The Road to Courage (By Way of San Francisco)

by Sproings

Summary

A road trip with Bucky sounded great. Except for the corporate sponsorship. And the strangers who’d be going with them. And the way Bucky always said they were “practically brothers” when Steve wanted ...

He tried not to think about what he wanted.

It was going to be a long drive to California.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Steve knew without looking that Bucky’s eyes were lighting up.

He looked anyway.

Yep. Bucky was grinning at him from the next computer over, his eyes all sparkly. He was wearing a gray hoodie, so his eyes looked storm cloud blue at the moment. Sparkly storm cloud blue, Steve amended to himself. If Bucky had been wearing his blue hoodie, his eyes would have been a deep, intense blue that would have been even harder to resist.

Steve’s own eyes were just a boring medium blue that only changed if he wore colored contacts. He had tried that once, and despite how careful he’d been, within a week he’d gotten a matching set of eye infections. Boring was better than disgusting, so he’d stuck with wearing glasses after that.

Steve tried to give Bucky a subtle quelling look, because Professor Fury was still talking.

Bucky had never been quelled in his life, though, and certainly not through subtlety. He bounced in his chair and nudged Steve with his elbow.

Steve ignored him and focused on the Professor.

“Turn in your applications by the 16th. I’ll announce the winners on the 18th. That will leave you nine days for planning and driving, so if you think you have a chance ...” (Professor Fury’s eye lingered on Steve and Bucky just a little too long.) “You might want to start planning now. Class dismissed.”

Bucky immediately grabbed Steve by the shoulders. “This is so great! We’ll get to see the whole country together.”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself there, Buck,” said Steve.

“Pfft.” Bucky let go of Steve so he could wave his hands dismissively. “You know we’re the best. Fury practically said the spot is ours.”

“If we want it,” said Steve.

Bucky’s face fell. “Don’t we?”

Steve looked down at the table. “It’s a long time to be stuck in a car with a bunch of strangers.”

“A bunch -- Steve, it’s two other people, from this class. And it’s only a week and a half.”

“You planning on teleporting back?”

“Fine, smartass. Two weeks. Is this about the video thing?”

Steve looked up at him. He was never quite sure if he was glad that Bucky could read him so well, or really annoyed by it.
Students from the next class were filing into the room. Steve took the opportunity to stall, saying, “Let’s get out of here,” as he grabbed his backpack.

Bucky stacked all his books and tucked them under his arm. They stood up at the same time, bumping lightly into each other, as usual, and shuffled out to the hall together.

“You’re great on camera, Steve,” Bucky said about half-way down the hallway.

Steve didn’t quite believe that, but it wasn’t the real problem, either. He wasn’t immune to the corny attraction of a theme like ‘Our Nation’s Treasures: From Sea to Shining Sea,’ but the corporate sponsorship was troubling. “I don’t want to be some talking head, is all. What if I want to dye my hair blue, or pierce my nose?”

“If you pierce your nose, it’ll probably get gangrene and fall off. But hell, you could do your hair a different color every day. We could make it a feature of the show. Have people vote for what color you do next.”

“Nobody’s voting on my hair color. That’s sort of the opposite of the point.”

“I dunno, they couldn’t do worse than this shitty green you’ve got going on,” Bucky said, grinning and reaching out to ruffle Steve’s hair.

Steve swatted his hands away and managed not to grin back. Instead he lifted his chin and said loftily, “Self-expression isn’t always about beauty. At least, not for deep people.”

“Something sure is getting deep around here. Smells like bullshit to me.”

It was bullshit. Steve knew his current dye job looked awful, he just hadn’t had time to fix it yet.

He couldn’t help but appreciate all the things Bucky wasn’t saying. This might be their only chance to really travel together. Flying wasn’t an option with Steve’s heart condition, and they couldn’t afford even a road trip while they were paying for college. After that ... Steve tried not to think too much about after that.

They were at the Commons by then, both of them settling in at their regular table. They’d arranged their schedules together, so they had all the same classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Steve pulled out his sketchbook and Bucky leaned against his shoulder to watch him draw. It was a habit they’d fallen into years ago, and Steve liked trying to sketch things in an entertaining way, hoping to make Bucky smile with a last minute detail that changed the story of the whole picture.

This time he penciled in a raccoon, quirking its mouth into a grumpy sneer and standing it upright on its hind legs. Finally, he gave the raccoon a ridiculously huge gun to hold, and was rewarded with a little huff of a laugh next to his ear.

Then Bucky suddenly sat upright and started sorting through his papers.

Steve leaned back, content to watch Bucky’s latest flurry of activity, knowing he’d get an explanation eventually. He recognized the application for Professor Fury’s project when Bucky slapped it down on the table.

Bucky read aloud, “The completed podcast must be exactly 10 minutes long. It must consist of both audio and video elements. It may not include interviews or other participation from anyone outside of class. Students may work alone or in groups. The winning applications -- blah blah blah. Steve, that’s it!”
“What’s what?” Steve asked, a little worried now, because Bucky had that look on his face. The one that meant Bucky had an Idea, with a capital I.

Bucky’s Ideas always ended in some spectacular fashion. Like the time Steve had chipped a tooth, ("Those three stairs are lava. We gotta jump over them.") or the time Bucky had broken an arm, ("Bet I can flip that skateboard!") or ... ("You could live with me. Just until your mom gets better. I’ll take care of you.")("Digital Broadcasting sounds like a fun class.")("Let’s be best friends forever, Stevie.")

“You could draw,” Bucky said, and the sky outside the window made his eyes an impossible electric blue. "It doesn’t say that we have to be on camera, just that we need a ‘video element’. So we can film you drawing, like stop motion or something --"

“Green screen,” Steve said, finishing the thought almost automatically.

“Exactly!” Bucky grinned. “Film it like the picture is drawing itself, while we talk in the background, same as always. We are so gonna win this. And after that, we’ll get to ...” Bucky switched to a cheesy announcer voice, “ ‘participate in a unique, expense paid, cross country tour, courtesy of Pym Technologies. Winning students from Kirby University will plan their own route, providing video content as they traverse our great nation --’ Seriously? Who wrote this?” Bucky tossed the application back on the table and slung his arm around Steve’s shoulders. “What do you say? Want to go see America together?”

“Sure Buck,” said Steve, because he never had been able to resist Bucky’s Ideas. Not once.

###

Bucky had never actually come out to Steve. He hadn’t needed to, after that night Freshman year when Steve had come back to their dorm and walked in on Bucky with Wade.

To this day, Steve wasn’t sure exactly what they’d been doing, but he knew that it involved lots of paintball splatters and virtually no clothes. Just Wade’s t-shirt, which Bucky was clutching tight.

That was all Steve saw before he spun on his heel and left.

He checked when he got back into the hallway, but there hadn’t been anything hanging from their doorknob, and there weren’t any texts from Bucky on his phone.

He wandered down the hall and propped himself in the corner of the stairwell. Maybe he should be mad at Bucky for not warning him. Every time Bucky had been in their room with a girl, he’d texted Steve ahead of time.

But he wasn’t with a girl. He was with Wade Wilson.

He probably hadn’t texted because it hadn’t been a plan.

Steve could picture how it had happened. The two of them laughing into each other, playfully nudging each other. Wade suddenly pushing Bucky against a wall and crushing their mouths together, running his hands through Bucky’s hair. Bucky grinning, his lips dark red, as Wade hooked a leg around Bucky’s hip --

Maybe he shouldn’t have pictured it. Wade was athletic, funny, impulsive, and Bucky ... Oh, Bucky.

Steve wasn’t mad. He was confused and lonely and ...
He hoped that they enjoyed it. Hoped it would turn into something tender and passionate and real for them.

For the next six months, it had.

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Steve hunched over the table that sat between the living room area and the kitchen area in their little apartment, aiming a camera at a sheet of paper.

Getting the drawings to show up on film wasn’t as easy as it sounded.

Pencil was just too faint. Ballpoint pen wasn’t much better. Sharpies were nice and bold, but the smell of them had Steve teetering on the edge of a migraine within minutes. Bucky noticed the way he’d been rubbing his right eye and made him put away the markers and sit on the couch.

“I don’t like the way the ink bleeds, anyway,” Bucky said, handing Steve his water bottle and some painkillers.

Steve swallowed the pills and took a drink. “I don’t like how it feels when it drags, either,” he admitted. “I wish I had something more slick.”

Bucky snorted. “I’m pretty sure I’ve got some lube around somewhere.”

Steve flipped him off, closing his eyes because everything had turned too bright.

“Yeah, fingers are a good place to start,” Bucky said. Steve knew Bucky was smirking. Bucky always smirked when he tried to shock Steve with how gay he was.

Steve had never come out to Bucky, either. It just hadn’t come up, and, well, why did it matter that he was bi? He had never dated a guy, certainly never kissed one. He didn’t really want to, for the most part.

He forced his eyes open. Bucky was indeed smirking, though it was quickly morphing into a look of concern, his lips falling out of that curve that only Bucky seemed to be able to make and settling into something like a pout.

Steve closed his eyes again, and felt the couch dip under Bucky’s weight. Familiar hands brushed his shoulders, and Steve let himself be tugged around to lean back against Bucky’s chest. Strong, sure fingers made their way into his hair. Steve didn’t like anyone touching his hair, for the most part.

Only Bucky.

He had a vague memory of sitting in his room, holding his head because he felt like it was flying apart. He had told Bucky that, or something like that, and Bucky hadn’t said a thing, he’d just threaded his fingers into Steve’s hair to help keep him together. He’d been doing it ever since, whenever the headaches were bad.

“We’ll figure something out,” Bucky said, trailing his fingers over the short, short hairs at Steve’s temples and up into the much longer hair along the top of his head.

“Crayons,” Steve muttered, with a smirk of his own.

“We’ll figure something out,” Bucky said. “Though they’re not exactly slick.” He lingered over the word, and ran
his thumbs up the base of Steve’s skull. It felt too good for Steve to be annoyed.

“Finger paint?” Steve said, and for no reason at all, he found himself picturing Bucky’s hands, covered in paint, sliding over Steve’s scalp, over Steve’s skin, leaving behind trails of color, all slippery and wet -- Migraines made him think the weirdest things. “Or maybe the paper is the problem,” he said.

“Oh yeah? What else could you draw on?” Bucky asked. He was making little circles with his fingers, just behind Steve’s ears. It was so nice.

Steve tried to think of something smooth and flat. “Glass.”

“You can draw on glass?”

Could he? “Um, yeah. Dry erase markers can.”

Those probably give you a headache too, though, right?”

“I don’t think so,” Steve answered. There was one on the fridge, and he didn’t remember it causing him any trouble. “I can test it later. On a whiteboard though, not glass. Crisp lines. No drag.”

“Sounds good,” said Bucky. “Want to turn on the tv?”

“Okay.” Steve picked up the remote, careful to stay within Bucky’s reach, and hit the power button.

They watched cartoons for an hour, and Bucky’s hands never stopped their soft movements through Steve’s hair.

* * *

Dry erase markers did not give Steve a headache (as long as he used the low odor kind and didn’t put his nose too close). And the whiteboard was exactly what he wanted for this project, clean and fast with lots of color options, and the added bonus of erasing instantly. That opened a wide array of storytelling options that he hadn’t had with paper.

As a test run, Steve sketched out the skyline. He started with the Chrysler Building and built up chronologically from there.

The World Trade Center Towers were some of the last to go up.

They were the only ones to come down.

