a few more Christmas movies after that.

Steve couldn’t concentrate on them, though. All he could think about was the tickle at the back of his throat and in his nose. It was a very familiar tickle, and he cursed himself for not saying anything about the cold first. He didn’t want to get sick, not today. Not with what he and Bucky planned to do tonight. He didn’t want to be trying his hardest not to sneeze on Bucky during their first time. He didn’t want to have to stop because he was coughing too much. He didn’t want his blocked up sinuses and throat to cause an asthma attack.

He wanted tonight to be perfect, and to feel perfect, but apparently Steve’s body disagreed with that fantasy. It seemed determined to get sick as fast as possible to prevent Steve from finally doing this. Or, at least, stop him from enjoying it completely.

Steve looked up at Bucky, who was completely immersed in the movie and oblivious to Steve’s internal panic and his impending illness. Bucky did however feel Steve staring at him and looked down at him with a smile.

“What’s up?” Bucky asked quietly and Steve just smiled back up at him and shook his head.

“Nothing…”

He turned back to the TV, and eventually so did Bucky.

*Maybe there’s something in Bucky’s medicine cabinet that could help.*

Steve excused himself, muttering about going to the bathroom, then went upstairs. He opened the cabinet and, before he touched anything, he memorised the order everything was in so he could put everything back exactly as it should be. Steve had to stand on his tiptoes to see the top shelf, then he started looking through for cold medicine.

Make up wipes, hay fever tablets (he briefly wondered if it was for Bucky or Becca, since Bucky seemed like the picture of perfect health. Besides the obvious. Finding out he had hay fever would make Steve feel a little less defective), mouthwash, dental floss, toothpaste, Bucky’s antidepressants, Becca’s period pain relief pills, the antibacterial cream Bucky needed for his arm,
gummy vitamins…

He couldn’t find any cold medicine and groaned a little as he started putting everything back where it should be. As he was putting the anti-depressants back, he accidentally knocked the make-up wipes off the self and sighed as he picked them up again and went to put them back. When he held them up, he noticed a bottle behind where the wipes had been. He hadn’t bothered moving them.

Steve took the bottle out and almost cried in relief when he read the label; “None-Drowsy Cough and Cold Medicine.”

He read the instructions to be sure how much he needed to take, then filled the cap with the dark pink liquid and drank it.

It said cherry flavoured on the label, but Steve was pretty sure whoever labelled it had never tasted a cherry before in their lives. That was not cherry flavoured.

He realised he had been gone for quite a while and put the bottle back, then the make-up wipes, looked over everything once more to make sure it was all in the right place, then went back downstairs to re-join Bucky and Becca.

The film they were watching was almost finished, and Becca was yawning. So they decided they would have chocolate cake, then Becca would be sent off to bed.

Steve didn’t even realise how late it was, but it was eleven at night already. The sun had disappeared a long time ago and the house and turned dark, since no one bothered to get up and turn a light on. The curtains were almost constantly closed. Bucky used the light on his phone to navigate around Becca’s presents still on the floor to get to the kitchen. Barely five minutes later he came back with three bowls of chocolate cake with custard.

They watched one Christmas special of The Simpsons while they ate, then Becca thanked Bucky for all the presents, as well as Steve. She hugged them both, then said goodnight and went upstairs to bed, taking an armful presents with her. Including a stuffed animal she had rolled her eyes at when she had unwrapped, complaining that she was too grown-up for one. Neither Steve nor Bucky believed her.

Once she was gone, Bucky flung his legs over Steve’s head, narrowly avoiding kicking him, to lie across the couch. He pulled Steve down with him, and Steve chuckled as he laid beside him on the narrow couch. As usual, he was on Bucky’s right, so the fingers running through his hair were made of flesh and bone.

They remained like that until the end of the episode and, to Steve’s delight, he didn’t feel anymore uncomfortably irritation in his throat or nose. It seemed as though the cold medicine had helped to at least slow it down for the time being. If he woke up tomorrow unable to breathe properly, it would be worth it. As long as he could have this one night clearheaded and illness-free.

Steve looked up at Bucky as The Simpsons finished and watched his expression, wondering if he even remembered what they even had planned tonight. He looked wat to relaxed and casual. But maybe that was an act, or Bucky was just relaxed because he had done this before. Steve had assumed that, because this was their first time together, Bucky would be nervous. Maybe that’s not how it worked. He knew Bucky wasn’t a virgin, and he had had sex several times with different people. They had had a conversation about sex before, and Steve had been amazed he hadn’t self-combusted from the shear intensity of his blushes. Bucky had been casual then, too.

Bucky had slept with four people. He was fourteen when he first had sex, and the other guy had
been eighteen. Bucky had hated his first time, but he assured Steve their first time wouldn’t be like his was. His was painful, and the other guy had yelled at him for crying and saying it hurt too much when they had only just started. Bucky said something about not enough prep or lube. He had also mentioned bleeding, and Steve had winced in sympathy. That had made him more nervous, but again, Bucky reassured him that he would be a lot more patient and caring than Bucky’s first had been with him, and he would make it feel good for him.

Bucky’s next two lovers had been a lot better in the bedroom, and his latest had been Brock. They didn’t talk about him much during their discussion, but from the little Bucky did say, Brock was rough. Bucky said he didn’t really mind rough sex, in fact he liked it… When it was discussed, and they knew each other’s limits and, most importantly, trusted each other. Bucky did not trust Brock, especially not enough to be comfortable or even the slightest bit aroused by him wrapping his hands around Bucky’s throat in the middle of sex. While Bucky spoke about this, his hand had rubbed at his neck, as if trying to get rid of the memory of Brock’s hands there, squeezing.

They had ended their conversation there and ate ice cream instead.

From that conversation, Steve knew Bucky had had quite a few bad experiences in the bedroom. This meant that he knew what felt good and what felt bad. That meant he knew that to do. He knew how to make sure Steve didn’t get hurt, and he felt safe with Bucky. And how to make sure he enjoyed it.

Bucky was still staring at the TV, and if he didn’t remember what they were going to do, Steve wouldn’t be the one to bring it up. That would be too embarrassing, he would look to desperate. Or, maybe Bucky didn’t forget and just hoped Steve did because he doesn’t want to do this but he doesn’t want to reject Steve either.

While his mind went wild with these possibilities, he heard a sound that never failed to silence his brain and make him feel calmer. Bucky laughing quietly. Steve initially looked at the TV screen to see if another episode had started and Bucky was laughing at that, but the adverts were still on. He looked back at Bucky and saw him watching him with a serene smile.

“You’re freaking out, aren’t you.” It wasn’t a question. Bucky knew Steve was freaking out.
“Relax. If you changed your mind I won’t be mad or disappointed.”

Steve blinked in surprise then and looked up at Bucky in confusion, then shook his head quickly. “I didn’t change my mind… I was sort of worried you had, actually…”

Bucky looked confused then and tightened his arm around Steve’s shoulders a little more so that he could pull him closer to Bucky. “Why wouldn’t I want to do anything with you?”

Steve guessed that that was a rhetorical question, though hundreds of reasons flashed through his mind. *I’m too small, I’m too skinny, I’m too pale, I’m too weak, I’m not attractive enough for you.* He didn’t voice any of this, though. Steve knew it would just upset Bucky hearing Steve talk about himself like that. Steve didn’t want pity today, he wanted happiness. So, he just shrugged. “Why would I change my mind?”

“Because you might not be ready, or you’re too nervous, or you’re too tired. Or you’re just not in the mood. All valid and totally acceptable reasons.” Bucky added the last bit quickly, but Steve simply shook his head again.

“I want to do this… I just don’t really know what I’m doing…”
“Well then it’s a good thing you have a certified manwhore to help you through it, then, isn’t it?” Bucky smirked as he said that, but Steve frowned.

Four people did not equate to Bucky being a manwhore. He didn’t even look like he was kidding or over exaggerating. Bucky looked like he genuinely did believe that, and that’s what made Steve feel even worse. If he had to take a wild guess about who it was that convinced Bucky that he was a manwhore, Steve would guess Brock right away. Natasha had said that when Bucky was with him it was like he was brainwashed. Maybe some of the things he convinced Bucky were true had stuck with him as facts, even now.

Instead of arguing that, Steve just leant up and kissed Bucky, cupping his face to keep Bucky still. Bucky didn’t even hesitate and immediately kissed Steve back, the slight curl of his lips showing that he was smiling. Whatever bad shit Brock had brainwashed Bucky into believing about himself, Steve was determined to undo it all. Whether it took months or years, he was going to make sure Bucky never thought anything like that about himself again.

Steve realised he may have been over exaggerating about the derogatory term Bucky had used to describe himself. He may not actually believe he’s a manwhore, and it’s possible no one – not even Brock – had ever tried to convince him he was. Steve may have just been overthinking it, or being too overly protective of Bucky.

Steve ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair as they kissed. It was longer than it had been when they first met, and for the months they had known each other before the incident occurred. He wasn’t sure if Bucky hadn’t bothered getting it cut because he didn’t want to be out of the house for that long, he didn’t trust anyone to bring sharp objects near his face after what had happened, he wanted to grow it out, or he simply didn’t care. In all honesty, hair care was pretty low on everyone’s Concerns about Bucky Barnes list. Steve kind of liked it, though. He had guessed before that Bucky kind of has a thing for people touching his hair.

Anyone he didn’t know or like were not allowed to touch his hair. People he liked could touch it, and Bucky liked it. Natasha would play with his hair sometimes when they sit next to each other, twirling strands around her fingers or just running her fingers through it. Lovers, Steve knew, Bucky loved to have touching his hair.

Now that Bucky had been giving Steve blowjobs for long enough, he didn’t have any rules against what Steve could and couldn’t do. That meant that Steve could now tangle his fingers in Bucky’s hair or tug at it during the act, or any time really. And Bucky would always let out the most delicious moans when he did.

Steve hadn’t really understood the appeal of having one’s hair pulled, but now he understood the appeal of being the person pulling someone else’s hair, because of the moans or breathy sighs Bucky would let out whenever he did.

His ability to be able to get a better grip on Bucky’s hair was definitely a tally in the pro-longer-hair column. To be honest, Steve couldn’t think of anything to go in the against-longer-hair.

It had been a while since he had pulled Bucky’s hair, since before the incident really. Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky would still like it, or if the act could be interpreted as threatening or too rough to Bucky now. He didn’t want to trigger Bucky, but he knew that his boyfriend definitely enjoyed it in the past.

Whilst they kissed, Steve stopped his fingers at the back of Bucky’s head, tangled in his hair, and gave a light, experimental tug to see how Bucky would react. Thankfully, Bucky didn’t tense or try to pull away. He wasn’t scared, he wasn’t hurt. If anything, he relaxed more into the kiss when he
felt it, his breath hitching only slightly. The only indication that he act had any effect on him.

Steve could help but smile against Bucky’s lips at that, and he tugged again, a little harder this time. Bucky gasped a little, opening his mouth slightly wider to meet Steve’s tongue with his own. That was definitely a good response, but Steve wanted more.

He wanted Bucky to react more to what he was doing, so he pulled at the handful of hair he had a little harder. This time, Bucky moaned and wrapped both arms around Steve to pull him closer to his body, so they were pressed up against each other.

That was the reaction Steve was looking for.

Regretfully, Steve broke the kiss and Bucky almost whimpered in disappointment when they separated, even if it was only slightly. Bucky’s lips didn’t stop though, instead placing heated kisses along Steve’s neck.

If Steve wanted to stop altogether, all he had to do was say so, and he knew Bucky would stop. But, though he was nervous, he didn’t want to stop. He didn’t want to nudge Bucky away from him this time to have a minute to cool off. He wanted to keep going. But not here.

“Buck…?” He breathed out, his eyes fluttering closed at the feel of Bucky’s kisses along the sensitive skin of his throat. Bucky let out a little grunt to acknowledge that he had heard Steve, and he was listening, but he wasn’t going to stop what he was doing. That was fine by Steve.

“Bed?” Steve whispered, though he wasn’t entirely sure why. It wasn’t a secret what they were about to do, and Becca was the only other person in the house, but there was no way she would hear Steve’s normal speaking voice from upstairs in her bedroom where she was sleeping.

Becca… Would she hear them? Steve didn’t want his boyfriend’s sister to hear them having sex. Not only would he never be able to face her again, but she might be uncomfortable around Bucky if she heard them. He didn’t want to put any strain on their relationship.

He was overthinking again, Steve could feel it. But he still couldn’t stop himself.

“Bed sounds good.” Bucky replied, but he made no move to stop kissing Steve’s neck and get up.

After a few more seconds, Steve couldn’t take it anymore and had to push Bucky away a little so he could stand up and pull Bucky along with him. “What about Becca…?”

Steve really hoped that didn’t ruin the mood, bringing up Bucky’s little sister. But he had to be sure it was okay to have sex a few rooms away from her.

“She always overexerts herself Christmas day, she’s dead to the world the minute her head hits the pillow. Every year.”

That was reassuring, and Steve nodded as Bucky took his hand and led him upstairs. He kept hold of his hand as they went into his bedroom and Bucky closed the door behind them. Bucky glanced back at Steve before locking the door, and the sound of that quiet click made this even more real.

It was smart, locking the door. In case Becca walked in. But it also made the gravity of the situation that much more suffocating, and Steve’s breathing became a little more shallow. He wanted this, he really did.

So why are you panicking?
Steve didn’t know.

He wasn’t worried Bucky would hurt him, or try to force him into something he’s not ready for. Bucky would never do that, and Steve knew that. Even if they were seconds away from finally having sex, if Steve said he wanted to stop, Bucky would stop. No matter how turned on or excited he was, Bucky would always stop.

Bucky’s patients was one of the many things Steve loved about Bucky, and he clung to that thought as he stepped forward and simultaneously pulled Bucky back towards him so that they met somewhere in the middle of the space that had been between them.

They were still holding hands, and Steve had no intention of letting go. Bucky’s other hand, the prosthetic, was hanging by his side, and so was Steve’s other hand. Neither of them seemed to know what to do with their hands, which made Steve feel a little better. At least Bucky was a little awkward too.

Originally, Steve thought it would be best if Bucky knew exactly what he was doing. That way, all Steve had to do was follow Bucky’s lead. Bucky would lead them through the motions. But actually, this was so much better than that. Bucky being awkward, and nervous. Steve could tell he was nervous, he could taste it on Bucky’s tongue. No matter how much the brunette tried to act cool and collected, he was nervous. And instead of making Steve more nervous, or making him lose faith that Bucky knew what he was doing, it just made it feel more real.

Of course Bucky was nervous, he loved Steve and he wanted this to be a good experience for him. He wanted Steve to feel good as much as Steve wanted Bucky to feel good. It made the situation more real. More human.

Steve eventually made the first move and raised his free hand to the hem of Bucky’s sweater. He could feel the heated flesh beneath it against the back of his fingers as he gripped the material. Bucky didn’t make a move to stop him, just kept kissing, so Steve let go of his other hand so that it could join the other on Bucky’s sweater.

Bucky broke the kiss then, and looked down at Steve’s hands. Steve watched his face for any sign that Bucky didn’t want to do this, but he saw none. Bucky looked into Steve’s eyes, and gave him the minutest nod. That was all the prompting Steve needed. He tugged the material up, and Bucky raised his arms a little to help Steve as he stood on his tip toes to get the sweater over Bucky’s head and off.

This was nothing new. They had done this before. They had kissed and undressed each other. Sometimes slowly, taking their time to explore each other’s bodies. Sometimes it was fast and heated. This was definitely the former.

They kissed again, this time Bucky initiated it, and Steve rested both of his hands on Bucky’s chest as they did. His skin was like a furnace under his fingers, and Steve stepped closer to get more of that heat. Bucky’s hands rested on Steve’s hips as they kissed, then moved down a little to grip the hem of Bucky’s own sweater that he had leant Steve. Steve was surprised he wasn’t sweating from the heat of the sweater, Bucky’s skin, and his own arousal.

They broke the kiss just long enough for Bucky to pull the sweater over Steve’s head and dump it somewhere on the floor besides them. When his hands returned to Steve’s sides, it felt so much better. He could feel every twitch of Bucky’s human fingers against his skin, and every small ridge in the metal fingers and palm. It was colder than his other hand, but that just made Steve more aware of his own body, more grounded in the moment.
This wasn’t so scary. All Steve had to do was focus on here and now, and here and now was nothing new. This wasn’t scary, or nerve-wracking. This was showing each other how much they loved each other, revelling in each other’s touch, adoring each other’s bodies, enjoying each other’s company. This was familiar.

Bucky stepped forward, and due to how close they already were, this forced Steve to take a step back. Then Bucky did it again and Steve realised what he was doing. He was leading Steve towards the bed.

He felt a flash of panic, but quickly pushed it down. This wasn’t new. They usually ended up on the bed. Once Steve felt the backs of his knees hit the foot of the bed, he expected Bucky to push him to lie down, but he didn’t. Even if he had, that would have been okay. They usually ended up laid down on the bed. But Bucky just sat him down, they sat down beside him as they continued kissing slowly.

This wasn’t new.

One of Steve’s hands moved up to Bucky’s hair, and he tugged it a little, how he knew Bucky liked it. It earned him another quiet little gasp, and Steve smiled a little when he heard it.

This wasn’t new.

He ran his other hand down, and felt the muscles of Bucky’s abdomen twitch under his fingertips. Steve didn’t go any lower than that. It would be too new. Bucky was always the one who’s hand trailed lower, he was always the first to start that kind of stuff. Luckily, Bucky took the hint and did just that.

Bucky moved one hand from Steve’s side and down to the waistband of Steve’s new pyjama bottoms. His fingers didn’t go under the waistband, but they did toy with the elasticated fabric a little. They were still sat up, so attempting to remove them would prove a little difficult. This meant Steve wasn’t surprised when Bucky applied the lightest pressure to Steve’s other side in a way of silently asking him to lie down. It was so light that Steve may not have even noticed it if he wasn’t so hyperaware of his own skin right now.

This wasn’t new.

They had laid down before, so Steve willingly did just that. He didn’t panic, he didn’t refuse or try to stop this. Bucky followed after him, but he broke the kiss when Steve’s head touched the soft pillows below him. It seemed a little strange to keep the kiss going while they were sat on the edge of the bed, and whilst Steve was in the process of lying down and therefore they had gravity working against them, but now that they were both still, Bucky stopped.

He looked down at Steve half-lidded eyes. The usual light blue was now darker, and the colour was just a ring around the black of his dilated pupils. That might have been from the lack of light, though, and Bucky must have seen the same lack of detail in Steve’s face as he had seen, because he reached over to turn the bedside lamp on. They didn’t break eye contact, though Steve had to blink when the light turned on. It wasn’t particularly bright, only just enough for them to see the micro expressions on each other’s faces and not much else around them. That may have been from the low lighting, or it could have been because Steve simply didn’t care about anything else around them.

He didn’t need to keep an eye on their surroundings, and neither did Bucky. Steve usually liked being able to see the whole room so he knew where everything was at all times, but he didn’t need to here. He had been in Bucky’s room enough times, and things rarely changed in there. Maybe a
few more or less clothes on the floor from one day to the next, a different book on the bedside table every other day, but that was about it.

Steve didn’t need to see what clothes were on the floor to make sure he didn’t trip if he went to get a drink during the night. He didn’t want to see which book Bucky was reading this week, because he had no intention of asking him about it any time soon. Steve would still ask, yeah, but later.

All that mattered in that room right now was Bucky, so it made sense that he was all Steve could see.

“We can stop any time…” Bucky spoke quietly, as if he was afraid to break the silence in the room, the moment too fragile to risk using his normal speaking voice in.

“I know, Buck.” Steve’s voice matched Bucky’s, and Steve smiled, showing that he meant it. He knew Bucky wouldn’t force him into anything. He knew he could stop this whenever he wanted.

“I mean it, any time.” The emphasis on Bucky’s words made Steve realise exactly what Bucky was doing.

He was making sure Steve didn’t feel manipulated or forced to suffer through it instead of having the pleasure of enjoying it, like Bucky went through during his first time.

What he meant was; “*Even if we’ve just started the actual sex part, you can still say no and I will stop.*”

Steve nodded again, and smiled up at him again to assure him that he knew exactly what he meant, and he knew what Bucky was saying to him was true.

Bucky leant down and kissed Steve again, but it was only for a second, then he pulled back again.

“I have to ask one more time, then I promise I’ll shut up…”

Steve couldn’t help but laugh quietly at that. He knew what Bucky was going to ask, and he would prefer if Bucky just trusted that Steve would tell him if he wanted to stop. But he had to admit, the concern and constant checking was endearing.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Tonight?”

Steve didn’t even hesitate, he nodded quickly, then reached up to pull Bucky down by a hand on the back of his head to kiss him again. The kiss started off sweet, but as it continued, it got a little more heated, and Steve could feel the blush colouring his cheeks. His eyes were closed most of the time, but the second Bucky pulled away, Steve opened them to see what he was doing.

Bucky balanced himself up on his metal arm and ran the fingers of his other hand down Steve’s chest to the waistband of his bottoms again. As his fingers trailed, his lips followed, placing sweet and gentle kisses down his chest and stomach until he reached Steve’s pelvic bone.

This was nothing new.

He slowly pulled Steve’s pyjamas down, and Steve bit his lip as he waited for Bucky’s lips to follow, as they had down his chest. He was not disappointed.

Bucky kissed down his pubic bone, and *just* to the right of Steve’s erection. It was a little frustrating to have Bucky’s beautiful and talented lips so close and not get what he had expected, but Steve tried to keep that disappointment hidden and watched as Bucky’s lips continued moving.
He kissed down one of his legs, still following the trousers to kiss the newly exposed flesh of his right leg, his left leg being temporarily ignored.

Once he got to Steve’s ankles, Bucky sat up to free his other arm so that he could pull the pyjama bottoms off his completely, and tossed them somewhere off the bed.

This was nothing new.

Steve had to keep reminding himself of that, again and again, but it helped. None of this was new, so there was no reason to panic. Bucky was just kissing him.

He felt the bed shift slightly, and looked down his own body in time to see Bucky lean down and start kissing Steve’s left ankle, as he had done with his right. This time, he worked his way up his leg, leaving gentle kisses in his wake. Steve breathed out a quiet sign under Bucky’s ministrations, and smiled at him lovingly.

When Bucky reached his groin, Steve couldn’t help but bite his lip. Sometimes, Bucky would do this sort of thing. He would kiss all over Steve’s body, but he would skim over or miss out entirely the one part Steve really wanted Bucky’s mouth the most.

He wasn’t sure at first, whether Bucky would do that or take pity on him, but it didn’t take long for him to figure it out.

Steve let out a quiet gasp as Bucky wasted no time taking the head of Steve’s already hard cock into him mouth. He sucked lightly, and Steve stared down and met Bucky’s eyes. Bucky was watching him closely and god, that was Steve’s favourite view; Bucky staring up at him with his lips wrapped around Steve’s cock.

While Bucky did that, he reached down and threaded his fingers through Bucky’s hair. He didn’t pull it, though. Not yet. He just ran his fingers through the soft locks, starting to curl a little at the edges because of the length of it, and smiled fondly down at him.

Like this, he could forget what they were about to do. There was no anxiety now, just pleasure. He didn’t have to think about whether or not what they were doing was anything new, or whether or not he should be panicking yet.

This was familiar, and he didn’t have to think about it. What to do when Bucky was sucking him off was a muscle memory. Steve opened his legs a little wider, so Bucky could settle between them, and bit his lip as he tightened his grip on Bucky’s hair, just a little.

After holding just the head on his mouth, Bucky eventually took more in, keeping his lips tight and his cheeks hollowed around Steve. It created the perfect vacuum for Steve to shallowly hump up into. He didn’t try to take control or encourage Bucky to take more than he was willing to. He definitely wasn’t trying to choke him.

He was just letting his body take over, and his mind shut down.

Bucky would often suck Steve off when Steve was stressed, or he was overthinking something. Steve really hoped that didn’t mean he was using Bucky as some kind of stress relief. It wasn’t every time he was upset about something, and he never brought it up or suggested it. Bucky always initiated it and assured Steve that it was okay and he wanted to.

Like this, all Steve had to do was listen to his body and to quiet in and out of Bucky’s breathing through his nose.
Their breathing was pretty much in synch right now, the only noise in the room, punctuated by the occasional slurping sound. Steve never would have suspected a sound like that would be such a turn on, before Bucky.

Eventually, more sounds filled the room. The quiet shuffling of the sheets below Steve whenever he pushed up into Bucky’s warm, wet mouth. Steve’s quiet moans and groans. Bucky’s moans too, usually just after a slight gagging sound.

Steve used to be terrified of doing something wrong in this situation and making Bucky mad at him, but he had since learnt that if Bucky didn’t like something, he would stop and tell Steve just that. Bucky didn’t mind occasionally feeling the blunt head of Steve’s cock jab against the back of his throat. In fact, judging by the quiet erotic moans that followed, he enjoyed it. Steve hadn’t been sure whether he was moaning because he liked it or because it made him feel sick, but Bucky had assured him it was the former.

Steve tilted his head back a little as he bit his lip. His cock was painfully hard now, jerking slightly against Bucky’s tongue. He started tugging at Bucky’s hair now. His hand remained on the back of his head, not controlling Bucky’s movements, but following them, and each time Bucky went down, Steve’s hand lagged behind him only slightly. So there was a little jerk at his hair before his hand followed his head and the pressure eased.

Bucky moaned more then, and Steve heard himself doing so too as Bucky’s efforts to bring him pleasure seemed to have doubled.

But Steve knew his body and he knew Bucky’s mouth, and if they kept going like this, he would finish in no time. That wouldn’t do. They had more to do tonight, so Steve tugged at Bucky’s hair again. Bucky didn’t stop immediately, not realising that the pull was to make him stop and not just for the sake of pulling his hair.

He looked up and let Steve’s dick fall out of his mouth with a quiet pop. His lips were slick with his own saliva and Steve’s precome, and Steve kept his hand in his hair to pull him up to kiss him, licking the mixture of fluids from his lips with a quiet moan. He could taste himself and Bucky mixed together, and it was delicious.

“Ready?” Bucky asked quietly as he rested his forehead against Steve’s, their shallow breaths mingling together.

This was nothing new.

When Bucky fingered Steve, he always asked him if he was ready or comfortable several times during the act. Steve guessed that that’s what was going to happen now.

Bucky was hurt his first time because of not enough prep and lube, so Steve knew he wouldn’t be taking any chances with Steve.

He was proved right when Bucky tore his gaze away from Steve’s eyes to look at where his hand had disappeared into the top drawer of his nightstand where he kept lube. Bucky seemed to hesitate for a second, like he wasn’t sure about something, then looked back at Steve.

“Condom?”

Steve hadn’t even thought about that. He had heard that it didn’t make it feel good for the person wearing it, but someone else had told him that that was a myth conjured up so guys had an excuse not to wear one. He didn’t think Bucky would have any STDs or STIs, and Steve knew he didn’t
have any himself, since he hadn’t done anything sexual before.

He was also worried Bucky would be offended if Steve did ask him to wear one. Bucky was willing to take Steve into his mouth, so why should Steve make him wear a condom for this?

This was new.

Before he could panic anymore about his answer, Bucky’s hand left the drawer empty and he cupped Steve’s cheek. “I don’t care, either way. I’m clean, but if you want me to wear one I won’t protest. I won’t be offended. I won’t care. It’s completely up to you,”

How Bucky could constantly know exactly what was going through Steve’s head, he would never understand. Steve nodded a little at that and bit his lip as he thought about it. Bucky didn’t look impatient or annoyed at the hesitation, he just waited considerately for Steve to make his decision.

“No condom…” Steve decided. He trusted that Bucky was clean, and he knew he was clean himself so he wouldn’t be putting Bucky in any danger.

Bucky waited a second to make sure Steve was sure and wasn’t about to change his mind before nodding a little. He reached back into the drawer and brought about the lube. Steve watched as Bucky coated a few of his flesh fingers with the gel, then bit his lip whilst he spread his legs.

This wasn’t new.

Bucky had fingered him before, this wasn’t anything new. This he could handle. He enjoyed this. Steve watched Bucky’s face as he waited for him to start. Bucky wasn’t looking at him anymore, he was focussing on his own fingers and Steve’s hole. It felt strange, being that exposed. It was nothing new, but it felt new. It felt like the first time they had touched each other in this way, even if Steve knew that wasn’t true. Logic was starting to fade out of his mind at this point.

Steve involuntarily tensed when he felt Bucky’s fingertip tracing his rim. He wasn’t applying any pressure yet, but the gel was cold and now so was Bucky’s finger. He tried to force himself to relax as he planted his feet on the bed so his knees were up. It didn’t work though, every time he felt Bucky’s finger move a little closer, Steve couldn’t help but tense up. Bucky looked up at Steve eventually, and Steve saw something calculating in his expression. He was worried Bucky would be annoyed, but then he remembered what Bucky had said about his first time and realised this must have been what Bucky had been like. He would have been just as nervous as Steve, more so in fact, since the person Bucky first slept with was someone he didn’t really trust.

He was still worried it was taking so long just for Steve to relax, but Bucky just smiled at him and moved his hand away from him, resting them both on Steve’s raised knees. The lube on Bucky’s fingers was now on Steve’s knee, but he didn’t care.

“I have another idea. Something that might help you relax better. Something we’ve never done before,” Bucky announced, and Steve instantly became nervous again.

This would be something new.

“W-what is it?” Steve asked, and cursed himself when he heard the slight tremble in his voice.

Bucky heard it too, Steve could tell, because his expression immediately became concerned. He didn’t mention it though, just leant down and kissed Steve softly to try and relax him.

“But you don’t like it, we won’t do it…”
Steve nodded at that. He knew that. He knew the offer to stop was always on the table, no matter what they do. Bucky still hadn’t told him what he was going to do though.

“What is it?” Steve forced his voice to stay level that time, so Bucky would know that Steve wasn’t scared and he trusted him.

“Rimming…”

Steve remembered what he had thought about that before. About what Bucky’s stubble would feel like around his hole. About how talented Bucky’s mouth would be in that situation. His throat suddenly felt dry, and he licked his lips to try and dampen them. It didn’t work, but Steve noticed Bucky’s eyes follow him tongue, then look back up at Steve’s face.

“What do you want to?” Steve asked quietly. He was a little nervous about that. He didn’t want Bucky to do something he didn’t want to just to try to make Steve relax more.

Usually, Bucky would say it didn’t matter what he wanted, just what Steve wanted. But this time, Bucky seemed to have realised that that would be counterproductive, because he nodded a little, never breaking eye contact.

Steve mirrored his shallow nod, and Bucky smiled at him as he dropped down to kiss Steve again. It was a lingering kiss, like Bucky didn’t want it to ever end. Steve understood that, and he felt the same. He wanted to keep kissing Bucky forever. But there were other things they wanted to do too, and Bucky eventually broke the kiss and moved back away from Steve a little.

“Turn over…”

It wasn’t an order, Steve knew that. If he changed his mind, he could refuse. Again, he didn’t want to, though he still hesitated a little. Bucky didn’t repeat himself, or try to prompt Steve to move faster, just waited patiently on his knees a few inches away from Steve on the bed.

Steve eventually forced his limbs to move. He turned onto his stomach and bit his lip as his cock rubbed against the bedsheets that were warm from where he had been laying. Initially, he worried he would get precome on the bed, but he quickly pushed that thought out of his head. Bucky didn’t care about that kind of stuff. He would just strip the bed and wash the sheets later.

He could see Bucky’s leg in his peripheral vision, but that was it. Bucky didn’t move, not until Steve was completely settled in position. Then, Bucky leant over and took Steve’s ankle in his flesh hand to pull his legs apart a little more, like when Bucky was sucking him off, he then settled between his legs.

Steve bit his lip in anticipation. From all the porn he had watched in preparation for something like this, Steve knew that a lot of people liked this kind of stuff. He had never seen a video of someone not liking this. He just needed to relax and stop thinking, just concentrate on enjoying it.

He felt Bucky’s hands on his ass cheeks and closed his eyes to concentrate on just that. He felt cool air against his hole, where some of the lube was still there, making it feel colder. He didn’t mind, not when he knew what was about to happen.

Steve felt the bed shift behind him, then gasped when he first felt Bucky’s lips against him. They didn’t touch his hole right away, instead Bucky placed chaste kisses near it. Steve relaxed more and more with each kiss.

This was new, but he wasn’t at the same time. It was just Bucky kissing Steve’s body, but in a place he never had before now.
After Steve managed to relax a little, Bucky must have felt this, because then he moved his lips closer and pressed a kiss right against Steve’s hole, causing Steve to gasp in surprise. It felt strange, but not necessarily bad. There was a moment where Bucky’s lips were gone, but his hands were still there, holding Steve open. The pause didn’t last long enough for Steve to look back to see why Bucky stopped though, and he almost immediately felt Bucky’s lips against him again. But this time, it wasn’t just his lips, and Steve couldn’t help but moan as he felt his boyfriend’s tongue as well. Again, it felt strange. But only for a second, then it felt good. Really good.