Steve hesitated. Erasing them seemed so wrong. He tried to do it respectfully, a slow sweep with a white tissue, doing his best not to let his hand shake.

After that he drew in the new tower, first as an empty framework, then gradually adding in the glass exterior, until the vaguely leaf-shaped building was complete.

When he finished, he made a copy of the video and sped it up to fit the ten minute time limit.

“Hey Bucky,” he called when it finally finished rendering. “Come tell me what you think.”

“I think Differential Equations suck,” Bucky answered blearily, walking over to slump on the couch beside Steve. “I never want to see another array in my life.”
“There, there,” said Steve, patting Bucky’s head. “Only two more weeks until finals, and then --”

“Oh god, I do not want to talk about finals,” Bucky moaned.

“You’ll do fine. You always do.” Steve dropped his hand to Bucky’s shoulder and rubbed his thumb into the tense muscle there.

Bucky closed his eyes and leaned into Steve’s touch for a minute. Then he sighed and said, “Okay, you gotta either give me a massage or show me your thing.”

Steve couldn’t help it, he cracked up laughing. “Sure, Buck. I’ll show you my thing. You’ll love it. My thing is awesome.”

“I’m sure it is,” Bucky said, grinning.

Steve shook his head and pulled his computer around, resting it on their knees.

“Oh cool,” Bucky said as the buildings started to appear. “Were you thinking Buster and Charlie for this?”

Buster and Charlie were characters that Steve and Bucky had developed back in high school for their speech team, and had been using ever since. Two guys in their nineties who snarked constantly at each other and refused to fit into old people stereotypes. They were based on various neighbors in the building Steve and Bucky grew up in, and on Steve’s fascination with history. They named them The Brooklyn Codgers, in honor of the baseball team that belonged in their hometown, even if the team had left long before they were born.

“I wasn’t planning anything for it. It’s just a test run,” Steve admitted, pushing up his glasses.

“It’s perfect, though. God, you’re amazing at this.”

Steve didn’t have an answer for that. They watched in silence for a few minutes.

“Oh,” Bucky said when the Towers disappeared.

“Too much?” Steve asked.

“No, it needs to be there. It’s part of the story. I think we have to keep your hand in the shot, though. If it was green screened out, the whole thing would be too cold. You okay with that?”

“Sure,” said Steve. “I’ll just wear long sleeves, in case I decide to get a tattoo.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “You’d end up with hepatitis or something.”

“Nobody lives forever.”

“Yeah, but I expect you to try.”

* * *

Finals week didn’t kill them, although Bucky made it seem like a near thing, and the application video turned out fantastic. Even Steve could admit it. He remade the skyline drawing, and they synchronized it so that one minute of the final video equalled 10 years of construction. He even included a date at the bottom, which he corrected and re-corrected as the Codgers argued with each other over what year things were built. It was funny and informative and poignant.
Professor Fury called Bucky’s phone first, and Steve got to watch a huge grin spread across Bucky’s face as he heard the results. That, combined with the way Bucky asked, “Who else is going?” made it pretty clear that they’d won.

It got a lot more clear after Bucky hung up, because he charged across the room and wrapped Steve in a hug, chanting, “We did it, we did it, we did it!”

Steve laughed and hugged him back. “Should we celebrate, or start packing?”

“Both?”

“Right, we’ll pack first, and then celebrate. Hey, who else won?”

“Sam Wilson, and Natasha. Oh, and Hill,” said Bucky.

Steve had never met Sam, but Maria Hill was Professor Fury’s TA, and Natasha was an old friend from high school. She might even be an old girlfriend. Steve wasn’t sure. He had thought they were regular friends. Except one time she had kissed him. She didn’t say why, though, so she probably had some other reason.

He was pretty sure she would have told him if they had been dating.

Bucky turned up some music and danced his way over to the closet to pull out a pair of battered old suitcases. Steve shimmied his shoulders to the music as he started a list of what to pack. Bucky’s eyes lit up at the sight.

“C’mon, dance with me Rogers!”

“Bucky ... “ Steve whined.

“It’s a once in a lifetime thing. You’ve got to. Pleeeeeease?”

Steve rolled his eyes, but he got to his feet. He sort of bounced around as Bucky danced, and really, it was worth it just to see Bucky so happy.

It was also worth it just to see Bucky move.

Steve tried not to think about it very often, but Bucky was really great looking. Especially when he raised his arms over his head and rocked his hips like that. Wow.

But Bucky thought of Steve like a brother. He told people that all the time, and Steve knew it was meant to be a compliment, even if it felt like (rejection) something else.

They were celebrating, though, so just for now, Steve let himself see sculpted abs and broad shoulders. Bucky’s eyes looked dark gray, and he danced a little closer, his exquisite lips curving in a playful smile, and --

Steve’s phone rang.

“That’s probably Fury,” Bucky said, going to turn down the music.

Steve hit the button to answer his phone. “Hello?”

“Hello Steve,” said a voice that was very definitely not Professor Fury’s.

“Peggy?” Steve said, and Bucky’s eyes went wide.
“I’m so glad I caught you,” Peggy said. “We were in the middle of planning the seating arrangements, and I realized you hadn’t sent a response, so I thought I’d ring you up.”

“Uh, what?” Steve said. He’d apparently forgotten the trick of speaking coherently to her in the two years since he’d last done it.

“I know it’s a long way, but I was so hoping you could come.”

“I’m sorry, Peggy, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The wedding,” she said, as if it should be obvious.

“I ... Wedding? Is it ... You’re getting married?” Steve said.

Bucky’s mouth dropped open and his forehead crinkled. He turned off the music.

“Oh, didn’t you get your invitation?” Peggy asked.

“I guess not.”

“I see,” Peggy said gently. “Perhaps it would be better if I sent the information in an email.”

“Yeah, that -- I’ll get back to you as soon as -- Yeah,” Steve said, trying to open his laptop.

“All right. Well. I look forward to hearing from you.”

“Sure thing. Bye Peggy.”

“Goodbye.”

When Steve hung up, Bucky asked, “You okay?”

“Yeah. Of course.” The email wouldn’t be there yet, but Steve was pretty sure Peggy was still on Facebook, because all her relatives were in England. Luckily, the computer remembered his old password.

Bucky put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Look, I’m sure you’re way better looking than whoever this guy is. You really don’t need to -- Oh, wow.”

Steve had found engagement pictures. Peggy was as beautiful as ever, dark red lips contrasting with soft, pale skin, and she looked radiantly happy.

Her fiancee was equally beautiful. Fairy princess beautiful, with dark skin and luminous eyes.

“No Bucky, I’m nowhere near as pretty as ... Janet van Dyne,” Steve said, reading her name off the tag.

“You still okay?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Bucky just gave him a look.

“I’m okay,” Steve said again. “I’m glad she’s happy.”

“Right,” Bucky said, and he picked up the suitcases again.
He didn’t turn the music back on.

# # #

The first time he met her was at the library. Which made sense, she worked there, and he spent most of his time there while Wade and Bucky --

Well.

Steve used to wait in the dorm lounge, until the time Wade caught him there. He bounded over to Steve, grinning, and said, “Hey, you know you could join us. For watching Fruits Basket, not for the sex. Or, yes for the sex. You could bang me like a bumper car. Want me to ask Bucky if he’d do a threesome?”

“No, no,” Steve said, because he had no interest at all in having sex with Wade. “No. Thanks. I’m just going to go study. At the library.”

And he had. And there was Peggy.

He’d noticed her, of course. How could he not? But he tried not to, focusing instead on his Poli-Sci homework. It worked, too. He got totally engrossed in reading about Robert McNamara and didn’t notice how late it had gotten until there was a tap on his shoulder.

“T’m afraid the library is closing,” Peggy said, and her voice and her accent were both lovely. “But, I was just heading to the coffeeshop around the corner. You could join me, if you wanted some company.”

He thought about saying ‘no thank you,’ because he didn’t even know her. He could practically hear Bucky laughing at him for that though, saying ‘that’s how you get to know people’, and she seemed nice, and she was smiling at him.

So he said, “Uh, sure. Yeah.”

“Excellent,” she replied, not seeming to notice how awkward he was.

That’s how it always was with Peggy. She made everything bright and easy and fun.

Even when she left him.

Chapter End Notes

I sort of accidentally wrote a companion fic, Postcards from the Road to Courage, which is mostly from Bucky's point of view. It picks up at chapter five of this fic, and the other chapters are linked along the way.

And here --
That is picture of Janet Van Dyne.
“Is that his girlfriend?” Bucky asked.

“I think she’s his wife,” said Maria.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Wife? How old is he?”

“I have no idea,” said Maria. “Ask him yourself.”

They were standing in the university parking lot, watching Sam Wilson. Steve had seen Sam in class, where he stood out not just as tall, dark, and handsome, but also charming, funny, and wise. It didn’t seem right for them all to be staring as he kissed his wife goodbye.

“Hey, are you going to Peggy’s wedding?” Steve asked Natasha.

“I can’t, it’s -- Wait. It’s in San Francisco. On the 27th.”

“Yeah, she -- “ Steve started, but Natasha interrupted him.

“Her wedding just happens to be on the same weekend that our project is ending, in the same city where our project is ending, on the other side of the country?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “I’m sure it’s all part of a secret plot to overthrow Mexico.”

“I’m just saying it’s one hell of a coincidence,” said Natasha.

“Anyway, were you going to go?” Steve asked. “Because I have to call her back, and I could let her know.”

Natasha squinted at him. “Are you going?”

Steve spread his hands wide. “I guess? We’ll be right there. There’s no reason not to.”

“Except she’s your ex, and you can’t bring a date all the way to San Francisco,” said Natasha.

“Oh, ouch,” said Maria. “Nobody wants to do that alone.”

“Hey, one of you guys could go with him,” said Bucky. “You know, as a fake date.”

Natasha laughed. “Like a rom-com. Then we’d fall in love, but we’d both think the other was only pretending, and there’d be angst and drama and a happily ever after. But it didn’t exactly work out for me and Steve the first time around.”

Shit, she really did think they’d been a couple.

“There was no first time around. And stop trying to set me up, Bucky.” Steve blew a stray hair out of his face, a plain blond hair, because he’d found time to bleach out the shitty green, but not to dye it again. “I can go to the wedding alone. It’s no big deal.”

Natasha and Bucky started talking at the same time, Natasha saying, “We dated for almost a year,” while Bucky said, “Somebody needs to find you a girl.”

“Stealth dates don’t count. And nobody needs to find me anybody. I do fine on my own.”
Steve ground his teeth as he watched Bucky and Natasha share an eyeroll. Before they could mock him any further, he spun on his heel.

And he almost ran into Sam, who had come up behind him carrying a huge, green duffel bag.

“Hi. Sam Wilson,” said Sam, putting his hand out.

Steve shook it. “Steve Rogers. That’s Bucky Barnes and Natasha Romanov. And you probably know Maria Hill.”

“Good to have names for all the faces,” Sam said, giving a wave at everyone. “This our ride?”

Steve turned around to look again at the van that had been provided for them. It was gray, with a big brown Pym Technologies logo on the side. Really. Brown on gray. It was insultingly ugly. “Yeah, and the inside is no better,” he said, yanking open the rear doors.

The van had two bucket seats in the front, a bench seat in the middle, and an empty space in back that was half full of luggage and camera equipment.

“Well. This will be ... cozy,” Sam said. He tossed his duffel in the back and closed the doors.

“We’ll be travelling in style, all right,” said Maria. ”With our fancy van and our two hundred and fifty dollar per diem.”