He thought he could feel Bucky smiling against his skin when he heard Steve’s moan, but he couldn’t be sure. It definitely encouraged Bucky, though. Once he heard that sound, Bucky licked at him again, his lips pressed against his too, like he was kissing him. Steve bit his lip, trying to keep his breathing under control and not make much noise. But he failed. The more Bucky’s tongue worked at him, the more Steve moaned.

Steve wasn’t even aware how much he was moaning anymore, too lost in the feeling to concentrate on his own voice. He heard someone speaking then, and realised it couldn’t have been Bucky, since his lips were preoccupied. He realised it was his own voice, but he wasn’t aware of what he was saying. It didn’t matter. Whatever it was, it seemed to spur Bucky on more, and Steve gasped against when Bucky’s tongue pushed into him a little. Not much, just enough to breach his rim. Steve squirmed slightly, but not to move away. He didn’t want Bucky to stop either. He wasn’t sure why he was moving. Probably the same reason he sometimes thrusted up into Bucky’s mouth when he sucked him off. Steve wasn’t really thinking about it, it was just the pleasure getting to him.

Rimming was definitely something Steve was willing to try again, and he hoped Bucky wanted to as well. Judging by the level of enthusiasm Bucky was putting into the act, it seemed like he was enjoying it too.

During a particular shift, Steve groaned when it pushed his ass back against Bucky’s mouth as well as making the head of his cock rub against the soft sheets under him. It felt amazing, and Steve needed to do it again. He thought for a second that he should probably be embarrassed about humping the sheets, but he really didn’t care anymore. Just when he thought this was the most pleasure he could possibly feel all at once, he felt more than heard Bucky moan against his hole, and Steve nearly cried out in pleasure. He just managed to stop himself, covering his mouth with one hand before more than a choked out moan could escape.

Bucky repeated that a few times, and Steve briefly wondered if he could feel his eyes watering or if that was just his imagination. It felt so good, he never wanted it to stop. Steve regretted never bringing this up before. As he had expected, he could feel Bucky’s stubble against his hole and the sensitive skin around it, and the slight scratching just added to the pleasure.

He couldn’t stop himself anymore, he needed to touch himself. Steve shifted slightly to get a hand between himself and the bed to stroke himself slowly. He had barely started when Bucky’s right hand circled around Steve’s wrist. Bucky’s face was still buried in the crease of Steve’s ass, and he was still licking and sucking, even nipping at Steve occasionally. He used the hand on Steve’s wrist to pull the blonde’s hand away from himself, and Steve outright whimpered, but did as Bucky wanted and let go. He chose instead to grip the sheets either side of his head in his fists to stop himself from touching himself.

Steve was one hundred percent sure he could definitely climax from this alone, if Bucky continued long enough. Before that happened, though, Bucky stopped.

He placed one more kiss on Steve’s hole, then sat up. Steve saw his hand in his peripheral vision
go towards where he had put the lube on the bedside table.

“Ready, Stevie?” Bucky asked quietly, his voice thick with arousal.

Steve looked over his shoulder as Bucky. His hair was a mess, probably from all the times Steve had pulled at it, and his face and chest was flushed a light pink, eyes dark in the low light.

He looked beautiful.

Steve nodded and spread his legs a little wider. He was definitely more relaxed now, but he still bit his lip as he waited. But Bucky didn’t coat his fingers in the gel like Steve expected. Instead, he moved out from between Steve’s legs and leant down to kiss him, his metal hand pushing on Steve’s shoulder lightly. Steve got the hint and moved so that he was laid on his back again, staring up at Bucky as he moved between Steve’s open legs again.

He coated his fingers in a generous amount of lube then, and used his metal hand to prop himself up a little, leaning down to kiss Steve again.

This time when he felt Bucky’s finger trace his entrance, Steve didn’t tense. His muscles were relaxed, and Bucky’s kiss was definitely helping to keep him that way. He could taste himself and the lube that had been around his hole on Bucky’s lips and tongue, and he moaned against him, wrapping one arm around his shoulders so that his hand was resting on the metal shoulder of Bucky’s left arm. He felt Bucky tense, even if it was only slightly, and immediately moved his hand away from the metal. Making Bucky comfortable was important too, and Steve didn’t want to risk Bucky tensing up because of him. Instead, he moved that hand up to the back of Bucky’s head, gripping Bucky’s hair lightly as first.

The finger trailing Steve’s entrance eventually breeched him, and Steve’s breath hitched slightly. Bucky tried to pull out of the kiss, most likely to ask Steve if he was okay or if he wanted him to stop. Steve was fine, and he didn’t want Bucky to stop, so he tightened his grip on Bucky’s hair to keep his lips against Steve’s own. It was the nicest way Steve could think of to tell Bucky to shut up and keep going, without actually having to say it.

Bucky pressed his finger in a little further, and Steve moaned quietly around Bucky’s tongue in his mouth to show that he was enjoying it. It didn’t take him long to adjust to the first finger, already loosened up a little by Bucky rimming him. Bucky felt this, and it didn’t take long for him to add another slicked finger beside the first.

That did cause a stretch, but it wasn’t unpleasant and it didn’t hurt. It was just a little uncomfortable, but that feeling quickly went away and was replaced by pleasure as Bucky slowly pumped his fingers in and out of him. It was as though he was searching for something at first, and when he found it they both knew. When Bucky’s middle finger brushed his prostate, Steve could stop himself from crying out this time. Luckily, the noise was muffled slightly by Bucky’s lips.

This time, Bucky definitely smirked. There was no way that Steve couldn’t tell this time, he was so used to feeling Bucky smiling against his lips. Bucky purposely brushed over that spot several times, making Steve squirm, gasp and moan almost constantly.

Bucky was the one to break the kiss, staring down at Steve the same way he had done the first time he fingered Steve, in the hotel barely over a month ago. That realisation hit Steve hard. He couldn’t believe that dance competition Becca won was less than two months ago. So much had happened in such a small window of time.

If he kept thinking about that, Steve was going to get a head rush, so instead he focussed on Bucky.
His face was a little more flushed, and his lips were darkened and slightly swollen from the kisses, a thin layer of sweat covered Steve, but not Bucky. Steve supposed that was because Bucky hadn’t really gotten much pleasure yet, and Steve would have felt a little bad about that if he didn’t glance down and know Bucky was definitely still aroused.

He reached out and took Bucky’s erection in his hand, and as soon as his fingers made contact, Bucky’s movements faltered slightly and he let out a shaky moan. Steve stroked him slowly, his other hand still in Bucky’s hair, keeping his head close. From this close, Steve could see every shadow caused by the low light. Most of his face was illuminated by the lamp besides them, but the left side of his face was definitely darker than the rest. Steve could also see a slight glimmer of sweat over Bucky’s skin, and all the tiniest of changes in his expression. His mouth remained open, his eyes flickering side to side slightly, like he was alternating between which of Steve’s eyes to look into, and Steve guessed his own eyes were doing the same thing.

Steve cried out again after a particularly firm pressure on his prostate, and Bucky dropped his head down to kiss him and muffle the noises at the very least, silence them at most. The grip Steve had on Bucky’s hair tightened, and Bucky moaned against him at Steve tugged at it, hard.

He used that grip to pull Bucky’s head back, breaking the kiss. The act had the desired effect, Bucky did break the kiss, and his eyes remained closed in pleasure when Steve opened his own to look at him. Steve hadn’t expected that much of an effect, but he was glad about it nonetheless and kept his grip firm.

“Bucky… I’m ready.”

Bucky’s eyes opened then, and he stared at Steve in silence for a few seconds, like he was trying to decide whether Steve was actually ready or if he was just too eager. Maybe Bucky had thought he was ready, but he was just being eager, then it had started to hurt and he had changed his mind. He wasn’t ready, but it was too late in the other guy’s eyes, and Bucky had had his chance.

That wasn’t the case here, though. Steve knew that, and he hoped Bucky saw it too. He tried to keep all concern off his face as he Bucky, waiting for him to believe Steve.

“You sure?”

Steve didn’t hesitate. Any hint of hesitation and Bucky would think he was lying. Steve was still nervous, but he didn’t want Bucky to know that. He nodded quickly, and Bucky nodded too a few seconds later.

“Okay… Tell me to stop if—“

“I will.” Steve interrupted with a smile. The smile was there to make it seem like he wasn’t getting impatient, but he was. Despite the nerves, he really wanted this to happen. He loved that Bucky kept checking, but he just wanted him to get on with it. Steve would tell him if something was wrong, and Bucky needed to understand that.

Bucky nodded again, then picked up the lube again.

Steve hardly blinked as he waited, watching Bucky slick up his length with the lube, making sure to get enough on it. Bucky let out quiet breathy moans as he stroked himself, and Steve wasn’t sure whether watching Bucky pleasure himself was making him more impatient, more aroused, or jealous of Bucky’s hand.

That was a little pathetic, Steve thought. Being jealous of his boyfriend’s hand, because it was
touching Bucky’s cock and he wasn’t. But he was beyond caring at this point. Without even meaning to, Steve spread his legs wider as Bucky moved a little closer to Steve, on his knees between his legs.

Steve bit his lip, a little bit of nervousness slipping into his expression before he could stop it. He was worried that would cause Bucky to stop, but he didn’t, and Steve was glad. Bucky must have understood that because Steve was nervous, it didn’t mean he wanted to stop.

Bucky kept his flesh hand on himself and planted the metal hand next to Steve’s head to hold himself up just above him. Steve felt the blunt head of Bucky’s cock against his entrance and bit his lip as he waited. He stared up at Bucky for a second, then reached up to pull him down by the nape of his neck for a kiss. Bucky eagerly returned the kiss and simultaneously pushed into Steve. He only pushed in a little, not even the whole head, but it was enough to make them both moan into each other’s mouths.

It hurt, Steve couldn’t deny that. It wasn’t bad enough to make him want to stop, though. Bucky’s cock was clearly bigger than his two fingers, but Steve wasn’t only just realising this now. He pushed in a little more, until the head pushed past the ring of muscle, and Steve gasped against Bucky’s lips, inhaling quickly. Bucky broke the kiss long enough for Steve to take a few deep breaths. The stretching feeling was still there, but the more time Bucky gave him to adjust, the more that feeling gave way to pleasure. It felt good, having Bucky inside him like this. Steve continued breathing deeply, under Bucky’s quiet instructions.

“Just keep breathing… It’ll hurt a little, but it’ll feel good soon, I promise… I’ll make you feel so good, Stevie, just breathe for a little longer…” Bucky muttered little comments like that almost constantly, the hand that he had used to push himself in was now rested on Steve’s stomach, rubbing soothing circles on his skin.

After a few more seconds of silence on Steve’s part and quiet words of encouragement from Bucky, Steve stared up at Bucky and nodded a little to signal that he was ready. The burn was all but gone now, and he needed more. Bucky hesitated for a second, again probably waiting for Steve to change his mind. He didn’t change his mind, and Bucky bit his lip as he pushed in a little further.

Steve couldn’t help but close his eyes as he focussed on the feeling of Bucky slowly penetrating him. He moaned quietly as Bucky lowered his head to kiss along Steve’s neck. Not the heated kisses from earlier, on the couch, just soft little pecks. The hand on Steve’s stomach still moved slowly, rubbing comforting, and Steve bit his lip as he concentrated on all the places Bucky was touching him. His hand on his stomach, his lips on his neck, his brown hair tickling under Steve’s chin, and most importantly his dick pushing into Steve.

Steve didn’t tell him to stop. The pain was gone now, and it felt so good. Bucky was right, he wasn’t even doing much yet and he was already making Steve feel great. A few more deep breaths was all it took for Bucky to bottom out inside him. He stilled then, and Steve ran his fingers through his hair as they both waited for Steve to fully adjust to Bucky’s length.

The kisses on Steve’s neck continued, until he pulled at the clump of hair he had in his hand to get Bucky to move up and kiss his lips again. Bucky did so eagerly and shifted slightly, causing a jolt of pleasure to shoot through Steve’s entire body, meaning Bucky had hit his prostate without even trying. Steve moaned, and Bucky broke the kiss to pull back barley an inch and look at Steve’s face. Whatever he was looking for, he must have seen it. Or whatever he was hoping not to see wasn’t there. Because after scanning Steve’s face, Bucky bit his lip lightly, worrying it between his teeth, then pulled out slowly so that Steve could feel every slight movement, then pushed in again.

Steve gasped quietly, and let out a breathy moan, his hand still in Bucky’s hair. He wasn’t sure
what to do with his other hand, or his legs raised with his feet on the sheets. It didn’t matter, though, because neither Steve nor Bucky were focussing on any parts of their bodies that weren’t connected. The pleasure had definitely outweighed any discomfort now, and Steve moaned almost constantly as Bucky pulled back and thrusted back into him again. He couldn’t look away from Bucky’s face. Bucky was moaning too, but quieter, and not as often as Steve. His pupils were wide, eyes half closed in pleasure, and his cheeks pink. The front of his hair was a little bit neater than the rest, and Steve ran his hand from the back of his head to where Bucky’s hairline met his forehead. Bucky’s eyes seemed to light up a little more in the dull light as Steve gripped the hair there, but Steve didn’t pull it this time. He didn’t want to hurt Bucky and, though Bucky liked hair-pulling when they were making out or he was sucking Steve off, he might not like it during actual sex. So Steve just held his head a few inches above his own and continued staring at him as Bucky kept moving slowly.

Each thrust felt better than the last. As it went on and Steve started to moan louder without even realising it, Bucky’s thrusts started to speed up. Steve couldn’t bring himself to be embarrassed by the noises he was making, especially since every time he made such noises, Bucky bit his lip and thrusted a little harder. The hand that had been on his stomach had now moved to the bed beside Steve, but it only stayed there for a few seconds, then moved to hold onto Steve’s waist. The grip he had was tight, almost possessive, but it didn’t hurt. In fact, Steve loved it. He loved the feeling of Bucky’s fingertips digging into his skin, and the hint of possessiveness behind it. It solidified the fact that this meant something to them both. Bucky cared about him so much, and he wanted this to feel good for both of them. He wanted Steve safe, too.

Steve understood that. Sex had always meant love to him, and he was worried that whenever he did lose his virginity, it wouldn’t be love. At least, not in the end. It wouldn’t last. But those worries were gone now. He loved Bucky so much, and he knew he loved him too. He knew it now more than ever, the way Bucky was looking at him and touching him. His expression was full of pure adoration, and Steve knew his own expression matched Bucky’s. At least he hoped it did. Steve wanted Bucky to know exactly what he was feeling.

It felt amazing, but it wasn’t enough, not yet. Bucky wasn’t close enough, he wasn’t moving enough, he wasn’t going deep enough. Steve used the grip on Bucky’s hair to pull him closer, but not quite close enough to kiss, then wrapped his legs around Bucky’s waist to push him in deeper. The change in the position caused Bucky to shift angle slightly inside him, and this time Bucky was hitting his prostate with every slight movement, causing Steve to moan louder.

Steve’s cock was trapped between Steve’s stomach and Bucky’s, and the friction added to the already incredible pleasure. He couldn’t stop himself anymore, Steve tightened his grip on Bucky’s hair enough to make him gasp, then pulled his down to crash their lips together. Bucky was stunned for a second, and the rhythm of his thrusts stuttered slightly, but he recovered quickly and kissed back just as hard as he was thrusting into Steve. It muffled Steve’s moans, but it didn’t silence them completely, especially not when Bucky lightly bit into Steve’s bottom lip at the same time as he pushed into him.

It felt like it was going on for an eternity, and Steve would have been completely fine with it if it did. Unfortunately, the friction on his cock and the pleasure of Bucky inside him was starting to get to Steve, and he knew he wouldn’t last much longer. Due to Bucky’s shallow breaths and the gleam of sweat covering his skin, Steve guessed he was close too. That was good. Steve didn’t
The kiss was messy, and occasionally they weren’t even kissing. They had their lips pressed together, or Bucky’s lips were against the corner of Steve’s whilst they both breathed, but they always met again and continued. It felt like they had been kissing for hours, but Steve would never be able to get enough of Bucky’s kisses. He wrapped one arm tighter around Bucky’s back and used the hand in Bucky’s hair to pull his head back into the kiss whenever it was broken for more than a few seconds. Bucky never protested, though, and he was always more than willing to resume the kiss.

Steve let out little whimpers of pleasure into Bucky’s mouth with every breath Bucky took adding more pressure to his cock between them.

“Close…” He muttered, his voice a little higher than usual because of his arousal.

Bucky just nodded, so close he almost headbutted Steve, then went back in for a kiss. Steve wasn’t sure if he was nodding to show he heard him, or nodding to say that he was close to. Either way, Steve took that as permission to finish whenever he was ready, and it didn’t take long.

Barely a minute later, Steve’s hand in Bucky’s hair tightened again, and he yanked Bucky’s head a little as he came. Luckily, Bucky’s mouth covered Steve’s at the same time, so the sound was muffled again. If he hadn’t, Steve was sure that definitely would have woke up Becca.

Steve almost saw white when he came, and every nerve ending in his body felt on fire. He was hyperaware of every cell of his body, but at the same time detached, like he was experiencing this through someone else instead of himself. It was, in short, mind-blowing.

He didn’t notice Bucky finish, until he felt him shudder slightly above him, and his thrusts slow down considerably. Bucky was still moving a little, and Steve gasped and moaned, exhausted but still able to take pleasure from those little movements before he became too sensitive. He didn’t have to tell Bucky he was starting to get too sensitive, though, because as soon as Steve realised that himself, Bucky was already pulling out of him slowly.

Steve heard a quiet wet sound as Bucky’s cock fell free from his ass, and he had never felt so empty before. He felt some liquid seep out of his ass and realised it must have been Bucky’s come, and that made Steve moan quietly too. When he watched porn, he never really liked the part where they’d show one man’s come dripping from the other’s ass, but it was so different when he was experiencing it himself.

He felt marked, like Bucky had laid claim on him. And that felt wonderful.

Though Bucky had already pulled out of him, he didn’t move any further away. He was still holding himself up above Steve, and their foreheads were resting against each other while they both focussed on their breathing, trying to get it under control.

Steve’s eyes focussed on Bucky’s throat as he watched his swallow a few times. His throat was probably dry, like Steve’s was.

Although it had barely been a minute since their lips last touched, Steve missed it, and he had to pull Bucky down for another kiss. He didn’t pull his hair this time, just rested his hand on the nape of his neck and applied a little pressure to encourage him to lower himself a little.

Bucky gladly kissed back, but it wasn’t the heated or messy kisses they had shared just moments ago. This one was sweet, and full of love.
Steve didn’t know what either of them were supposed to say in this situation, so he remained silent. Bucky moved off of Steve, and he started to let out a sound of protest, until Bucky’s lips pressed against his again. It was just for a second, and then he was gone again, but it was enough to silence Steve. Without Bucky’s body heat above him, Steve suddenly felt freezing. His own come had cooled on his stomach, and it started to feel uncomfortable and sticky. So did the come around his hole.

But he didn’t care about that right now. What he cared about was finding out where Bucky had gone. He forced his eyes open and looked around the room, but it was empty. Bucky had left.

Steve started to panic then, thinking he had done something wrong, forced Bucky to leave him. He thought Bucky was mad at him for something, or maybe he was just disgusted.

That thought was worse.

Bucky being mad at him for something, Steve could handle. It wasn’t a pleasant thought, but he could find out what he did wrong and find a way to fix it and never do it again. Bucky being disgusted because he had sex with Steve, that he couldn’t fix. He couldn’t change who he was or how he looked as much as he sometimes wanted to.

Despite the fact that Steve knew, deep down, that he was overreacting, that did little to stop the tears welling up in his eyes. Just as he was almost completely convinced Bucky was grossed out by him, the bedroom door opened and Bucky came back in. Steve could just make out Bucky’s smile in the low light through his tears, and then he was confused again.

Bucky must have seen the light from the lamp reflected off the tears in Steve’s eyes, because the smile immediately disappeared and was replaced by worry.

“Stevie? What’s wrong?” Bucky frowned as he crawled back onto the bed beside him, placing something on the bedside table that Steve didn’t register and didn’t particularly care enough to look at.

“I… I thought you’d left…” Steve tried to explain lamely.

“Well… I did.” Bucky let out a nervous laugh, trying to lighten the mood. But Steve didn’t find it funny.

He knew it wasn’t Bucky’s fault. Steve didn’t know what he was doing when he left the room, he could have had good reason to leave. But that doesn’t change the fact that he had been worried, and he was upset.

Bucky sensed that Steve didn’t find it funny, and moved to lean against the headboard, then pulled Steve back with him to hug him against his right side. Steve sat back against his arm and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder, sniffling slightly.

“Steve… Where did you think I went?” Bucky asked quietly, carefully, as though he was afraid of the answer.

“Thought you… You were grossed out by me or something… And you didn’t want to be around me after what we did…” Hearing it out loud, Steve could tell how stupid it would sound to Bucky.

Bucky had proved again and again that he loved Steve, and for some reason he found him attractive. He wasn’t repulsed by Steve.

“Steve…” Bucky still spoke quietly, and he ran his human fingers through Steve’s hair as he rested
his cheek against the top of Steve’s head. “I’m never grossed out by you… Except when you do that thing when you click your jaw… That’s pretty gross.”

Bucky was trying to lighten the mood again, and Steve let out a quiet laugh at that.

“I’m never going to leave you.” Bucky said that with such conviction that Steve couldn’t help but believe him.

“Where did you go?” Steve whispered in response, his voice almost breaking with emotion at the end.

Bucky leant over Steve to retrieve what he had put on the bedside table, holding the two items up for Steve to see. He had a water bottle in his hand, and a damp cloth over his wrist.

Steve stared at the items for a second, and he could see Bucky getting a little anxious out of the corner of his eye. Then, Steve laughed. Not a quiet laugh. A loud, almost hysterical laugh.

Bucky flinched back slightly in surprise, and Steve immediately tried to apologise, but he just laughed harder. Water and a cloth. That’s why Steve had panicked. Because Bucky went to get a bottle of water and a damp cloth.

When he was done laughing, he looked up and saw a bemused smile on Bucky’s lips too. Steve sat back against the headboard as he breathed, smiling wide, and Bucky chuckled and used the cloth to start cleaning the dried come from Steve’s stomach. Bucky’s stomach had a wet patch on it too, and Steve guessed some of his come had gotten on his too, given how close together they were pressed and Bucky had cleaned himself up before re-joining Steve.

Steve stared at Bucky’s face, tight with concentration, as he clean Steve up. He couldn’t help but smile again. Bucky’s face was highlighted by the lamp again, but at this angle it casted more shadows across his face. Like always, he looked beautiful.

Once Bucky was done cleaning Steve’s front for him, he moved back on the bed then grabbed Steve’s ankles. Steve yelped in surprise as Bucky yanked at his legs to make him lay down on the bed. He laughed, and Bucky joined in as he pushed Steve’s legs apart. Steve opened them willingly and lifted his legs a little so that Bucky could run the cloth along the backs of his legs, then over his ass and his hole.

Steve guessed that this should be embarrassing, being cleaned up like this. But the cloth was warm, and Bucky’s metal hand traced circles on Steve’s knee as he worked, and Steve had never felt more relaxed in his entire life.

Once he was clean, Bucky sat up and dropped the cloth on his bedside table, then picked up the water bottle. Steve heard the seal break, his eyes closed, and then Bucky tapped his shoulder. He sat up and gratefully took a gulp from the bottle Bucky held up to his lips. Bucky didn’t hand the bottle over, just tipped it so that Steve could drink, then took it away again when Steve had had enough.

He took a few mouthfuls too, turned the lamp off, and pushed the covers down the bed so that he and Steve could slip under them. He then wrapped himself and Steve in the duvet. Steve immediately snuggled up to Bucky’s chest, and Bucky wrapped his flesh arm around him, his other hand by his side.

Steve wasn’t having that.

He reached under the covers to take the metal wrist in hand, then wrapped it around himself, the
same way he had done when they had hugged that morning. As it had been that morning, Bucky was reluctant at first, but he tentatively tightened his arms around Steve, and Steve let out a sigh of contentment and wrapped his own arms around Bucky’s middle.

He was exhausted, and began to fall asleep as soon as he was comfortably wrapped up in Bucky and the duvet.

Just before he fell asleep, Steve muttered; “Merry Christmas.”

He may have just imagined it, since he was pretty sure Bucky was already asleep, but he thought he heard his boyfriend mutter back to him.

“Merry Christmas, Stevie…”
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Bucky takes care of sick!Steve
Steve fucks up

Steve woke up and glanced at the clock beside Bucky’s bed to check the time. It was still dark, but in winter that didn’t really mean much. It could have been nearly lunch time and it would still be dark.

2:49am

Steve groaned as he snuggled against Bucky’s chest a little closer. He wasn’t sure what had woken him up, especially after having been so exhausted by last night’s activities, but whatever it was wasn’t worth staying awake at this hour for. Steve closed his eyes as he attempted to go back to sleep, but he couldn’t. He was tired, yeah, but he couldn’t drift back into sleep.

He fidgeted a little, careful not to wake Bucky, but he couldn’t seem to get comfortable. Bucky muttered something in his sleep, his brows knitted together slightly, and Steve waited until he relaxed again. After a few seconds, his face smoothed out again and he went still, presumably back into a deep sleep.

Steve sniffled a little, then cringed as he felt the air he had breathed in scratch at his throat. He knew this feeling all too well. The cough and cold medicine he had taken from Bucky’s medicine cabinet was wearing off, and the illness he had previously fought off was now pissed at him for attempting to avoid it, so it would be back with a vengeance.

He took a deep breath and instantly regretted it, feeling the air cut at his throat like tiny knives. He really needed to cough, but he didn’t want to risk waking Bucky, so he carefully moved out of Bucky’s arms to get out of bed. Steve made sure the duvet was still securely wrapped around Bucky so that he wouldn’t get cold without Steve there, then practically ran out of the room and to the bathroom. As soon as the door was closed, Steve doubled over from the intensity of the fit of coughs that wracked through his lungs. It sounded awful, and he really hoped Bucky or Becca didn’t hear. It sounded like he was coughing up a lung, which was entirely possible. He took a few shaking breaths, but that just caused more coughing.

Once it was over, Steve had to focus on his breathing more closely. He couldn’t breathe in too much at once, or he would cough again. His nose was running too, and he quickly grabbed a tissue from the pack in the medicine cabinet just in time to sneeze into it several times. Steve’s eyes watered and his nose was already raw from rubbing the tissue against it. He looked in the mirror and groaned at the sight. Bucky would be able to tell he’s sick.

The thought of Bucky taking care of him wasn’t awful, but Steve didn’t want him to feel obliged to, and he didn’t want to be a burden, especially this close after Christmas day.

Steve stayed in the bathroom for a few minutes, just to make sure the coughing and sneezing were over for the time being, then made his way back to Bucky’s bed. Bucky had told him before that he
has a really good immune system, and Doctor Banner had confirmed that in the hospital when they had worried that the infection caused by the rusted barbed wire would have spread further than Bucky’s arm. Because of this, Steve wasn’t worried about getting Bucky sick. He had to keep any germs away from Bucky’s arm, but Bucky seemed adamant on keeping his prosthetic on, so that wasn’t really an issue. The sensitive area was always covered.

He closed the door quietly behind him and blindly tried to manoeuvre back towards the bed without tripping. The clothes from the night before were still strewn all over the floor, leading towards the bed. Steve tripped over a sweater and fell over with a thud. The noise woke Bucky up, and Steve looked up as he saw the lamp turn on beside the bed, and Bucky looking a little alarmed, sat up in bed, his breathing a little too fast.

“Sorry…” Steve apologised sheepishly and pulled himself up off the floor.

With the light on Steve could see better where he was going, but he didn’t go to his side of the bed. He sat on Bucky’s side in front of him and reached out to cup his face. Bucky still looked a little scared, due to the paranoia he had been experiencing it made sense.

“Its okay, Bucky…”

Bucky stared at him for a few seconds, scanning his face. Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky was looking for any signs that Steve was hurt or in danger, or if he was noticing the signs of his illness.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked quietly, and Steve nodded with a reassuring smile.

Bucky reached out and pulled Steve into a hug, which he happily returned. They remained like that for a few minutes, then Bucky pulled back just enough to look at Steve’s face again. “What’s the matter, are you sick?”

There was no point lying to stop Bucky from being worried. He could see that Steve was ill, and in the morning Steve knew he would be even worse. He already had one lie on the go, he didn’t want to lie to Bucky anymore. So he nodded a little, but quickly shook his head when Bucky started fretting over him.

“I’m fine, Bucky, don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

Bucky didn’t seem entirely convinced, but he did drop his hand off of Steve’s forehead where he had been checking his temperature. “You have a fever…”

Steve sighed. He had expected that. He was feeling too warm, and he could feel sweat starting to coat his skin already.

“It’s okay. Just go back to sleep, and I promise you have baby me all day tomorrow, okay?” Steve compromised with a small smile, and Bucky smiled back as he nodded.

“Okay… Are you coming back to bed or will it be too hot? You don’t have to have the covers on if you don’t want it, and I won’t touch you if it’ll make you too hot…”

Steve kissed Bucky’s forehead. He was going to kiss his lips, but he didn’t want to get Bucky sick, and he didn’t want to do anything Bucky would think was gross. Kissing a sick person was pretty high on that list. But as soon as he moved his lips from his head, Bucky tilted his head up to capture Steve’s lips with his own.

Since Bucky was the one to initiate it, Steve kissed back, but he kept it sweet. Nothing too intense. When they separated again, Steve answered Bucky’s question.
“I’ll lay on top of the covers, I could use a few more hours of sleep.”

Bucky nodded and gestured for Steve to get on the bed. Steve followed the silent instruction and crawled over Bucky’s legs instead of going round. He curled up on top of the covers on his side, and Bucky turned to face him. He only watched Steve for a few seconds, then leant over to kiss him again and muttered a goodnight.

Steve closed his eyes with a sigh. He hated being sick, but at least this time he wasn’t dealing with it alone. Bucky seemed happy about the idea of being able to take care of Steve. It’s not like he could go home and wait it out there, and he didn’t want to be a burden on Angie and Peggy any more than he already is.

It took a while to go to sleep, but when he did, it was because Bucky’s metal hand was resting on Steve’s side.

__________________________________________

Fuck.

That’s all Steve could think of when he woke up next. His neck and all of his joints were sore, his nose was completely blocked, and his throat felt like a desert. A desert that had recently been bombed with shrapnel.

Bucky was still asleep beside him, and the metal on his hip had warmed up with the heat coming from Steve’s skin. Steve checked the time again and saw that it was ten in the morning. Not an ideal time to wake up when you’re ill, but it’ll have to do. There was no way he was going back to sleep again.

Steve rolled over onto his back to try and lessen the pressure on his neck, but then his head started thumping with pain. He groaned quietly and closed his eyes to block out the little light that was shining through a gap in the curtains and onto the bed.

Steve felt a hand in his hair, stroking it comfortingly, and he originally thought he was hallucinating and imagining his mother was still there. But then he realised the touch felt too real and opened his eyes. Bucky was still lying down, but he had freed his flesh hand from between them and played with Steve’s hair with it. The light shone a bright strip across Bucky’s bare chest, and if Steve’s throat wasn’t dry before, it definitely was now.

“How you feeling?” Bucky asked quietly, his voice thick with sleep.

Steve almost started worshipping Bucky just for speaking quietly, he must have recognised that Steve had a headache on the verge of a migraine.

“How’d you feel?” Steve answered simply and chuckled a little to try and lighten the situation.

Bucky smiled in reply, full of sympathy, and Steve leant his head into Bucky’s hand slightly, reveling in the caring touch.

It reminded him so much of his mother that he felt tears well up in his eyes. His mother had been dead for a year, he shouldn’t be crying just because a touch reminded him of her. His boyfriend's touch shouldn't remind him of her. Steve blamed it on the fever. Bucky had played with his hair like this before, and it never reminded him of her, so that was the only reason Steve could think of for why it did now. This was the kind of situation where Sarah would do what Bucky was doing now.
“My mom would have loved you…” Steve muttered quietly, his eyes focused on Bucky’s face.

Bucky looked a little caught off-guard from the statement, but he recovered as quickly as he always did when he was surprised, and smiled sadly.

“She made you, I’m sure I’d have loved her too.”

“You would’ve. She loved books.” Steve mumbled in reply, smiling fondly at the memories of her curled up on the couch with a book whenever she had a day off.

“That’s two things I have in common with her, then,” Bucky answered and Steve looked confused for a second, so he elaborated. “We both love books, and you.”

Steve smiled at that and tried not to blush, closing his eyes to focus on the feeling of Bucky’s fingers in his hair.

The hand then disappeared, and Steve pouted slightly but he didn’t open his eyes, not until he felt plastic against his cheek. He moved his head a little to see what Bucky was holding against his face, and smiled when he saw the bottle of water, still half full from last night.

Steve pushed himself into a sitting position, and he intended to take the bottle from Bucky, but the brunet batted his hand away and held it up to his lips for him, the same way as he had last night.

Again, he didn’t argue, and just took a few gulps from it. Swallowing hurt his throat, but the liquid did help a little.

“Thanks.” He smiled as Bucky put the empty bottle down on the bedside table again.

“Want to stay in bed all day? Or come downstairs and watch some mind-numbing daytime television with me?”

Steve chuckled lightly, but nodded. “Mind-numbing TV sounds great.”

Bucky got out of bed and pulled his pyjama pants on from the night before, then handed Steve’s over to him so he wouldn’t have to get out of bed to get them. Steve pulled them on and accepted the t-shirt Bucky handed him. He didn’t bother giving Steve the sweater, for that he was grateful. He was too hot to wear a sweater.

He took Bucky’s hand and allowed him to pull him up gently, then led him downstairs. Becca was already down there, and the mind-numbing TV Bucky had promised was already on. She smiled at them and called out a greeting, but she stopped when she saw Steve’s face.

“Are you okay?”

Steve shook his head and sat down on the couch where Bucky led him, next to the armchair Becca was sat in. “I’m ill.”

“Was it because of the snowball fight?” Becca asked, looking a little guilty.

“Nah, it’s just this season in general.”

She seemed to relax slightly at that, and nodded a little. “I hope you feel better soon,”

“Thanks.” Steve smiled and looked up as Bucky returned from the kitchen.

He handed Steve a mug of cocoa, then took the blanket from the back of the couch to wrap it
around Steve’s shoulders. Steve tried to protest at first, but he remembered his promise the night before about allowing Bucky to baby him today and just smiled as he thanked Bucky.

“Didn’t you make me one?” Becca asked, looking upset.

“Nope.” The puppy-dog eyes Becca was throwing his way didn’t effect Bucky.

“Why not?”

“Get sick and I’ll make you whatever you want,” Bucky ruffled her hair as he walked past her to retrieve his phone from where he had left it the night before.

He then joined Becca on the couch as Bucky went through whatever notification were on his phone. Becca muttered something about favouritism, but Steve didn’t need to feel bad, he knew that she was just joking, she wasn’t actually upset Bucky hadn’t made her a drink. Besides, she already had a glass of orange juice in her hand.

They finished watching the episode that was playing on the TV, then Becca announced that she was going to do try dancing in her new leotard, to make sure it fit right and she could move around properly in it. She kissed Bucky’s cheek on the way past and went to her room to get it, then down to the basement.

“Gonna join me on the couch?” Bucky asked once she was gone, and Steve smiled as he got up, the blanket still around his shoulders, and sat down beside Bucky.

Steve rested his head against Bucky’s shoulder and tucked his legs up under himself as Bucky wrapped his right arm around Steve’s shoulders.

“Do you need anything else?”

Steve smiled a little and shook his head as he took a sip of his cocoa. “I’m good, thanks.”

Bucky seemed to think about that for a minute, then nodded and tightened his arms around Steve to pull him a little closer. They stared at the TV screen while they watched the show that had started. Steve wasn’t really paying attention to the show, more focussed on the feeling of Bucky holding him close. Although his head hurt, as did his sinuses and his throat, he felt his best with Bucky’s arm around him and his head resting against Steve’s.

Eventually, Steve fell asleep against Bucky’s shoulder.

Steve woke up a few hours later, but he wasn’t resting against Bucky’s shoulder anymore. Now he was laid across the couch, his head on a pillow, and the blanket tucked tight around him. Obviously Bucky had done it before he had went wherever he had disappeared to. Steve smiled a little and looked around to try and see where exactly Bucky had gone, but he was nowhere in sight.

He heard noises coming from the kitchen and frowned a little as he tried to recognise the song playing. It was an old one, from the thirties or forties, maybe.

It was one Steve’s mother used to listen to when she was stressed, by Bing Crosby.
It took him a little longer than it should have done, but he eventually recognised it as *Only Forever*. One of his mother’s favourites.

Steve smiled a little as he listened to the familiar tune and pushed himself up into a seated position, then instantly regretted it. His head throbbed, and sharp, painful coughs wracked his frame. Steve vaguely registered the sounds of pans moving around in the kitchen before the door opened and Bucky came out carrying a bowl of soup on top of his metal hand, like a waiter, and a glass of water in his other hand.

Bucky smiled at Steve, and Steve smiled back as Bucky placed the glass and bowl on the coffee table, then dug into his pocket to hand Steve some painkillers.

“That’ll help with your head, and I have some liquid medicine that’ll help your throat and cough, but you’ll have to take the pills and the liquid medicine four hours apart. Choose wisely, which do you want first?”

Steve frowned as he thought about that, then opted for the pills Bucky held out. He took them with some water and prayed that his headache would go away fast. The cough and sore throat he could handle, but his head was killing him.

Steve closed his eyes as he waited for the pills to kick in, then opened them again when he heard the soft clink of Bucky’s metal prosthetic against the porcelain bowl. He put a cushion on Steve’s lap then put the bowl on top of it.

“Careful, it’s hot.” Bucky smiled and kissed Steve’s cheek before handing him a spoon.

The soup was chicken and noodles, and Steve could tell it was homemade. It probably took Bucky a lot of effort, and he smiled at the thought of Bucky taking so much time to make him soup in the hopes that it would help Steve feel better.

It did help soothe his throat and clear his blocked sinuses, and by the end Steve actually started to be able to taste it. It tasted delicious, and Steve frowned slightly as his spoon scraped against the bottom of the now empty bowl.

“Is there anymore?” Steve asked, and Bucky stood with a nod and took Steve’s bowl back into the kitchen.

He came back a few minutes later with it refilled and placed it back on the cushion on Steve’s lap. Steve thanked him and immediately started eating again.

Bucky’s phone rang, and he frowned at the unknown number and muttered a “be right back” to Steve before leaving the room to answer it. He was only gone for five minutes, but when he came back he looked upset.

“What’s wrong?” Steve frowned, instantly worried.

“Nothing.” Bucky forced a fake smile and shrugged. “Don’t worry about it, just concentrate on getting better.”

Steve shook his head. “If something’s upsetting you, Buck, please tell me…”

Bucky sighed, and Steve maintained eye contact with him as he waited for more of a reaction from his boyfriend. For either a sign that Bucky was going to tell him what was wrong, or for Bucky to tell him to butt out and drop it.
Steve didn’t mean to upset Bucky or bug him, but he knew there was something going on and it was obviously something bad. Bucky was upset after talking to Natasha, and now the phone call had put him down too. He wanted to know what was happening so he could help, but Steve had a sick feeling that it was something to do with Brock, and he didn’t know how he’d be able to help with that.

“I have to go to court and talk about what Brock did to me…”

*I knew it.* Steve sighed and frowned slightly.

Bucky shouldn’t have to be anywhere near that man, and he definitely shouldn’t have to sit in front of a group of strangers and tell them all the things Brock had done to him. Brainwashed him and threatened to physically abuse him when they were in a relationship, stalked him after they broke up, threatened Bucky’s boyfriend, kidnapped him, tortured him, caused him to lose his arm…

He shouldn’t have to relive that in order to retell it. He should be focussing on forgetting what happened so he could move on with his life. But no, because apparently the universe hated Bucky Barnes that much, he had to suffer even after his abuser was locked up.

Bucky seemed to have noticed Steve getting lost in his angry thoughts, because he moved from the chair to sit beside Steve on the sofa and wrapped an arm around him, like Steve was the one who would need comfort now.

“Don’t think about it, just focus on getting better.” Bucky muttered and kissed Steve’s temple.

Steve nodded and smiled at Bucky before turning his attention back to his soup. As he ate the rest, he couldn’t help but think about what Bucky had told him. He wanted to ask when the court date was, what exactly Bucky would have to talk about, and what Brock’s attorney would say to Bucky to try and counter his statement. Attorneys could be ruthless, especially when their client is someone like Brock. He’d probably try to make it seem like Bucky was lying, or he was leading Brock on.

The police had the messages from Bucky’s phone between him and Brock, so there was solid evidence that he had threatened both Bucky and Steve. They had Brock’s fingerprints in the gloved used to wrap the barbed wire around Bucky, and Steve’s and Natasha’s statement that Brock and Jack Rollins were there, as well as the testimony of the cops who got there and arrested them. And the hospital reports, and statements from the EMTs and medical experts that had treated Bucky in the hospital. Doctor Banner would be willing to speak for Bucky.

It didn’t seem necessary that they would need Bucky to take the stand, but Steve wasn’t a lawyer, and he didn’t know the details of this kind of case.

He wanted to protect Bucky from this, but like every other time Steve had wanted to protect him, he couldn’t.

“Stop.”

Steve looked up in surprise when he heard Bucky speak, not sure what exactly he had been doing that Bucky would want him to stop.

“I can tell you’re obsessing over this. Stop it. I might not even do it, I’m on the witness list, but they might not decide to call me in. The prosecution doesn’t want me to have to deal with that, and I doubt Brock’s lawyer will find any benefit to the jury hearing me talk about it instead of just having someone read out my statement. It’ll hurt his case more than it could possibly help it.”
That helped Steve relax a little, and he sniffled before nodding. Bucky reached out to the coffee table and held up a box of tissues for Steve. Just in time, too, because just as Steve took one out, he doubled over with the force of his sneeze. Luckily, he had finished his soup, or it probably would have burnt him really bad.

Bucky took Steve’s bowl away for him and refilled Steve’s glass of water. Bucky had put a waste basket beside the couch, and Steve dropped the tissue in it as he dropped his head back against the couch. His throat didn’t hurt as much, thanks to the soup, and the painkillers were starting to ease the ache in his head.

Steve was a little confused about that at first, usually he felt dead for several days before he started to feel better, ever since his mom died and she couldn’t take care of him anymore. He really should learn to take care of himself in these situations, but Steve couldn’t be bothered to dwell on that too much at the minute. He had Bucky taking care of him now, and that’s all he cared about right now.

Unfortunately, he felt a fever start to come on again and groaned just as Bucky re-entered the room after cleaning up the kitchen a little.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky sounded worried as he joined Steve on the couch again. He must have seen the hot flush in Steve’s expression, because he pressed his right hand to Steve’s forehead and frowned before muttering something about a thermometer and getting up to go find one.

Steve wanted to tell Bucky it was okay and to stay, but the brunet was already gone by the time Steve had had chance to register his words. Or at least half of them. Enough to understand, at least.

It was probably only a few minutes until Bucky returned with a thermometer, but in that time, Steve felt even hotter and shoved the blanket off his shoulders. Bucky held the thermometer up and Steve opened his mouth without Bucky actually having said anything, then tried not to gag as Bucky slipped it under his tongue. He shuddered slightly, but shook his head when Bucky went to grab the blanket. Bucky seemed to have understood what Steve wanted, because he let go of the blanket and just wrapped his arm around Steve to tug him against his side, where Steve happily rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder.

Eventually, Bucky took the thermometer out of Steve’s mouth and Steve noticed the corners of Bucky’s lips tug down in a frown. But he didn’t look too worried, so it probably wasn’t bad enough to need to go to the hospital or anything.

Steve felt Bucky gently move him to lean against the arm of the chair, then felt the change on the couch to indicate that Bucky had gotten up. He came back a bit later, but Steve kept his eyes closed. He felt a cold rag against his head and smiled a little as Bucky draped the blanket over him again, then he felt Bucky’s lips against his cheek and Steve smiled again.

It wasn’t long after that, that Steve fell asleep.

When Steve woke up, the TV was on mute, and he opened his eyes to see that subtitles were on and an episode of Friends was on. A Christmas special from one of the much earlier seasons.

He looked around and saw that Bucky was sat in the arm chair with his knees up to his chest, but he wasn’t watching the TV. He had a cup with steam coming from it in his left hand and his phone in his right, and he was scrolling through something with his thumb.
The rag of Steve’s forehead was warm, but not as warm as Steve had expected. Bucky must have changed it to a colder one or something at some point during Steve’s nap. He still had a fever, he knew that without needing the thermometer, and he was starting to feel dizzy. That feeling was amplified when he forced himself to sit up and felt the whole room spin around him. He screwed his eyes shut and lifted a hand to keep the rag there, and Bucky was by his side when he opened his eyes again.

“Do you need anything?” Bucky asked quietly.

“A new body?” Steve joked, and Bucky smiled.

“Well, I would give you mine, but…” He held up the prosthetic, and Steve frowned slightly at the implication. He wanted to tell Bucky that needing a prosthetic didn’t mean his body wasn’t any good anymore, but the intake of breath he needed to say that irritated his throat and caused another coughing fit.

Bucky rubbed his back through it, then handed him another tissue.

“I’d rather have a cool metal arm than this.” Was all Steve eventually managed to get out.

He heard Bucky laugh quietly beside him, and despite his misery, Steve smiled too.

The rest of the day was spent with Steve drifting in and out of consciousness, gladly taking the liquid food and the drinks Bucky offered each time he woke up, and Bucky changing the wet rag on his head to a colder one each time it got warm. He always rearranged Steve’s blankets too when it bunched up in his sleep.

_He made a very good nurse. And maid_, Steve thought with a smile as he watched Bucky gather Steve’s empty plate and cup, then take the thermometer from Steve’s mouth again. He seemed satisfied with whatever is said this time, and Steve smiled back when Bucky looked at him, then shook his head when Bucky asked if he wanted anything else.

The next time Steve woke up, his mind was cloudy, and he felt as though he was about to start hallucinating. But that wasn’t unusual for Steve when he was ill, so he wasn’t worried. He could usually tell the difference between what he was really seeing and what he was imagining, so all he had to do was avoid mentioning the hallucinations to Bucky, because he just knew Bucky would freak out and insist on calling an ambulance to take Steve to the hospital.

He tried not to snigger when he imagined Bucky in a French Maid costume, and when he failed, he covered it up with a cough so Bucky didn’t ask what he was laughing at. Steve had to admit he was a bit disappointed when he looked up again and Bucky was wearing his pyjamas again.

“It’s a good thing I haven’t sent you home, or you’d probably be dead by morning.” Bucky muttered with a smile, and Steve laughed lightly, his fever getting the better of him.

“What home? I got evicted.”

_Shit._

It took Steve’s clouded mind a minute to figure out why Bucky had frozen and was staring at him like that, but when he did realise, there was no way to take it back.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

The fallout. Sort of.

Bucky didn’t openly react to Steve’s admission.

He was silent for a few seconds, then simply left the room.

Steve had expected yelling, but honestly the silence was worse. He almost wished Bucky had started yelling at him for not telling him, for lying every time Steve talked about ‘home’. Even though he was ill, Steve could still comprehend that the silence meant something much worse. He had never had an argument with Bucky before, and he really didn’t want their first argument to be when Steve was ill. But there was nothing he could do about it now, Steve had already admitted to the eviction, and Bucky was already clearly upset…

Or was he?

He hadn’t said he was upset, and Steve hadn’t had a chance to see his face before he left the room. Maybe he was just going to get Steve another drink, and then they were going to talk about it and Bucky was going to say it was okay, that he understood why Steve hadn’t told him.

Even as the thought occurred to him, Steve knew it was a longshot.

But then, Bucky came back with another glass of water in his flesh hand. There were a few cubes of ice in it, and some condensation around the glass, and Steve’s mouth watered at the sight. He smiled and held his hand out for it, about to thank Bucky, but instead of putting it into his hand, Bucky put it onto the coffee table, a little harder than Steve had expected. He winced slightly at the loud noise and looked up at Bucky to see why he had done that. Of course, logically, Steve understood why.

Especially when he saw Bucky’s face.

He didn’t particularly look angry. Bucky wasn’t glaring or anything like that. But it was clear that he was angry nonetheless. His face was pinched, his lips pressed into a thin line, so thin that Steve could barely see the pink of his usually plump lips.

Steve hated that expression on Bucky. He had never before seen an expression on Bucky’s beautiful face that he didn’t like, but this one was certainly a bad one. Not because it made Bucky look bad, Bucky never looked bad. But because it meant he was upset.

Even when Bucky had been crying and distraught from all the things he had suffered through because of Brock Rumlow, he still looked beautiful. And honestly, Steve still thought Bucky looked good now, even when he was angry at him.

It didn’t take long for Steve’s brain, even as ill as he was, to realise the difference as he hesitantly picked up the glass of water and sipped at it. He didn’t mind Bucky being upset before, because he wasn’t upset with Steve. This time, it was all Steve’s fault that Bucky was upset, and that was what was causing this sinking feeling in Steve’s stomach. He wanted to apologise, but before he could
process that Bucky really was upset with him, the brunet had already left the room. Steve wasn’t sure exactly where he had gone, but he definitely wasn’t in the living room anymore.

Steve took a few minutes to think about what he was going to do about this. He couldn’t fix it by telling Bucky that it wasn’t true, because that would mean lying to him again. He couldn’t take it back. He had tried to get a new apartment, but all of them had been out of his price range or too far away. Eventually, Steve got dizzy trying to think of a solution and ended up falling asleep.

Steve could vaguely hear the sound of the TV playing, he could hear the studio audience laughing at something, but he couldn’t make out the jokes being made.

He eventually woke up enough to open his eyes and look around the room. Steve was still laying on Bucky’s living room couch. He saw Becca in one of the armchairs, a blanket wrapped around her legs drawn up to her chest. She wasn’t laughing along with the studio audience on TV. In fact, she was talking, and Steve tried to focus on what she was saying.

“… Stupid. He should have told us.” She was talking about Steve, he knew it, and he closed his eyes again so she wouldn’t realise he was awake.

Steve knew it was bad to eavesdrop, but he couldn’t help it. He guessed Becca must be talking to Bucky, meaning he was in the room somewhere, and Steve really wanted to know what he thought about what Steve had done.

“But I’m not surprised. You know he’s too proud for his own good. And how do you even go about bringing this sort of thing up to someone?” Becca continued, and Steve silently prayed to hear Bucky agree.

He heard Bucky’s voice from somewhere above his head and realised he must be in the other armchair. “Yeah, I get that. But I don’t see why he would hide this from me, of all people, shouldn’t I be the one person he can tell anything to?”

Steve felt like crying then. He didn’t want Bucky to think that Steve couldn’t tell him things, Steve really wanted to tell Bucky everything. He just didn’t want to have to deal with the sympathy and pity that would have from people knowing he was homeless. It would be even worse if it was Bucky who looked at him with such pity. Though he may prefer that to the anger he had seen on Bucky’s face after he had brought him his drink.

“Maybe he was just worried you’d be disappointed that he lost his apartment? Or maybe because he spent so much time with you in hospital that he thought you’d feel responsible for him losing his job and not being able to pay for the apartment—” Becca continued, but she was hardly able to finish her sentence before Bucky started talking.

“So this is my fault? I didn’t force him to stay with me. And I didn’t choose to be in a hospital for so long.” He sounded frustrated, and that made Steve want to cry even more, but even so he kept quiet and still, feigning sleep.

“I know that.” Becca continued, her voice level and calm. “I’m not saying it’s your fault. I’m saying Steve might be worried you’d think it’s your fault.”

It was silent for a few seconds, and Steve almost thought that was the end of the conversation. But then Bucky spoke again. “Well maybe he’s right… Maybe it is my fault.”

Steve wanted to say that it wasn’t Bucky’s fault, that he would never think that. Steve had made his own decision to spend as much time as he could with Bucky while he was forced to stay in the
hospital, but Becca beat him to it.

“It’s not your fault, Bucky.” Steve could hear the desperation in her voice, trying to make sure that Bucky wouldn’t blame himself, and Steve was eternally grateful to her. “He made his choice, you didn’t make it for him.”

Bucky was silent a little longer, then Steve heard him sigh. “I’m still mad at him...”

Steve couldn’t blame him. Steve would still be mad too if it were him in Bucky’s position, but Steve couldn’t comprehend the thought of being mad at Bucky. Bucky had never done anything wrong, and Steve couldn’t imagine him ever doing anything that would upset Steve.

“... But I still love him.”

Steve felt a little better after hearing that. He deduced that the conversation was probably over now and yawned as he pretended to wake up, stretching his arms out to make the act more believable. Steve pretty much instantly regretted that part, though, as all his joints aches and cracked as he moved. He groaned with his eyes closed, and when he opened them again, Bucky was knelt in front with a hand on Steve’s arm to help him sit up. Steve smiled at that and placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder to use as a crutch to push himself up into a seated position.

“Thanks...”

Bucky just nodded a little, then readjusted the blanket around Steve’s shoulders. He disappeared into the kitchen again, and Steve wasn’t surprised to see him return with a new glass of water, ice cubes included.

Steve took the glass from him with another thank you, and Bucky just nodded again and returned to his seat in the armchair. By the point, Steve had left plenty of space next to him for Bucky to sit down beside him, but Bucky didn’t even look at the space.

As much as Steve would have loved to have Bucky next to him, he wasn’t surprised when he didn’t sit there, and he couldn’t blame him. Bucky was still mad. But he still loved Steve.

Steve just kept repeating that statement in his head, assuring himself that he had definitely heard it, and it wasn’t just for Steve’s benefit. He said it to Becca, not him, so Bucky must have meant it. It made sense, they had been through so much together in the short time they had known each other, it was unlikely that Bucky would just stop loving him for something that seemed so small in the grand scheme of things. They could get through this, Steve knew they could.

If they could get past a crazy ex, a kidnapping, an amputation and the healing that came after that, then they could get past a well-intended lie. And homelessness...

Steve hadn’t even thought of that part yet. Yeah, maybe Bucky would forgive him, but that didn’t change the fact that Steve was homeless now, living with his friends in an apartment that was barely big enough for the actual owners. Steve loved Peggy and Angie, and he really appreciated what they were doing for him. But their apartment was only really meant for one person. They had somehow managed to make it work for both of them and they would never say this to Steve, but having him there too was making it a little cramped. It didn’t mean that they resented him being there, they had assured him on multiple occasions that they were happy with Steve staying with them as long as he needed. But everyone had their limits, and Steve didn’t want to outstay his welcome or cause any stress to his friends.

Maybe he could ask Sam if he could stay with him for a little while. Steve had been a little worried
that his termination at work would mean an eventual termination of his friendship with Sam. He really liked Sam, but they had become friends through work, and maybe Sam would eventually get bored of him or forget about Steve if he didn’t have to see him almost every day.

But so far, that hadn’t happened. Steve and Sam had been texting back and forth enough to consider each other still good friends, and Steve was grateful for that. He hadn’t told Sam about his living situation yet, but if he did, maybe he would give him a place to stay. Sam’s home was definitely bigger than Peggy and Angie’s, and there was only one person currently living there. So maybe it would he more suitable.

Of course, Steve had considered asking Bucky if he could stay with him… But that seemed a little too much like he would be asking to move in with him permanently, and Steve didn’t want to seem too forward. Even if he explained that it was only temporary, until he found his own place, it would still seem too much like moving in.

It would be nice to live with Bucky… Being able to wake up next to him every day, eat breakfast in his kitchen every day… But Steve wouldn’t let himself think too much about how perfect that would be. Because it wasn’t going to happen. Not yet, anyway.

Steve had pretty much finished his glass of water by the time he realised he had zoned out. The cold irritated his throat a little, but it was still refreshing and Steve knew it was important to stay hydrated when he was ill. And his fever was starting to come back again, so the cold would be helpful there too.

When the glass was three quarters of the way empty, Steve put it down on the coffee table on a coaster, then looked between Bucky and Becca. “So… What’re you watching?”

He didn’t look at the TV, though. He didn’t really care about what was on it, Steve mostly just wanted to hear Bucky speak. Becca must have picked up on that, because she didn’t look like she was going to answer, and was instead watching Bucky, also waiting for him to speak.

“Friends.” Bucky eventually muttered after a few minutes of silence in which he must have come to the conclusion that no one else was going to speak.

Steve nodded a little and looked at the TV. Rachel was ranting about something to a very bored-looking Monica, but Steve couldn’t focus on the words they were saying. He was too busy watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye. Bucky was staring at the screen, but he didn’t seem like he was paying attention either. He didn’t look like he was even consciously looking at the TV, he looked like he had zoned out. Or dissociated.

When Bucky was in this state, he didn’t really notice anything going on around him, so Steve was able to watching him properly without having to pretend to be looking elsewhere. His hair was getting a little long, curling a little under his ears and he had a little more stubble than he usually left. And he still looked beautiful. The only thing Steve disliked about how Bucky looked right now was the empty, glazed over look in his eyes, and the little downward tip of his lips.

Steve vaguely registered the sound of Becca’s blanket being pushed off her legs and the ruffle of fabric as she stood and walked over to the kitchen. He guessed she had saw Steve staring at her brother, but he didn’t care. It wasn’t exactly a secret, how much Steve loved Bucky. And he didn’t care if he looked desperate, just watching and waiting for Bucky to acknowledge him. Because he really did feel desperate.

“I love you…” Steve whispered.
He wasn’t sure if Bucky heard him. Bucky blinked, but other than that he didn’t move or react. He could have just blinked automatically, nothing to do with what Steve had said.

Steve was eventually almost convinced he wasn’t going to get a reply and pulled the blanket around himself again as he pulled his legs up to his chest and rested his chin on top of them, watching the screen in front of him as Chandler and Joey laughed about something.

“I love you too…”

Steve stopped breathing for a second when he heard that. Each time Bucky said those words, it felt like the first time and Steve was always taken aback.

“But I’m still mad… Why didn’t you tell me?” Bucky continued quietly, so quietly that Steve wouldn’t have heard the words if he wasn’t paying such close attention to Bucky.

“Just… Didn’t want you to feel sorry for me. I’m working on fixing the situation. I’ve been looking at apartments, but I think I’ll need to get a job first because I don’t have a lot left in my savings…” Steve explained just as quietly, as though he was afraid to speak up in case he shattered the fragile moment.

Bucky was quiet for a while, and Steve almost thought that was the end of the conversation, but then there was a shifting of fabric and Bucky crossed in front of Steve to sit on the couch beside him on Steve’s right.

“I don’t feel sorry for you.” He was speaking the same quiet volume he had been before, but since he was closer it sounded louder to Steve, more confident and assertive, but still soft. The way Bucky’s voice usually sounded. “Shit happens. You got fired, it was only a matter of time before you couldn’t pay your rent anymore.”

Steve was a little surprised by that. Bucky still seemed upset, but he was being understanding too. He understood that Steve didn’t mean to lose his apartment. He had budgeted as well as he could, cut back as many expenses as he could, but a set amount of money can only go so far, and now his bank account was pretty much empty with nothing going in to replace what was going out.

“But I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me… I could have helped you, lent you some money…”

Steve quickly shook his head at that. “Because I didn’t want to take money from you.”

“You wouldn’t be just taking it, I’d be giving it to you. And if you were that bothered about owing me, we could have agreed on you paying it back when you have a job again.”

Steve hadn’t thought about that. It would still be embarrassing having to ask for money from Bucky, but it wouldn’t have been as bad if it had been a loan and not a hand-out. He really should have thought about that. He could still have his apartment, and Bucky wouldn’t be mad at him anymore.

“Yeah… That would have worked…” He admitted quietly.

“I could still lend you some money if you want? To get a new apartment, and to keep you alive until you have a job…” Bucky suggested quietly, and Steve could hear the trepidation in his voice.

Bucky was worried about offending or upsetting Steve by offering to do something to help him, and that made Steve feel even worse. He didn’t want Bucky to feel bad about trying to help. That’s just how Bucky was, he was always trying to help people whenever he could and Steve didn’t want
to change that about him no matter how unintentionally he might do it. Bucky had such a beautiful and kind soul, even despite everything he had been through. It was a miracle life hadn’t broken him down and made him callous and cruel. Steve had seen people turn bitter because of much less.

“Thank you, Buck… But you don’t have to do that. I can get by on my own.” Starting with a ‘thank you’ seemed like the best way to make it sound less like a rejection. Steve tried to portray how grateful he was for the offer, even if he didn’t intend on taking Bucky up on said offer.

“Thing is…” Bucky was still looking down at his lap, and he shook his head a little, almost to himself before continuing. “You don’t have to… ‘Cause I’m with you ‘till the end of the line, Doll. I love you, and I want to help you as must as I can. Every step of the way. You don’t have to just ‘get by’. I can help you do more than just survive.”

Steve had managed to look at Bucky again as he spoke and it may have just been the illness, but Steve was very close to crying. How could one person be so incredibly beautiful, inside and out? And what the hell did Steve do to deserve him?

Bucky could still be mad at Steve, he could still want to keep some distance from Steve and Steve really wanted to respect that. But he couldn’t stop himself, he had to touch him, had to show him how much he appreciated everything Bucky did for him. How much he appreciated Bucky.

He dropped the blanket from around his shoulders and twisted to throw his arms around Bucky’s shoulders in a tight hug, as tight as he could manage while he was still weak from the illness. Bucky only hesitated a little, and Steve hoped that it was just because of shock, then he wrapped his right arm around him. His prosthetic stayed at his side, between him and Steve, but Steve was willing to let it slide this time. He didn’t want to push Bucky to do something he wasn’t comfortable with, especially not now.

“I love you too, Bucky…” He whispered against Bucky’s shoulder, afraid that if he spoke any louder his voice would crack and he would start crying.

Bucky rubbed Steve’s back comfortably and pressed a kiss to Steve’s temple, like he knew that Steve was on the verge of tears. And as if on cue, as soon as he felt Bucky’s lips against his skin, Steve started crying. He clung to Bucky a little tighter and buried his face against his shoulder a little more, trying to hide there, even though he knew that Bucky knew he was crying. Steve tried to be quiet, but he couldn’t.

All the pent up frustration and stress that he had managed to suppress over the past few months crashed over him. He couldn’t even tell exactly when the first stress was. Maybe when Bucky was kidnapped? No, before that. When he first encountered Brock Rumlow in the parking lot of the restaurant? Yeah. That seemed about right. There were so many, it was hard to keep track. But they had made it through them.

Steve and Bucky had gotten through so much pain and trauma together in the few months they had been together. Surely the rest must be a breeze compared to that. They made it through all this, Steve was sure they could make it through anything.

That was supposed to make Steve feel better and stop crying, but if anything it just made him cry harder, just for different reasons. He had almost lost Bucky in the worst possible way, but he still had him. Bucky was still here. He was still with Steve, still had the same beautiful soul Steve had seen in him when Bucky had stood up for him in the hardware store what felt like a lifetime ago. And most importantly, he was alive. He was safe here, and mostly whole. Bucky may have a lasting reminder of what he had been through, and he may not look exactly the same as he had before, with one less limb than when they had first met. But that didn’t matter to Steve. Bucky was
already recovering in leaps and bounds, better than anyone would have expected. Nothing could ever knock him down for good.

Steve should be able to get through this too. Yeah, he had been stressed, but he hadn’t been through the same distresses as Bucky had been through. Being scared for your boyfriend wasn’t the same as being tortured and having to have an arm amputated because of said torture. Steve was homeless, but at least he wasn’t traumatised and disfigured from the experience. He didn’t have any mental health problems as a result of this, like Bucky’s PTSD. He had no right to be crying on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky should be the one allowed to cry, and Steve should be comforting him. He felt so, so guilty for being so self-pitying over something that seemed utterly trivial in comparison to Bucky’s troubles.

Steve reluctantly pulled back from Bucky and wiped his eyes, blushing profusely as he ducked his head to try and hide himself from Bucky’s gaze. “Sorry…”

Bucky’s arm slipped from Steve’s shoulders when Steve moved away, unable to keep his arm around him without having to twist uncomfortably because he was sat on Steve’s right. But his hand didn’t fall away completely, and instead he took Steve’s hand in his, as though he was just as reluctant to let go of Steve as Steve was reluctant to let go of Bucky.

“Why are you sorry?” Bucky asked and, when Steve looked up at him, he saw the look of complete bewilderment on his face and knew that Bucky legitimately didn’t know why Steve was apologising.

“I shouldn’t be so upset… Losing my apartment is nothing compared to what you’ve been through and you’re not crying… You’re fine…”

If possible, Bucky looked even more confused, and Steve winched as he realised how offensive that could sound, saying that Bucky was ‘fine’ diminished what he had been through and made it seem like Steve didn’t believe he was still suffering whereas he must be. He prepared himself for Bucky to get upset again, though he wasn’t sure he would actually be able to handle Bucky yelling at him without Steve bursting into tears again.

“You think I don’t cry?” Bucky asked quietly instead, and Steve hadn’t been prepared for that. He knew Bucky had cried a lot when he had first come home, but he hadn’t been crying nearly as much as Steve expected, and as far as Steve knew, Bucky didn’t really have nightmares or anything either. That was another thing Steve had fully expected, but hadn’t really seen.

“I cry all the time. I just do it when I’m showering, or when I’m cooking so that I’m alone. Or when you and Becca are asleep. The nightmares usually don’t hit until around three in the morning, so everyone else is asleep and I can get away with sneaking down to the basement so I can cry as hard as I want without having to worry about waking anyone up. And by that time I can just stay up until around the time you’ll be waking up, then sneak back upstairs and into bed so you don’t know I was up. I just pretend to be asleep until you wake up.”