“I don’t suppose that’s two-fifty each?” Sam asked.

Maria gave a hollow laugh.

“Please tell me you have a plan.”

“I have a plan,” said Maria.

* * *

Maria’s planning skills were the stuff of legend, and it didn’t take long for Steve to see why. As she drove, she told them that she had made up charts for who would drive and for how long, along with estimates for when to buy gas, when to get food, and how much they could afford to spend at each stop, with built in contingencies.

Somewhere in New Jersey, she carefully broached the subject of saving money by sharing hotel rooms. Steve and Bucky both shrugged at the idea of sharing a double bed. They had lived together for years, it wouldn’t be a problem.

“So, how do you two know each other?” Sam asked, and Steve wouldn’t have thought it was possible to sound extremely neutral, but Sam had managed it.

Bucky chuckled and said, “Don’t worry, we’re definitely not a couple.” (The ‘definitely’ seemed really unnecessary.) “Steve is straight, and besides, we’re practically brothers.”

“I’m not straight,” Steve blurted out, stunned that it had finally come up.

“Yes you ... What?” said Bucky, staring.

“I’m not. I’m bi. Or, I guess pan, maybe,” Steve said. “I never really picked a word.”

“Huh.” Bucky blinked, then put in his earbuds and started scrolling through his songs, dismissing
the whole conversation.

“Hey, welcome to the B-side,” said Natasha from the passenger seat, holding her fist out.

Steve bumped it with his own. “Uh, thanks. So, you’re bi, too?”

“Yes,” she said, very casually.

“I didn’t know that I knew anyone else who was,” Steve said.

Maria said, “Oh, you’d be surprised.”

Natasha turned to look at her. “You, too?”

“Uh huh,” Maria said, not taking her eyes off the road.

A silence settled around them. Steve wondered how uncomfortable it was for everyone else.

Sam made an ‘ok’ symbol with his hand and raised an eyebrow at Steve, making it a question.

If Steve hadn’t already started to like Sam, he would have then, because his combination of subtlety and compassion was a rare and wondrous thing.

And maybe Steve hadn’t been able to resist imagining what it would be like to finally come out to Bucky. Maybe Imaginary-Bucky was usually enthusiastic about it, or sometimes angry about it. But Steve had never imagined that Bucky would be totally disinterested.

(“Just until your mom gets better.” But she never had.)

Bucky had literally turned his back on Steve. He was staring out the window, apparently enthralled by New Jersey.

(Steve owed Bucky a debt so immeasurable that Bucky could never owe Steve anything.)

It wouldn’t be reasonable for Steve to feel hurt by it.

(Enthralled by fucking New Jersey.)

Steve was just relieved that Bucky wasn’t mad at him for not telling him sooner. Things could have gone a lot worse.

“I’m fine,” he said quietly to Sam.

Sam nodded thoughtfully.

“Did you want to change your mind about the hotel situation?” Steve asked, a little pointedly.

Sam scoffed. “I’m pretty sure I’ve slept in worse conditions than anything you and Barnes could throw my way.”

Oh, right. Sam was military. “What branch did you serve in?”


“Wow. Isn’t that pretty badass?”

Sam grinned. “Now how am I supposed to answer that? If I said yes, I’d be arrogant, and if I said
no, I’d be dishonest.”

Steve laughed. Sam was amazingly easy to talk to. “Which place did you pick for our trip?”

Maria had arranged their route, but they’d all chosen stops along the way. ‘Our Nation’s Treasures’ was a pretty open ended theme, so it hadn’t been too hard. “Red Rocks Park, in Colorado,” Sam answered.


“Yeah, I haven’t been there, but ... I had a friend who grew up near there. He always said I should see it, so I thought I’d take my chance.”

Steve noticed the way Sam used the past tense, and he didn’t quite know what to say.

Sam made things easy, again, saying, “You picked Gettysburg, right?”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “I’ve always wanted to see it in person. Books aren’t the same.”

“No, they are not,” said Sam.

Steve glanced over at Bucky.

Bucky’s eyes were closed and his mouth had fallen open a little in his sleep. There were shadows under his eyes, and the long line of his neck was exposed, and he was about to slump over against the window.

Steve took off his jacket, rolled it into a ball, and carefully tucked it under Bucky’s head, not waking him.

# # #

The first time Bucky saved his life, Steve was eight years old.

Their class came back from the Music Room to find juice boxes on each of their desks. It was sort of captivating, the way the condensation had gathered on the brightly colored boxes. Trying to stab the straw just right through the little foil divot on top. It tasted pretty good too, like something new.

Steve remembered smiling over at Bucky, and he remembered Bucky smiling back. Bucky’s smiles weren’t rare, but Steve treasured each one, anyway.

He looked down at the juice box again. It had a pink cartoon elephant on it, and he wondered if he could draw one just like it, and he noticed that his tongue was itchy.

He was pretty sure his tongue had never itched before. Mainly because he hadn’t realized that his tongue could itch. It was weird.

Actually, his whole mouth had started to itch. He’d have sworn his teeth itched, and his throat was burning. He coughed, but that only made it feel worse.

He put his hand on his neck, and was surprised that it didn’t feel hot under his fingers. He blinked across the room. Bucky’s smile faltered into a frown.

Steve tried to say Bucky’s name, but nothing came out, only a creaky little grunt. It didn’t seem to matter though, because Bucky was on his feet, crossing the room to him.
That was wrong. It was against the rules. Mrs. Patil must have said something, because Bucky turned to her and said, “He needs help!” without slowing his pace.

Mrs. Patil appeared and held something plastic against Steve’s lips. He finally recognized it as his inhaler, and that was when fear gripped him.

Dr. Molina had been very specific when she’d given it to him. “The word inhaler comes from the word inhale, which means to breathe in. That’s important. You need to breathe in as deep as you can, or else the medicine won’t get to your lungs.”

But right now, Steve couldn’t breathe in at all.

The world was going gray around the edges, and Steve flung out his arms in panic.

Then something punched him in the leg. *Hard.*

He looked down to see Bucky holding the needle he had plunged into Steve’s thigh in one hand, and Sam Alexander’s epi-pen pouch in the other.

A moment later, Steve could breathe again, and all the gray went away, and there were sirens and flashing lights outside.

Bucky didn’t get to ride in the ambulance. It was too bad, he would have thought it was cool. He even thought the bruise on Steve’s thigh was cool.

Bucky was really great that way.

# # #

After a few hours of a weird cow counting game between Maria and Natasha, which Natasha somehow lost when they passed a cemetery, they arrived at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

“Hey Bucky, wake up,” said Steve, jabbing him with his elbow.

“Ow, fucker,” Bucky muttered, rubbing his arm. “Jesus, why didn’t you guys wake me up sooner?”

“You look so cute when you’re asleep,” said Natasha.

“I look cute all the time,” Bucky replied, yawning and stretching and proving himself right.

“Even with dicks drawn all over your face,” said Maria, totally deadpan.

Bucky’s eyes, misty gray like the clouds overhead, went wide. He turned to Steve.

Steve shook his head.

“Jeez, you couldn’t leave him hanging for a little while?” Natasha asked.

Before Steve could answer, Bucky said, “Nah, Steve can’t lie for shit.” He reached over and ruffled Steve’s hair, and Steve couldn’t really dodge in such close quarters. It didn’t last long, anyway, because Bucky blinked and pulled his hand away after a second.

“Excuse me for being honest,” Steve said, smoothing out his hair. Then he handed Bucky a water bottle. “Your breath smells like you could use this.”
Bucky narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath, and Steve half-expected him to lean over and blow in his face. It seemed like the Bucky thing to do. But instead, he smirked and said, “Gee, thanks.”

“The park is pretty big,” Sam said, checking out the map on his phone. “Steve, was there anything specific you wanted to see?”

“Cemetery Ridge,” said Steve, immediately.

Sam nodded. “We should probably stop at the Visitor’s Center first. For restrooms.”

As if on cue, the van’s navigation system said, “Turn left in 1.4 miles, at the Gettysburg National Military Museum Visitor’s Center.”

“Does anyone else find that a little creepy?” Sam asked.

Natasha turned around. “How old are you?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Old enough to know how all the science fiction stories go bad. Next thing you know it’ll be promising you cake at the end of the level.”

“The cake is a lie,” Bucky and Steve said in accidental unison.

Maria laughed. “I’m officially naming her GLaDOS.”

“That’s very reassuring,” said Sam.

* * *

“Nobody told me it was so high,” Steve said breathlessly, as he looked out over the field.

“What?” Bucky said. He was standing over between Natasha and Maria, for some reason.

Steve walked back to them, pulling out his phone, because he was pretty sure he had a picture on it that showed the battlefield. Yep, there. “See that line of trees down there?” he said, pointing. “That’s where Pickett’s division was.” He tilted his phone so that Bucky could come around and see.

But Bucky just stayed where he was and held out his hand.

Steve shrugged and handed over his phone. “They had to cross that whole field, and the road, and then come up this hill.”

Bucky looked at the map, then looked at the field. “The Union would hardly even need to aim from up here. Any shot that missed would hit someone else, instead.”

“Is that a wall?” Natasha asked, pointing at the map and leaning on Bucky’s shoulder.

“Yeah, made of stone,” Steve said.

She looked impressed. “Really well defended.”

“Plus, from down there, the Confederates probably couldn’t even see that their artillery over-shot the Union troops,” Steve said.

Maria nudged his elbow. “Pickett’s Charge was Lee’s idea, right?”
Steve nodded and pushed up his glasses, not used to her standing so close.

“Well, if Lee was so great, then why did he do that? What was he thinking?” Maria asked.

Everyone turned to Steve, even Sam, who had seemed to be absorbed in setting up a camera and tripod. Steve looked out over the field again. “Lee was thinking that he had to lure Grant away from Vicksburg. Because if Grant won there, then the Union would control the Mississippi River, and that would pretty much be the end of it.”

“Did it work?” Maria asked.

“Pickett’s Charge was on July 3rd. Lee’s Army retreated that night. And Vicksburg surrendered to Grant on July 4th.”

Bucky frowned. “Then what should Lee have done?”

“Fought for the Union,” Steve answered, smirking.

Bucky narrowed his eyes and moved his hand, and Steve prepared himself for a noogie attack, but it didn’t happen. Instead, Bucky asked, “Can you show all that on your whiteboard, nerdbrain?”

“Of course I can, assbutt,” Steve said.

Bucky did not shoot back with his usual retort about what a fine and lovely assbutt it was. (One time he had used the word ‘pert’ and Steve had collapsed on the floor laughing.) “Okay. Well, I’m going to go with Nat to get some b-roll,” he said.

Steve blinked at him. Maria or Sam could probably help with the filming, but ...

(They had always been a pair.)

It was fine. They should both branch out more, especially in a group project like this. Work with the whole team, not just with each other.

“Sure, whatever,” Steve said.

So Bucky didn’t watch Steve draw. Not the standard battlefield map, not the horizontal view, not the US map that showed where Vicksburg, Mississippi and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania were.

He didn’t steal any of Steve’s french fries at lunch, because he was too far away.

He didn’t sit in the backseat with Steve. He sat up front with Sam.

Somewhere along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, a weirdly forbidding highway that left Steve feeling like he was being judged and found wanting, Natasha’s head settled onto Steve’s shoulder.

Maria looked at Steve. Looked at Natasha. Handed Steve one of his dry erase markers.

“I’m not drawing dicks,” Steve said. But he uncapped the marker.