Steve stared at Bucky as he spoke. He couldn’t quite comprehend what Bucky was saying. All the times Bucky had taken a little longer than usual cooking, or in the shower… He was crying. Alone. Trying to stay quiet so that the two people who should be there to comfort him wouldn’t hear him. Now that Bucky had pointed out that he often woke up at three in the morning and just stayed awake, usually until Steve went to sleep at eleven at night (at the earliest), Steve could see the evidence of that on Bucky’s face. Under his eyes were darker than usual, clear signs of exhaustion. Steve couldn’t believe he had missed that. The amount of time he spent staring at Bucky’s face, and he only ever saw the perfect parts. He didn’t see what he really should have been seeing, that
Bucky wasn’t doing so well. He was struggling, and he needed help.

“I’m sorry…” Steve whispered again, but for different reasons this time. “I should have noticed… I just assumed you were doing okay, that if you were struggling you’d tell me. But it’s not your fault. You shouldn’t have had to tell me, I shouldn’t have just assumed you’d tell me, that I could just ignore the signs until you brought them up… I’ve been a terrible boyfriend, Buck, but I promise that’s going to change.”

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, but Steve knew exactly what he was going to say. He was going to tell Steve that it was okay, he wasn’t a bad boyfriend, Bucky didn’t expect him to notice, he had even been trying hard to make sure Steve didn’t notice, and to make sure Becca didn’t too.

But Steve stopped him. He cupped Bucky’s face him his hands and shook his head a little, moving to straddle Bucky’s waist so that he was directly facing Bucky. He ran his thumbs over Bucky’s cheekbones, smiling softly when he felt the muscles in Bucky’s jaw relax under his palms. In fact, Bucky almost completely unwound beneath Steve’s body, and at least that made him feel like he was doing something right.

“Bucky. You never have to hide the fact that you’re hurting from me. I understand why you might feel like you need to hide this from Becca, I know you feel like you need to be strong for her and always be completely composed. I know you always want to be someone she can look up to, you want to be her rock. And I understand that. But you don’t have to be like that for me. I look up to you, literally.” Steve laughed quietly at his own little joke, and felt his heart soar when Bucky laughed too before Steve continued. “But you don’t have to pretend you’re okay all the time. You can fall apart whenever you feel like it, and I’ll always be here to help put you back together. I’ll always comfort you, even if all you want me to do is sit with you and hold you while you cry, I’ll do it. No matter what time it is, what either of us are doing, just let me know and I’ll drop everything to free my arms up for you.”

Bucky was staring up at Steve in so much awe, but Steve didn’t understand why. He was offering what every boyfriend should offer, regardless of the situation. Steve suddenly remembered what Natasha had said so long ago, that Bucky had had some really terrible boyfriends. Demons, she had described them as. Brock may have been Bucky’s worst boyfriend, but he wasn’t the only bad one. That just made Steve want to treat him even better, to show him just how he should be treated. With nothing but love.

Tears slipped down to Steve’s thumbs, and he realised Bucky was crying. But he was smiling. And Steve was even more confident in his decision to assure Bucky that he could cry to Steve whenever he wanted. The tears were worth seeing Bucky’s smile.

“And I don’t care how late or early it is either. All you have to do is wake me up, and I’ll be there for you. You don’t even have to say anything, just nudge me awake and I’ll jump straight into Perfect Supportive Boyfriend Mode.”

Bucky laughed quietly, but he knew that Steve was being serious, Steve could see that, and he laughed quietly with him. He wiped the tears from Bucky’s cheeks and leant down to press a kiss to his temple. Steve lingered there for a moment, just smiling against Bucky’s skin. Until he felt Bucky tense slightly under him before speaking.

“Hey, Steve…?”

“Yeah, Buck?”

Whatever Bucky was about to say, he was clearly nervous about it, and Steve really didn’t like
that. He never wanted Bucky to be nervous about telling him anything.

“Well… You have a key… Why don’t you just… Stay here?” Bucky spoke quietly, looking anywhere but at Steve’s face. “It wouldn’t be a charity thing. You’re already here all the time anyway, Becca loves having you around too, and I already gave you a key… I want you here. Even if you didn’t lose your apartment I probably would have asked you soon anyway…”

God, Bucky was adorable when he was nervous. He was beautiful. And after the explanation Bucky had given, how could Steve possibly deny him?

“Are you sure?” He asked quietly, and as soon as Bucky nodded, Steve grinned. “Okay… I’ll move in with you, Buck. But just until I get my own place…”

“Or longer… Whatever.” Bucky shrugged, but smiled at Steve, and Steve smiled back before he leant down to kiss him.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Steve moves in.

It took them a while to separate, Steve will admit that. Bucky managed to stop crying after only a few kisses, then the room was silent besides the sounds of their lips and tongues meeting, and their breathing. But eventually, Bucky nudged at Steve’s shoulder with his right hand so that Steve would pull back, allowing Bucky to smile at him.

“We should tell Becca you’re going to be moving in…” Bucky suggested, and Steve nodded in agreement.

He was almost certain that Becca would be happy if they explained the situation completely. Becca was a smart girl, if she had the facts she needed. The only thing Steve could think of that could possibly go wrong was if they just said Steve was moving in, she might think Steve had manipulated Bucky into letting him stay here for free by purposely admitting that he was homeless. That wasn’t the case, and Steve fully intended on making sure she knew all the facts to make sure she didn’t think that, but he wasn’t sure how Bucky intended on phrasing it.

“She’ll be okay with it, right?” Steve asked quietly, just to make sure, and Bucky nodded immediately.

“Of course. She loves you almost as much as I do. Almost. If she loved you in the same way as me, I’d be concerned.” Bucky joked with a quiet chuckle, and Steve smiled.

“I don’t think anyone will be able to love me the same way you do. You’re just delusional.” Steve joked back, but Bucky didn’t laugh. Instead, he frowned.

“People would be lucky to love you like I do. Anyone who isn’t completely in love with you is an idiot.”

Steve smiled at that. He would never quite get over how much Bucky cared about him. Bucky was perfect, and he thought Steve was perfect. That was the best compliment Steve could ever imagine. And he knew that as long as Bucky cared about him, Steve would always have a bright flash of hope in his life.

Steve had been through some very dark times in his life, the darkest being when his mother died and he was left completely alone for the first time in his life. He hadn’t had a job at the time, and thank god his mother had had life insurance or there was no way Steve would have been able to give her the funeral she deserved. Steve had felt like there was no way he would ever be happy again. His life was completely black, he was surrounded by darkness.

But now, it was different. The past few months had been tough, with everything that had happened to Bucky and losing his job and apartment, but at least now Steve knew there was no way he would ever have a period that dark again. Steve hadn’t had many friends in school, and the friends he had had were just his friends because of circumstance. So when his mother died, he didn’t really have
anyone to lean on. He was truly alone. But now, he had Bucky, and he knew that no matter what happened in his life, no matter how dark his life got, there would always be some light. Because he had Bucky. Bucky would always be a shining light in his life.

“You’re way too sweet on me, Buck…” He pressed a kiss to Bucky’s cheek and smiled when he felt Bucky’s cheek tug into the shape of a smile too.

“I know. But you deserve it.” Bucky answered almost immediately, then the smile faltered a little. “If you had talked to me about this sooner you could have already moved in and gotten completely settled here by now…”

Steve couldn’t help the pang of guilt he felt when Bucky said that. He knew Bucky was always willing to help out anyone he possibly could. He knew that if he had just said something, Bucky probably would have offered exactly what he just did.

“I know… But I didn’t want you to feel like you had to ask me to move in here. Because you don’t.”

“Really? In that case I take it back, stay at Peggy and Angie’s place.” Bucky answered, deadpan, and Steve pulled back to look at his face to see if he was serious.

He looked serious, but then Bucky rolled his eyes. He must have seen the fear in Steve’s eyes, because he immediately said that he was kidding.

“I’m not mad at you for not telling me… Not much, anyway. I’m more upset that you’re not communicating with me properly. If this relationship is going to work out, you need to talk to me.”

Steve nodded. He knew that. Every TV show, movie, or book he had read that involved a relationship always talked about how communication is one of the most important parts of a successful relationship. But it was just difficult. He had never had a relationship before, he didn’t know how to bring up difficult conversations like this. But he had to try, for Bucky. Steve wanted to spend the rest of his life with him, he’ll have to talk to Bucky about things that may make him uncomfortable in the future, so now was a good place to start. If they communicated now, it would be easier in the future.

“I’ll try, Buck… I promise.”

“That’s all I can ask.” Bucky smiled, then leant forward to press another kiss to Steve’s cheek. “Can you call Becca to come in here while I make some tea?”

Steve nodded and got off of Bucky’s lap, then held his hand out to help Bucky up. He knew Bucky didn’t need it, but it was just more of an excuse to be able to touch Bucky again anyway. Regardless, Bucky smiled and took hold of Steve’s hand, and Steve immediately saw another potentially uncomfortable conversation that they’ll have to have eventually. Steve had held his left hand out to Bucky’s left hand, but Bucky just twisted his right wrist to take Steve’s hand with his own flesh one. He was still avoiding using his prosthetic as much as he could.

But that was a conversation for later, after they had told Becca that Steve was moving in and when they were in private.

Steve found Becca and asked her to come to the living room, but she didn’t seem particularly surprised or curious. She probably already knew what Steve and Bucky were going to tell her. Smart kid.

Steve took a seat on the couch, and Becca sat in the armchair she had been in before. There was a
brief moment of silence as they waited for Bucky to come back in carrying a tray with three cups on it. He put it down on the coffee table, then pushed one cup to the edge of the tray towards Becca and another closer to Steve so they would all know whose was whose, since they all took tea differently. He sat on Steve’s left, so his prosthetic was furthest away from him and Becca. Steve wasn’t sure if it was intentional or just coincidental, but he made a mental note of it anyway.

“Becca, you probably already know what we’re going to tell you…” Bucky started, smiling a little.

It was as if he had flicked a switch on Becca’s face. As soon as he said that, a wide smile broke out across her face and she nodded quickly. It was then that Steve realised the neutral expression she had had on her face from when he found her to when Bucky returned was just a mask. She was just as excited as they were, but she didn’t want to show it until she knew for sure.

“Steve is going to be moving in with us until—“

Bucky didn’t get to finish his sentence. Or, he might have done, but Becca’s loud squeal of delight drowned it out as she got up and threw herself into Steve’s arms. Steve was shocked, but he managed to laugh and hug her back before she pulled away to hug Bucky, who definitely only used one arm intentionally. Becca must have noticed that, because her face was turned to Steve and he saw her smile falter slightly, but the smile was back in full force before she pulled away so Bucky wouldn’t notice the change.

“This is great!” She gushed, as if her smile and her excitement hadn’t dropped at all. “Can I come with you to help bring your stuff? Do you have any CDs? I know you have an awesome taste in music. Or is all you music just on your phone? Do you have any pictures of your parents? I’ve always wondered what your mom looks like, from what you’ve told me I bet she was beautiful. Oh, and—“

“Okay, okay! Becca, chill!” Bucky laughed as he shook his head a little at her enthusiasm. “Things are going to be almost exactly the same as they have been before, but just with more of Steve’s stuff around.”

Steve nodded in agreement, then started mentally going through all her questions to see if he could answer any of them. “I don’t have any CDs. I usually just listen to music on Spotify Free. Or I listen to Bucky’s music. And I have some pictures of my mom and dad, but none of them are framed or anything like yours.”

He gestured around the room to the framed pictures they had along one wall of the Barnes family and their friends. It was only then that he realised there was a picture of him on the wall, with Becca, Bucky and Natasha when Becca won her dance competition. They were all smiling wide, and Becca was stood in the middle holding her trophy close to her chest with Bucky and Natasha either side of her and Steve on the other side of Bucky. Bucky hadn’t told him he was going to get that picture printed and framed for their wall, and even if he did, he expected that to be one of the ones he had in his bedroom. The living room wall was mostly family. The picture of Bucky with Becca and their mother at the beach was there, the same as the one in Bucky’s room. There was a picture of them and both of their parents sat on the couch, but it wasn’t the same one as Bucky had in his room. This one was on them a little older than they are in the other one. Bucky was around fifteen in that picture, so Becca would be about ten. There were some pictures of other relatives, but the pictures were clearly old and the relatives didn’t look exactly loving in the ones in which they were stood or sat with Bucky and Becca, and Bucky was ten years old or younger in all of those ones. That explained why none of these older relative took Bucky and Becca in when their parents died, and why Bucky had to take care of his little sister by himself with no emotional or even financial support.
Bucky must have noticed Steve staring at the wall, because he felt him nudge Steve’s shoulder. He looked back at them and realised he himself was frowning. Probably because he was frowning in annoyance because of the lack of intervention from the rest of their family at a time of such crisis. Steve started to wonder if they ever talked to the Barnes kids, or if they knew what had happened to Bucky recently, or even if they would want to know. He always tried not to hate people he hadn’t met himself, but Steve couldn’t help but hate these people for seemingly abandoning family.

Even so, Bucky seemed to be frowning in confusion now, so Steve forced himself to smile at them and gestured for the picture of them at the dance competition. “I didn’t know you had that framed…”

“Well, yeah… It’s a good picture.” Bucky nodded a little with a smile. “You made it onto the Family Wall, congrats. The only other non-relatives on there is Nat and Romey.”

“Romey?” Steve asked in confusion. The name sounded familiar, but Steve couldn’t remember where he had heard it from, and he looked over at the wall to look for someone who could be Romey.

There were a few younger people in the pictures who weren’t Natasha, but they could have been relatives. There were pictures of people about Bucky’s age and some others about Becca’s age. There were some older ones too, and some toddlers.

But most of them had dark hair and either blue or brown eyes from what Steve could see, so they all looked like they were relatives.

“My best friend,” Becca announced, then stood from her seat to go over to the wall. She pointed at a picture of herself dressed in 80s clothes with her arm around a taller girl with thick brown hair.

Steve realised where he had seen her then, and nodded. “Oh right! She was at the Halloween party, right?”

Becca nodded with a smile, then went back to sit in her armchair. “We’ve been best friends for about four years.”

Bucky nodded too, then stood. “Are you guys hungry? I’m going to start making dinner, then maybe later today we can get your stuff from Peggy and Angie’s place?” He directed the last bit at Steve, and Steve nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll text them and let them know.”

Bucky left to go to the kitchen, and Becca asked a few more excited questions which Steve answered happily, then he remembered what Bucky had said earlier. That he usually cried when he was alone, like in the shower or when he was cooking.

He didn’t want to worry Becca or expose Bucky’s vulnerability to her, so he told her he was going to help Bucky cook to ‘earn his keep’ and she laughed and nodded, then told him she was going to take her laundry upstairs to put it all away.

That was good, that meant that she would be well out of earshot from the kitchen, just in case.

Steve hesitated slightly, then went over to the kitchen. He stopped outside the door and listened carefully. He could hear Bucky moving some pots around, then silence.

*Maybe everything was okay? Maybe Bucky wasn’t crying?*
He was about to go in anyway, but he stopped when he heard another sound from the kitchen. It sounded like just a sniffle at first, and Steve was worried that Bucky had caught his cold. But then there was a definite sob, though it was muffled. He couldn’t stay out anymore, and he quietly pushed the door open and looked inside. He wasn’t trying to spy on him, he just didn’t want to startle Bucky by just barging in and pulling him into a hug like Steve really wanted to.

The first thing he saw was glass on the floor, then Bucky crouched on the floor leaning against the cupboard with his flesh hand over his mouth, his eyes screwed closed, and his prosthetic arm hanging by his side.

“Buck…” Steve called out quietly, so that Bucky would realise he was there.

Bucky looked startled when he looked up at Steve and, as he had expected, there were tears streaming down his face. So Steve immediately went over to him, careful to avoid the shards of glass littering the floor between himself and Bucky. He crouched by his side and placed a hand on his right shoulder. The touch was all it took for Bucky to visibly crumble and lean against Steve, and Steve quickly wrapped both his arms around Bucky’s shoulder, then rested a hand on the back of Bucky’s head to keep him close and keep Bucky’s face buried against his neck. Steve could feel Bucky’s tears against his neck, but the dampness didn’t bother him. He just stroked Bucky’s hair and let him cry against his skin.

“It’s okay, Buck… Cry as much as you want, sweetheart, it’s okay…” It hurt seeing Bucky cry like that, but Steve understood that Bucky needed to. It wasn’t healthy to keep his emotions bottled up and repressed, he didn’t want Bucky to do it for his benefit and he was sure Becca would feel the same.

Steve turned his head to press a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head and felt him shaking slightly in his grip. “You’re safe, Bucky, I promise… I love you…”

He continued to hug Bucky and whisper soothing words to him until he felt Bucky slowly stop shaking. It felt like Bucky was relaxing a little, but he kept him pressed close to Steve.

“I broke some glasses…” Bucky muttered against Steve’s skin, and Steve looked up from where his face was pressed into Bucky’s hair to look at the glass on the floor, then noticed that there was some on the counter under the cabinet where they kept the glasses and plates.

“It’s okay… I’ll clean it up,” Steve assured him, then pressed another kiss to his hair, but Bucky quickly shook his head and pulled away from Steve.

“I-I’ll do it…”

Bucky immediately reached out with shaky hands to pick up the pieces of glass, but Steve shook his head and turned to open the cupboard and take out a dustpan and brush. “It’s okay, Bucky, I’ll —”

He stopped when he saw that Bucky was still picking up the glass, and the pieces already in his hand were slick with blood. “Bucky, stop!”

Steve instantly regretted his tone when he saw Bucky flinch and grip the glass in his hand a little tighter, so Steve moved to his side and cupped his face.

“Bucky… It’s okay, sweetheart, I’ll clean up the glass. Just let go, okay?” He made sure to talk quietly and soothingly as he moved one hand down to Bucky’s wrist. “You’re hurting yourself…”

Bucky had his eyes screwed closed, but he opened them then and stared at Steve for a few seconds
like he was trying to comprehend exactly what Steve was saying, then looked down at his hand. The blood was starting to drop from the tip of a rather large shard gripped in his hand, and Bucky winced as he let go of it. More blood dripped down when Bucky splayed his hand out to make sure he had dropped all the pieces, then Steve turned the hand over to look at the cuts on his palm and fingers. It looked bad, but that could just be because there was blood covering it.

“I’ll get something to clean that up, just don’t touch anything else. Okay?” He asked quietly, and Bucky nodded as he continued staring at his own hand.

Steve stood and went to the sink. He took a cloth out of the drawer, then soaked it in warm water and rinsed it out. As a second thought, he filled a bucket from under the sink with water so he wouldn’t have to keep going between Bucky and the sink, and so Bucky wouldn’t have to move. He knelt down again beside Bucky on the hard floor, then took his wrist in one hand and lightly dabbed the cuts to clean the blood up. Steve had expected him to flinch, but Bucky still didn’t react. He was getting a little worried, but he hoped it was just the dissociation thing, and Bucky would be okay again soon.

He rung the cloth out in the bucket, then cleaned up the rest of the cuts. Now that all the blood was gone, the cuts didn’t look so bad, not enough to need to go to the hospital or anything. That was good. Bucky had already spent way too much time in the hospital in his life by now.

“Bucky… Please just stay here while I clean up, okay?” He asked, and Bucky nodded again.

Steve wasn’t entirely sure if Bucky was actually listening, or if he was just nodding whenever Steve spoke, but he didn’t make a move to reach for the glass again, so Steve was okay with that. He took the bucket over to the sink to pour out the pink tinted water and left the cloth in the sink for now. Steve used the dust ban and brush to clear up the glass and pour it into the bin. Then, he used the cloth to clean up the drops of Bucky’s blood on the floor and put the cloth in the bin too.

Bucky stayed on the floor leant against the cupboards the whole time, and once he was done Steve went over to kneel in front of him again. “Bucky? Please talk to me…”

It took Bucky a few seconds to react and he blinked rapidly, then finally met Steve’s eyes and sighed quietly. “I’m sorry…”

“Don’t apologise, love. It’s okay.” He pressed a kiss to Bucky’s forehead, then took hold of Bucky’s wrist again to look over the cuts. “Do you have any band aids?”

Bucky nodded a little and gestured with his metal hand to the cupboard on the other side of the kitchen. “In the metal tin in there…”

Steve stood to go to said cupboard and retrieve a pack of band aids, then came back over and covered the cuts on Bucky’s hands with a few of them. “You okay?”

Bucky nodded again, then gripped the counter above his head with his prosthetic to haul himself up off the floor. Steve kept his hand on Bucky’s wrist as he stood up with him, then looked up at him and cupped his face.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded again, then turned to the oven to open it and check on whatever he was cooking. Still, Steve wasn’t exactly convinced, so he stayed close. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Bucky didn’t even hesitate, then closed the oven and turned to face Steve, a small smile on his lips. “Sorry about that… I overreacted a little… Thanks for taking care of me.”
“It’s okay, Bucky,” Steve smiled and stepped a little closer to him to rest his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. “I don’t mind taking care of you.”

Bucky chuckled quietly, then leant down a little to press a kiss to Steve’s lips. Steve happily kissed him back and moved one hand up to Bucky’s hair.

Becca commented on the band aids covering Bucky’s hand during dinner, but Bucky assured her that he just broke a glass and cut himself, that it was no big deal. She didn’t talk about it after that, then started talking about some plans she had with her friends soon.

Maybe Bucky didn’t notice it, but Steve did. Becca was nervous, and even though she was talking about it like she was just stating what she had planned, Steve could hear the hidden question in her voice. She was asking Bucky’s permission to go to her friend’s house for a sleepover and to watch movies. It would be the first time she had left the house for an extended period of time since before Bucky’s kidnapping, and she was clearly anxious about doing so.

Bucky didn’t seem bothered though, Steve wasn’t even sure if he could hear the silent question in her words. He just nodded along to what she was saying, asked what kind of movies they were going to be watching and who would be going. He seemed to approve of the girls Becca listed, because he nodded again and ate a bit more of his food.

“Sounds like fun.” He commented, and Steve looked between him and Becca. Becca continued watching Bucky was a few more seconds, her eyes darting as she looked over every detail of his face, presumably for any sign that Bucky didn’t want her to go.

Maybe she was worried that Bucky wouldn’t want to be away from her after everything that had happened, or maybe she thought Bucky would be worried for her safety. If either of those were true, Bucky didn’t show it.

Eventually, Becca just came right out and asked her brother if that would be okay, and Bucky looked up from his food to look at her in confusion, clearly not understanding why Becca felt the need to ask. From what Steve had seen before, Becca hadn’t really needed to ask permission to do anything. As long as she told Bucky where she was going and when she’d be back, Bucky was pretty much okay with anything. He trusted Becca to stay safe and make responsible decision without him having to ask a thousand questions about her plans.

“Of course it’s okay. Why do you ask?”

Becca didn’t answer right away, and Steve could feel the tension in the room escalate, even if no one had really said anything awkward.

“Just… Wanted to make sure.” She looked back down at her food and Bucky kept watching her for a few seconds, but eventually decided that it wasn’t important and returned his attention to his own food.

The rest of the meal was pretty uneventful, and Becca then offered to come get Steve’s stuff from Peggy and Angie’s place, but Bucky assured her she didn’t need to and she can help them unpack his stuff when they got back, and she could make some space in Bucky’s closet for Steve’s clothes while they were gone.

Steve assured Bucky that he didn’t have a lot of stuff, so they took Bucky’s suitcase and one of his gym bags to pack everything up into. Most of his stuff were already packed at the girls’ apartment since he insisted the living arrangement would be temporary and there was no point unpacking
everything. But his stuff were mostly in cardboard boxes, so they weren’t exactly in appropriate containers to transport them to Bucky’s place, especially since they didn’t have a car. Bucky still hadn’t mentioned buying one, and since he and Becca didn’t really go anywhere outside of walking distance while Becca was out of school, there was no real point in having one right now.

They started walking to Steve’s old apartment building in silence, and Steve stood on Bucky’s left on purpose to test out a theory he had. If he had been walking on Bucky’s right, he would have held his hand. But where he stood now, Bucky kept his hands in his pockets the whole time. So Steve linked his arm with Bucky’s. He could feel the hard metal under the sleeve of Bucky’s jacket. It felt so different to holding onto Bucky’s other arm, but it didn’t matter to Steve. It felt different, but not bad. Even so, Steve could feel Bucky tense beside him, but he held his ground to show Bucky that he didn’t mind touching it, it didn’t bother him in the slightest.

“I love you,” Steve told him, and he looked up in time to see the corners of Bucky’s lips tug up in a small smile.

“I love you too.”

Bucky seemed to relax a little then, and the rest of the walk they spent in a comfortable silence.

Bucky stopped outside the apartment building, and Steve was brought to a halt too as his arm was still linked with Bucky’s.

“I only met Peggy and Angie once… And that was before…” Bucky looked down at his metal prosthetic, the hand still tucked into the pocket of his jacket as if to hide it.

“They won’t mind that you have a prosthetic, Buck… They know what happened. At least the basics. They know you lost your arm.” Steve explained briefly, then moved to stand in front of Bucky so that he could lean up and kiss him to try and soothe his worries.

When they eventually separated, Bucky nodded a little with a sigh. “Okay…”

Peggy was must more composed than Angie was. She didn’t even glance at Bucky’s metal prosthetic. She simply held her hand out to shake Bucky’s right hand in a greeting, saying it was nice to see him again and she thought it was really nice of Bucky to let Steve move in with him and Becca. Bucky smiled and assured her it was no problem, with a quick side glance at Steve.

Peggy offered him a drink, and he accepted a glass of water. She held the glass out towards the centre of Bucky’s chest so it didn’t look like she was aiming for any particular hand, and Bucky took it with his right hand and thanked her. He sounded casual, like anyone would when accepting a glass of water. But Steve could sense another layer in his words, and he was sure Peggy heard it too, because her answer of ‘It’s not problem’ held much more weight than it should have done.

Angie was… Less subtle. She wasn’t purposely trying to upset Bucky or make anyone uncomfortable, Steve was sure of that, but she was just much more open about how she felt and thought. Which meant that she started asking Bucky’s questions about his prosthetic before Steve could find the opportunity to pull her and Peggy aside and tell them Bucky didn’t like talking about it or even acknowledging it. She asked if it was heavy, if he thought it was cool, and if he could do any cool stuff like rip car doors off their hinges, all pretty much in the same breath. Bucky looked alarmed, but before he could answer, Peggy distracted him with the question about whether or not he wanted a drink. Steve knew Bucky’s memory was pretty good so even after answering Peggy’s question, he was sure Bucky could remember Angie’s. But even so, he used Peggy’s interruption as an excuse to ignore Angie’s questions altogether.
Steve understood why, and he could see the realisation and regret on Angie’s face when she realised too. She didn’t bring up the questions again, and instead asked how his little sister was, and if she was still dancing. At the mention of Becca, Bucky’s eyes lit up a little and he nodded as he told the girls the new dances she had started choreographing herself, and how intricate and impressive they were. Peggy didn’t know much about that stuff, but Angie was a major theatre fan, and she listened enthusiastically, and even suggested a few lesser known dancers Becca may be able to take inspiration from. Bucky thanked her for the suggestion and assured Angie he would pass on the names on Becca. Though that was all he said about it, Steve hoped that Bucky looked at them himself. He knew he had stopped dancing so he could focus on getting a job and supporting Becca, and then there was the amputation and the new limb. Bucky hadn’t danced for a long time as far as Steve knew, but it was still something Bucky had once enjoyed and still might. Even if he didn’t dance himself much anymore, Steve still hoped he maintained the interest in the art. There had been times before, when they had first gotten together, where Bucky could talk for hours about different dance styles and the pros and cons of each, and which he enjoyed watching more, which he enjoyed doing most… It was incredible to watch Bucky talk about it. He could see Bucky’s eyes light up, and Steve loved it. He loved watching Bucky talk so passionately about something, even if Steve didn’t know much about it himself.

After pleasantries had been exchanged and the girls had had time to talk to and catch up with Bucky, they put Steve’s stuff into the suitcase and gym bag Bucky had brought. It was a little depressing that all of Steve’s possessions from nineteen years of life could be collected into such a small amount of space. But he had the stuff he needed, and it made it easier for them to transport it to Bucky’s house anyway, so he couldn’t be too upset about it. If there was more, he would gladly burn half his belongings if it meant Bucky didn’t have to carry too much or have to give up too much space in his own bedroom for them. Hell, Steve would be willing to burn all of his possessions for Bucky. The pictures of his mother would be a little harder to part with, but he would never forget her face anyway.

Though even as he thought that, he knew Bucky would never ask Steve to do that regardless of whether or not Steve would be willing. His parents were dead too, so Steve knew that Bucky understood the need to keep hold of those little pieces of them, including the pictures. Even if they knew they would never forget their faces, it was still nice to be able to see them still, frozen with a smile in a happy moment.

After assuring them that this wasn’t the end of their friendship just because they were no longer across the hall from each other, Steve said goodbye to Peggy and Angie, then started walking back to Bucky’s home. Steve dragged the suitcase along beside them on its wheels and Bucky put the gym bag over his shoulder. They walked in silence. Steve could see that Bucky was a little drained from talking to Angie and Peggy, and honestly Steve couldn’t blame him. Angie in particular was very draining if you weren’t used to being around her for an extended period of time.

But Bucky never complained. He knew they were Steve’s friends, so he would never say a bad word about them. Even so, Steve had to ask.

“Buck? Do you… Do you like Angie and Peggy?”

Bucky didn’t even hesitate, as soon as Steve asked the question, Bucky frowned and answered. “Yeah, of course. Why do you ask?”

Steve shrugged and picked at the suitcase handle. “I don’t know… You just seem quiet. I thought maybe you weren’t really happy about seeing them.” Steve hoped that Bucky was just ‘recharging’, but he was still worried that he was wrong, and Bucky didn’t like his friends.
“No, no. It’s just a little… Much. I’ve only been around you and Becca for a while, it’s a little draining to be around people as energetic as Angie.”

So Steve was right. He let out a sigh of relief and smiled at Bucky, then wrapped an arm around Bucky’s waist. “I’m really glad you like them. I know she can be a little much, but she means well and they’re both great people.”

“I know that. Don’t worry, Steve.” Bucky smiled as he draped his arm over Steve’s shoulders to tug him a little closer to his side.

When they got home, they took Steve’s stuff up to Bucky’s room and hung his clothes up first. He could hear Bucky snigger quietly as he took the clothes out, then laughed when Bucky said it was because of how small Steve’s clothes looked compared to Bucky’s hung up in his wardrobe.

Becca came to help them, and she found a place for Steve’s few book in Bucky’s bookcase, then put Steve’s shoes beside Bucky’s in the little box by the window. Steve didn’t have a lot of stuff, so he was pretty much unpacked after only a few minutes.

As promised, Steve showed Becca (and Bucky) the pictures of his mother that he had. The first one he showed them was of Sarah in a hospital holding Steve as a baby, her hair sweating and her face blotchy, but she was smiling wide and her eyes were sparkling happily. The next one was of Steve’s first steps, with Sarah crouched behind him with a wide smile on her face.

Once Steve showed them the picture of Steve at the hospital in his graduation gown and cap, smiling beside Sarah in her hospital bed wearing an oxygen mask, Bucky shot up and left the room quickly. Steve immediately worried that the sight of the hospital had triggered Bucky and upset him, but he returned a few minutes later with some photo frames with a grin.

The frames where ones he had bought for some pictures a year ago, but none of their pictures fit. But Steve’s graduation picture and the one of Sarah holding him just after he was born fit in the frames perfectly. Once they were framed, Bucky handed them over the Steve again.

“Do you want to hang them in here on our bedroom wall, or in the living room?” He didn’t even hesitate to say ‘our’ bedroom wall, and Steve was surprised by how natural it sounded.

Eventually, they decided to put the baby picture on the bedroom wall and leave the graduation picture in a drawer for now. Steve still wasn’t comfortable seeing his mother in an oxygen mask, looking so much paler and thinner than she ever had done when she was healthy. Maybe he would one day, but for now, it stayed in the drawer, where he could look at it when he wanted to and avoid it when he didn’t want to see it.

Bucky and Becca both understood that and didn’t push him to put it out on display. He also showed them a picture of when his mother was a lot younger, in her late teens, stood beside a young man. He didn’t have to explain who the man in the photo was, and the Barnes kids wore identical small, sad smiles.

“She’s beautiful. And he’s so handsome.” Becca pointed out, and Bucky nodded in agreement.

“He looks just like you, Stevie…” Bucky added, and Steve laughed quietly.

“Well, one of you is lying. He can’t look just like me and be handso—Ouch!” Steve felt a sting of Bucky flicking his ear.

“Quit putting yourself down, you’re beautiful.” Bucky insisted, then leant forward to kiss Steve
before he could argue, muffling Steve’s laugh.

Becca made a gagging noise on the other side of Steve, and the blond felt his boyfriend shift a little, then Becca whine in annoyance. Knowing Bucky, he probably reached over to cover her eyes. Once they separated from the kiss, Bucky took the photo from Steve and ran his fingers along the edges. Steve wasn’t entirely sure what Bucky was doing, but he didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“I think I have a frame the right size for this picture too if you want it?”

Steve was about to say no, Bucky had already given him two. Steve should buy some himself, or at least pay Bucky back, but he stopped himself and nodded with a smile instead. Bucky was always saying he didn’t mind giving Steve stuff, and Bucky seemed to genuinely like giving Steve things, so he relented and decided to let Bucky give him the frame.