“What about a big scary bug?” Maria asked. “On her arm, so she’ll freak out when she wakes up.”

“You’re kind of evil,” Steve said, impressed.

Bucky looked over the seat. “Don’t get Steve killed. I don’t want to have to find a new roommate.”
“Gee, thanks Buck.” Steve actually kind of meant it.

“I won’t get him killed,” said Maria. “Maimed, possibly, but not killed.”

“No maimings while I’m driving,” Sam said. “They’re very distracting.”

Steve started drawing on Natasha’s wrist, delicate criss-crossing lines. “You know why I stopped following Natasha on tumblr?”

Bucky laughed, because he knew, and Maria raised an eyebrow, because she didn’t.

“She was always reblogging pictures of spiders.”

When Natasha woke up 45 minutes later, she did not maim Steve. She yawned and stretched, caught sight of the bracelet of spider-webbing around her wrist, and carefully inspected it, softly touching each of the little red spiders in it. Then she stuck her other arm under Steve’s nose and said, “Make them match.”

* * *

A video about Gettysburg isn’t complete without mentioning that one of the greatest speeches of all time happened there.

The five of them gathered in Natasha and Maria’s hotel room, along with all of their equipment, because none of them felt safe leaving it in the van. They had to edit together their b-roll and record their voice-overs. And decide who would read the Gettysburg Address.

Steve didn’t mention his first instinct, which was to have Bucky do it. (Bucky was his first instinct for most things.) He certainly wasn’t going to vote against having Sam read it, though. He couldn’t really vote against Maria or Natasha, either.

“We should all do it,” he said finally, interrupting a stare off between Bucky and Natasha. “Everybody can take a different section.”

It didn’t take long to divide it up. The speech was so short they only had about four lines each.

Sam went first, then Natasha, Bucky, Maria, and finally Steve, who somehow ended up with the longest part.

They finished recording, and Steve was listening to his section, trying to find the best takes, when he noticed Bucky frowning down at his own hands on the other side of the room. The exact opposite side of the room, as if he was --

(trying to be as far away as possible)

He probably just wanted some time alone, after being cooped up in the car with everyone all day.

Bucky looked up, and caught Steve staring. Steve crossed his eyes, hoping to make him laugh, but all he got was a smile. Steve knew Bucky’s smiles, though. He knew when they were real.

And when they weren’t.

# # #

“Do you ever think about Oreos?” Wade asked.
Steve had been on his way to meet Peggy at the coffee shop when he found Wade sitting in the stairwell.

“I like Oreos. Two nice strong cookies with the cute squishy cream filling in between them,” Wade went on, making no sense at all. “But sometimes I wonder, what if the cookies belong together, and the filling is keeping them apart?”

“I don’t understand the question,” Steve said.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t.”

“Are you okay?” Steve asked. Wade seemed way more upset than the subject warranted.

Wade shrugged.

“You know, there are cookies that just have icing on them. Like oatmeal cookies, or those puffy vanilla ones,” Steve said, doing his best to help. “And a lot of cookies don’t have frosting at all.”

“That’s exactly it,” said Wade, sadly, and it was weird to see him be sad. “Sometimes there’s no room for cream filling. Have a nice night, Steve.”

“Okay. You too.”

When Steve told Peggy about it, she looked him over for a second and said, “Of the three of you, which one is the cream filling?”

“You mean me and Bucky and Wade?” Steve asked. “I’m the cream filling?”

“Do you think he was asking you to get some distance from Bucky?” Peggy asked. “To give Wade a proper chance with him?”

“I’m not leaving Bucky. He’s ...” Steve trailed off, unable to find any words that could explain what Bucky was to him.

“Won’t you have to, eventually? You only have three more years at university. What happens then?”

Steve didn’t know what would happen then. He tried not to think about it. “He’s everything,” Steve blurted out. “I can’t leave.”

Peggy bit her lip. “Then you shouldn’t.”

None of it made sense, though.

When Steve got back to the apartment, he found Bucky sitting on the bottom bunk (Steve’s bunk) staring down at his hands.

“Hey,” Steve said, suddenly worried.

Bucky looked up at him and tried to smile. It didn’t work out. At all. He blinked a few times and looked down at his hands again.

Steve sat down beside him, gingerly, as if Bucky was somehow fragile. “What’s going on?”

“I -- Wade -- We broke up. He’s gone.”
“Oh.” Steve couldn’t come up with anything to say. Shit, he had to say something. “Sorry.”

“It’s probably ... I mean, it wasn’t going to last anyway, so ... better sooner than later, right?” Bucky tried again with the smiling thing, and failed even worse than before.

Steve couldn’t stand the sight of that. That lie in the middle of Bucky’s face. It was so wrong. “C’mere,” Steve said, and he dragged Bucky into a hug.

Bucky held himself rigid, shaking his head. “It’s fine. I don’t need -- It’s fine.”

Bucky’s shoulders started to shake, and he pressed his face against Steve’s chest.

Steve whispered, “Okay. It’s okay,” and rubbed circles on Bucky’s back until his breathing evened out.

They watched Star Wars and ate gummy worms and didn’t talk about Wade Wilson again.
“Oh, c’mon guys. It’s the least you could do, since you wouldn’t let me go to my park,” said Bucky.

There had been signs on the highway for a “Buchanan State Park”. Nobody had wanted to go, not even Bucky, but he clearly wasn’t above using it to get everyone to go out drinking.

Knowing Bucky, he’d manage to find a place that had dancing, too.

“Me and Stevie never got to celebrate getting picked for this trip, either,” Bucky went on.

Shit.

Steve didn’t have much choice after that. It was his fault they hadn’t gotten to celebrate. He shrugged at Maria. “As long as we’re done editing.”

She sighed. “Fine. But we all pay for our own drinks. None of this goes on our expense account.”

“As if we wanted Fury to know we were out drinking,” Natasha said.

Sam shook his head. “You kids have fun.”

“C’mon, Sam. We’re a team. We’re supposed to stick together,” said Bucky, nudging Sam with his elbow.

Sam rolled his eyes. “I’ll drive you there. But I’m staying in the van.”

“Okay,” Bucky said. “You’ll miss all the fun, though.”

An hour later, Steve was wishing he had missed all the fun.

He was sitting alone at a tiny table, sketching on a napkin with a pen he’d found on the floor. His head was throbbing along with the music. Last he’d seen them, Bucky, Natasha, and Maria had all been dancing together, all of them loose and cheerful from whatever they’d been drinking.

Steve was drinking orange soda. Or, he had been. His latest glass was half-empty and he really couldn’t stand the thought of drinking the rest.

He looked around the room again. Bucky was dancing with a bunch of strangers. His hips swaying close to one after another of them.

Strangers.

Steve picked up his jacket and went outside.

He found the van and propped himself against the hood of it, holding his head. Outside was cooler and quieter, but it hardly mattered, now. The migraine was rolling and it wasn’t going to stop.

“How much did you drink?” Sam asked.
Steve shook his head, and immediately regretted it. “I don’t drink. ‘S a migraine.”

“Oh, that sucks, man. What do you need?” said Sam.

(Bucky)

Steve fumbled through his pockets. Inhaler, epipen, and yes, the little pill box. He took out two pills and dry swallowed them before muttering, “He didn’t even notice.”

“Barnes,” said Sam. It wasn’t really a question.

Steve nodded. “Been avoiding me all day. Doesn’t want me to get the wrong idea.”

“Oh. So when he said you were like brothers, that was ... not how you feel?” Sam propped himself next to Steve on the van.

“He’s my best friend,” Steve said, and he knew he was going to say too much. “I chose him. I’d choose him again. Every day. Forever. It’s not like family, like an obligation. It’s ... It’s a privilege.”

Yep, that was too much.

“Well, that’s how I feel about my best friend, too,” said Sam. “Have you told him that being brothers isn’t what you want?”

“I can’t.”

“Why is that?*

Steve took a deep breath. The cold air helped a little. “When I was twelve, my mom was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. And Bucky ... His parents set up a legal guardianship. Took care of me, even before she died. It all expired when I turned 18, but still, I can’t disrespect that.”

“It makes the conversation more complicated, I get that, but you can still tell him how you feel.”

(“We’re definitely not a couple.”)

(“Definitely.”)

“Not much point,” Steve said. “It’s fine. Just, headaches make me mopey, that’s all.”

Sam frowned like he didn’t believe that, but he said, “Have you talked to your doctor about them? There are better medications than acetaminophen.”

“I need meds for a lot of things, and since migraines can’t actually kill me, they ended up at the bottom of the list,” Steve explained. He was tired of talking about things he couldn’t have, so he said, ”You mentioned your best friend. What are they like?”

Sam grinned. “Smart, funny, kind. Like you said, it’s a privilege, having a friend like that.”

Steve nodded, slowly so it wouldn’t hurt.

“Her name is Carol,” Sam went on. “We’ve been married for almost three years, now.”

There was no reason for that information to twist in Steve’s chest, so he ignored the feeling and asked about how they’d met. Sam said she was a pilot, and told stories about calling her a ‘flyboy’,
and how she liked to make fun of him for jumping out of perfectly good airplanes.

Finally, Bucky came out of the bar, flushed and smiling, sauntering in a straight line as if he hadn’t been drinking at all. Maria and Natasha were there, too, arms slung around each other, laughing together like friends.

Steve climbed into the passenger’s seat without a word, and Sam drove them all back to the hotel, and Nat and Maria went to their room, and everyone brushed their teeth.

Steve went last. By the time he finished, Bucky and Sam were in their beds, eyes closed, lights off.

Steve sat on the bathroom floor in his t-shirt and boxers, huddling in the corner against the tub. It was cold, and the cold was ... Well, it didn’t feel good, but it distracted from the pain behind his eye. And the toilet was handy, in case he needed to throw up.

He had no idea how much time passed before the light snapped on, bringing a whole new level of agony.

“Steve?” Bucky said. A second later, the light blessedly disappeared, and Bucky came closer. “Damn it, why didn’t you tell me?”

Steve couldn’t answer. Couldn’t say that Bucky was busy not caring.

“I get it,” Bucky said. “You don’t want to be there with me. But you still shouldn’t --”

“Bucky,” said Steve. It came out tiny and broken, a lot like how Steve felt.

But Bucky was so close now, and Steve’s defenses were flattened by the headache. Steve clutched at him, grabbing handfuls of his t-shirt.

“You should be in bed,” Bucky said, gently patting along Steve’s back and shoulders, as if he was trying to make out the shape of him in the dark.

“I’m fine,” Steve said.

Bucky went still for a second, probably stunned at the sheer magnitude of that particular lie. “Yeah, sure. But Sam’s gonna need to use the bathroom eventually, and you don’t want to be in his way.”

“Oh,” Steve said, because he actually hadn’t thought of that. “Okay.”

They got to their feet together, and Bucky kept a hand on Steve’s shoulder, enough to steady him but -- But it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t what Steve wished he could have.

After Steve curled up in the bed, Bucky whispered, “Should I go sleep in the chair?”

Steve shook his head, then realized how useless that was in the dark. “No.”

The bed shifted and bounced, so Steve knew Bucky was there, but he must have stayed on the edge, as far away as possible.

Steve threaded his own fingers through his hair, but it didn’t help at all.

He was shaking a little and his eyes were watering and his head hurt and there was nothing he could do.
When he woke up, his back was cold. He must have rolled out of his warm spot in his sleep, because when he flopped over, the heat was still there.

Bucky was still there, too.