“Only if you’re sure you don’t want it…”

Bucky was already on his feet, and he came back a few minutes later with another frame. As predicted, it was the perfect size for the picture of Steve’s parents. Becca yawned as they framed the picture, then smiled at the final result and kissed Steve’s and Bucky’s cheek before announcing she was going to bed. She said goodnight and the boys returned the sentiment.

That picture ended up on the wall, right beside of picture of Bucky and Becca’s parents.

Steve and Bucky spent the next hour or so laying on the bed and kissing. Steve didn’t attempt to do any more than that for a while. He wasn’t sure if Bucky would want anything more than kissing yet. But after a while, Steve decided to try his luck and ran his hand down Bucky’s chest to rest on his abdomen. Bucky didn’t react right away, but Steve did feel his muscles tense slightly under his fingertip. That didn’t necessarily mean that Bucky didn’t enjoy it, Bucky’s abs used to flutter under Steve’s hand all the time. He kept his hand there for a few seconds, then slowly moved it a little lower.

But Bucky’s lips stilled against Steve’s, and he broke the kiss with a quiet sigh, his eyes closed tight. “Steve… I don’t…”

Bucky didn’t finish his sentence, he was clearly struggling with how to phrase his thoughts, so Steve moved his hand back up to his chest and shook his head a little. “It’s okay, Buck… I understand. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

He looked surprised, and Steve tried not to feel hurt by that. Did Bucky really think that Steve would try to pressure Bucky into doing more than what he was ready for?

The situation reminded Steve of when they were first dating, when Steve wasn’t ready to do anything more than kisses and Bucky had been so patient for him. The least Steve could do was return the favour and be as understanding and uncomplaining.

“Like you said to me, ‘I’m not going anywhere, I’ll wait as long as you need’. You went through so much, Buck, and you’ve changed.” Bucky’s eyes widened a little, a look of panic flashing through them, and Steve quickly continued. “That’s not a bad thing. You haven’t changed for the worst or anything like that. It’s just a fact. And it’s okay if you feel differently about how much intimacy you want. I…”

Steve hesitated for a minute, not sure whether he should mention what he had noticed about how little Bucky attempted to use his prosthetic. He didn’t want to upset Bucky by bringing it up, but
Steve decided now was as good an opportunity to mention it as ever.

“I notice that you don’t use this a lot…” He ran his fingers over Bucky’s metal arm, starting above his short sleeve and moving his fingertips down to his forearm. Again, Steve felt Bucky’s body tense beside him, but this time he didn’t pull back. “You’re still not comfortable with it. That’s okay. I don’t expect you to be at ease with such a huge change so soon. But I want you to be comfortable with it. Eventually.”

Steve stopped to watch for Bucky’s reaction, and the brunet slowly smiled. He had expected Bucky to be uncomfortable or try to avoid the subject, but he didn’t try to interrupt Steve or change the subject.

“I know this is probably pretty stressful for you… I’m sorry you have to suffer through this.” Bucky muttered, and Steve frowned in confusion.

“What…? Bucky, I love you. Yeah, this has been stressful, but I want to be with you. And none of this is your fault, you have nothing to apologise for, sweetheart.”

Bucky smiled sweetly at the little petname, then leant forward to kiss Steve again, briefly at first. “Can we keep kissing…? Or is it a little anticlimactic for you if we just kiss?”

Steve laughed quietly and shook his head, his hands coming up to cup Bucky’s face. “I’d love to keep kissing you, Barnes.” He assured him, then moved closer to lock their lips together again, his lips quirked up when he felt Bucky’s smile.
By the time they eventually fell asleep, Bucky was completely relaxed again and had his head resting on Steve’s chest. He had been a little hesitant to rest his head there at first, but Steve has assured him he could handle it, even after his recent illness. It felt nice, actually, having Bucky’s head on his chest. His hair tickled Steve’s chin, and Steve couldn’t help but smile as he felt Bucky fall asleep against him while he played with his hair.

The next morning was pretty much the same as every other morning Steve had woken up at Bucky’s, but at the same time it was so different. He wasn’t just sleeping over this time, he didn’t have to think about when he was going home or whether or not he was close to overstaying his welcome yet. This wasn’t Bucky’s house, Bucky’s room, Bucky’s bed. It was theirs. He looked around at the room around them, noticing all the little indicators that this really was their room, his and Bucky’s. The pictures of Bucky’s family, as well as Steve’s on the wall were the first things he saw. Then his eyes settled on his robe hanging on top of Bucky’s on the door of the closet, then his shoes next to Bucky’s. A warm feeling blossomed through Steve’s chest as he took it all in, then registered the weight he felt there. He looked down and his smile widened when he saw Bucky’s head still on his chest, his slow and even breath warming Steve’s chest in slow puffs.

Yeah, Steve could definitely get used to waking up like this every morning. He ran his fingers through Bucky’s shaggy hair, noting how much it had grown out since all of this started. Again, he debated whether or not he should mention it to Bucky, but honestly he didn’t care. It looked nice like this, Steve could certainly get used to having a little more to run his fingers through as they kissed or cuddled together, and Bucky always seemed to like Steve playing with his hair anyway.

He was broken out of his musing and memories by Bucky letting out a little happy sound, the noise causing vibrations to tickle Steve’s chest. He let out a little chuckle as he twirled Bucky’s hair around his fingers and Bucky nuzzled against his chest a little in a sleepy daze.

“Morning.” Steve greeted quietly, and smiled as he felt Bucky’s lips tug up against his chest.

“How’d you sleep?” He tried to keep the question as light and casual as possible, but the implications were there, and Bucky seemed to have picked that up too because he stiffened just a little.

He knew Steve was asking if he had any nightmares that night, but the tension in his muscles only lasted for a second before he went pliant against Steve again.

“Fine… No nightmares, not with my favourite teddy bear so close,” He assured him and pressed a kiss to Steve’s chest, just above his left nipple, causing Steve to giggle quietly with a blush.

“Glad I could be of service.” Steve joked in return and continued playing with Bucky’s hair, completely content to stay there as long as possible with Bucky wrapped up safe in his arms, so
warm and calm.

Bucky seemed to have a similar idea, because he let out another quiet hum, then went still and silent. The fingers of Steve’s other hand ran up and down Bucky’s flesh arm, and Bucky started tracing patterns and lines on Steve’s fingers, over his ribs, around his navel. Steve couldn’t help but close his eyes as he focussed on the feeling, a smile tugging on his lips. He wasn’t sure exactly when Bucky stopped, but he eventually realised he had and the weight on his chest was now gone, causing him to let out a disappointed little whine as he reopened his eyes. It was a bit of a shock to see Bucky’s face so close to his own, but not an unpleasant one by any definition. Especially when he saw the soft smile on Bucky’s lips and a sliver of his tongue poke out to dampen them a little. Steve subconsciously mimicked Bucky’s action and closed his eyes as Bucky leant down to seal his lips against Steve’s in a soft kiss.

There was no way of knowing how long they had been kissing, trading soft touches along each other’s chests and sides of they did, before there was a very loud knock at the door. Bucky flinched at the loud noise and accidentally bit Steve’s bottom lip, but he quickly apologised and Steve laughed as he waved off his sorrys.

Bucky groaned when he realised the loud noise had been someone knocking on the door, demanding their attention.

“Ignore it.” Bucky whispered, then leant down to kiss Steve again and Steve chuckled quietly against his lips as he kissed back, extremely okay with that idea.

However, Becca didn’t get the message and a few moments later she called up to them to say that Tony Stark was at the door. Bucky let out a groan, but after everything Stark had done for them since the whole Rumlow mess began, Steve could tell Bucky wasn’t too annoyed about him being here. Mostly because he actually got out of bed and started getting dressed. They had stripped off to their boxers before bed, so Bucky grabbed the same shirt and sweatpants he was wearing the night before and dressed quickly.

“Are you coming?” Bucky asked, and Steve nodded as he pulled his shirt on over his head. He didn’t like the idea of leaving Bucky alone with anyone, even someone like Stark who clearly means them no harm. He couldn’t help the little flare of protectiveness that he felt towards his boyfriend around other men, not because he was worried about Bucky being unfaithful in the way that people would usually be uncomfortable with their partner being around others. He just wanted to make sure Bucky was safe.

Once they were both dressed, he grabbed Bucky’s hand before they could leave the bedroom and tugged him closer to him. Bucky looked a little confused for a moment, then Steve reached up to tidy Bucky’s hair up a little and he chuckled as Bucky laughed in realisation. When Steve deemed his hair presentable, he nodded and gestured for Bucky to lead the way out. Steve took hold of Bucky’s right hand as he followed him downstairs to where Stark was already looking very at home in Becca’s usual armchair with Becca nowhere in sight. She probably just went back to her room.

“Hey Barnes, how’s the arm?” Tony asked when he saw them, a little too casually for Steve’s liking.

Bucky’s face coloured a little, but he shrugged it off. “I’ll let you know when I find it.”

Tony laughed, and Steve was glad to see a little of the tension fall from Bucky’s shoulders as he took a seat on the couch, tugging Steve down next to him. Tony’s smile faltered a little as his
expression switched to something a little more serious.

“Seriously, though. How’s the prosthetic treating you?”

Bucky shrugged again before speaking. “It’s fine… Haven’t really gotten used to the weight yet. Or the difference in the strength.”

Steve watched Bucky as he spoke and noted that he was purposely trying to keep his eyes on Stark and not glance at Steve. He didn’t even realise that Bucky had been struggling with the weight of it, or if Bucky had even been trying to get used to using it to hold things.

“Yeah, that’ll take some getting used to, but you’ll get the hang of it. But if not, we’re working on other prototypes that could be a little lighter. They’re a long way from being anywhere near done, but if you’re still not used to that one before then, you can have first crack at the new ones.” Tony explained, gesturing to Bucky’s prosthetic.

Steve could tell all the talk about it was making Bucky uncomfortable by the way Bucky kept squeezing Steve’s hand and the muscles in his jaw jumping every now and them, but they both knew Tony meant well and he wasn’t trying to make him uncomfortable. Tony was just a very direct guy.

“Yeah, thanks.” Bucky smiled a little, though Steve could see it was a little forced.

Even so, Tony smiled and nodded before changing to subject to asking how they’re doing on food and other supplies. Bucky assured him they’re doing okay, thanks to Tony still paying him.

“Yeah… About that…”

Shit. Steve tensed a little beside Bucky, and he felt Bucky tense a little too. Tony couldn’t keep paying Bucky for not actually working, they all knew that. They knew this was coming. But Steve hadn’t expected it to be so soon, Bucky hadn’t had time to recover enough to be able to find another job yet, and it was literally less than 24 hours after Steve agreed to move in with Bucky, putting more strain on Bucky’s funds.

“I got you a job.” Tony finished after a very long pause, the pause clearly just to create suspense.

Steve relaxed completely with a quiet huff and Bucky relaxed a little, but there was still some tension in Bucky’s muscles.

“I don’t know if I can work yet…” He answered hesitantly, and Tony held up a hand before speaking.

“You’ll be an advisor. All you have to do is look over construction plans and just say whether or not they’ll work and give any suggestions you might have about how to make it better or more efficient. It’s basically the same stuff you and I were doing together when you were assigned as team-leader, but without you actually having to do the physical work. And you’ll be working for Stark Industries and not HYDRA Construction because seriously fuck those guys. You’ll be sent the construction plans in an email so you don’t have to come in, just email back if there’s any problems with the design or if you have any suggestions, and you’ll be paid the same as you were at your last job. If you decide to take the job, that is.”

Bucky went silent then as he seemed to be thinking over the offer. It seemed like a great deal to Steve. He didn’t have to leave the house, he got the same amount of money without any of the physical strain, and it wasn’t too stressful. He just had to look at blueprints and designs with a critical eye. It seemed perfect, but Steve didn’t want to say anything yet, and decided instead to let
Bucky think it through and come to his own decision without anyone interfering.

Eventually, Bucky nodded a little. “Okay… Yeah, I’ll take the job.”

Tony’s face broke out in a wide grin, and he held his hand out for Bucky to shake while his other hand went to the brown leather satchel at his feet. Bucky chuckled and shook his hand, then read over the contract Stark offered him. While he read through the contract carefully, Stark talked to Steve. He asked how he was doing and how his job was going, and Steve briefly glanced at Bucky before answering that he was fine and so was his job. He didn’t want to tell Tony that he was unemployed now, and Bucky seemed to understand that because he didn’t call him out on the little lie when he was finished reading and signing the contract.

Bucky handed the contract back and offered for Stark to stay for an early lunch, but Stark reluctantly declined, explaining that he had a meeting with his father coming up soon that he really couldn’t be late for. Steve and Bucky both showed him out, and Bucky thanked him sincerely one last time before he left.

The first email came later that day. Bucky’s phone buzzed to announce that he had mail, and he collected his laptop so that he could open up the attached files and see them better than he would have been able to on the screen of his phone. He didn’t say a word as he looked over the different aspects of the building design, including the interior workings, but Steve could see that the tension Bucky had built up since they first encountered Brock Rumlow in the parking lot of the restaurant months ago was starting to dissipate.

“You seem calmer…” Steve noted as he and Bucky cooked dinner together later that night, after Bucky had made note of everything he could think of to make the building better and emailed the list back to Stark.

“Yeah…” Bucky nodded a little as he mixed the pasta sauce he made. He seemed to understand exactly what Steve was referring to and smiled. “It feels more like I actually have a purpose again, now that I’m working again, like I’m not completely useless, despite…”

Bucky lifted his left arm a little to indicate what he was referring to, and Steve frowned slightly as he walked over to take both of Bucky’s hands in his. “You’re not useless. Something terrible happened to you. It’s okay to take some time after that to do nothing and just recover, no one thinks you’re useless for not working right away.”

“My main issue was that I can’t even go shopping because I don’t like being outside long enough to go to the store and everything we’ve been eating was bought by Tony and given to us, and I checked by bank statements, he hasn’t taken any of it out of the wages I haven’t been entitled to.”

Steve was about to explain that Tony gave him the food and the money willingly and of his own volition, but then Bucky gave him a look, and Steve knew that if he did voice what he was thinking, he’d be called out for being a hypocrite.

“I don’t need to be given things because I went through a traumatic experience and am suffering from PTSD.” He argued, but Bucky rolled his eyes.

“It’s pretty much the same thing, and you know it. Huh… We even have the same self-worth issues about taking things from other people. We really were meant to be.” Bucky teased with a smirk and squeezed Steve’s hands.

The grip on Steve’s right hand was a little too tight, since Bucky still hadn’t gotten used to the
strength of his prosthetic, but he didn’t say anything. That would make Bucky realise he’s using it and he might get uncomfortable about it and stop, and Steve really didn’t want that. He wanted Bucky to be more comfortable about it, he wanted him to use it without thinking. Steve squeezed his hands in return and ran his thumb over the back of Bucky’s metal knuckles. That seemed to have made Bucky aware that he was using it, and he tensed a little.

Steve could tell he was going to pull his hands out of his grip, but Steve held on a little tighter to stop him. Bucky shook his head a little and tried to pull them away again, but Steve held on tight. “Don’t… Bucky, don’t. Listen to me, I want you to be comfortable with this. I want you to know I’m okay with it and I want you to know you can use it, no one is going to look at you differently for using a prosthetic, it’s not going to make you too weird or too different. You can touch me with it, you can touch Becca with it, you can use it however you want, but please know you can be comfortable with it. You’ll get used to it, like Tony said, but to get used to it you have to use it.”

Throughout Steve’s small speech, Bucky was shaking his head and trying to tug his hands out of Steve’s grip, but Steve wouldn’t let him.

“Steve… Please stop…” His voice was barely above a whisper, but Steve could hear the emotions behind his words. The words were shaky, and Steve realised then that there were tears in his eyes. He stopped and let go of Bucky’s hands out of shock, seeing how upset Bucky was getting. Because of him. Bucky stumbled back a step once Steve had let go of his hands and tugged the sleeve of his sweater down to cover his metal hand, then clutched the prosthetic to his chest as if he was trying to hide it. He leant against the counter in the corner as he tried to get his accelerated breathing back under control, and Steve felt his heart breaking as he realised it was him who made Bucky so upset.

“Buck… I’m so sorry, I just… I just want you to understand—”

“It’s not that simple.” Bucky cut him off, a slightly biting tone in his shaky voice.

Steve stayed silent for a moment, then nodded and took a small step closer to Bucky. “I know, baby… I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pushed you…”

“No, you shouldn’t have. You think getting a prosthetic means I can go back to living how I did before? You think it’s the same as having both of my arms again? It’s not. Tony talked about how it’s supposed to feel real and it has sensors so I can still feel touches to it and it picked up signals from my brain so I can move it like a normal arm but it’s not the same. It’s heavy and uncomfortable and I can’t control how hard I squeeze it, I break everything I try to pick up with it, I’m surprised I didn’t break your hand just by holding it. I haven’t been out in public much since I got it but I know as soon as I start going out again, people will stare. Not to be rude, just because they’ve probably never seen anything like it before. They’ve seen prosthetics but none like this. I appreciate that Tony got me it because it’s the best technology they have, but it looks different to any other prosthetic and people won’t be used to it. Kids are going to ask their parents if I’m a robot or something and the parents are going to hurriedly tell them to shut up and not to stare and that’s going to make the kids think there’s something wrong with me. Everyone’s going to wonder what happened, if I was born without an arm or if I lost it in a war or something, but I bet no one will guess it’s because of something as pathetic as getting an infection from being wrapped up in barbed wire by my crazy ex-boyfriend!”

He was getting more and more irate the more he spoke, and Steve realised he was letting out all the upsetting thoughts that had been building up since he got the prosthetic.

“Pathetic? Bucky, what happened to you wasn’t pathetic. You are not pathetic.” He tried to assure
him, but Bucky just shook his head.

“It is. I’m supposed to protect Becca and you and anyone else who needs protecting and I couldn’t even protect myself from a guy with a pocket knife! When we got to that stupid barn, he got out of the car first then told me to get out. The knife was nowhere near me and the keys were still in the ignition. I should have just driven off and gone to the police station and I didn’t. He said he would hurt you and Becca if I tried to escape, so I just did as he said and got out of the car. I could have gotten away and gone straight to the police station. I had a car, I would have been faster than them and the police would have been able to get to both of you before Brock but I was too scared and pathetic to just drive away because he had a knife outside the metal box of my car.”

Steve hadn’t expected Bucky to mention that night, Bucky had never told him the specifics of what happened the night he was kidnapped. The shock of it left Steve speechless. Just hearing about it was too much for Steve, he almost felt like he was in the car outside the barn Bucky had been taken to. But he couldn’t tell Bucky to stop. If he was willing to tell Steve about what happened that night, Steve had to respect that and listen. Bucky had to live it, the least he can do is listen to it.

“You were scared… You didn’t know how quickly he could have gotten to you, you didn’t know if he’d be able to get to you before you managed to get the car going. You were in danger, people don’t think clearly when they’re in danger. Leaving would have put us in danger, even if there was only a small chance that they would get to us. And as terrible as what happened to you was, it could have been worse, Buck…”

Bucky shook his head a little, but instead of making things worse this time, Steve’s words were starting to actually make Bucky relax a little so Steve took another step closer to him so he was close enough to rest his hand on Bucky’s right shoulder.

“If you didn’t manage to get the car started quick enough, or if he managed to get back in the car before you could leave, you could have—“ Steve had to stop for a second to brace himself for the next part. “—you could have died, Bucky. He could have killed you…”

He knew his voice broke a little as he said those words. He hadn’t wanted to admit it for so long, hadn’t wanted to think about it, but those thoughts had gone through his head the moment he stepped out of Bucky’s car and left him and Brock alone, and they hadn’t stopped since. Those few weeks when Bucky had been missing, Steve had tried so hard not to dwell on the thoughts of Bucky being dead. When they found him, Steve was just relieved he was alive. He wasn’t okay, but he was alive. And since then, Steve often had fleeting thoughts about what would have happened if Bucky had been killed, how he would have felt, what would have happened to Becca…

He tried not to think about it, but he needed to now, to make Bucky understand how much worse this could have been.

“You stayed alive. You did what you had to in order to give yourself the best chances of survival. That’s brave, Bucky. Stepping out of that car and going into that barn with him was so brave, you had no idea what would happen to you, but you did it anyway. And doing it knowing that it would mean they would leave Becca and I alone was protecting us. You can and do protect us, and you are not pathetic.”

By this point, he had managed to get close enough to wrap his arms around Bucky’s waist, and Bucky relented and wrapped his right arm around Steve’s shoulders. Steve didn’t say anything about it, but after only a moment’s hesitation, he wrapped his metal arm around him too, and Steve couldn’t help but smile against Bucky’s shoulder in triumph, even as Bucky cried. It was okay that he was crying, he had a lot of pent-up emotion Steve hadn’t even noticed before, and it was good
that he was letting it out now.

All Steve could do was keep his arms tight around him, keep Bucky close, and wait for him to let it all out.

Bucky didn’t use his prosthetic any more than he did before their talk as they finished up making dinner and then ate it. Becca chatted excitedly about the sleepover she was going to the next day, and Steve noticed a bit of tension on Bucky’s shoulder as she spoke of it. She didn’t notice, but Steve was beginning to think Bucky was rethinking letting her go. He knew he wouldn’t say anything to her, though. She was too excited, Bucky would feel too guilty if he said she couldn’t go now.

After dinner, Becca offered to wash the dishes, then all three of them settled down for a movie in the living room with Bucky and Steve cuddling on the couch and Becca curled up in her armchair. Bucky had his right arm around Steve’s shoulders and the other resting on Steve’s leg thrown over Bucky’s under the blanket draped over them. Becca eventually fell asleep, and Bucky gently nudged her awake to tell her to go to bed once the movie was finished.

After that, Bucky and Steve both had a glass of wine each and watched another movie, this time a romantic comedy. Steve was back to the feeling of utter bliss he woke up to as he rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder, focussing more on his breathing than the movie playing in front of them. He smiled each time Bucky laughed, not because of the movie but because of the sound of Bucky’s laugh.

After about half an hour, Steve really couldn’t care less about the movie and tilted his head up to press a lingering kiss to Bucky’s jawline. Bucky smiled down at him, and barely two seconds later Steve was on Bucky’s lap and they were kissing like they were each other’s sole source of oxygen. His arms were draped over Bucky’s shoulders, and Bucky’s hands – both of them – were resting on Steve’s hips. His right hand squeezed every now and then, but his left remained a still pressure on his hip. Bucky tasted like wine and the chocolate he had eaten after dinner, and Steve knew he could get addicted to that taste.

Bucky broke to kiss way too soon, and Steve couldn’t help but let out a little whine of disapproval as Bucky pushed on his chest a little with his flesh hand.

“I love you…” Bucky whispered to him, looking up at Steve with a look of adoration in his eyes, and Steve found himself unable to breathe under the weight of his stare.

“I love you too, Buck…” He replied, equally as quietly but with the same amount of weight behind his words.

They smiled at each other for a moment, just taking in each other’s features like it was the last time they would ever see each other. Steve actually started to get a little worried that it really would be, his mind going back to the terrifying images of Bucky lying dead somewhere, the nightmare he had once had of Brock beating him and crushing Bucky’s throat under his boot.

But then Bucky kissed him again, and all those images disappeared, replaced by memories of Bucky laughing and smiling, of picnics and kisses on the steps of art museums bathed in the glow of the sunset.

The trip to their bed was a blur of stumbled steps and lips against lips, and they eventually fell onto their bed with a laugh, Steve on top of Bucky with his legs either side of Bucky’s hips. He looked down at Bucky with a wide smile, his heart skipping a beat when he saw the wide matching grin
on Bucky’s face. He looked so carefree in that moment, like nothing bad had ever happened to them, and Steve wished they could stay this way forever. No insecurities, no complications, no responsibilities, just each other, happy and together.

Steve didn’t want to ruin this moment, so as much as he wanted to get his hands and mouth on all of Bucky, he limited himself to just Bucky’s upper body. They continued kissing for a little longer, Bucky’s right hand exploring Steve’s chest, his sides, his back, and his left hand remaining at its place on Steve’s hip. The metal was cold when Bucky first laid it there, but Steve forced himself not to react. Bucky was clearly trying to get used to it and use it a little more, he didn’t want to make that any harder for him. He didn’t want Bucky to feel uncomfortable and go back to never using it.

Bucky was the first to break the kiss with a sigh, his eyes closed as he rested his forehead against Steve’s. His lips were red and kiss-swollen, his cheeks a little flushed. Just when Steve thought he was getting used to Bucky’s beauty, a sight like this knocks the wind out of him and he’s in awe all over again.

It was clear that Bucky still didn’t want to go any further than kissing, and that was fine with Steve. He pressed another soft kiss to Bucky’s lips, then his cheeks and finally the tip of his nose, making Bucky giggle quietly, then Steve moved off him so that he was lying beside Bucky. He tucked himself against Bucky’s side as Bucky reached over to turn the light off, then they both snuggled under the covers, all without having to exchange a word.

“Goodnight, Stevie. Love you.” Bucky muttered tiredly as he wrapped his flesh arm around Steve’s shoulders and curled up around him, and Steve smiled as he rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder, pressing a soft kiss there.

“Goodnight, Buck. I love you, too.”

Their first day living together had been eventful, Steve thought before he fell asleep. It had been emotional, for good and bad reasons. But overall, Steve wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. This was definitely where he belonged, tucked into Bucky’s side, both of them safe and happy.
Chapter 43

The emails started off slow the next day. When Bucky checked his phone after waking up he had one ready for him to start work on, and Steve made breakfast for the three of them while Bucky worked on it.

It was nice, Bucky sitting at the bar in the kitchen typing away on his laptop while Steve made breakfast. Bucky said he didn’t really mind what they had, so Steve made toast and bacon and placed the plate beside Bucky’s laptop with a smile, kissing Bucky’s cheek as he passed him to give Becca her food. He saw a ghost of a smile tug at the corners of Bucky’s lips but other than muttering his quiet thanks, his focus remained on the screen in front of him. The talk they had before about the prosthetic seemed to have made a little difference, because Bucky occasionally used both hands to type with as opposed to leaving the prosthetic on the counter beside him. The sound of metal hitting the keys was a little different to his flesh fingers typing, and the sound seemed to throw Bucky off slightly, because he hesitated after the first time he used it, but then just continued as if nothing had happened. Thankfully, he didn’t break any of the keys on his laptop whilst he typed.

Becca gave Bucky and Steve a questioning look when she noticed the laptop and the intense look on Bucky’s face, and Steve explained to her that Stark had given him a new job as an advisor. She nodded in understanding and watched Bucky work from over his shoulder, but the blueprints on the screen seemed to go straight over her head because after a moment of staring in confusion, she shrugged and seemed to lose interest, focusing on her food instead.

Steve also watched Bucky work for a few minutes from his seat beside him, and he couldn’t help but chuckle slightly at what he saw. The building Bucky was writing points about was pretty basic, and it would only be used as a storage building, but Bucky was analysing it in great detail and writing down everything he could possibly think of to make it better. He was clearly taking this new job very seriously, and Steve was a little worried after a while that he’d have to bring it up and tell Bucky he didn’t have to work so hard, but the sense of accomplishment radiating from Bucky when he finished and sent his notes back to Stark was too sweet to quell. Bucky couldn’t stop smiling for about an hour afterwards, and Steve was on a high just being around him when he was in this mood.

He got a phone call an hour later from Stark asking how he was feeling about the new job, and Bucky gushed about how much he was enjoying it, how it gave him the chance to use parts of his brain and skills that he hadn’t had a chance to exercise in so long, and Steve couldn’t help but press a kiss to Bucky’s jaw while he talked. He was so happy today, so beautiful and radiant, there was no way Steve would be able to keep his hands off him for too long.

He would have to, however, because Stark announced to Bucky that he had a ton of other buildings that he needed someone to look at and the only reason he hadn’t sent them all yet was because he wasn’t sure if Bucky would feel up to working that much so soon. Bucky assured him he would love to, and barely ten minutes later Bucky had seven new designs in his inbox to work on. Apparently Tony had teamed up with another construction agency and another company that wanted to use Tony’s new clean energy systems to be more environmentally friendly. Having worked with Stark before and been forced to listen to him go on and on about his inventions, Bucky knew enough about the systems to be able to give input on the building designs without having to wonder too much about whether his suggestions would work with the clean energy equipment. He took it all into consideration immediately.
Steve couldn’t really begrudge having to leave Bucky alone while he worked when he saw how happy working made him, so he busied himself with cleaning up the house a little while Bucky worked. While he folded laundry, Steve couldn’t help but smile to himself as he thought about the situation they were currently in. Despite everything that had happened to them, Bucky specifically, he was working while Steve folded laundry in the other room and Becca practised a dance routine in the basement. Steve was just now struck by how domesticated the whole situation was, and he had only been living here for a day. This was it, this is how he wanted his life to be for the rest of his days.

Well, he would prefer to have a job of his own so that Bucky wasn’t the only one providing for them, but he had already applied for everything he was qualified for and had heard nothing back from any of them. He wasn’t going to lose hope though, he didn’t want to give up and just live off of Bucky’s hard work. Sometime this week, he was going to ask to borrow Bucky’s laptop when he wasn’t working and apply for as many other jobs as he could find. While he solidified his plan in his head and steeled his determination to get another job by the end of the month, Becca walked in and started to help Steve fold clothes, without him realising.

Which meant that he almost had a heart attack when he reached in to grab another item of clothing and instead came in contact with a human hand.

He was not exactly proud of the screech he let out, and he couldn’t help but blush as Becca laughed, causing him to send her a mock glare. They folded together in silence before Becca cleared her throat awkwardly and started talking.

“Okay, listen. I really want to go to this sleepover tonight. I haven’t seen my friends in a while, since all this shit kicked off. But I know Bucky is not as okay with it as he might have been when I first brought it up, he’s worried and nervous about letting me go for a night and I get that. I was worried too when Romey first brought it up, but I’m going to have to go out and live my life eventually and I think if I can get through this sleepover it’ll be easier for me to be out of the house with friends or for school when school starts up again. And it’ll be easier for Bucky to deal with me being away for so long if he can get used to it sooner rather than later. But I don’t want to do it if it’s really going to upset him. I don’t have to go to this sleepover, it might be too much too soon and I appreciate that. So, what I’m trying to say is… Do you think I should go to this sleepover? Or should I cancel and start off a little easier, like just going to the mall with friends for a few hours as oppose to a whole night away right off the bat?”

Steve was a little surprised by how nervous Becca seemed about this, she had given no indication of being worried about it before now, but he was more surprised that she was asking Steve. He understood that he was older than Becca and may be able to understand complicated emotions like this more than her, and he was Bucky’s boyfriend, but Becca was his sister. Surely she would believe she knew him more than Steve, right? She would be able to anticipate easier how Bucky would react in this kind of situation?

But, he supposed, none of them had ever been in this kind of situation before. Maybe after their parents died, they may have been in a similar emotional place… But their father had been the threat in that situation, and he had died that night too. Yeah, Rumlow and Rollins had been arrested that night and as far as they knew they were still awaiting trial, but they were still out there and they were still technically a threat. There’s no way any of them can really anticipate how any of them are going to react. They can make educated guesses, but that’s the best they had right now. So Steve made an educated guess.

“Bucky knows you want to go to this sleepover. If you cancel now, he’ll assume it’s his fault you’re not doing things you enjoy and he’ll probably feel terrible about it…” He glanced up from
the shirt he was folding to look at Becca and saw her nodded a little in agreement before he continued. “I think you should go to the sleepover. Like you said, if you guys can get through this okay, it’ll be easier when you have to start school again and have to be out of the house for extended periods of time. Have fun, just keep your phone on and charged just in case Bucky needs to drop you a text just to make sure you’re okay. Okay?”

Becca nodded again and smiled a little before hugging Steve. It messed up the shirt he was folding, but Steve didn’t care as he wrapped his arms around her in return, smiling a little.

“Thanks, Steve.” She smiled, then left him to continue with the laundry alone.

“Thanks for the help with the laundry!” He called out after her sarcastically and smiled as he heard her laughing.

Once he finished folding everything he took Becca’s and Bucky’s clothes up to their bedrooms. He left Becca’s clothes on her bed since he didn’t know where her stuff went and didn’t want to go through her drawers, then went to put Bucky’s clothes away in his drawers and closet where they all belonged. He even colour-coded Bucky’s clothes from black to white with the colours between them going from darkest to lightest. By doing this, he found a few things that he hadn’t expected to come across in Bucky’s closet and he couldn’t help but laugh about a few of them. He found a Hawaiian shirt in an obnoxiously bright blue with yellow flowers all over it, and he struggled a little to picture Bucky wearing it, but that just made him more determined to see Bucky in it one day. He also found a soft, thin, pastel-pink sweater that would look adorable on him, so Steve subtly put it a little more front-and-centre than the other items in the hopes that Bucky would decide to wear it sometime soon. It would look even more adorable with Bucky’s hair being a little shaggier than it used to be.

Once he was done, he went down to see Bucky still working on his laptop, this time sat on the couch. He was finished a few minutes later as Steve cleared up the area around him, which Steve learnt because Bucky’s right arm was suddenly around his waist and he pulled Steve down onto his lap. Steve laughed as he fell back against him and squirmed a little as Bucky started kissing at his neck, a wide grin on his face.