He was facing the other way, just his hair and his neck and one arm showing. His hair was all rumpled, and his arm had little crease marks from where he’d been lying on it.

Sometimes Steve wondered if his life would be easier if Bucky wasn’t so good looking. Other times, he wondered if Bucky’s kindness and humor and strength were a big part of what made him so beautiful.

Either way, Steve wasn’t allowed to trail his fingers between Bucky’s shoulder blades, or nose along the edge of his hairline to that spot just behind his ear, or even just hold him, soft and close.

Steve rolled back over, out of the warm spot, and checked his phone. His alarm was going to go off in five minutes, so he went ahead and got up, trying not to wake Bucky.

After he went to the bathroom, he found his pill box. He opened the compartment for Monday, took his pills, and decided that today was going to be better. He didn’t have to think about Bucky like that. He didn’t have to think about that at all. They were friends. All of them. Five friends, having fun, seeing the country together. Nothing more.

He took his shower, and when he came out, he didn’t even notice that Bucky wasn’t wearing a shirt. He watched SpongeBob with Sam while Bucky showered, and he watched Teen Titans with Bucky while Sam showered, and he didn’t bump his shoulder against either of them.

They all rode the elevator together, down to the lobby to get breakfast.

Maria and Natasha were already in the little room off to the side of the lobby, where the breakfast buffet was set up. They were sitting close together, like they were sharing secrets. Friendly. It was nice. Like Steve and Bucky ... used to be.

As he got closer, Steve could see Natasha brush her fingers along Maria’s arm. He slowed down. Maria leaned even closer, and caught Nat’s fingers with her own.

Steve faltered to a stop.

He was pretty sure Natasha had just kissed Maria.

That was not fair. It was a no-kissing trip. Just friends. No thinking about ... that.

Sam and Bucky had stopped at the same time Steve had, and apparently for the same reason.

“I was not expecting that,” said Sam.

Bucky smirked. “You didn’t see them dancing last night.”

“I guess sometimes people don’t see what’s right in front of them,” Sam said mildly.

Steve would have given him a dirty look, except Bucky would have noticed.

As it was, Bucky nodded so vehemently that Steve wanted to give both of them a dirty look.
He didn’t roll his eyes at them, though. He just said, “Anyway. Breakfast.”

Bucky looked Steve up and down, and Steve’s heart rate kicked up a bit. “Where’s your jacket?” Bucky asked.

“Oh.” Steve’s jacket had all his emergency supplies in it, and he had stupidly left it in their room. “It’s okay. I’ll be extra careful.”

Bucky looked so thoroughly unimpressed that Steve had to stomp down the urge to grin. Just, Bucky did unimpressed really well. It was right up there with smirking and pouting. He was a real pro at those, too.

“Fine, I’ll go get it,” Steve said, rolling his eyes as dramatically as he could before turning back toward the elevators.

“Thanks. ‘Cause hauling your corpse back to Brooklyn would put a real damper on our trip,” Bucky said, following him.

Sam caught up with them. “Corpse? Corpses are bad Steve. I’m against corpses.”

“Food allergies. it’s no big deal,” Steve said.

“No big deal.” Bucky turned to Sam. “I watched him die in second grade.”

“I did not die!” Steve automatically reached out and gave Bucky a little shove.

Bucky shoved him right back, to Steve’s immense relief. “You died, and you turned blue and you made Mrs. Patil cry.”

“Did she really cry?” Steve asked.

“Did he really turn blue?” Sam asked.

“Yes, and yes,” said Bucky. “And I’ll be damned if I ever watch you eat something new without having an epipen on hand.”

“Aww, did you cry too, Buck?” Steve taunted. He already knew the answer. When Bucky fell and broke his arm when they were 14, Steve had run over and asked if he was okay, and Bucky had calmly said, “No.” He hadn’t even come close to crying.

As expected, Bucky narrowed his eyes and said, “Yes.”

Wait.

“I was eight years old and my best friend was dead,” said Bucky. “Of course I cried.”

Bucky seemed completely serious, and Sam gave Steve a look, as if some kind of point had been proven, and Steve didn’t know what the hell to think.

“Besides, you had, like, half of my Pokemon cards. I thought I’d never see them again.” Bucky smirked, and Steve laughed in spite of himself.

###

Bucky was the first person to get Steve to laugh again. After.
Steve spent endless days in his room. It used to be Mrs. Barnes sewing room. Now it was supposed to be Steve’s.

He didn’t feel anything.

He didn’t want to.

Bucky came and sat with him whenever possible. He brought candy that Steve didn’t taste. Read stories that Steve didn’t hear. Played almost every dvd that they owned.

Eventually, he managed to drag Steve out to the movies. They stood in the lobby while Bucky waited with incredible patience for Steve to pick which one they should watch.

Bucky would know if he picked one at random. He would sigh. Steve was so tired of making Bucky sigh.

Figuring he could say it was for the art, Steve muttered, “Finding Nemo.”

Bucky didn’t sigh.

Instead, he looked horrified. “Are you sure?”

“Why?”

“Uh, it’s a Disney movie, Steve,” Bucky said, as if he hadn’t made Steve watch Lady and the Tramp with him yesterday.

“So?”

“So, maybe we should watch Matrix Reloaded, instead.”

“Whatever.”

Then Bucky sighed.

Why would Bucky suddenly have a problem with Disney, though? Steve tried to remember the Disney films they’d watched lately. Snow White? No. Cinderella? No. Bambi?

Oh, shit.

Steve punched Bucky in the arm.

“Ow, dammit,” Bucky said.

He would never admit it, but one of the things Steve loved about Bucky was that he always said “Ow” when Steve hit him.

It was probably a terrible thing to love about your friend. But Bucky didn’t have to say it. He was tough, and Steve never hit him hard.

Bucky always said it, though.

Steve said, “Their moms all die.”

“Well it’s not my fault,” Bucky said, rubbing his arm.

Steve’s mouth twitched.
“Go punch Walt,” Bucky said. “He started it.”

“I can’t. He’s buried somewhere.”

“Actually, I heard that he was cryogenically frozen. So maybe someday you could.” Bucky waggled his eyebrows enticingly.

Steve laughed. He laughed so hard he started to fall over backwards and had to grab Bucky in order to stay upright. Just his elbow. Just for a minute.

They watched Matrix Reloaded, and complained together about how much it sucked.

Late that night, instead of staring blindly at the ceiling, Steve snuck into Bucky’s room.

Bucky dropped the book he’d been reading and scooted over, making a space on the bed for Steve to crawl into.

Steve didn’t say anything. Couldn’t say anything. He just crushed his face into Bucky’s chest and cried. He cried and cried, pouring out his grief in the one safe place he had left in the world, while Bucky’s tears fell into his hair.

###

“Check out the corn field,” said Natasha. She was driving, and she was the only one looking outside. Steve had been putting streaks of red chalk in his hair and rolling his eyes as Bucky pointed out his missteps. Sam was on Steve’s right, leaning against the window, sleeping. Maria was in the passenger’s seat, watching Natasha. (Maria was gazing longingly at Natasha’s hands as they stroked the steering wheel, but Steve wasn’t thinking about that.)

“Yeah, that’s a corn field,” Bucky drawled.

Steve leaned across him to get a better view. “It goes on forever. Almost to the horizon.”

“Sam have -- Oh,” said Maria, realizing he was asleep. A second later, a marker was waving in Steve’s face. “Just one dick, Steve. You know you want to.”

Steve sighed and took the marker.

Bucky snorted. “Sam’s the only one in the car who doesn’t like dick, isn’t he?”

“I’m not drawing dicks,” Steve said as he started to draw.

Maria said, “Just because Sam’s with a woman now, doesn’t prove anything.”

“Does he, Steve?” Natasha asked.

“How would I know?”

“You’re always talking to him,” said Bucky.

“Not about dicks,” said Steve, and he froze when Bucky leaned on his shoulder to watch him draw. Maybe things could be normal again.

“What about, then?” Bucky asked. Steve didn’t even shiver as the words ghosted over his neck. (It was a near thing, though.)
“His wife, mostly,” Steve answered, with no intention of saying what else they’d talked about. “And before anyone asks, I don’t know how she feels about dick, either.”

“I haven’t had any complaints,” said Sam.

Steve lifted his marker and looked up at Sam, who still had his eyes closed, but also had a crooked smile on his face.

“You can keep drawing, Steve,” Sam said. “I trust you.” There was only a tiny hint of irony in his voice, but it was more than enough to remind Steve that he wanted to earn Sam’s trust.

Not that he’d planned to do anything untrustworthy, anyway. He drew a parachute with a tiny Sam swinging underneath it, then above that he started on a plane flown by a blonde woman (in big goggles, because it was cute, and because Steve didn’t really know what Carol looked like). And even though he could still feel the lingering after effects of last night’s migraine, he pulled out a gold Sharpie marker to fill in the pilot’s hair.

Bucky gave a long-suffering sigh and used a notebook to fan away the fumes.

Steve turned to thank him, and wow, Bucky was right there, close enough that Steve could see flecks of blue and green and gray in his eyes. Close enough that Steve could -- could -- He cleared his throat and turned away, muttering, “Thanks.”

“You are now entering West Virginia,” said the van’s navigation system.

Sam flinched a little. “I don’t like you, GLaDOS. I’ll like you even less if you made me mess up Steve’s drawing.”

“It’s all right,” said Steve. “Actually, I guess I’m done.” The drawing was as good as it was going to get. It was okay. Not bad.

“It’s awesome!” said Sam, looking it over. “I knew you were good, but -- Wow, Steve. Thank you.”

“No problem,” said Steve.

Sam pulled out his phone and took a picture of his arm.

“Were you done with your hair?” Bucky asked. He still had Steve’s chalks in his lap.

“I don’t know,” Steve admitted. “I can’t see it. Do I need more?”

Bucky gravely inspected him for a moment, then shrugged. “You could put in some blue.”

Blue was Bucky’s favorite color. Steve’s was red, and Bucky was forever trying to get Steve to wear both colors together, especially because Steve’s birthday was on the fourth of July. Which suited Steve just fine. “Sure,” Steve said, getting out his blue chalk. “Where?”

Bucky pointed vaguely above Steve’s ear. Steve lifted a strip of hair in that area, but Bucky shook his head. “That spot already has red on it.”

Steve tried again, and Bucky tried not to laugh. “No,” Bucky said. “Over, and down a little.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Steve held out the chalk and asked, “Can you do it?”

Bucky blinked. “Uh, yeah. Sure. I mean, I don’t want to mess it up or anything, though.”
"You won’t. Besides, it’ll all wash out tonight, anyway."

Bucky shrugged and took the chalk. Steve angled his head so Bucky had better access, and he ended up with a view of nothing but Bucky’s Star Wars t-shirt.

It was a cool t-shirt, and Steve really liked the Millennium Falcon, although some of the lettering was hard to read, since it was stretched a bit.

Bucky’s fingers were in his hair, which was even nicer when Steve didn’t have a headache.

That shirt didn’t really fit. I was too small for Bucky’s chest. Didn’t leave much to the imagination.

Bucky’s chest was objectively attractive. Bernini would have sculpted him in a whirl of motion. Caravaggio would have painted him shadowed and dangerous. Rembrandt would have sketched him in deceptively loose strokes, capturing all of his strength and humor without a single wasted mark.

Steve wouldn’t do any of those things. He didn’t draw Bucky, anymore.

It was nice to think about, though. From an objective point of view.

Sam laughed. Hopefully, he hadn’t gained mind reading abilities.

“What’s funny?” Natasha asked.

“Carol liked Steve’s drawing. She sent back a picture.” Sam passed his phone to Maria, who smiled at the picture then handed the phone to Bucky.

Blue chalk from his fingers smeared the phone. Bucky muttered, “Whoops,” and pulled up the bottom of his shirt to wipe away the marks.

Steve kind of regretted watching that so closely. He needed to not think about that.

(Bucky’s abs were also objectively attractive.)

(Very attractive.)

(Fuck.)

In the picture, Carol was wearing huge goggles and giving a thumbs-up sign, and she had a big grin on her face.

Steve chuckled and handed the phone back to Sam.

“You are now entering Ohio,” said GLaDOS.

“Already?” Steve asked, looking out the window. They were crossing a bridge, and on the other side was a big sign saying ‘Ohio Welcomes You’.

“Does that mean we’re almost to Columbus?” Bucky asked, his hands going still.

Maria said, “Not really. We --”

“You will arrive in Columbus, Ohio in approximately one hour and fifty eight minutes,” said GLaDOS.
Bucky turned to Sam. “You’re right, that’s kinda creepy.”

###

The worst grade Steve ever got on an art assignment was on a figure study of a boy named Cody.

It wasn’t that Steve had trouble with figure studies. He drew people pretty often. He drew one particular person all the time.

The trouble was that Cody was so obviously uncomfortable with being drawn.

Steve had volunteered as a model before, and maybe it was all his experience at being in the hospital, but having the class stare at him for half an hour didn’t bother him. A class full of high school students trying to draw just didn’t compare to a troop of med students who all wanted to feel his swollen glands.

But Cody clearly hated being up there.

Steve started to draw hunched shoulders, but he tore off the paper with only a few lines of charcoal on it. He started again, blocking out the angle of legs braced for impact, and threw that away, too. It made him want to hit somebody, though there was nobody to hit. Steve could imagine himself running up there and shielding Cody from view, but that probably wouldn’t do either of them any favors.

With five minutes left, Steve hastily sketched a pair of hands clenched tightly together.

The teacher kept Steve after class and demanded an explanation, even though she was still filling out Cody’s extra credit sheet for the modeling, and Cody was still right there.

“He didn’t want to model,” Steve said. “And I wasn’t going to draw him without his consent.”

“Steven, you know that modeling is optional.”

“Nothing is really optional when your grade is on the line, though.”

Cody clutched his books to his chest and hurried out of the room.

Steve got a B on the assignment.

The next year, on their first day back at school, a blonde girl called Steve’s name and waved him over to her lunch table.

There was nobody in this lunch hour that he wanted to sit with, so Steve went over, warily, because he’d been burned before.

“Uh, hi?” he said when he got there.

The girl held out her hand and said, “My name is Raven.”

As he reached for it, Steve realized that he recognized her hand. He recognized her eyes, too, just not with make-up on them. She used to be called Cody.

“Nice to meet you, Raven,” Steve said, sitting across from her. “Are you taking Art again this year?”

Raven smiled and said, “No.”
Steve sat at Raven’s table for lunch for the rest of the year, and after a few days, Bucky’s schedule changed and he sat there too, even though he was popular enough to sit anywhere.

Bucky was great that way.
Columbus, Ohio

They were approximately one hour and fifty-eight minutes from the Ohio border, in the city of Columbus.

As they all got out, Steve bounced lightly off of Bucky, who had stopped beside the van’s door to look at the building. Almost as if nothing had changed.

“It’s like a little version of the Botanical Garden,” Bucky said.

The resemblance was certainly there; the big Victorian greenhouse with twin spires was very similar. “It was probably built between 1890 and 1920,” Steve said.

Bucky turned and raised an eyebrow.

“It’s in the Beaux Artes style. Probably part of the City Beautiful campaign,” Steve explained.

Bucky was just blinking at him, half-smiling.

Steve pushed up his glasses. “It was kicked off by the Chicago World’s Fair. Burnham and Olmstead. What?” That last part was because Bucky was grinning at him and shaking his head.

“Nothing,” Bucky said. “That’s just, so you.”

Steve didn’t know how to respond to that. He went into his old man voice, Buster from the Brooklyn Codgers, and said, “I got a mind like a ferret. Chases down facts and never let’s ‘em go.”

“Is that so?” Bucky said in his Charlie voice. “All right, then, who was the third guy to walk on the moon?”

Steve knew Armstrong and Aldrin, but after that he had no idea, so he said, “John Fitzgerald Kennedy.” Bucky bit his bottom lip, which meant he was trying not to laugh, so Steve went on. “He’s still up there. They needed somebody to run the Interstellar Defense System.”

That made Bucky laugh. And he threw his arm around Steve’s shoulders. Had it really only been a day since the last time that had happened?

Everyone else was halfway to the building, which the sign proclaimed was the Franklin Park Conservatory. Steve was in no real hurry to catch up.

As they got near the doors, Bucky broke away from Steve, walking backwards in front of him, grinning. “Moment of truth,” he said, and stopped to read a plaque beside the entrance.

The plaque said, ‘Palm House, constructed in 1895.’

“You were right,” said Bucky. “You are a ferretbrain.”

“Suck it, Barnes,” Steve said, grinning and flipping him off.

Bucky smirked and raised an eyebrow, then blinked and looked away.

Shit. Steve hadn’t even thought about it. Shit, shit, shit, he didn’t want another day of distancing and being oh so careful and no touching.
Bucky cleared his throat. “Better catch up with the others,” he said, and he nudged Steve with his elbow.

“Yeah,” Steve said, nearly sighing in relief. He opened the door, and they went through together, Bucky bouncing off Steve as they got inside.

Sam, Maria, and Natasha were waiting, looking up at a glass sculpture made up of bright blue spires.

“Chihuly glass,” said Steve.

Maria turned to him and said, “Gesundheit.”

“Dale Chihuly,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. “He’s the artist.”

“Ferretbrain,” Bucky said in a sing-song voice.

Sticking his tongue out would probably be worse than flipping Bucky off, and jabbing him in the ribs was not much better, and freezing like this had already made things awkward again.

And Bucky knew. He knew what Steve was thinking, and even together they couldn’t find a way through it.

“So, the Pacific Island Water Garden sounds cool,” said Sam. “They’ve got butterflies.”

“Oh, yeah. Sounds great,” said Steve.

“Yeah, great,” said Bucky. “Let’s go.”

Natasha gave them a look, but then she turned to lead the way to the gardens, linking her arm with Maria’s.

Gardens with air conditioning and a low pollen count were an awesome idea, in Steve’s opinion. And he and Bucky still bumped into each other every few minutes. They were just more careful about it. So they went through the Himalayan area, where a perfumey flower made Steve hurry away, and the Rainforest area, where Maria tried to get footage of the Macaws who lived there, and the Desert area, where Bucky repeatedly explained that he was melting, even though it wasn’t really that hot.

Then they finally got to the Pacific Island area, and the butterflies. Maria and Natasha went off together, to do some filming and not for other reasons, Steve assured himself. Sam was busy texting Carol, so Steve and Bucky left him alone and wandered off into what felt like a jungle.

There was a light breeze that barely brushed Steve’s hair, and Bucky started to laugh.

“What?” Steve asked.

Bucky pointed at him and said, “There’s two of them on your head.”

Steve looked up, uselessly, and Bucky giggled at him. “Well, what do they look like?”

“One is orange, and the other is black and white,” Bucky said. “I think they like your chalk.”

Bucky opened his bag and pulled out their camera. He looked up at Steve, ready to ask if it was okay to film him, and Steve was ready to say yes. He wanted to give Bucky something (anything he was willing to accept). But just then, an enormous yellow and black striped butterfly landed on
Bucky’s hand, followed almost immediately by a tiny black and red one.

Steve carefully reached out and took the camera. Their fingers didn’t touch, and the butterflies stayed.

Bucky’s hands still had faint shadows of blue from Steve’s hair, and the butterflies focused on those, carefully inspecting creases and calluses. Steve focused on keeping his breathing even and his shot steady. It was harder than it seemed.

“Hey guys,” Maria said, coming around the corner. The butterflies fluttered off. “Oh. Sorry. We were going to go see some of the outdoor gardens.”

“We’ll come,” said Bucky.

Steve gave him the camera and said, “You go ahead. I want to go see the Palm House.”

“And not get a migraine from all the sunlight,” Bucky added.

Steve shrugged. “Anyway, see you guys later.”

Bucky walked off with Maria, and Steve walked off alone. He carefully checked himself for butterflies in the mirrors by the exit, then made his way to the Palm House.

It was the oldest part of the Conservatory, with crisp white banisters that curved around to the upper level, full sized trees that dappled the sunlight, and a big round water fountain that burbled gently in the middle of the room. It was all lush and soft and beautiful. Steve settled onto a wrought iron bench and tried not to think about Bucky’s hands.

# # #

Bucky could tell if Steve had a fever. He could just touch Steve’s forehead and know.

Bucky could write with soft curls and loops. Steve could draw, but he never had the patience to write like that.

Bucky could make it all the way across the climbing bars at the park, hands clenched tight, legs swinging, shirt pulling itself up high.

Bucky could set up dominoes in spirals and branches, his fingers moving deft and sure as Steve recovered from the flu, from a cold, from pneumonia.

Bucky bandaged Steve’s knee, Steve’s elbow, Steve’s cheek.

Bucky wrapped his hands around Steve’s at a funeral.

Trailed his fingers through Steve’s hair.

Clutched Wade’s t-shirt.

# # #

“There you are,” said Bucky, making Steve jump.

“Here I am. I thought you were going with the others?”

Bucky shrugged. “Changed my mind. Hey, cool, more Chewbacca glass.”
“Chihuly,” said Steve. He looked up at the red and yellow corkscrews of glass that hung from the ceiling.

“Seems like the kind of thing Maria would like,” Bucky said suggestively.

Steve was going to make a joke of it, so he smirked and looked down at Bucky’s pants, but then he turned away, not quite able to hide a scowl, because they didn’t do that anymore.

Bucky sighed and sat next to him on the bench. “It isn’t. Shaped like that. In case you were worried.”

Steve hated it. He just wanted things to be normal for them again. (He wanted more than ‘normal’, but god, he’d take normal over this.)

“I didn’t mean to ruin everything, Bucky. That was the last thing I wanted.”

“You didn’t ruin anything. It’s just -- It’s not easy.”

Steve turned to him. “Did you seriously avoid using the word ‘hard’?”

Bucky snorted. “Maybe.” He looked down at the splashes of color that the light made on the floor as it filtered through the glass. “Anyway, it could have been worse. You could have let me walk in on you making out with some strange guy.”

“Wade was definitely strange,” said Steve, as lightly as he could.

“I’m sorry it happened that way,” Bucky said. “I didn’t plan any of that.”

Steve already knew that. Or at least, he’d imagined it that way. Bucky didn’t need to be careful with Wade. Didn’t need to make sure he had his inhaler, his epipen, his medic alert bracelet, his handful of pills every morning. Bucky could just have fun, be free, enjoy himself.

With Wade.

Maybe nobody would ever want Steve. Maybe nobody would ever think he was worth the trouble. But he couldn’t turn to Bucky for comfort about that. Bucky had given him enough, he wasn’t going to ask for more.

“Hey Bucky?”

“Yeah?”

“Who was the third person to walk on the moon?”

Bucky finally looked at him again, with a small smile. “Pete Conrad.”

“Did he go up with Armstrong and Aldrin?”