“Well, someone’s in a good mood.” Steve remarked with a quiet chuckle as he resigned himself to the fact that he wasn’t going to get away from Bucky so easily. Not that he could feel too upset about that as he rested his head back against Bucky’s shoulder.

“For now. We’ll see if I have a mood swing later.” Bucky answered in a slightly joking tone, but Steve could tell there was a hint of honesty in his words.

“Well either way, I’m glad to have you back in the room.”

Bucky laughed quietly and pressed another flurry of kisses to Steve’s neck, making him giggle again.

“Gross, do you guys have to do that in the living room? You have a room of your own for a reason.” Becca griped as she walked in, but Steve could see the small smile on her face as Bucky buried his face against Steve’s shoulder with a groan.

“Who pays the rent around here? Every room in this house is my room.” Bucky shot back, and Becca just laughed in return, but they all sensed a slight shift in the atmosphere as Becca started picking at her nails. “What’s up?”
Becca looked like a deer caught in the headlights at that, and Bucky rolled his eyes as he spoke again. “You always pick at your nails when you want to tell me something you think I’ll be pissed off about. You do it when you have late fees from the library, when you spill juice or smash glasses, and that time you drank wine at a party and made out with a boy. And am I ever that mad about this kind of shit?”

“No…” Becca started, then chuckled. “Except for the time with James. Don’t pretend you weren’t plotting to murder the guy.”

“True. But unless you’ve managed to make out with another boy in the past month you haven’t left the house during, I think everyone will survive whatever it is you want to tell me.”

Steve smiled a little as he watched their interactions and ran his fingers over Bucky’s arm still around his waist. He knew exactly what Becca was going to say after a glance at the clock, even if Bucky may have forgotten where she was going tonight. Steve just hoped that the comforting touches Steve was offering would stop his mood from dropping too much when Becca told him it was time for her to go to Romey’s for the sleepover.

“It’s nearly six…” She pointed out, but Bucky’s face remained blank of any signs of recognition. “I’m going to that sleepover, remember?”

“Oh, yeah!” Bucky nodded when he realised and glanced up at the clock. “Are you walking or…?”

Steve could tell Bucky didn’t like the idea of Becca walking. It was still winter, so it was pretty much dark outside by this point, but Becca was quick to assure him that that wasn’t the case.

“No, Romey’s dad is coming to pick me up. He figured you’d feel better about it if he came here to get me…”

Bucky nodded a little and some of the tension in the arm around Steve faded away. “Yeah, that sounds good. When’s he getting here? You got everything you need? Don’t forget your toothbrush this time.”

“I already packed my stuff, and yes I have my toothbrush. Romey just texted me asking if I’m still coming so I think he’s just waiting on my answer, then he’ll drive over to pick me up… I just wanted to clarify with you that it’s still okay for me to go before I say yes or no…”

“Yeah, you can still go if you want to.” Bucky shrugged, feigning disinterest. “Do you still want to go?”

“Yeah…”

“Tell Romey that then.” He gestured to her phone in her hand with his left arm, and Becca nodded a little as she lifted her phone to send the text.

Ten minutes later there was a knock at the door and Steve got off of Bucky’s lap so he could answer it while Becca got her bag. Steve noted that Bucky had made a habit of looking through the peep hole before answering the door now, and the door was always locked with the deadlock in place, but Steve couldn’t really blame him for taking these precautions.

He answered the door when he recognised the man outside and invited him and Romey in while they waited for Becca to come back with their stuff. Steve noticed that the man kept glancing at Bucky’s left arm, but either Bucky didn’t notice or he just didn’t outwardly react to it. Steve hoped it was the former. He didn’t want Bucky’s fears that everyone would stare at him if he went outside
to be confirmed.

Becca joined them after a few minutes of small talk, and Romey’s dad shook Bucky’s hand before he left, the touch lingering a little longer than necessary and a pitying look in his eyes. Bucky just smiled and said goodbye to them as they left, hugging Becca a little longer than usual.

Bucky stood in the doorway for a few more seconds until the car was gone from view, then he returned to the living room after locking the door again with a sigh. He slumped down onto the couch and Steve instantly scooted closer to him and snuggled up to his side, but he didn’t say anything yet, just waited for Bucky to speak first.

“Did you see it?” Bucky muttered, and Steve nodded a little. He wasn’t sure if Bucky was referring to the way Romey’s dad looked at him, his arm, or how he held his hand a little too long, but he saw all of it, so he didn’t feel the need to ask Bucky to clarify exactly what he meant. “I knew it would happen. The pitying looks, the side-glances at my arm…”

“I know, baby… But I’m sure he didn’t mean it in a bad way… He was probably just sorry that you had to go through something so bad. Romey probably told him what happened and he’s just sympathetic…”

“Yeah, well…” Bucky muttered, and Steve could feel that his mood was starting to drop again, so he leant up to press soft kisses to Bucky’s jaw, hoping to feel the muscles there relax under his lips.

After a few tries, Bucky eventually did start to relax and he released a sigh as he draped his right arm around Steve’s shoulders to tug him closer, and Steve happily cuddled up to his side.

“I love you…” Steve stated with a smile, and Bucky smiled a little too before he ducked his head a little to catch Steve’s lips in a kiss.

“I love you too.”

Since Becca was gone, Steve decided to make him and Bucky a romantic meal, complete with candles and wine. He shooed Bucky out of the kitchen every time he came in to try and help, or steal some of the food Steve was making, though it was a little hard to deny Bucky anything he wanted. Especially since he seemed to have gotten the subtle hint Steve had left and decided to wear the soft pink sweater Steve had hung up that day, with a pair of black skinny jeans which Steve was pretty sure were the same pair he was wearing when they met. It was pretty hard for Steve to forget them when he had been staring at Bucky’s ass in them as he walked out of the store after yelling at Schmidt for him.

The sweater was a little too big for Bucky, so the sleeves fell just over his hands and Steve almost got a nosebleed when Bucky tugged them over his fingers and rubbed his eyes with the ball of his fist covered by the fabric. Bucky had been complaining that staring at his laptop screen had started straining his eyes, but Steve honestly couldn’t focus on a word he was saying, he just looked way too adorable like that.

He had decided to make chicken and pasta for their meal, partly because Bucky wouldn’t really have to use a knife for it, since that would mean using both hands and he wasn’t let comfortable with that. The pasta was ready, and the chicken was almost done, so he went to the dining room as quietly and sneaksily as he could so Bucky wouldn’t realise what he was doing. Bucky didn’t know what the plan was for tonight, and Steve wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

After a fruitless search for candles, Steve decided he may need a little help and texted Becca. He
apologised for interrupting her sleepover and asked if they had candles, explaining why he needed them. Becca sent a lot of different emojis to express how adorable she thought his idea was, then told him where they kept some long red candles and silver candle holders. Apparently the candle holders had been presents to their parents from some distant relatives for their wedding, but they never used them and they were just gathering dust, and Becca assured Steve that Bucky wouldn’t mind him using them.

Bucky had been banished to the living room to relax and watch TV, so it wasn’t too hard to get everything set up until it was perfect. He even managed to find a red tablecloth (thanks to Becca’s helpful hints) and spread it out on the table. Once the candles were lit and the meal was set out, including a bottle of red wine and two glasses, Steve turned the main light off and turned on a small lamp so they would actually be able to see their food but it wouldn’t be too bright. He grinned at the sight. Despite the spur-the-moment decision to make it romantic and not having time to actually make sure he had anything that could make it romantic, he still managed to make it look like a scene from a romance movie.

He went into the living room and had to resist the urge to awh at the sight of Bucky curled up on the couch with his sleeve-covered fist in front of his mouth and the sweater pulled over his knees tucked up to his chest. His hair was a little messy from shifting his head against the arm of the couch so there were dark clumps stuck up in random directions, and Steve’s fingers itched to run through the silky strands.

“Buck…” He called out after a moment of just watching him, indulging himself.

Bucky looked up at him and smiled as he pushed himself to sit up, then followed Steve’s gesture to go to the dining room. He looked a little suspicious, probably because of the wide grin Steve couldn’t keep off his face, but he went to the dining room anyway and as soon as he pushed the door open, Steve heard a small gasp.

He ducked under Bucky’s arm to get into the dining room and held his arms out in a gesture to the room. “What do you think?”

Even though he had been so confident about this idea just a few seconds ago, Steve was suddenly terrified that Bucky would hate it. That he would think it’s too cheesy, or Bucky just wasn’t in the mood for romance right now. Those fears melted away though when he saw Bucky’s face break out in a wide grin.

“Steve… This is amazing… You did all this for me?” He asked in disbelief, and Steve couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

“No, I did it for my other boyfriend. He’s going to be here in ten minutes and I wanted your opinion on whether or not it looks good before I tell you to scram and leave us alone.” Steve joked, and Bucky laughed as he stepped forward and pulled Steve into a deep kiss.

Steve’s hands immediately went to Bucky’s shoulders as he kissed him back, then wrapped his arms around his neck to hold him closer, their bodies pressed together from their thighs to their chests. Bucky seemed to be pouring all of his love and gratitude into the kiss, and it left Steve a little lightheaded when they eventually separated, which is why the next thing Bucky said briefly confused him.

“Where’d you meet him?”

After a moment of trying to figure out who Bucky was referring to, Steve chuckled and decided to play along. “We met through work. Some guy was being a dick and he stepped in like a knight in
shining armour to defend my honour.”

“Really?” Bucky smirked. “He sounds awesome.”

“He really is.” The amusement left his voice as he said that, leaving behind only authenticity and a soft smile.

Bucky smiled back and leant down to kiss Steve again, then Steve reluctantly stepped out of his embrace to pull Bucky’s chair out for him. He chuckled as he sat down and Steve kissed the top of his head before going to pour their wine, then sit in his own chair.

“This looks really good, Stevie… Thank you.”

It didn’t take a genius to realise that Bucky wasn’t just referring to the food, and it didn’t take a genius to realise Steve wasn’t just talking about the food when he replied.

“You deserve it.”

They ate in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, then Bucky started complimenting Steve’s cooking and teasing him when Steve blushed at the compliments, so Steve tried to curve the conversation to something that wasn’t quite as embarrassing for him.

“So how was work?” It sounded like such a casual question, Steve couldn’t help but smile at the normality of it. He just couldn’t get over the normality they had experienced today; it actually seemed like they could live a typical life together after everything that had happened.

“It was pretty good. Stark was impressed by my suggestions and how much thought I was putting into it all. Both Starks, actually. I got an email from Howard thanking me for some input I had in designing his office headquarters. I didn’t even know it was going to be for him, but apparently I did a good job and he’s really happy with the modifications that have been made based on my suggestions.”

“That’s great, Buck! Good job!” Steve grinned and couldn’t help but reach over to squeeze Bucky’s hand. He had finished eating by then, whereas Steve was still working in his own food, though mostly he was just stalling so that he would be done by the time the dessert he was making would be ready.

Bucky shrugged at the comment, and Steve could see a hint of pink in his cheeks, perfectly matching his sweater. He felt a sense of accomplishment in getting Bucky to blush, a form of revenge for the teasing earlier. In fact, as Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand back, Steve decided to keep going.

“I knew you’d do great at this. You’re amazing at everything you attempt, I don’t even know why I bothered asking. Of course it went well, it was you doing it.” He gushed, and Bucky shook his head as he looked down at his empty plate, but Steve could see the smile he was fighting to try and hide from him. “I mean it, Buck. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

Bucky seemed to be struggling to think of what to say, and again Steve felt success at making Bucky speechless, but he was saved from his struggles by the oven beeping in the other room. Bucky looked at the door to the kitchen with a confused little frown, then gave Steve a questioning look. Steve, in return, just smirked and went off to the kitchen to get the desserts, taking their dinner plates with him. He left them in the sink to wash up later, then took the chocolate lava cakes out of the oven. He moved them onto plates and drizzled chocolate sauce around them on the plates, then took them into the dining room where Bucky was waiting. He had his phone in his
hand, but he quickly put it away when Steve came back in.

“Everything okay with Becca?” Steve asked, guessing that was who he was texting but careful to keep any possible hint of accusation out of his voice. He knew why Bucky wanted to make sure Becca was okay, and he couldn’t begrudge him texting her.

“Yeah, they’ve had dinner and they’re settling down to start the movie,” Bucky answered with smile, then his eyes widened when he saw what Steve was carrying.

“Wow… That looks so good…”

Steve could practically see Bucky’s mouth watering, and he chuckled as he put the plate down in front of him. “Don’t judge until you try it.”

He didn’t have to wait long for Bucky to do so. As soon as Steve’s hand let go of the plate Bucky had picked up his forked and cut a bit off to eat it. The noise he made in response was enough to make Steve blush, and he quickly turned his attention to his own dessert in the hopes of hiding his response. If Bucky noticed, he decided to be merciful and not mention it or, more accurately, tease him about it.

“It’s perfect, Stevie.” Bucky stated between bites, then quickly raised his fork to eat more.

“Thanks… My mom taught me how to make it.”

Bucky paused mid-chew at that and watched Steve for a second, a gaze Steve refused to meet, then continued eating and nodded a little before speaking. “Thanks…”

Again, there was a hidden meaning to the words. He wasn’t thanking him for the food. He was thanking him for sharing a little something Steve and his mother did together with him, and Steve smiled, touched that Bucky realised the implications.

Since her death, Steve had tried not to think about her too much, and in order to make the lava cake for Bucky he had to remember what his mother had taught him, meaning thinking about moments with her in great detail.

“She would have really liked you…” Steve may have said that before, he couldn’t remember for sure, but he felt the need to say it again because it was true. Sarah would have really loved Bucky.

“I’m sure I would have really liked her too…” Bucky returned with a small smile.

The rest of dessert was a blur of Bucky complimenting the food and talking about how great Steve was, then Steve talking about how perfect Bucky was in return until eventually Steve was in Bucky lap and they were kissing the residual taste of chocolate out of each other’s mouths.

They didn’t have to worry about Becca coming in and making gagging noises tonight, and Steve fully intended to make the most of that. They didn’t have to be quiet outside their bedroom either, and Steve couldn’t help but let out a few quiet moans as Bucky nipped at his bottom lip and swiped his tongue over it to soothe the sting. Bucky moaned too as Steve’s hands moved over Bucky’s chest, “accidentally” brushing against his nipples as he did. It wasn’t hard to figure out that Bucky wasn’t wearing anything under his pastel sweater, so the soft fabric brushing over his sensitive skin couldn’t have been helping him keep his composure. Steve definitely used that to his advantage, shifting every so often to rub his chest against Bucky’s. This movement also caused other parts of their anatomy to rub together too, but Steve tried not to think about that right now. Bucky may not be ready for that still, and Steve didn’t want him to think he was pushing for anything. Just being
able to kiss Bucky like this was enough.

One of Steve’s hands stayed almost constantly in Bucky’s hair, and when Bucky’s right hand slipped under Steve’s shirt to run his thumb over one of Steve’s nipples, Steve couldn’t help but hiss in pleasure and accidentally tugged on Bucky’s hair. He pulled back to start to apologise, but then he took one look at Bucky’s face and it took all of his self-control not to come all over himself right then and there. Bucky’s lips were kiss-swollen and red, his face blushed, and his messy hair had fallen over his forehead, almost reaching his eyes. Steve’s hand had found its way to the top of Bucky’s head, and the sight of the strands tangles in his fingers sent a shock of pleasure through Steve’s body.

He eventually got himself back under control and actually managed to apologise this time, but Bucky just looked confused for a moment, then laughed.

“Don’t worry, I like it.” Bucky assured him with a wink, and Steve practically whimpered as he dropped his head to kiss Bucky again, hard.

Bucky let out a little moan at the intensity of the kiss, and Steve smirked in triumph as they fell back into the rhythm of their kisses. After a few minutes of this, as a little experiment, Steve tightened his fist a little in Bucky’s hair and tugged at it, causing Bucky to let out a quiet moan, and the noise went straight to Steve’s dick. Of course, this wasn’t the first time hair-pulling had elicited such a response from Bucky, but Steve just hadn’t been sure if the slightly rough touch would be appreciated after what Bucky had recently been through, though it was nice to know the whole ordeal hadn’t ruined that for Bucky.

They continued their make-out session, the moments getting a little more intense as it went on and with Steve occasionally pulling on his hair just to hear him moan, it wasn’t long before the kisses turned a little messier, more desperate, and Steve’s intermittent squirming wasn’t just to brush the sweater against Bucky’s nipples. He had been a little hesitant the first time he grinded his hips against Bucky’s, expecting Bucky to push him away and tell him he wasn’t ready for that yet, which Steve would have fully appreciated and accepted. But he didn’t. In fact, Bucky had let out a little moan and grinded up against him in return. The tight jeans meant that Steve could feel Bucky’s excitement clearly, in the same way he was sure Bucky could feel his, and it was clear then that neither of them felt any inclination to stop any time soon.

Steve’s lips were starting to get sore, and he was pretty sure Bucky had drawn blood with one of the bites he had delivered to Steve’s bottom lip, but he couldn’t be sure exactly when that happened and he couldn’t bring himself to care either. Bucky was happy, Becca was safe at her friend’s house, and he and Steve were together. Things were quickly getting better, almost back to how they were before, except for one obvious big different. It was then that Steve realised Bucky’s right hand had been exploring his body freely, whereas the prosthetic hand rested on his hip in the same place it had been in when Steve had first straddled Bucky, essentially trapping him in his chair.

He didn’t know what to do. He really didn’t want to ruin the moment or break the kiss to talk about it, and the last thing he wanted to do was upset Bucky, but he couldn’t quite focus on the bliss of Bucky’s lips and tongue once he noticed it. Steve settled on an idea to make Bucky see that he didn’t mind the prosthetic whilst not having to break the kiss or the moment. The hand in Bucky’s hair moved to rest on his shoulder whilst his other hand moved from Bucky’s chest to run down the metal arm until his hand was over Bucky’s. He felt Bucky tense slightly under him, but his lips only faltered for a second before he continued with the previous amount of enthusiasm. Steve waited until Bucky seemed comfortable again, then moved the hand under his up side a little. This, unfortunately, caused Bucky to break the kiss, but he didn’t pull away completely or pull his hand out from under Steve’s. And he didn’t look uncomfortable; there was still a look of elation in
his eyes, mixed with just a hint of confusion.

“What’re you doing?” He asked quietly, a little out of breath and dazed, and Steve took great pride in knowing he was the one who made Bucky like that.

“I want you to touch me…” He breathed out, and Bucky looked a little more confused.

“I am touching you…”

Steve rested his forehead against Bucky’s as he tried to think of the best way to explain what he meant – as well as get his breathing back under control – but he decided that actions spoke louder than words and took Bucky’s left hand in his, tangling their fingers together before he raised it to his lips and kissed the cold knuckles. It was strange, but not an unpleasant feeling. It was definitely something he could get used to, and very quickly. Bucky seemed to be trying not to look at his hand, staring into Steve’s eyes, but when he started kissing it, it was hard for him to avoid it. His eyes flicked between Steve’s and the metal against his lips, he looked a little uncomfortable at first but Steve could see the trepidation melt out of his eyes as he licked his lips.

“I’m starting to get jealous of my own prosthetic hand…” Bucky said it as though it was a joke, and Steve chuckled quietly as he moved Bucky’s hand back to his hip.

He leant down to kiss him again, his own lips slightly cooled by the metal, and Bucky moaned against them as he worked to reheat them again. The prosthetic went still again, and Steve squeezed it a little as a silent prompt. It took a few more seconds, which Steve was happy to give Bucky, then his hand moved from under Steve’s to run up and down his sides. The concentration Bucky must have been putting into that took the focus away from the kiss a little, but Steve was happy to pick up the slack if it encouraged Bucky to be more comfortable with his new arm. Eventually, Bucky got a little more confident with it and moved his arm to wrap around Steve’s middle, holding him closer to his own body. Steve let out a happy little moan in praise and Bucky smiled against his lips as he returned the kiss with renewed vigour.

Steve’s hand moved up the side of his neck until it was buried in Bucky’s hair again, the strands tangled in his fist as he started grinding against Bucky again. During the slight distraction of getting Bucky to use the arm more, Steve’s excitement had ebbed slightly, but now it was back in full force and he had to break the kiss as he shuddered slightly when Bucky grinded up against him particularly hard. The reprieve was only brief though, because Bucky used the opportunity to kiss along Steve’s jaw and to the pulse point in his neck. Steve’s eyes fluttered closed as Bucky’s lips sealed around that spot, kissing, sucking, licking and biting there. He tugged on Bucky’s hair a little as his other hand moved down to thumb over one of Bucky’s nipples through his sweater, causing Bucky to moan against his skin. Steve still wasn’t sure exactly how far Bucky was planning on taking this, but he definitely wasn’t going to argue with what they were doing at that moment.

Bucky started to get a little more confident with his left hand and while his right hand moved up to slip under Steve’s shirt again, the metal one moved down to settle over Steve’s ass. It was only a gentle pressure, but it was enough to make Steve moan and grind down against Bucky again. That seemed to spur Bucky on, because he then bit down on his jugular, pinched one of his nipples and squeezed one of his ass cheeks all at the same time. Steve almost came then, but he managed to stop himself as he bit down hard on his lip to stop himself from making too much noise, thought a moan did slip out.

Bucky pulled back then to look up at Steve’s face, and the expression he was wearing was pretty much the same as what Steve guessed his own showed. Dazed awe and adoration.
Bucky’s right hand moved from under Steve’s shirt to his lips and he ran his thumb over his bottom lip, then Steve realised he had bitten his lip hard enough to draw more blood than Bucky had previously, or maybe he had reopened the bite Bucky had caused. Either way, Steve couldn’t really think about it anymore, because Bucky leant forward then and licked at Steve’s bottom lip to clean the blood off. Steve had to suppress another shudder at the feeling, especially when Bucky sucked on his lip a little to make sure he got it all. God, he was done for. Bucky was going to be the death of him, sooner rather than later, and Steve found that he was completely okay with that.

Steve couldn’t help himself after that, he fully prepared himself for the possibility that what he was about to do next might end the moment, and he was okay with that. He was willing to risk it, and he was willing to stop if Bucky told him to, but he really needed to try it. As they kissed, he shifted his hips a little, then moved one hand back to Bucky’s hair and dropped the other to cup Bucky through his jeans. Bucky’s breath hitched slightly, but he didn’t stop kissing him and he didn’t try to stop Steve, so Steve took that as a good sign. He rubbed the bulge he could feel there and swallowed Bucky’s moans happily. He didn’t even care about his own straining erection anymore. This was all for Bucky, to make Bucky feel good.

“Steve…” Bucky breathed out as he broke the kiss, and Steve was a little worried that he would tell him to stop, but the word didn’t sound like a rejection, it sounded like Bucky was drowning in the pleasure, and Steve found that he wasn’t quite willing to throw him a rope yet.

He pulled back just a little so he could look into Bucky’s eyes and searched them for any signs that Bucky was uncomfortable and wanted to stop, but he saw none. Bucky must have understood what that Steve was looking for permission, because he gave him a tiny nod, his mouth hanging open a little. Steve took the invitation happily and moved both his hands to Bucky’s crotch so he could stroke him through the fabric with one while undoing the fly with his other hand. As soon as the button and zip were open, Steve surged forward to kiss Bucky again. Bucky let out a surprised little whine, and Steve used the fact that he was thrown off slightly to slip his hand inside Bucky’s briefs to stroke his length slowly, causing Bucky’s breath to hitch a little.

The angle was a little difficult, but Steve managed to get a pretty good rhythm going, one that made Bucky squirm and moan under him. Bucky’s left hand squeezed Steve’s ass a few times, then moved to his hip as his other hand came down to tug open Steve’s jeans. Steve almost said that Bucky didn’t have to do this, he was happy to give Bucky pleasure without getting anything in return, but Bucky must have known what he was going to say and leant forward to kiss him again before he could get the words out. The feeling of the cool air of the room against his erection when it was finally freed was enough to make Steve sigh in relief, then Bucky wrapped his flesh hand around him and Steve had to bite his lip again to keep himself under control. It felt like it had been so long since they had done anything like this, and Steve certainly hadn’t had the time or been anywhere close to being in the right mood to do it to himself.

He was a little worried he would be embarrassingly fast, but he could see and feel the tell-tale signs that Bucky was close anyway. The muscles in his thighs tensed under Steve every time he ran his thumb against the head of his cock, and his breathing was coming out a little laboured. Maybe Steve should have taken a little pity on him, but Bucky definitely wasn’t pulling any punches for Steve, pulling out all his best tricks on him. He twisted his wrist on each upstroke, ran his thumb across the head to smear Steve’s precome around, and ran his fingers over Steve’s balls with each downstroke. Yeah, there was no way Steve was going to last long.

It almost became a race in Steve’s mind, desperate to make Bucky come before Bucky could do the same to Steve. Unfortunately, he lost. And the reason he lost was because Bucky decided now was the time to get a little confident in using his metal hand. Steve was so sure he was going to win, Bucky was so close, then he moved his prosthetic. All he did was cup Steve’s balls, but since
Bucky hadn’t touched him with it in a while, the metal had cooled and the difference in that temperate and the heated feeling of Bucky’s other hand around his shaft was enough to shove him over the edge. He only just managed to bury his face against Bucky’s neck before he was crying out in pleasure, tugging Bucky’s hair again as he did.

The reaction caught them both off-guard, and Bucky froze for a second in surprise. He didn’t have much time to dwell on it, though, because Steve then decided he needed to get Bucky to the finish line as soon as possible to make his own quick ending a little less embarrassing. It only took a few more strokes and a few fevered kisses exchanged between them before Bucky gasped and moaned into Steve’s mouth as he came in Steve’s hand.

They both took a few moments to bask in the afterglow of their orgasm, wrapped up in each other’s arms and breathing against each other’s shoulders as they came down from their highs.

“God, I love you.” Steve eventually muttered, and Bucky chuckled quietly as he pressed a kiss to Steve’s head.

“I love you too, Doll.”

It had been a while since Bucky had called him that, and the pet name brought a small smile to Steve’s lips as he closed his eyes and relaxed against Bucky.

He had almost fallen asleep by the time Bucky decided he needed to nudge him to make sure that didn’t happen. They cleaned up – themselves and the dining room – then headed up to bed, both of them yawning as they held each other’s hands on the way up the stairs and to their room. Bucky kept his oversized sweater on, but stripped everything else off. The sweater covered him down to the middle of his thighs, and Steve had to stop himself from commenting on how cute that was. He settled instead for just smiling at him as Bucky ran his fingers through his own hair and climbed under the sheets beside Steve.

Steve knew that they would eventually have to discuss his reaction to Bucky using the prosthetic on him, but they both silently decided that was a discussion for another day. It was a conversation Steve wasn’t particularly looking forward to.

He had made it no secret that he was comfortable with it, and he didn’t mind Bucky touching him with it. But he kept it a secret even from himself how much he liked it, until now. Steve felt bad about it when he first realised how he felt about the arm, thinking he was sexualising Bucky’s traumatic experience. But after a little more thinking, in bed that night with Bucky curled up beside him, he came to terms with it a little more. It wasn’t the situation that led to Bucky getting the arm that he liked, of course not. It made him sick to think about what happened to him, what Bucky had to go through. He would give anything to go back in time and stop any of this from ever happening to the love of his life. But the arm was a part of him now, it was another part of Bucky, and he loved it as much as he loved the rest of the man sleeping soundly beside him.

And yeah, Steve wasn’t going to lie, the arm was pretty cool.

And Bucky looked pretty hot with it.

He would analyse that a little more tomorrow, when his mind was a little clearer and he could more accurately decide whether or not that made him a terrible person.

For tonight, Steve just wanted to curl up around Bucky and sleep with his face buried in Bucky’s soft hair.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Steve forgot a job interview.

Steve woke up the next morning to an empty bed, and immediately decided he hated that feeling.

He decided that waking up with Bucky’s warm body against his own was the best way to start the day, and he was not happy that today was not one of those days. He frowned as he reached out to try and find him, discovering just cold sheets instead.

Luckily he didn’t have to wonder where Bucky had gone for long, because the door opened after a few seconds of Steve awakening and Bucky stepped inside. Steve sat up when he heard the door open, and Bucky smiled as he closed it behind him and climbed into bed beside him.

“Hey, sorry if I woke you up.” He muttered before pressing a soft kiss to Steve’s lips.

“Nah, I was already awake. Where’d you go?” Steve just managed to suppress a yawn long enough to ask the question.

“Becca’s home. She called me to let me know she was coming back and I went to open the door and wait for her. She’s in bed now.”

“Is she okay?” Steve asked with a frown as he checked the time, seeing that it was eight in the morning.

“Yeah, they just always stay up horrendously late at sleepovers, then have to get up early to pretend they kept up their promise to Romey’s dad to go to sleep at a reasonable time. Teenagers.” He shook his head in mock-disappointment as he curled up under the sheets with Steve again, and Steve chuckled quietly as he wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders to hold him close.

“Well, as long as she’s safe.” Steve mumbled against Bucky’s hair as he pressed a kiss there and he felt Bucky smile against his chest as he nodded a little.

“Have I ever told you how much I appreciate what you’re like with Becca?” Bucky asked as he pulled back a little to look up at Steve, a small smile still on his lips.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked in surprise.

“Well, you care about her, and you treat her almost the same as I do. You’ve helped her through a lot too, being here for her while I was missing and in hospital… I didn’t expect you to be close with my sister, but as soon as you guys met you got along. I just really appreciate it. Not a lot of people our age would be willing to take on a teenager the way you have, so… Thanks.”

The way Bucky spoke, Steve was sure he had thought about this a lot and he couldn’t help but smile a little more at the words. “I’m happy to do it. Becca is great, and she deserves all the care she can get. And anyone who would throw away the chance to be with you just because you take care of your sister is an idiot.”
Bucky chuckled at that and pressed another kiss to Steve’s chest. “Still… Thanks for everything. I’m going to get a little more sleep, want me to get off you so you can get up or are you staying?”

Steve could tell Bucky started talking immediately after the thank you because he knew Steve would assure him that it was okay, and they would be stuck in an endless cycle of Bucky thanking him and Steve telling him not to.

“I’ll stay here a little longer.” Steve answered with a smile, purely because he wanted to stay under Bucky a little longer.

Steve woke up to his phone ringing, and he sighed as he reached over to get it. Bucky moaned as he moved off Steve so he could reach his phone.

“Whoever it is, tell them to fuck off.” Bucky groaned and Steve chuckled as he pressed a kiss to Bucky’s cheek and read the caller ID.

“It’s Peggy.”

“Oh… Tell her to fuck off a little more politely.” He amended and Steve laughed again as he answered the phone.

“Hey Peg, what’s up?”

“What’s up? Oh, well, Angie has shaved her head, I’ve had a breast reduction – back pains, you know? – we both live in Malibu now and we’re married with a baby on the way. We’re adopting a beautiful little boy called Derek.”

“Uhm… What?” Steve frowned in confusion. He had actually been a little worried at first that Angie had actually shaved her head, and he wouldn’t be too surprised if Peggy had a breast reduction – she did complain about back pains occasionally because of them – but the rest didn’t make sense.

“A lot happens when you don’t speak to us in forever. You also missed the job interview, by the way.”

Steve closed his eyes and groaned quietly as he got out of bed to go into the hallway in order to carry on the conversation out of Bucky’s earshot. Partly because it seemed like he wanted to go back to sleep and partly because he didn’t want Bucky to hear that he had missed a job interview. Honestly, he had completely forgotten about the job interview, and he cursed himself for forgetting. He wouldn’t have had to worry about getting a job if his brain hadn’t been all over the place, and he hadn’t forgotten that he already had an interview lined up.

“Oh, crap… Peggy, I’m so sorry, I promise I’m not ignoring you guys and I completely forgot about the interview. Just, so much stuff has happened and the days have sort of blurred…”

“Don’t worry, I know you have a lot on your plate right now. I told the manager you called me about a family emergency and you couldn’t make it. The manager is pretty laid back so he didn’t mind, but we really do need someone to fill the spot so do you think you can come in for an interview soon? If not, we’ll have to get someone else in for the job…”

Steve could tell Peggy really didn’t mind that Steve hadn’t been in contact lately and forgot the job, and she really was sorry that they’d have to get someone else in to interview if he didn’t come in soon. He glanced behind him at Bucky’s bedroom door and thought about that for a moment. Bucky was doing better lately, and Steve really wanted to start contributing financially. Bucky
wouldn’t mind Steve getting a job, and he could handle being alone for a little bit while Steve went to interview and when he had to work.

“As soon as possible?” Steve heard Peggy talking to someone else before she came back onto the phone with Steve.

“The manager said you could come in later today if you can? About three?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect, I’ll be there. Thanks Peg, I really owe you one.”

“Damn right. See you then.” Peggy replied, but Steve could hear the small smile in her voice.

“See you then.” Peggy hung up then, and Steve smiled down at his phone before going back into Bucky’s room.