“Uh, no, that was Michael Collins, the pilot. He stayed up in orbit.”

“He went all the way up there and never got to walk on the moon?” Steve asked, appalled.

“Yep.”

“That sucks.”
“Yep. Wanna go see the glassblowers?”

Steve’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t know there were any.”

“C’mon. They should be starting soon,” Bucky said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand.

Steve took it and let Bucky haul him up, and they still managed to knock into each other’s shoulders, like they always did.

They meandered to the glass blowing demonstration, which Steve probably enjoyed more than Bucky did, and then to the gift shop, which Bucky probably enjoyed more than Steve did. Steve mostly lingered over the colorful glass spheres that were too expensive to really consider, while Bucky checked out everything, pointing out keychains and stuffed animals and tiny little plants to Steve.

Maria, Sam, and Natasha found them there, and Sam asked Steve for help picking out a postcard for Carol, and then they finally piled back into the van.

It was Bucky’s turn to drive, and he asked if Steve wanted to ride shotgun, which, of course, Steve did.

Bucky fiddled with his phone, syncing it to the van’s audio system before they left.

Bucky’s musical tastes were incomprehensible. Steve liked a little bit of everything, but Bucky liked a little bit of anything. The first song that played was some kind of synth-pop, and the lyrics seemed to be in German. Steve liked it, but he wondered how the hell Bucky had found it.

When the next song came on, Steve got about a second to laugh before he had to start singing.

“Movin’ right along, in search of good times and good news, with good friends you can’t lose.”

“This could become a habit,” sang Bucky.

“Is that the Muppets?” Natasha asked.

Steve nodded and kept singing the Kermit parts, while Bucky sang the Fozzie parts.

They sang the whole song together, then Steve dissolved into giggles for a moment before he turned to explain. “It was my favorite movie when we were kids, and Bucky would come over and watch the dvd with me whenever I was sick.”

“We watched it a lot,” said Bucky, glancing over to smile fondly at Steve.

“So we ended up dividing all the songs into parts and, you know, doing performances.”

“By which he means, be nice to us, or we will do the whole movie,” Bucky joked.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Not much of a threat. We’re awesome.”

“We are awesome,” said Bucky. “Here, let me just put the music on pause, and we can --”

“No,” said Maria. “Thanks, but no.”

Bucky laughed.

“Oh, look, White Castle,” said Sam, pointing out a sign in the distance. “Have you guys ever had them?”
Nobody answered, they just all shook their heads.

“We have to go,” said Sam. “You’ll regret it so much.”

Steve gave Sam a questioning look, but Bucky was already turning into the parking lot to get in line at the drive through.

“Recalculating,” said GLaDOS. “Please return to the prescribed route.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” said Bucky.

Steve laughed and put GLaDOS and the music on mute.

“Sam, what do we want to order?” Maria asked.

“Five chocolate milkshakes, five orders of onion chips, and twenty White Castles.”

“Twenty?” said Natasha.

Sam grinned. “They’re little. Trust me.”

Bucky placed the order. While they waited, he shot a furtive glance at Steve and pulled out his phone. He was going to text someone, probably everyone, about Steve’s allergies.

Steve sighed and turned to the backseat, saving Bucky the trouble. “My epipen is in my front pocket,” he said, pulling it out to show them. “If I turn blue and die, stab me in the thigh with it, push the button, and hold it for ten seconds.”

Natasha smirked. “Cool. I always wanted to stab somebody.”

“Gee, thanks Nat,” Steve said as he put away the pen. “I don’t plan to give you the chance, though. No offense.”

“That’s okay. But if I was planning to poison you, what should I use?” she asked, grinning.

Steve could practically feel Bucky scowling, so he patted his shoulder. “Strawberries, pineapple, and maybe celery.”

Maria pulled out her planner and wrote that down. Steve turned back around to face the windshield. It was nice. They were trying to keep him safe, but ...

(Nobody else needed that. Nobody else had a shitty body that was always trying to kill them. Nobody --)

Bucky’s hand landed on Steve’s shoulder, jarring him out of his thoughts.

“You want to turn the music back on?” Bucky asked, even though he was perfectly capable of doing it himself. Steve knew his own mind well enough to appreciate the offer of a distraction, though.

He also appreciated that the song that started playing was an orchestral version of something from Legend of Zelda. It was just such a Bucky thing to play.

Bucky was great that way.

# # #
Steve and Bucky’s performances of The Muppet Movie (and there had been several) only ever had one audience member.

Those were some of Steve’s favorite memories of his mom. She would hang up a rope and drape sheets over it to act as their stage curtains, and she’d make a bowl of popcorn for herself, just like at the real movies, and she’d smile, and laugh, and clap at the end of every song.

It wasn’t until years later that it occurred to Steve what a vast store of patience she must have had, and years after that when he learned to wish he’d inherited some tiny fraction of it.

At the time, Steve just knew that she loved him. It was simple and clean. Mom loved Steve, and she loved Bucky, too. She’d sing along to Rainbow Connection, and she’d cheer and hug them together when the show ended, and she’d make more popcorn, and chocolate milk to go with it, and she’d call Bucky’s parents to ask if he could sleep over, and they’d stay up half the night telling stories.

A lot of what Steve knew about love he’d learned while curled up on the couch cushions next to Bucky, while Mom told them stories.

“... And then your dad drove to the hospital so fast,” she said.

“Did he break the law?” Bucky asked, impressed.

Mom said, “I’m afraid so.”

“But breaking the law is bad,” said Steve.

She smiled at him. “Usually, it is. But the law is there to keep people safe. And the safest thing for us was if he got us to the hospital as soon as he could. It’s a really good thing he did, too. Do you know why?”

Steve did know why. “‘Cause of my zipper!” When he noticed the confused look on Bucky’s face, Steve pulled off his shirt to show the scar. “The doctors had to fix my heart, so they gave me a zipper,” Steve explained, pointing at the bright pink scar down the center of his chest.

Bucky’s eyes had gone huge. “But what if it comes open? Will your heart fall out?”

Steve had never thought of that. It was scary.

“No,” Mom said, with absolute certainty. “It can’t come open. Not even in the bathtub.”

Bucky frowned at Steve’s scar. “But what if it does?”

“It won’t,” said Mom. “But if anything ever did happen, I would make sure that Steve was taken care of. I love Steve, so it’s my job to keep his heart safe. Okay?” Bucky didn’t answer. He was still frowning at the scar. Mom continued, “You can both help, though. Just keep an eye on each other, and if anything goes wrong, run and tell a responsible adult.”

“Is my mom a sponsible adult?” Bucky asked.

“She is very responsible. And so is your dad. And so am I. Now, are we ready for hot chocolate?” They were.
“Did you get any useful footage of the Macaws?” Natasha asked Maria. They were sprawled on one of the beds in their hotel room, and Sam was sitting on the edge of the other, while Bucky and Steve took up the two tiny upholstered chairs that were even less comfortable than they looked.

“No,” Maria said, “because birds are assholes.” She pouted dramatically, and Natasha said, “Aww,” and patted her shoulder. Steve figured that might have been more comforting if it hadn’t been accompanied by wicked laughter.

Maria didn’t seem to mind, though. She leaned right in and pressed a kiss under Natasha’s ear. Steve looked away after that.

“Maybe they would have let you film them if you didn’t call them assholes,” Sam said, spinning his laptop around so Maria could see his video, which showed the two Macaws chattering at each other and preening.

“I didn’t call them anything until -- Oh! You got footage?” Maria said.

Sam grinned. “You’ve just got to know how to speak their language.”

“I knew I should have learned to speak Asshole instead of Latin,” said Maria. “Way more useful.”

Sam flipped her off, and Bucky and Steve laughed.

“Seriously Sam, that’s great. Thanks,” said Maria. She turned to Steve and Bucky. “What did you guys get?”

“Some good close-ups of butterflies. The stuff from the glass blowing all sucked, but we got b-roll of the sculptures, and Steve’s gonna do the voice over for it,” said Bucky.

Steve nodded. “Did you know that Dale Chihuly lost an eye in a glass blowing accident?”

“Oh wow,” said Natasha. “Do you figure that’s what happened to Professor Fury?”

Maria snorted. “I am definitely not asking him.”

“I think he lost it in a bar fight,” said Bucky.

“I think he lost it in a bear fight,” said Sam, and they all laughed.

Steve said, “I think he just slipped in the shower, took his eye out on the tub faucet.”

“Gross,” said Maria. “Nice one. I mean, I may never shower again, but well done.”

“You have to shower,” said Natasha. “You promised we could go swimming. I want to show you my bikini.”

Maria looked very interested in that. “Okay then. We need to finish the episode on Gettysburg so we can release it tomorrow, and get most of the editing for Ohio done, and then ... Bikini time.”
Steve watched the blue and red from his hair swirl purple down the shower drain and resigned himself to his fate. He really didn’t like swimming. The chlorine messed with his asthma, and he usually ended up with an ear infection from the water. Besides that, Bucky had spent four years on the high school swim team.

(They wore speedos.)

Every week, Steve finished with Chess Club, then waited by the pool and looked over his History notes, watching the pages of his notebook curl up in the humid air rather than watch ... anything else.

Swimming meant endless frustrations and very little in return, but Steve would do it anyway, because it was better than letting everybody down.

He washed his hair one more time. He’d brought shampoo from home so that he wouldn’t be faced with a new kind of smell every day, since that was a good way to kick off a migraine, but it also meant they didn’t need to rely on the tiny bottle that the hotel provided. Which was a good thing, because it would have been long gone by now.

He rinsed and was towelling off when Bucky knocked on the bathroom door.

“Steve, Mom’s on the phone.”

“Shit,” said Steve. Of course she’d called, it was Friday. They usually went to eat dinner with her on Fridays. He hastily wrapped a towel around his waist and went out into the hotel room.

Sam must have already left. Bucky was sitting by the little desk where he’d propped up his phone, wearing a t-shirt and swim trunks.

Bucky looked Steve over and said, “Hang on, Mom. Steve’s parading around naked.”

“I’m wearing a towel.”

“Not very well,” Bucky said, smirking.

Steve checked, and found that his left hip wasn’t covered at all. “Aw, dammit,” Steve said, and there was no reason to blush, it was only Bucky, but unfortunately reason had nothing to do with it, and Steve knew he’d turned crimson.

“Then I guess it’s just as well that I never figured out Skype,” said Mrs. Barnes. “Why the sudden interest in nudism, Steve?”

“I was in the shower,” said Steve, who had never once wondered where Bucky got his sense of humor. He picked up his swim trunks. Bucky put a hand in front of his eyes, because he was ridiculous, and Steve got dressed.

“Okay Mom, Steve’s finally decent,” said Bucky.

“Steve’s always decent, honey. You know that.”

Steve swaggered over to the empty chair, and Bucky rolled his eyes.

Mrs. Barnes went on, “You’re always decent too, Bucky. Even when you roll your eyes at me.”
Bucky scowled, and Steve laughed and said, “I’m pretty sure he was rolling his eyes at me, Mrs. Barnes.”

“Mm-hm,” said Mrs. Barnes, thoroughly unconvinced. “So, where are you boys?”

For a weird second, they stared blankly at each other, then Steve checked the hotel notepad on the desk and read, “Eaton, Ohio.”

“It’s on the far side of the state,” Bucky added.

“What’s it like out there?”

“Full of corn,” Bucky said, looking mystified.

Steve totally agreed. “In one spot, I think I could actually see the curvature of the Earth, the fields were so big.”