Bucky had fallen back to sleep while Steve had been on the phone, splayed out over the bed with his face buried in the pillows. Steve couldn’t help but smile and managed to find enough space to curl up beside him to get a little more sleep, but before he fell asleep he made sure to set an alarm to give him plenty of time to get to the diner for his job interview.

Becca came in a little later to poke Bucky in the face a few times until he woke up. Steve was awake by this point but he faked being asleep so he could watch them interact. Bucky groaned and batted Becca’s hand away, but she was persistent and kept poking his cheek.

“What do you want, you annoying little gremlin?” Bucky grumbled, and Becca laughed before answering.

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re old enough to make your own damn food.” He argued as he pulled a pillow over his head, but Becca tugged it off again and made him groan.

“Please make me something?” She had her most innocent voice on, and Steve tried to repress a chuckle as Bucky groaned long and loud before dragging himself out of bed.

While Bucky was cooking something for Becca, Steve checked the time then went down to sit in the kitchen with them both. He must have zoned out at some point, because the next thing he knew there was a plate of pancakes and bacon in front of him and Becca was waving a hand in front of his face.

“Huh?”

“You okay? You spaced out…” Bucky looked genuinely concerned and Steve felt a little bad about making him worry, but he quickly shook his head as he spoke.

“I’m fine, I was just thinking. What did you say?”

Bucky relaxed a little after that and nodded before he answered him. “I asked if Peggy was calling about any specific.”

“Oh, yeah… About that… I kind of have a job interview. I had one a while ago but I completely forgot about it, and Peggy got me another one. It’s later today.”

Bucky and Becca both smiled wide at that and congratulated him, and Steve smiled. He was kind of expecting Bucky to be nervous about letting him go, but Becca’s sleepover last night must have
helped to relax him a little. He told them the time, and Bucky offered to walk him there. The interview would probably only take about half an hour, and Bucky could get something to eat while he waited. After making sure Bucky actually wanted to come, Steve agreed to him joining him at the diner.

While Becca washed the dishes and Bucky put them away, Steve texted Peggy to make sure it wouldn’t look bad that his boyfriend was coming to the interview with him. After all, it would be better for both of them if Steve got this job. Peggy assured him that it would be fine if Bucky was just there getting something to eat while Steve had his interview. Angie would be finishing her shift at the same time as Steve’s interview, so she was willing to keep Bucky company in the meantime.

Bucky was okay with that, and Steve confirmed it with Peggy before putting his phone away. Becca told them about the sleepover and the movies they watched while they all sat in the living room. It sounded like she had a lot of fun, and Steve didn’t miss the smile that tugged on Bucky’s lips as he listened to her talk about it.

She went back up to her room after a while, and Bucky started working on another building that Stark had sent him the plans for. While he worked, Steve went to get a book and curled up on the couch beside Bucky. It didn’t take long, however, for him to realise he wasn’t paying attention to the words in front of him. He was too nervous about the upcoming interview. He always got nervous when he had to go for interviews, but there was so much more riding on this one. It wasn’t just Steve he was earning for, he wanted to earn for Bucky and Becca too. And now they knew he had an interview, they might be disappointed if he failed.

“You’re going to get wrinkles.” Bucky muttered, and Steve glanced over in surprise. Bucky was still staring at his screen, but now that he had mentioned it Steve could feel the pinch around his eyes and between his brows that meant he was grimacing. “Bad book?”

Steve chuckled and shook his head a little. “No, it’s nothing. Don’t worry.”

He should have known that wouldn’t work with Bucky, because he immediately closed his laptop and put it aside so he could tuck his leg under himself in order to face Steve’s properly. “Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing…” He tried again, then sighed when he saw Bucky’s disbelieving expression. “Just worried about this interview… I want to be able to help contribute to the house.”

“Steve, I told you that you don’t have to worry about that.” Bucky argued, but Steve just shook his head.

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to.”

Bucky watched him for a moment, and Steve was careful to keep all of the self-pity out of his expression so that Bucky wouldn’t think that Steve felt like he had to.

“Well… Try not to worry about it. They’d be lucky to have you.” Bucky answered, and Steve heard only honesty in his tone.

For the next few hours, Steve and Bucky watched TV and exchanged the occasional kisses and non-sexual touches. Steve appreciated that last night was the first night that they had made each other come since Rumlow and Rollins had kidnapped Bucky, but he didn’t expect that to mean that Bucky would be willing to exchange sexual touches just like he had before all of this. Bucky was
still nervous and self-conscious, and Steve was willing to respect that and wait as long as Bucky
needed to make it a more common thing. He never went further than he could tell that Bucky was
comfortable with, and he was more than happy with whatever Bucky was willing to give.

But eventually he had to stop and sighed as he looked at his watch.

“If I want to get to my interview on time we should leave soon…”

Bucky nodded in agreement and Steve was given enough time to shower and dress nicely before he
and Bucky set off to walk to the diner Peggy and Angie worked at. Before they left, Bucky
changed into a long-sleeved shirt that covered both of his arms and put on a pair of leather gloved,
so no skin or metal was showing. Steve had to refrain from mentioning it. If it made Bucky more
comfortable to go outside if his prosthetic was covered, Steve couldn’t argue with it.

Once they got there, Angie rushed over and announced that she had just clocked out. She asked
how Becca was doing and asked about Bucky’s new job, which Steve had filled her and Peggy in
on through text, and Steve wasn’t so nervous anymore. Bucky instantly jumped into talking about
the new job and offered to pay for Angie’s coffee while they were there. Angie ordered a meal,
which prompted Bucky to do the same and when Angie reached for her purse, Bucky shook his
head with a smile and insisted on paying for it. Peggy still had to work for another hour, so she was
the one who brought Bucky and Angie their food and led Steve over to where the manager was
waiting for him.

The manager was called Reed, and he was very kind. He told Steve exactly what he should expect,
including shitty customers. Steve assured him that he was used to shitty customers because of his
old job, and they both got on very well. Steve was close to considering Reed a friend by the time
the interview was over.

Reed seemed to feel the same way, and Steve was offered the job on the spot. He revealed that
Peggy had told him the vague details of what happened to Steve’s boyfriend, so Steve was offered
more “family emergency” opportunities in case he needed to leave work to look after Bucky. Steve
hadn’t expected that, but he was very grateful for the opportunity and he was sure to insist that
Reed knew he appreciated it and that he wouldn’t take advantage of it, he would only use it when
he needed to help Bucky. Reed offered him the option to start the next day, and Steve took it
enthusiastically.

He left the interview with a wide smile on his face as he joined Angie and Bucky’s table. Angie
had been ranting about some TV show that her and Bucky both enjoyed, but she stopped when he
joined them and asked Steve how the interview went. Steve stole a piece of bacon off of Bucky’s
plate as he relayed what had happened during the interview. He could tell that Bucky was going to
call him out on stealing his food, but all Bucky did was smile and congratulate him instead when
he saw how happy Steve was.

After Steve had helped Bucky finish his food, all four of them headed home together. Peggy
insisted on driving Bucky and Steve home, and she also insisted on congratulating Steve before
letting him and Bucky out of the car.

As soon as they were within the comfort of their own home, Bucky gushed about how proud of
Steve he was and insisted that he didn’t have to use a cent of his paycheck to put towards the rent
or groceries in the house, but Steve refused to agree.

He insisted on paying at least a third of the rent, and after realising that Steve wouldn’t give in,
Bucky eventually relented. He only agreed to let Steve pay a third of the groceries too, which Steve
wasn’t happy about. He wanted to pay at least half if Bucky wouldn’t let him pay half of the rent,
but Bucky insisted that he could pay for himself and Becca.

They eventually came to an agreement in terms of what Steve would pay towards the upkeep of the house he was living in. Neither of them were particularly happy about it; Steve wanted to pay more and Bucky wanted him to pay less, but they managed to find a middle ground.

As a celebration for them both having jobs again, Steve and Bucky shared a bottle of wine between the two of them. Becca was allowed one very small glass, and she cringed at the taste. That made Steve and Bucky both laugh, but she finished the glass more out of determination than actual enjoyment.

She was still tired from the sleepover, so she went to bed not long after she had finished her glass. That left Steve and Bucky alone to enjoy a movie and the rest of the bottle. Steve ended up having less than Bucky because the brunet finished and refilled his glass more often than Steve could, but he didn’t particularly mind. Especially when he noticed the soft blush that the alcohol caused to colour Bucky’s cheeks.

Steve had been a little worried about Bucky’s weight-loss as of late, but he was glad to see that Bucky was putting the healthy weight back on again. His cheeks looked less gaunt now, and his ribs weren’t as prominent under his clothes as they had been lately. He was amazed at how quickly Bucky seemed to be recovering. Steve understood that Bucky wouldn’t be the same as he was, at least not for a little longer, but he was happy to see that he hadn’t been permanently mentally scarred by the event. Bucky was becoming more accepting of the changes that he couldn’t ignore and reverse, and he seemed less worried that Steve or Becca would be bothered by it.

Bucky was a little more paranoid than he had been before all of this, no one could ignore that. He kept the deadbolt on and kept the door locked, but he smiled more now. He was more likely to use his prosthetic arm like it was his real arm, and he was more likely to smile and laugh.

Things were getting better. They weren’t altogether back to normal, that would take more time, but they were getting there. Slowly, but surely.

Bucky was becoming more comfortable and confident, and that made all three of them happier despite what had happened.

They were watching a cop comedy when Bucky’s phone rang. There was a name on the caller ID, but Steve couldn’t quite see it before he noticed the colour drain from Bucky’s face.

Steve’s heart immediately started beating faster when he noticed the quick flash of panic of his lover’s face, terrified that maybe Brock Rumlow or Jack Rollins had escaped from prison and were stupid enough to contact Bucky.

“Hello, Ms Potts.” Bucky greeted as he answered the call.

That helped to calm Steve slightly; Pepper Potts was Stark’s lawyer who had taken on Bucky’s case without hesitation. That didn’t mean the call indicated anything bad had happened…

It may have just been an update on the case… But an update didn’t mean a good update.

“Right… Yeah, that’s fine… I’ll see you then. Thank you, goodbye…” Bucky hung up only five minutes later, and Steve lifted his head from Bucky’s chest to give him an inquisitive look.

Bucky tried to ignore him for a moment, Steve could tell that that’s what he was doing. There was no way Bucky just didn’t see that Steve was looking at him. Eventually though, Bucky sighed and
turned his gaze to Steve. Steve didn’t have to ask before Bucky answered the questions on his mind.

“The court wants my testimony of what happened. I just have to explain what happened between when Brock got into my car and when the police found me; thanks to you and Nat. I won’t have to go to court and be in front of them. I don’t even have to be in the same room as them. I just have to go to the police station and give my testimony on camera… Pepper said it might help if I didn’t have my prosthetic on when I gave the testimony, since the tape will be shown in court and it might get me more sympathy from the jury if I’ve clearly lost an arm because of all of this…” He sighed and shook his head a little, avoiding Steve’s gaze. “I can wear it if I want to, but she suggested that I don’t… As long as I’m comfortable with not wearing it… She’s set up a date for me at the police station next week…”

Steve could hear the hidden question in his tone. Bucky wanted to know whether or not Steve thought he should wear it. Personally, Steve wanted to be sure that Rumlow and Rollins got as much jail time as possible for what they did, and if not wearing the prosthetic would help that, he was all for it. But Bucky’s comfort meant more than that, and if Bucky wasn’t comfortable being recorded without his prosthetic, then Steve didn’t want that.

He explained his own dilemma to Bucky, and Bucky nodded a little in thought. “I want them to get as much time as possible…”

“Then I’d suggest not wearing the prosthetic, like Pepper recommended… It’ll only be for however long it takes for you to tell the camera what happened…” Steve reasoned, and Bucky nodded minutely again.

“I’m not sure yet…”

Steve nodded in understanding and pressed a kiss to Bucky’s jaw. “You have a week before you have to make a choice… Take that time to think about it. No one will think less of you, whatever you choose.”

He felt the need to add the last part, just in case, and Bucky nodded a little with a small grateful smile tugging on his lips. “Thanks, Stevie…”

Steve smiled too, and they ended up kissing for the next half an hour. Bucky was a little slow during the kiss, but Steve gladly kept at that pace to be sure that Bucky didn’t feel pressured to go too far.

All they did was kiss that night, and Steve loved it just as much as he loved their passionate session from last night. Just being able to cup Bucky’s jaw and feel his heated body against Steve’s own was enough for him.

They went to bed after the movie’s credits had been playing in the background for twenty minutes, and Bucky fell asleep curled up against Steve with his face buried against Steve’s hair and Steve’s face buried against Bucky’s firm chest.

Bucky fell asleep before Steve, and Steve wasn’t sure what Bucky was going to do in terms of his prosthetic during his testimony by that point, but he personally didn’t think it really mattered. The facts of the case alone were enough to make any jury side with Bucky, whether or not it was clear in the video that he lost his arm or not. That fact would still be in the case, Pepper Potts was sure to use Bucky’s disability to her advantage to make sure Rollins and Rumlow went away for a long time for causing it. Whether or not the jury saw Bucky without his new arm wouldn’t affect the case too much. Steve would understand if Bucky wanted to keep the prosthetic on during his
testimony, and he understood that it was completely up to him how he did this. If Bucky had to relive what happened to him in order to retell it, it should at least be in a format that Bucky is comfortable with; he shouldn’t have to deal with other aspects that would make him more uncomfortable during this time than strictly necessary.

He was worried, of course he was. Steve knew that Bucky having to tell this story to strangers in a police station would be upsetting, but he hoped it would be worth it. If Bucky could get through this, there was a very low chance that either of them or Becca would be bothered by Brock and Jack again. He was willing to support Bucky through this part of the process, just like he had throughout everything else. He remembered the promise Reed had given him that if he ever needed time off from work to support Bucky, he would be given it, no questions asked. If he was working at the time Bucky had to give his recorded statement, Steve was sure that Reed would allow him the day off so that he could be there for Bucky. That took a little bit of the pressure from Steve, and allowed him to worry more about the pressure that would be on Bucky that day.

Bucky had been sleeping for about an hour before Steve’s brain calmed down enough for him to relax, comforted by the idea that he would be able to be there for Bucky during the next stage of his case against Rollins and Rumlows.

Things were definitely starting to get better. Steve had a job with a boss that appreciated Steve and Bucky’s situation, and was willing to allow Steve the opportunity to work as well as be there for his boyfriend. Bucky was getting more and more confident with his prosthetic and more comfortable with what had happened to him. Becca no longer felt obliged to stay at home or afraid to leave the house.

If things carried on the way they were, Steve was sure they would all be okay. They would get through everything that had happened, and they would all be happy again. That was the thought that allowed Steve to finally fall asleep with his face buried against his lover’s chest, warm and safe in his part flesh-and-bone, part solid metal embrace.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Bucky has to go to the police station.

Steve enjoyed working at the diner. The hours weren’t too long, and it allowed him to be home with Bucky and Becca most of the day, the other staff members were nice, as was the boss. It was nice being able to see Peggy and Angie for a few hours a day too. The pay was great too.

He told Reed about Bucky having to go to the police station and the date on which he was going, though he didn’t go into detail about why, to avoid violating Bucky’s privacy. He didn’t need to, Reed understood and booked Steve off for that whole day so that Steve could be there for him.

During the week leading up to Bucky’s meeting with the police to make his statement, Bucky became a little more distant. He was a little more closed-off, and less likely to speak to Steve or Becca when he was upset. He spent more time in his bedroom than in the living room whenever there was someone else in there, no matter who it was. Natasha came to see them a little more often than she had been before, but Steve couldn’t blame her for keeping her distance before this. Bucky needed the space, but Steve was more than happy to have her back now.

The first time she spoke to Bucky about the trial, she spoke to him in his bedroom alone, and when she came out she looked pale. That worried Steve, and when he asked her about it, she admitted that Bucky had started speaking like he did when he was dating Brock. He insisted that Brock didn’t mean to cause an infection that would make Bucky lose his arm. He hadn’t meant anything that bad, he was just trying to intimidate him and cause him a little pain.

That upset Steve more, and it took all of his strength not to barge into his and Bucky’s room to knock some sense into him in a nothing-but-loving way. He managed to refrain, though, but he couldn’t stop shooting Bucky the occasional worried side-glance. He didn’t want Bucky to defend his kidnappers even the slightest, and he needed to speak to him about it after what Natasha said. Steve didn’t expect Bucky to open up about why he was willing to cut Rumlow and Rollins any kind of slack, but he still needed to try.

It was two days before his appointment at the police station when Steve finally got up the courage to bring it up to Bucky, and they were curled up on the couch together at the time. It was a beautiful, relaxed moment; a rare moment of bliss that they didn’t get as often as Steve would have liked nowadays. He almost didn’t want to bring it up, he didn’t want to ruin their infrequent happy moment together. But Steve couldn’t just leave Bucky to suffer in silence, and he wanted to know just how far Bucky was willing to go to protect the people who hurt him. He wanted Bucky’s torturers to suffer for the maximum amount of time, but he was worried that Bucky would say something that would stop that.

“Do you know what you’re going to say?” Steve asked quietly. He didn’t want to elaborate, but he assumed Bucky knew what he was referring to. The subject had been an elephant in the room all week, after all. His hopes were confirmed when Bucky tensed slightly before speaking.

“Pepper told me not to prepare anything… It’ll make it seem too staged…” Bucky explained, and Steve nodded a little, almost prepared to drop it there and return to the calm tranquillity that had
previously enveloped them. But he couldn’t.

He needed to know.

“You’re going to tell them the truth… Right?” Steve asked quietly, almost afraid of the answer.

Even so, he twisted himself to look Bucky in the eyes. He wasn’t particularly surprised to see the confusion in Bucky’s expression, but he hoped that would mean Bucky wasn’t even thinking of lying, given that he wasn’t even sure what Steve was referring to.

“What else would I tell them?” Bucky asked with a slight frown, and Steve reluctantly shifted in Bucky’s arms so he was facing him more directly.

“Natasha mentioned that… you were going to say Rumlow didn’t mean to make you lose your arm… She said you were defending him…”

Bucky sighed and moved his right arm from around Steve’s waist to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I was waiting for someone to bring that up.”

Steve waited for Bucky to elaborate, but he didn’t continue speaking, and that worried Steve more. “Well?”

He waited as patiently as he could whilst Bucky stared at the wall somewhere over Steve’s shoulder, but the silence seemed to stretch out forever, and Steve was worried that he would have to prompt him again at the risk of sounding pushy. Fortunately, Bucky spoke before he got to that stage of restlessness.

“I didn’t mean any of that… It was a force of habit from when I used to talk about him with Nat. I always defended him, even when he did horrible things, and I’m apparently still a little bit in that mind-set in certain scenarios… I won’t say any of that stuff to the police. Even if he didn’t mean to do this, he still did it.” Bucky held his metal arm up in a referencing gesture as he spoke, and Steve let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding as he reached out to lace his fingers together with the metal ones.

“Good… I don’t want them to get off easy, is all…” Steve reasoned with a smile, justifying his worries as much to himself as he was to Bucky, and Bucky nodded as he smiled back.

But it wasn’t the right smile. It was the tight-lipped smile that never reached his eyes, the one he wore when he was trying to make people believe he was fine when he wasn’t, when he was trying to be strong for others.

“I’m sorry I brought it up…” Steve tried to amend as he leant up to press a kiss to Bucky’s jaw, underneath his ear. He could feel that the bolt in his jaw was tensed, and he let his lips linger there in the hopes of feeling it loosen again, which it eventually did.

“It’s okay.” Bucky shrugged. “You want to make sure I say whatever will give them the most jail time. I understand.”

Steve nodded in agreement, then reached up to run his fingers through Bucky’s hair with the hand that wasn’t holding Bucky’s. The new length to it made him look different to the way he looked when they first met, more so than the new limb did. Steve didn’t exactly dislike the new look, or prefer it to how he looked before. It was different, but it was still Bucky’s eyes, his jaw, his lips, his nose. His forehead was just more covered now than it had been when his hair was perfectly styled into an effortless coif all the time. But Steve had to admit he didn’t exactly hate having more to play with as they were curled up together like this, or when he woke up before Bucky and
couldn’t quite pull himself away from his sleeping boyfriend right away.

When he eventually pulled his eyes away from the brown locks curled around his fingers, Steve noticed a calculating look in Bucky’s grey-blue eyes. He wasn’t sure if it was because of their previous discussion or because of something in the silence that followed it, but he wanted Bucky to speak his mind more, so he asked.

“What’re you looking at?” Steve smiled as he asked, so it sounded more casual than accusing, to try and bring some of the ease back to their afternoon.

“Do you want me to get a haircut?” Bucky asked suddenly and Steve’s smile faltered, mostly out of surprise, which prompted Bucky to explain. “You keep touching it… Is it a hint that I need to get it cut?”

Steve shook his head immediately and smiled. “I don’t mind what you do with your hair, Buck. It’s longer than I’ve ever seen it, sure, but I don’t hate it. I just like playing with it. If you want to cut it, cut it. If you don’t, then don’t.”

He shrugged, mostly just because Bucky’s eyes had turned scrutinizing and he wanted to fully convey that he didn’t mind. It was an odd conversation to follow the one they had just had, but it was lighter, so Steve was happy to have it as long as the discomfort didn’t return to Bucky’s muscles. Bucky seemed relaxed for the time being, though the fingers of his right hand curled or twitched every now and then.

“I don’t think I can be bothered to get it cut right now…” Bucky answered, his tone almost sounding like he was trying to make excuses for himself or apologise, which made Steve feel a little guilty.

He didn’t want Bucky to feel like he needed to make excuses to look however he wanted. So he wasn’t cutting his hair as often as he had done before, that didn’t matter to Steve.

If anyone had the right to lose track their physical appearance, it was Bucky. But it wasn’t like he was becoming less attractive in any way. He was still as beautiful as he had been when Steve first laid eyes on him in the hardware store what felt like a lifetime ago. He was still as healthy as a recently new amputee could be expected to be.

He was a little paler than he had been, but Buck didn’t look particularly sickly. He slept more, but Steve figured that Bucky deserved as much rest as he could get. The biggest difference was the hair and the fact that Bucky didn’t shave as much as he had before. The most he had ever had before was a light sprinkling of stubble, like a light shadow on his jaw and cheeks. Now, it was a little more defined, and it scratched a little when he kissed Steve, but Steve didn’t mind it. In fact, he was starting to like it.

“Whatever you decide to do, I’ll support you. Nothing about your appearance could possibly make me love you any less. You’ll always look perfect to me.” He answered honestly, and he smiled when he saw Bucky smile in response.

He leant up to kiss Bucky to emphasise his point and Bucky happily kissed him back. Steve was starting to really like the scratching of Bucky’s stubble more each time they kissed, and he moved his hand back up to Bucky’s hair to run his fingers through it again with a smile against Bucky’s lips. The locks were thick, and Steve almost got his fingers caught in it. He was a little worried he would hurt Bucky if he tugged his hand through it, but luckily he managed to detangle his fingers without too much trouble.
Even though he had managed to free himself, he felt Bucky’s smile grown against his lips then heard a little chuckle. Though he was happy to hear the sound – and, god, he was happy to hear the sound – it still prompted him to pull back so he could ask what was so funny.

“You almost lost your hand.” Bucky pointed out in reference to Steve’s little struggle and moved one of his own hands up to run through his hair so that he could push the strands Steve had ruffled loose back out of his eyes. He seemed to have realised what he said then, and laughed again. “We could have matched.”

He waved his metal fingers in accentuate his point and Steve wasn’t sure if he was supposed to laugh or not. Bucky just rolled his eyes at Steve’s obvious internal struggle.

“Relax. Humour is my coping mechanism, you’re supposed to laugh.” Steve laughed nervously, which made Bucky chuckle again. “You tried.”

Before Steve could argue that its not exactly easy to laugh at his boyfriend’s disability, Bucky tugged him in for another kiss and Steve fell into it easily, a genuine smile tugging at his lips this time.

The morning Bucky was supposed to go and give his statement, Steve didn’t initially remember why he had set his alarm.

The noise was annoying, especially since it dragged him out of such a great dream. The more the sound blared the less he could remember about the dream, but he vaguely recalled Bucky being in it, smiling and laughing with Natasha and Becca.

Sarah was there too, sat on Bucky’s right with a hand on his arm, laughing along so freely to whatever he was saying. It was a nice thought, though Steve knew it could never happened. He still very much believed that Sarah would have loved Bucky as much as Steve did.

The soft smile the dream inspired was quickly wipes off his face when he remembered why the alarm was going off, accompanied by Bucky’s irritated groan next to him.

“Are you going to turn that thing off or do I have to throw it at a wall?” The brunet grumbled, managing to drag a small smile from Steve was he turned it off.

He turned to face Bucky after turning his bedside lamp on and sighed at the sight. Bucky was lying on his front with half of his face buried against the pillow his arms were folded under, part of the rest of his face hidden behind messy dark hair. He was shirtless, still wearing his prosthetic, and the duvet was pushed down to just under his ribs, showing off the curve of his spine as he shifted to burrow deeper into the pillow.

His eyes were still closed, his breathing slow and even, and Steve was genuinely concerned that Bucky was about to fall back to sleep if he hadn’t done already.

“Buck? We’ve got to be at the station in a little over an hour.”

That was a tiny lie. They had an hour and forty five minutes before they had to be at the station. But Bucky needed time to wake up, hopefully eat something, and maybe shower if he felt like it. He showered the previous morning so it wasn’t necessarily needed, but Steve planned for it just in case, so either way they would have plenty of time to get to the station and get this over with.

The lie was necessary, or else Bucky wouldn’t get up until five minutes before they had to be there while Steve develops a stress ulcer knowing damn well they’d be late. It was at least a fifteen
minute walk, and Bucky still didn’t have a car to cut that time down.

Bucky wouldn’t even notice that they had more time than he was told anyway, since he stopped having a work schedule that meant he had to keep track of time he had taken to not really waking up until he had already been up and walking about for an hour or so. He had no concept of time right now.

He just groaned in response to Steve’s prompting, and the blond tried very hard to keep his resolve undeterred. It was difficult; he really wanted to let Bucky sleep in longer, but they needed to get this out of the way so they could move on to the next thing.

“Come on, Buck. The sooner we do this, the sooner it’ll be over. I’ll buy you an ice cream after.” He baited, and that caused Bucky to open his eyes just a little, squinting against the light.

“Ice cream?” He mumbled, his voice thick with sleep, and Steve grinned.

“Yeah, I’ll buy you ice cream on our way home. My first pay check from the diner came in yesterday.”

Bucky hummed a little and pushed himself to roll onto his back, then sighed and stared up at the ceiling.

“I don’t wanna do this…” He muttered seriously and Steve sighed too as he laid back down beside him on his side so that he could face Bucky.

“I know, babe…” He ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair to brush it off his face. “Just a few hours from now it’ll be over though…”

Bucky huffed and closed his eyes. “I’m gonna wear my prosthctic.”

Steve had almost forgotten that that was something he had to think about, given Ms Potts’ suggestion, and he felt terrible when he realised Bucky had probably been fretting over that all week while Steve stayed oblivious.

“If that’s what you want, you can wear it.” He assured him softly, and Bucky nodded, a determined set to his jaw.

“I might wear a short sleeved shirt though. So they’ll see in the video that I have a prosthctic.”

“Good idea.” Steve nodded in understanding and pressed a kiss to his forehead before getting out of bed.

Steve made them some breakfast while Bucky got dressed; just cereal, nothing big. Bucky didn’t think he would be able to handle too much given how anxious he was, and Steve understood that. Besides, they were planning on getting ice cream after the interview anyway so they weren’t going to starve.

Bucky wore a baby blue t-shirt that brought out his eyes beautifully, and his usual black skinny jeans and boots. He looked perfect as always, even the silver metal of his prosthctic seemed to go with the outfit as if intentionally. While he ate, Steve went to get dressed too and picked a grey tshirt and jeans with his beat up sneakers.

Not nearly as effortlessly flawless as Bucky, but he had given up hope of ever being as subconsciously finely tuned to perfect fashion as Bucky was anyway.
Bucky was washing the dishes when he came back down, and Steve smiled as he came up behind him to wrap his arms around his middle, standing on his tip toes to rest his chin on Bucky’s shoulder. The taller man tensed initially, but quickly relaxed when he realised it was Steve, the sponge’s movements only pausing for half a second before he continued scrubbing his bowl clean.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asked softly, pressing a kiss to Bucky’s shoulder to punctuate the question.

“Nervous…” Bucky answered honestly, not even a hint of his usual dismissive reaction to that question in his voice.

“I’ll be right there with you the whole time.” Steve assured him and Bucky nodded a little.

“I know… Thanks, Stevie. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.” He all but whispered, and Steve smiled softly against the soft fabric of Bucky’s t-shirt.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” Bucky answered without hesitation and turned his head to press a kiss to the top of Steve’s head.

As expected, Bucky didn’t notice when it had been an hour and a half between when Steve had woken him up and when he was handing Bucky his coat on their way out.

Bucky left a note for Becca in case she woke up and wondered where they had gone, then locked the door behind them as they left to walk to the station.

Steve immediately reached out to take Bucky’s hand while they walked, and Bucky tensed next to him. He wasn’t sure why at first, but it only took Steve a moment to realise he was holding Bucky’s left hand, clad with one of the leather gloves he had taken to wearing whenever they left the house. But Steve made a point of not letting go of it, keeping his grip firm enough that Bucky would feel it through the sensors under the leather, so he knew Steve wasn’t going to let go.

Bucky seemed tense for a few blocks, but he eventually seemed to relax a little and even squeezed Steve’s hand a little in return, the pressure barely there. He was probably worried about breaking Steve’s hand with it, and Steve couldn’t find it within himself to be mad about Bucky treating him like he was fragile. It was probably smart to do so with the prosthetic, and he couldn’t think of anything past how happy he was that Bucky wasn’t recoiling from his touch.

The police station had a clinical, sterile air to it that reminded Steve of the waiting room in the hospital that he had to stay in while he waited to hear if Bucky was okay. It put him on edge a little, and a quick glance at Bucky told him that he wasn’t the only one. It must have been worse for Bucky, so Steve pushed his own discomfort aside as he squeezed Bucky’s hand a little in a silent gesture, hoping to convey to Bucky that he wasn’t going anywhere and everything would be okay. Bucky managed a small, strained smile in return. It wasn’t convincing, but Steve would take it.

They went to the front desk and Bucky seemed to have been stuck on what to say, so Steve spoke up, telling the receptionist why they were there and the name of the cop they were supposed to see. He could feel Bucky’s relief and gratitude radiating off him without Steve having to look at him to be sure, and he squeezed his hand again in acknowledgement.

The receptionist led them to a private waiting room with the interview room attached and told them the officer would be with them shortly, he was just finishing up something else.
The room looked as though it was meant to soothe a child, and Steve didn’t want to think about why that was, how many children had been through here for different unpleasant reasons. There were colourful smiling animals painted on the areas of the floor that weren’t covered by jungle-themed rugs, a small bookcase against the wall full of children’s books and a small table with large jigsaw pieces scattered over it. The chairs they sat on were soft, and the right size for adults so Steve guessed they were usually for parents or guardians of the children, judging by the stack of magazines on the small table beside them. Most of them were old gossip magazines from up to a year ago, so neither Steve nor Bucky bothered looking at them for more than a quick glance.

Instead, Steve focussed on Bucky, but tried not to make it too obvious. Just occasionally glances. Bucky seemed more focussed on their surroundings, looking over the toys in one corner and the books haphazardly crammed onto teal coloured shelves. It wasn’t hard to guess that the same upsetting thoughts about the uses of this room were going through his head that Steve had tried to avoid thinking about, and Steve shifted a little closer to him so their shoulders touched before he spoke.

“Hey… You okay?” His voice was barely above a whisper. For some reason, it felt like it would be inappropriate to talk too loud in here.

“Yes, just…” He gestured around, and Steve understood. “Kind of obvious who they usually use this place for, you know?”

Steve nodded and let go of Bucky’s hand so he could wrap an arm around his middle, to tug him closer as well as try to block out any discomfort.

They were waiting a lot longer than the receptionist said they would, and Bucky started to get a little restless after a while, unable to sit still. He took to pacing around the room when he was fidgeting too much to stay seated, and eventually stopped in front of the bookcase.

Steve just watched him in silence, ready to jump up and comfort him if need be but otherwise content to just let Bucky wonder around.

They probably should have brought one of Bucky’s books for the wait, but Steve hadn’t realised it would take this long. Bucky didn’t read as much as he wanted to, Steve knew that. Even before all this, when Bucky’s biggest worry was taking care of Becca, he didn’t get to read a lot. Work and household chores took up too much of his time. Hopefully now that Bucky could work from home he would have more time to do so, once the bulk of this whole ordeal was behind them.

He came back with a Roald Dahl book, *James and the Giant Peach*, and there was an oddly serene smile on his lips.

“My mom loved this book.” He explained without Steve having to ask, and Steve smiled a little in return. “She kind of named me after him.”

“Really?” Steve looked down at the book in intrigue.

“Yeah. Told my dad she just liked the name, which she did, because she knew if he knew it was because of a fictional character he’d insist on not naming me that. He’d think it was too nerdy.”

“It suits you.” Steve’s smile widened as he looked up from the book at Bucky. “But Bucky suits you better.”

“Why’s that?” Bucky cocked his head a little in interest as he looked up at Steve.

“I don’t know… Its kind of old fashioned, like Skippy or Buster.” He explained and grinned as
Bucky laughed.

“Old fashioned suits me?”

“Yeah, you’re a little old fashioned.”

“Should I be offended?” He could tell Bucky was teasing, but Steve still felt the need to clarify.

“No, not in attitude or values, per se. I’m not saying you’re racist or homophobic or anything like that. Just, like, you call me Doll, you insist on paying for dates, you’re a romantic gentleman. I bet you know how to swing dance, don’t you.” It wasn’t even a question, Steve hadn’t forgotten that Bucky used to dance, and he was willing to bet they taught him swing dancing among other things.

And yes, he was also teasing a little.

“As a matter of fact, I do. What of it?” Bucky was pretending to be affronted, but Steve could see the slight tug of a smile at the corners of his lips, so he went along with it.

“I knew it. You’re basically a typical old-fashioned gentleman who time travelled here from the 20s or something.” Steve announced, and that dragged a laugh from Bucky.

“You caught me.” He shrugged with a dramatic sigh.

“Yes I did.” Steve grinned proudly, playing along as well as referencing another way in which he ‘caught’ Bucky.

He seemed to catch on, because he grinned too as he leant forward to kiss Steve.

The kiss was only brief, because of course that’s when the cop decided to show up. They pulled back quickly when they heard someone at the door clear their throat, and Bucky had to turn in his seat to see the man stood there.

He looked like a pretty stereotypical cop; dark hair cut short, dark eyes, crisp uniform, well-built but not overly so. He introduced himself as Officer Cliff Hughes and asked which one of them were James as Bucky and Steve both stood. He shook Bucky’s hand first when he introduced himself, then Steve’s as Steve explained that he was his boyfriend, there for moral support.

Officer Hughes pulled up one of the tiny chairs around the kids’ table to sit in front of Steve and Bucky as he gestured for them to take a seat. He looked a little ridiculous in the tiny chair, his impressive frame hunched over and his knees practically against his chest as he explained that, though it was good that Steve was here, he wouldn’t be allowed in the room while the interview is taking place.

That deflated them both a little, and Hughes must have noticed because he immediately assured him that if Bucky needed to stop they could take as many breaks as he wanted and he could come sit with Steve during those breaks until he felt up to going to back and continuing with his statement. That made them both feel a little better and Steve reached out to take Bucky’s hand while Hughes explained what was going to happen.

They had plenty of time booked to do this, given that it was a sensitive issue, so Bucky didn’t have to feel the need to rush or feel bad about taking too many or too long breaks. The more detained Bucky was the better, though no one would blame him if he couldn’t remember certain bits. It was often the case with traumatic situations where the person’s brain will block certain parts of their memory to protect themselves. They understood that, but there may be some times when they will have to prompt Bucky to elaborate on certain parts if he’s too vague. Hughes assured him that if he
couldn’t remember, all he had to do was say so and they would move on, they wouldn’t pressure him for an answer.

Steve listened intently as Hughes explained everything, running his thumb along the back of Bucky’s hand. It was the metal one, so he made sure to press a little harder than he would with the other one to be sure that the sensors picked it up and Bucky could feel it. He glanced at Bucky and bit his lip a little in concern.

He seemed to be paying attention to what Hughes was saying, but there was a slightly distant look in his eyes as he nodded along to what the cop said.

When asked if he understood everything, Bucky said yes and the cop stood up and gestured to a door on the other side of the room to the one he had come in through.

“The interview room is through there. It’s all set up and ready for us, I’ll go through and give you two a minute, just come right in when you’re ready.” He gave a parting smile before going through to wait for Bucky, and as soon as the door closed Bucky let out a sigh.

He wasn’t sure if it was relief, exasperation, or nervousness, so Steve turned so he was properly facing Bucky, one leg tucked under himself.

“Hey, talk to me,” He prompted quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Getting a little tired of hearing that question…” Bucky muttered as he ran his flesh hand over his eyes, but Steve could tell there was no real irritation in his voice.

He sounded tired, which was a little unnerving given that he hadn’t even started the interview yet and he already seemed drained.

“I’ll be right here. Remember what he said, take as many breaks as you need.” Steve assured him, and Bucky nodded a little as he looked over Steve’s shoulder to the door Hughes had gone through. That look of determination was back on Bucky’s face, in the hard set of his jaw, and Steve leant forward to kiss the bolt that jumped a little under Bucky’s skin as his hands rested on Bucky’s shoulders.

“I’ll be right here.” He ensured again, and Bucky nodded a little as he started to relax under Steve’s touch.

“Okay…” Bucky muttered, more to himself than anyone else. “Okay.”

He said it again, more confidently, then stood with another sigh and shrugged off his jacket, placing it and his gloves off to the side over the magazines.

*To show his prosthetic*, Steve realised.

He gave Steve a brief kiss, then headed to the room quickly, as if he was trying to get in there before he could lose his nerve.

Steve watched him go and bit his lip as the door closed behind him. After a moment, to make sure Bucky wasn’t about to back out straight away, Steve took his seat again.

He assumed Bucky and Hughes were talking already after a few minutes, but Steve couldn’t hear anything and guessed the room must be soundproofed so anyone sat in the waiting room wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop. As much as Steve appreciated why that was and wanted to give Bucky his privacy, he did kind of wish he could hear at least the typical droning sound voices made when
they were too muffled for anyone to make out words, so that he could judge the tone. Just so he knew that Bucky was okay and he wasn’t freaking out behind the heavy door separating them.

Steve looked around for something to distract himself with and saw the book Bucky had left on his seat. He picked up *James and the Giant Peach* and flicked through it momentarily before opening it to the first page. He had read a few Roald Dahl books before, but he was always more interested in the pictures and the art style of Quentin Blake included in the books rather than the actual stories.

He went back to the first page and started reading, not really expecting it to be as good to him as the stories were to kids, since he was an adult, but he had nothing better to do until Bucky needed him so he decided he might as well give it a shot.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

I have nothing to say for myself about the absence.

I know I suck.

Enjoy.

Steve hadn’t expected anything to be able to distract him from what his boyfriend was doing in the other room, but after a while his anxiety faded a little and he was able to pay attention to the story in front of him. He still kept an ear out in case Bucky needed him, and he was always ready to jump out of his seat as soon as the door opened, but Bucky hadn’t come out for a break yet so Steve had to assume that he was doing okay for his own sanity’s sake.

The story was actually pretty good and despite him being older than the intended audience, it still managed to captivate him. He didn’t assume that he would be able to finish the whole thing while he waited for Bucky, so he made a mental note to ask if Bucky had a copy for him to finish at a later date. Given that it was his mother’s favourite, there was a chance Bucky had a copy somewhere, even if Steve didn’t remember seeing it in his bookcase. He had managed to get through quite a bit when the door burst open, but Steve dropped the book without giving it a thought and shot to his feet instantly. His arms were around Bucky before he even had time to register what had happened, and Bucky’s face was buried against Steve’s shoulders as tremors wracked through his body, his own arms tight around Steve in return.

Over Bucky’s shoulder, Steve saw Hughes shoot him an understanding smile as he quietly closed the door, separating himself and the interview room from Steve and Bucky. Steve smiled back in gratitude just before the door closed and tightened his arms around Bucky, moving one hand to stroke through Bucky’s hair and keep his head against his shoulder. He was stood on his tip toes to get closer to him, Bucky’s entire body pressed up against Steve’s as he felt a wet patch form on his shoulder. Steve realised then that Bucky was crying and carefully manoeuvred them until they were knelt on the floor, so he could hold him more comfortably without having to strain up or for Bucky to have to hunch down a little. He contemplated the seats, but then they would be turned at an angle or they would have to have a little distance between them. Steve didn’t want that, and he was almost certain that Bucky didn’t want that either. Besides, the carpet was plush and comfortable enough. Steve wasn’t even sure what he was saying, but he knew he was speaking. None of it really made a lot of sense, it was just a constant nonsense string of comforting sentences whispered into Bucky’s hair.

A glance up at the tiger clock on the wall told him that it hadn’t been long enough for Bucky to have gotten through everything already. They weren’t done here, this was probably just a break. A much-needed one judging by the state Bucky was in. Steve absently wondered how long Bucky had been upset enough to need a break for, how long he had wanted to stop but had pushed on until he couldn’t stand another second, just to try and get it all done at once so that they could just leave. He was probably also very conscious of how much of Officer Hughes’ time he was taking up.

Sometimes he wished Bucky wasn’t such a considerate person. He wished he put himself first more often, acknowledged his own needs and took care of them even if it inconvenienced someone
else, sometimes only in his own mind. It would make things like this much easier on Bucky, but Steve knew that it wasn’t going to happen. It was as if it was hard-wired into Bucky’s DNA to always put others before himself unless he was literally falling apart, like he was now.

It felt a bit patronising, but Steve rocked them a little in an attempt to try to comfort Bucky. He almost expected Bucky to pull away a little with a laugh, telling Steve to stop treating him like a child despite the clear child-centricity of the room around them, but he didn’t. He just went along with it, and Steve felt a pang of heartache at the little whimper Bucky let out as he let Steve sway them back and forth.

“It’s okay, I’ve got you, you’re safe…” Steve whispered into his hair as he closed his eyes to fight back the tears that sprung to his own eyes.

No, he couldn’t cry right now. He had to take care of Bucky, be strong for him, even if the sight of the man he loved so distressed was breaking his heart. He could cry later – when Bucky was okay and Steve was alone – he could cry about how Bucky had been hurt so much and how he didn’t deserve it, and how unfair all of this was.

Later.

When Bucky was okay.

Eventually the trembling stopped, and Bucky went a little limp against Steve, like he was ready to drop off to sleep at any moment. Steve wished he could let him sleep, he wished they were done, and he could just magically teleport them to their bed so that Bucky wouldn’t even have to walk home, and he could instead just rest and recharge after such a draining experience. But they weren’t done. He didn’t ask if Bucky needed to go back in, or if he was ready, and Bucky didn’t say anything about it. They stayed like that, clutching each other on the floor in silence, until Bucky let out a shuddered sigh. Bucky pulled back just a little, his arms still wrapped around Steve’s middle like he was his only lifeline, and Steve kept his arms around Bucky’s shoulders with one hand playing with his hair at the base of his neck.

Bucky’s half-lidded, red rimmed eyes were locked on a spot on Steve’s shoulder, and he muttered out an apology that made Steve frown in confusion. He tore his eyes from Bucky’s face to look down at his shoulder and he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when he saw what Bucky was apologising for. He was apologising for his tears marking Steve’s top, and given that it was a light grey, the damp spot stood out clearly. It was a little ridiculous that Bucky would apologise for that, hence why Steve wanted to laugh, but it was also heart-breaking that he felt the need to do so. Queue the urge to cry.

Either way, he wanted to crush Bucky to him and wrap his arms around him, and never let anyone who could possibly cause him harm come near him ever again. He wanted to shelter Bucky from the rest of the world, and it genuinely pissed Steve off that he knew he couldn’t do that. Not only would Bucky never allow him to take on that kind of responsibility, but it would also mean shielding Bucky from the good things in the world too, and if anyone deserved to see the good, it was Bucky.

Instead, he settled for cupping Bucky’s face and leaning forward to press a soft kiss to his lips.

“Don’t apologise, sweetheart.” He whispered as he rested their foreheads together, smiling as Bucky’s eyes closed in something resembling relief.

Steve cupped Bucky’s jaw and ran his thumb along his cheekbone in a soothing gesture, staring at Bucky as the lines smoothed out along his face the more he relaxed. His breathing was slow now,
calmer. Eventually Bucky took a deep breath and pulled away from Steve a little, opening his eyes again to look at Steve.

“Okay… Sorry, got a little overwhelmed.” He chuckled awkwardly and Steve just smiled in response before Bucky continued. “I should go back in… Get the rest over with.”

“Only if you feel ready…” Steve pointed out, keeping one hand cupping Bucky’s face as the other dropped to take his right hand in his.

Bucky took a moment to consider that, then nodded. “I’m ready.”

They disentangled themselves and got up, Bucky’s balance a little off. Steve reached out to steady him, and Bucky smiled weakly in thanks.

He wanted to insist that Bucky stay with him for a little longer, to get himself properly back under control because he forced himself back into it, but he knew Bucky wouldn’t listen. Though, Steve understood why he wanted to get it over and done with, so he kept his opinion to himself and just gave Bucky a soft and reassuring kiss before he went back into the interview room.

The silence was heavy in the air after Bucky left, the soundproofing of the interview room leaving Steve’s breathing and the ticking of the orange and black striped clock as the only sounds in the room. Bucky’s freak-out had stressed Steve a little, but after a few minutes of silence, once he was sure Bucky wasn’t about to come back out, he bent down to pick the book up again and find his page. He ended up reading a few pages he was sure he had read before, but he eventually got to his place again and settled in his seat to wait, still slightly on edge as he waited for Bucky to come out again, either because he needed another break or because he was finished.

It was about another half an hour before Bucky came back out, and he came out slowly and calmly, no sign of panic in his expression or stance.

Still, Steve was on his feet in a second, the book almost forgotten in his hand.

Officer Hughes said they were done, and there was nothing else he needed from either of them so they could leave whenever they wanted. The waiting room was booked for another hour so if they wanted to they could stay there for a bit longer to give Bucky time to recuperate, but a quick glance exchanged between the two of them told Steve that neither of them were particularly keen on the idea of staying there any longer than necessary. Bucky thanked Hughes but told him they should get going, and Hughes shook hands with both of them before heading out, leaving them in the waiting room after making sure they both knew how to get out of the building.

They both let out a collective breath once it dawned on them both that they were done, this part was behind them even if there was still more things to come that they would have to worry about. But right now, Steve had promised Bucky ice cream. He wasn’t entirely sure if Bucky would still be up for the type of ice cream Steve had in mind though; in cones at an ice cream parlour. He looked exhausted, like he was about to fall asleep on his feet any second now, and his eyes were still red-rimmed which told Steve that he had cried more in the interview room. He felt bad for not being there for that, but Bucky had known he was on the other side of the door if he needed him, so he didn’t mention it right now.

Right now they needed to just forget about everything.

Even if he didn’t want the ice cream Steve was thinking of, they could get a carton of Ben and Jerry’s or something and eat it in front of the TV.
Bucky confirmed his suspicions that he was too tired for an ice cream parlour, almost apologetic, like Steve had been looking forward to it and Bucky was somehow letting him down. Steve assured him that he didn’t mind and pressed a kiss to his jaw as he took his hand, after Bucky had put his jacket and gloves back on. They popped into a store quickly so Steve could buy some Ben and Jerry’s – Cookie Dough, Bucky’s favourite – and Bucky smiled as they left, leaning over to kiss Steve’s temple in silent thanks.

Becca was up when they got home, and Steve quickly ran through his memories to try and figure out if they had even told her what was happening today. He didn’t have to, though, her expression was enough to give away that she knew; a mixture of curiosity, pity and what she was probably hoping was a comforting smile. Bucky must have told her at some point during the week, probably while Steve was working.

She didn’t say a word as she put her book down and got off the couch to go over to Bucky, then waited for him to finish locking the door. When he turned around, she wrapped her arms around his middle and buried her face against his chest. A ghost of a smile tugged at Bucky’s lips as he hugged her back and rested his chin on top of her head, but it was like he didn’t quite have the energy to turn it into a full smile.

“How’d it go?” She asked quietly, her voice a little muffled.

“It sucked.” Bucky muttered in return, a pout on his lips.

Steve rested a hand on Bucky’s arm around Becca for a second in silent comfort, then went to put the ice cream away for later, leaving the siblings alone for a moment.

He busied himself making tea for everyone to give Bucky some time alone with his sister, either to go over what happened or to just sit together. When he carried the tray into the living room Bucky and Becca were sat on the couch together, his right arm draped over her shoulders and her head resting on his shoulder. It was a cute image, and Steve couldn’t help but smile as he put the tray down on the coffee table in front of them.

They both smiled and thanked Steve, and seeing them both smiling wide, sat so close together, Steve was struck not for the first time by their close resemblance. If it weren’t for the height and age difference they could almost be mistaken for twins like this, but Steve kept the thought to himself as he moved the cups closer to the right people.

While he was fussing with the cups he could practically feel Bucky roll his eyes, and he wasn’t particularly surprised when Bucky’s arm came out to catch his hip and pull him down next to him. He laughed and rolled his eyes himself as he snuggled up to Bucky’s other side. He didn’t realise at first, but the arm that had dragged him down and was currently draped over his shoulders was the prosthetic. Bucky hadn’t been hyperaware of it or way too careful. He just used it like he would his other arm, and Steve smiled wider to himself at the thought, again keeping it to himself to not draw attention to it.

They stayed like that, the ice cream forgotten in the freezer and the three of them watching TV, until Becca made a psst noise. Steve looked over at her and she held her finger near Bucky’s chest and pointed up. He took the hint and looked up, almost laughing at the sight. Bucky still had his arms around Steve and Becca, and his head had lolled back against the back of the couch, eyes closed and his mouth hanging open a little. Fast asleep.

He looked adorable and it felt like a crime to disrupt him, but if he carried on sleeping like was he was bound to get a painful crick in his neck, so Steve reluctantly sat up as Becca did the same.
“Buck…” He spoke quietly as he rested a hand on his chest, giving him a small nudge.

“Is he dead?” Becca asked in a joking manner when he didn’t reply, and Steve managed a small laugh.

His heart wasn’t really in it though, the memories of Brock taking Bucky away more prominent in his mind after today’s events, as well as the memories of the nightmares he had had in which Steve saw Bucky die. He tried not to think of them as much as possible, but sometimes little things would bring back the mental image in full-force, so quickly that Steve couldn’t stop it. Sometimes it was little jokes, like the one Becca had just made, sometimes it was when Bucky made a noise in his sleep when he himself had nightmares, noises that sounded like the ones his brain had leant to the image of Bucky being choked. Sometimes it was something as stupid as Bucky tilting his head a certain way to ease a tense muscle or something, reminded Steve of Bucky reaching out for his help and Steve being unable to get to him.

Luckily Bucky woke up before his mind was given the chance to jump too far into the possible scenario that the stress of today had given Bucky a heart attack – or an aneurism, or a stroke – and he had died between them without Becca or Steve even realising it…

Steve really should take a moment of self-reflection one of these days and try to figure out why his mind always jumped to such horrifying assumptions at every given opportunity, but today was not that day. Today he was looking after Bucky.

“Come on, let’s go sleep upstairs. You’re neck’s gonna be killing you if you sleep like that.” Steve explained, and Bucky groaned as he pushed himself to sit up, reluctantly taking his arms off of Becca and Steve.

“Will you stay with me?” His voice was so quiet and raw that Steve felt his chest ache in response to the vulnerability he heard there.

Becca looked like she was about to make fun of him, like she usually did when he and Steve were acting all loved up, and Steve tensed slightly. This wasn’t just Bucky being a sap, he was genuinely vulnerable and fragile right now, and Becca’s teasing would not be taken as lightly as it usually was; it would hurt.

But she seemed to realise that before she could open her mouth, because the smirk was quickly wiped from her face and she bit her lip as she watched Bucky closely. Maybe her eyes teared up at the sight of her big brother like that, or maybe Steve imagined it. He didn’t get a good enough look before he was tugging Bucky up off of the couch.

“Of course, baby.” He assured Bucky quietly as he led him to the stairs.

Bucky called out a belated ‘bye’ to Becca, but she didn’t respond past waving a hand, her other hand covering her mouth. Yeah, Steve was pretty sure he didn’t imagine the tears he saw in Becca’s grey-blue eyes – the same eyes as her brother’s – and he felt like he should talk to her, explain that Bucky was okay, just a little drained, but Bucky needed him right now. He would explain to Becca later.

Steve got into bed with Bucky and tucked the covers around him, making sure he was comfortable before he himself laid down beside him, his arms wrapped tight around Bucky’s shoulders as Bucky rested his head on Steve’s chest.

As he held him tight, he felt Bucky’s breathing slow and even out to indicate that he was falling back to sleep.
Bucky only slept for an hour or so, just a relatively short nap to recharge after the draining experiences of the day so far. Despite the fact that he didn’t sleep much this time, it brought to light how often Bucky slept in general and Steve was a little concerned about that. Maybe he should bring it up to him some time, maybe Bucky needed to go back onto the antidepressants he had been prescribed before Steve had known him. But that was a conversation for a less emotional day; he didn’t want to pile too much on Bucky at once.

When Bucky woke up, they both stayed in bed a little while longer, just kissing and touching before Steve eventually pulled himself away with great difficulty. As much as Steve wanted to stay curled up with Bucky, he had to speak to Becca and make sure she was alright. He didn’t want that responsibility to fall on Bucky’s shoulders. Steve appreciated that she was Bucky’s sister, and Bucky would feel responsible for making sure she was okay, but Steve wanted to give him a break from responsibility today. He didn’t tell Bucky where he was going, just told him he would be back in a little while. Bucky didn’t seem too bothered and just nodded in response, closing his eyes as he stretched out on the bed to take up the space Steve vacated.

Becca called out for him to come in when he knocked lightly on her bedroom door, and Steve smiled a little in what he hoped was a reassuring way when he saw her.

She was at her desk, doing homework, and Steve tried to fight a wave of guilt when he realised that Becca had homework to do during the winter break and neither he nor Bucky had thought to ask her if she did. Of course Bucky had an excuse, but Steve didn’t. He was supposed to have been taking care of Becca while Bucky was gone and while he recovered, and he hadn’t thought to ask about homework, even after it had been made so clear how much her school work meant to her, given that she wanted to get into Julliard. The winter break was almost over now, though it felt like it had been going on forever. She would have to go back to school soon and Steve wondered how she felt about that, but that was a conversation for another time.

“Hey, just wanted to make sure you’re okay…” He asked as he came in and closed the door behind him, moving to sit on her bed behind her desk chair.

She turned in her chair to face him and smiled, the same false smile Bucky wore when he didn’t want anyone to worry about him.

“I’m fine.”

He watched her for a moment before speaking again. “It’s okay if you’re not… A lot has happened, it’s okay if you’re upset or overwhelmed.”

“He’s alive.” Becca shrugged, referring to Bucky. “I should be grateful, right? It could have been so much worse…”

“Yeah, it could have.” Steve agreed, quickly trying to push away the mental images from his dreams that threatened to resurface again, showing him just how much worse it could have been. “But it could have been better too. It could have never happened at all. Just because it could have been worse doesn’t mean you can’t be upset about how it went.”

Becca watched him for a moment, as if the second she agreed and opened up to him, Steve would laugh in her face and tell her to grow up and stop being so ungrateful about having her brother back. But surely they know each other well enough by now, after everything they had been through together, for her to know that Steve wouldn’t do that, right?

Just when Steve was trying to formulate a speech to give her about how he was there for her, and
she could talk to him about anything, Becca interrupted his thoughts by finally speaking up.

“I’m angry.”

She left it at that, but Steve knew that that wasn’t it. There must have been more she wanted to say; Becca had been so strong and kept it together for the most part. Surely she had more to say about the situation than just stating that she was angry.

Steve didn’t have to wait long, but he was glad he did because Becca practically exploded. And she seemed like she had really needed to.

“I’m angry that bad things keep happening to him! First, what happened with our parents. He had to give up any aspirations he had of making a life for himself so that he could take care of me instead. He was barely older than a kid himself, and suddenly he had to take on the role of a parent! He worked long hours of physically strenuous work so that I could stay in the house I grew up in, with him, instead of being sent off to some distant relatives, who don’t give a damn about us miles away from my school and my friends. None of his previous boyfriends treated him anywhere close to how he deserves; most of them treating him like absolute dirt. Brock worst of all! Then, when he finally got smart enough to see how shitty Brock treated him, and that Bucky didn’t deserve that, it didn’t exactly do anyone a whole lot of good!” She was starting to get heated now, and she pushed herself up from her chair to pace the room as she continued.

“He stalked him for months before finally laying off. Months! But then he seemed to give up! And things were good again. Then he met you, and things were great. He finally had someone who appreciated how awesome Bucky was and treated him how he should be treated, but I should have known the good wasn’t going to last forever! I should have known that Brock was never going to just give up and back off, and I should have known someone as awesome as you wasn’t going to stick around and put up with this shit forever! I let my guard down, and Brock came back. He showed up at the Halloween party and I hid in the kitchen! I let Bucky handle it alone! He started working with Bucky and I let it slide again. My brother does everything he can to protect me and I can never return the favour, I can never protect him when he needs it, and because of that he got hurt so bad! And I couldn’t do anything! He is permanently disfigured because of Brock and I couldn’t stop it! For the rest of his life he is going to have a reminder of what Brock did, he is never going to be the same again! Never going to heal! Because I couldn’t protect the only family I have left! All I can ever do is sit on the side-lines and watch as people hurt the most important person in my life over and over again and I can’t stop it!”

By this point Steve was a little worried Bucky would come to see what all the yelling was about, but he was more worried that Becca was going to hyperventilate. The hallway outside Becca’s bedroom remained silent and the only sounds within the room were Becca’s laboured breathing as Steve stood and pulled her in for a hug, which she gladly accepted with a sob.

At some point she had been running her fingers through her hair almost frantically, causing the long curls to become messy and tangled, and she practically collapsed against Steve while they hugged now that the anger she had kept buried for god-knows-how-long was finally released.

Steve rubbed her back as she sobbed against his shoulder. She was the second Barnes he had held through a minor breakdown today, but he would never complain about this. It was awful that they were both going through things that upset them so much, but Steve was happy to be there, to be able to help them through it in some way or another, even if it was just as a shoulder to cry on.

After a while her crying subsided to little hiccups, but Steve kept holding on to her until she pulled back first. She looked embarrassed, and Steve reached up to wipe her tears away with his thumb as he smiled in a way that he hoped was more comforting than pitying.
There were a few things from Becca’s speech that he felt the need to address. A lot of things, actually, but he tried to focus on one at a time.

“First thing’s first… What did you mean when you said you knew someone like me wasn’t going to stick around forever?” He asked quietly as he guided her to sit on the bed, sitting next to her with her hands clasped in his.

That part related directly to Steve, so he figured it would be the easiest thing for him to address without having to speak on behalf of Bucky or anyone else. Whatever Becca meant, she had said this good thing would come to an end, and Steve was certain that he could reassure her that it wasn’t about to end if Steve had anything to do with it.

She ducked her head to hide behind her hair and sniffled slightly before replying, barely above a whisper. “You’re going to leave… Maybe not yet because you’d look like an asshole if you left your newly disabled boyfriend so soon after a traumatic event, but once it’s been a socially acceptable amount of time you’ll find a reason to leave him that doesn’t involve admitting it’s because he’s disabled now.”

She explained it all in a rush, and Steve sighed when he realised how familiar this conversation was. Becca and Bucky didn’t just look alike, they were so similar in so many other ways too. He was sure he had had this conversation with Bucky before, needing to assure him that Steve loved him and he wasn’t going to leave because Bucky got hurt.

“I’m not going anywhere, Becca.” He spoke clearly, making sure his tone of voice gave her no room for doubt. “I am irrevocably in love with your brother, and I’m never going to leave. As long as he wants me, I’ll be here.”

That seemed to ease one worry a little, and she smiled at him as some of the tension eased from her shoulders.

“Most of the others barely acknowledged my existence…” She continued, then barked out a laugh. “‘Most of the others’… I’m making him sound like such a slut.”

Steve chuckled with her, but he shook his head a little to show that he didn’t think that.

“It’s okay, I know there were others before me. He’s a handsome guy, I can’t blame him.” He shrugged and Becca laughed again, shaking her head too.

“I few months ago I would have told you not to let him hear you say that, his ego doesn’t need the help… But now I think it might do him some good to hear that kind of romantic crap.”

Steve rolled his eyes at the choice of words for the last part, but before he could respond Becca spoke again.

“Anyway. Most of them didn’t acknowledge my existence, most hated how Bucky took care of me. Only a few talked to me, but mostly only to get in Bucky’s good books. They never actually cared about me or wanted to know anything about me. They were just using me to get to Bucky, and using how close me and Bucky are to get into Bucky’s pants.”

Steve was pretty sure he would never stop being surprised by how flippantly Becca talked about her brother’s sex life, but he supposed that came from them being so close. Still, he was a little confused about how they could use Bucky’s relationship with Becca to get him into bed. Becca seemed to understand what Steve was thinking, because she elaborated without needing to be prompted.
“They’d talk to me for like, five minutes while Bucky finished getting ready for a date or something. Pretend to be interested in my interests, then get to the point. They all asked me to tell Bucky that they were such great guys. The most irritating thing is I actually fell for it the first few times, they talked to me so I thought they were great. Convinced Bucky to keep seeing them, then they turned out to be assholes and it was my fault he was with them.”

She sighed, then took a deep breath as if to brace herself for her own next words, her eyes down as if looking at Steve for the next part would be too difficult.

“I thought Brock was great when I first met him... I thought Nat just talked shit about him because they were related and that’s just how they were with each other… I told Bucky to decide for himself whether or not Brock is worth his time, not let Nat decide for him… Brock has that bad boy attitude that every teenager thinks is awesome, and he actually talked to me a lot. He remembered stuff I was interested in and talked to me about it every time we saw each other. The fact that he bothered to remember, and he never asked me to put in a good word with Bucky was a nice change…”

That wasn’t what Steve was expecting. He wasn’t sure if it had just been his own mind filling in blanks and assuming that Becca had always hated Brock or if she had told him she always hated him before. If she had, she must have lied, and Steve understood why; there was clearly guilt evident in her voice. She felt bad for liking her brother’s abuser at one point in time, and she felt like this was somehow her fault for not hating him the entire time.

“Didn’t last long though... Barely a week after they became official I saw how Brock treated Bucky differently – worse… Bucky didn’t seem to notice the change, so maybe he had always been treating him horribly, just not around me at first so that no one could point out to Bucky how wrong his behaviour was, so instead all Bucky heard was everything talking about how great Brock was. I don’t know. All I know is that I should have stopped it.” She sighed again and rubbed her eyes.

“That’s not true.” Steve insisted. “There’s no way you could have known how bad he really was; abusers work pretty hard to keep the abuse relatively under wraps until they’re sure that, if someone like you were to see it, they could easily explain it away to their victim or brainwash the victim into thinking that the concerned family member is overreacting. As much as it pains me to say it, from what I’ve heard about when Bucky was with Brock, the guy was good as what he was doing. He knew just how to manipulate Bucky, and you, to get what he wanted.”

Becca sighed a little and nodded. Though she still seemed down, she did also seem like she accepted what Steve said.

“You can’t blame yourself for any of this. Nothing bad that has ever happened to Bucky has been your fault. That I know of. Maybe when you were a toddler you hit him in the balls with a baseball or something, I don’t know your whole lives.”

He had said the last part as a joke, and he was relieved to hear Becca bark out a laugh in response before correcting him. “Tennis ball.”

That made Steve laugh a little too before he continued.

“You’re still a kid, Becca. And you were an even younger kid back when all of this started, you can’t be held responsible for anything. The only one who is at fault here is Brock. And that friend of his, Jack. But not you. I know that, when bad things happen… like what happened with your parents… It’s easy to feel like you’re expected to grow up so much faster—”
“Bucky had to.”

“I know. And that sucks. But you don’t. Bucky grew up fast so that you wouldn’t have to, so that you could still be taken care of and you could still be a kid. I know you want to protect him in return, but you have to understand that no one is expecting you to. He doesn’t expect that from you, no one does, and you’re not letting him down when bad things happen to him.”

Becca’s eyes were filled with tears again when he finished, but she was nodded in understanding. Steve understood why she was upset; everyone likes to believe that they can and should protect the one’s they love. Everyone wants to be able to shield their loved ones from all the awful things and people in the world, and it hurts when they’re hit with the realisation that it’s not always possible.

He didn’t want to crush Becca’s hope that she could protect her brother, but he couldn’t let her allow guilt to eat her up over something she had no control over.

He couldn’t assure her that she could just protect him better the next time he needed it; she would spend her days on edge waiting for the next time she can jump to her brother’s aid and prove herself. It was too much pressure to put on a teenager.

So Steve decided to assure her of the next best thing.

“Besides, you don’t have to protect him on your own anymore. I’m here, and I can keep an eye out for him enough for the both of us, so you don’t have to worry.” He started, then squeezed Becca’s hands a little as he continued. “I know I haven’t exactly done a great job so far, but I promise I will guard him with my life from now on.”

He had half expected Becca to point out that he hadn’t exactly kept Bucky safe either, and boy had that been plaguing on Steve’s mind for a while, but instead she nodded and pulled her hands out of Steve’s to throw her arms around his shoulders in another hug.

“He’s lucky to have you, Steve. We both are.”

The words warmed Steve’s heart, and he silently vowed to himself that he wasn’t going to give her reason to regret that statement.

He would never let anything bad happen to either of them again.

End Notes

The next chapter will be up soon, please let me know what you think :)

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