“Sounds neat,” said Mrs. Barnes.

“Oh, uh,” Steve said. “I guess I should tell you. I’m bisexual.”

“That’s nice,” said Mrs. Barnes. “Does that mean you’re dating someone special?”

That was a simultaneously fantastic and terrible response. It was kind of impressive.

Steve muttered, “No, I’m still not dating anyone,” at the same time that Bucky snapped, “Jesus, Mom, you’re embarrassing Steve.”

Steve expected a witty rejoinder, but instead the line went quiet for a moment before Mrs. Barnes said, “I’m sorry. I just -- I love you boys. You’re the only family I have left, and I want you both to be happy.”

Bucky didn’t just roll his eyes, he rolled his whole head in exasperation.

“We love you, too,” said Steve.

“Yeah, love you, Mom, but we’ve got to go meet up with the others now. Bye,” said Bucky.

“All right, love and kisses. Bye, boys,” said Mrs. Barnes, and there was a click as the call ended.

“Seriously, Steve. Does she think that neither of us were going to try to be happy, but if she reminds us that Dad is dead, then we’ll give it a shot?” Bucky was so annoyed that his cheeks had gone pink.

“She means well,” Steve said, tiredly. “I can’t believe she said, ‘That’s nice,’ though.”

Bucky smiled a little. “She said the same thing to me.”

“Did she ask if you were finally dating anybody?” He hadn’t meant to be quite that bitter, but Bucky smirked.

“No, I’d already told her about Wade. So instead, she offered to buy us condoms.”

Steve actually fell over laughing.

#  #  #
It was a car accident.

Steve was in the dorm lounge, waiting, when Mrs. Barnes called. She told him what had happened, in bleak, empty tones, and she said that Bucky hadn’t answered his phone. Which, yeah, he was busy.

A bubble of hysterical laughter threatened to escape, so Steve said a gentle goodbye and went back to his room.

Wade drove them to their old apartment. The Barnes’ place. Now it was just Mrs. Barnes’ place. Steve sat in the backseat. Alone. Bucky stared out the window, looking blank, and Wade filled every bit of silence with incessant chatter.

They hugged Mrs. Barnes. All three of them did. Even Wade.

They went to bed in their old rooms. The beds were small. Bucky’s bed must have been awfully crowded.

Steve got up. Went to the bathroom. The same bathroom where Mr. Barnes had taught them both to shave. Jesus, his razor was still on the counter.

He wandered to the kitchen. Mr. Barnes liked to make chili. Used to like to make chili.

It was the same, but it was different. When it was Mom, Steve had been empty inside. With Mr. Barnes, he felt numb instead.

“Hey,” said a quiet voice from the doorway. It was Bucky, padding over to sit beside Steve on the kitchen stools.

“Hey,” Steve said back.

They sat in silence, each with their hands folded on the counter in front of them.

Bucky swallowed with a dry click in his throat, and splayed out his fingers, and Steve suddenly wrapped his arms around him, and Bucky buried his face in Steve’s shoulder.

Muffled against Steve’s shirt, Bucky said, “How did you survive this when you were only twelve?”

“Well, there was this jerk who kept bringing me candy and making me watch movies. I got through it just to spite him,” Steve said, rubbing circles into Bucky’s shoulders.

Bucky made a snuffling sound that was nearly a laugh.

So they watched Spaceballs together, sitting on the floor and leaning back against the couch, Steve with his arm around Bucky’s shoulders because they both needed the contact.

Until twenty minutes later, when a sing-song voice from the hallway said, “Oh Bucky, I have a chimichanga for you.”

Steve shot Bucky a look of horrified amusement, because that was the worst, most hilarious come-on line that Steve had ever heard of. Wade walked in, carrying a bag of take-out, and said, “I like how your mind works, Steve, but it’s just food.”

Steve covered his face with his hands and laughed, except he was shaking and his eyes were watering.
Bucky and Wade curled on the couch together after that, the chimichangas forgotten.

Steve sat alone in a chair, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

# # #

They were almost to the pool, Steve trailing along behind Bucky.

On the plus side, given how Maria and Natasha probably looked in bikinis, and how Sam probably looked with no shirt on, and how Bucky looked ...

Well, at least nobody was likely to pay any attention to Steve, or his scars, or his pathetic swimming skills.

It would be fi--

Steve walked smack into Bucky, who must have turned around at some point, because Steve’s face was full of Bucky’s chest. “What?”

“No, you even want to go swimming?” Bucky asked.

Neither of them had moved, and Steve had to look up a little to see his eyes. (They were nightsky blue.) “They’re expecting us.”

“Hmm, dodging the question,” Bucky said softly, almost to himself.

“It’s not -- You like swimming,” said Steve.

“I’m good at swimming. Doesn’t mean I always like it.”

“What?” This wasn’t making any sense.

“You gonna make me go back to our room alone?” Bucky asked.

Steve felt like he’d short-circuited. He followed Bucky back down the hallway, to the elevators.

In their room, they were met with the sound of the shower running.

Steve had been having some spectacularly stupid thoughts on the elevator ride up, so he decided he was relieved that Sam was around to keep him from acting on any of them.

But the TV had the obnoxious habit of turning blocky and pixelated whenever the channel was changed, and there were frustratingly few channels to begin with. Bucky seemed equally annoyed by it, as he slapped down the remote and stalked over to glare at the back of the television.

“Here, gimme an HDMI cable,” he said, reaching out blindly from halfway inside the ugly entertainment center.

Steve found one and handed it over, staying close, just in case. Then Bucky made a triumphant little ‘ha!’ sound and wriggled his way out.

Steve turned away, because the wriggling was too much to take right now.

While Bucky set up the laptop for Netflix, Steve pulled the pillows from under the covers and propped them against the wall. The shower had stopped, and soon Sam would be out. Steve held on to that thought as Bucky launched himself onto the bed and shimmied close.
It was -- they always did this. Nothing had changed. Once, their neighbor, Mrs. Weisenthal, had come over to babysit them, and she said they were like a couple of puppies, always piling together. Nothing had changed.

Steve shivered and wrapped his arms around himself.

Bucky turned to him, almost close enough to bump noses. “You want to borrow my sweatpants? Or get under the covers?”


As Steve was digging through his suitcase, Sam came out of the bathroom, wearing shorts and a beat-up Air Force sweatshirt. He looked at the TV. “Please tell me you’re not planning on watching porn.”

“It’s Netflix. There is no porn,” said Bucky.

“Good,” said Sam. “And you two are not allowed to abandon me with Maria and Natasha again. I can never unsee that.”

“Why, what did they do?” Bucky asked. Steve finally found his sweats and pulled them on over his swim trunks.

“Well, eventually they got a room,” Sam said.

“But first they put on a show?” Bucky asked.

Sam covered his face and nodded. “God, I miss Carol.”

“What are we watching?” Steve asked. He crawled back onto the bed and settled in next to Bucky, shoulder to shoulder. Normal.

“I heard Sense8 was good,” said Bucky.

Twenty minutes later, Bucky rattled the mouse furiously, trying to find the back button. Sam was giving him a look, so Bucky mumbled, “If I was going to watch porn on purpose, it would have men in it.”

Sam seemed to accept that. “What do we watch instead?”

“Full Metal Alchemist,” suggested Steve.

“No, Full Metal is too dark,” said Bucky. “Ouran High School Host Club.”

Steve grinned. “Definitely not dark. All right.”

* * *

It was going to be a good day.

Steve wasn’t actually awake, yet, and he already felt good about it. Felt good in general, except for how his nose tickled, but pressing in closer to Bucky’s hair fixed that.

Wait.
It wasn’t the first time they’d woken up with one of them wrapped around the other. That kind of thing happens when you drift off together watching movies or whatever. But it was the first time Steve really admitted to himself how much he didn’t want to let go. How much he wanted to touch and taste and --

He couldn’t afford to think about it, because that wasn’t what they were.

They were ‘practically brothers’.

They were just roommates, while Bucky was kissing Wade.

They were an empty space so that Steve didn’t get the wrong idea, even though it was too damned late for that, because just like every memory he had was wrapped up in Bucky, so was every idea of desire, and no other eyes would ever be that blue, no other lips would ever curve just so, no other skin would taste like whatever Bucky tasted like, and it didn’t matter, because that wasn’t what they were.

And he couldn’t afford to think about it.

And he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Steve rolled away, leaving an empty space between them, and he was cold, and it didn’t matter.

* * *

Breakfast was stupid.

There were pineapple and orange muffins, and cups of strawberry yogurt, and awful bagels. Really, the only thing the bagels had to recommend them was that they wouldn’t actively kill him. Probably.

Bucky ate one of the awful bagels, and then he started texting, almost certainly warning everybody that Steve was still a delicate fucking flower who was allergic to everything and couldn’t survive a normal breakfast.

Steve didn’t see the point. It wouldn’t matter what they ate, unless they kissed him after. Nobody wanted that.

He threw away the rest of his bagel and walked out.

Bucky caught up with him by the elevators. “Hey, you’re going to do your hair again today, right?”

“Why?” Stupid slow elevator.

“I just thought you’d want to, because of Indiana and their ‘Freedom of Bigotry’ law.”

“Ugh, why are we even going there?”

Bucky shrugged. “Because we can’t teleport over it? Anyway, Maria said she has a plan.”

Of course Maria had a plan.

Steve and Maria stayed in the hotel, where they uploaded the Gettysburg episode to youtube, sent a copy to her contact at Pym Industries, and set up a tumblr account to promote the series.

Natasha, Sam, and Bucky went to buy supplies for lunch and to fill up the gas tank so they could
make it all the way across Indiana without spending any money.

Steve’s mood improved considerably after he ate one of the granola bars the others brought back.

Having rainbow stripes chalked into his hair by Bucky on the car ride also definitely helped. Steve spent a nervous moment wondering if he should feel guilty about how much he enjoyed it, but Bucky had volunteered, and he’d spent all day Thursday proving that he could maintain boundaries if he wanted, so Steve just relaxed into it, tilting his head when directed and watching the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest, which was a better view than the endless cornfields out the window.

“All right, you’re done,” Bucky said finally, inspecting his work. “Now do me.”

“Your hair?” Steve asked, surprised. Bucky was pretty vain about his hair (with good reason, his hair was fantastic).

Bucky frowned. “I mean, if you want. I was hoping for a drawing, though.” He held out his wrist.

Maria turned around from the front seat and stage whispered, “Dicks, Steve. Rainbow dicks.” She was wearing rainbow sunglasses, and a blue, pink, and purple t-shirt that said, ‘Exceptional Bisexual’ on the front in black glitter.

“I’m not drawing dicks,” said Steve, pushing up his glasses. “You want rainbows, Buck?”

“I want whatever you’ll give me,” Bucky said.

Steve tried, but he couldn’t keep from raising an eyebrow at that.

Bucky smirked at him and said, “Just draw.”

Steve drew.

He started with a roller coaster, loosely based on the Cyclone, in a rainbow gradient that looped all the way around Bucky’s wrist. Above that, he drew a flying saucer with two little green aliens inside. Then he went around Bucky’s wrist again with a scattering of stars in every color.

The whole time Steve drew, Bucky sat back with his eyes closed. His breath caught a little when Steve drew the first star on the delicate skin at the front of his wrist. Steve muttered, “Sorry,” and Bucky shook his head and said, “It’s okay,” so Steve kept going.

One of the hardest lessons in art is knowing when to stop, and it was that much harder with this particular canvas. But Steve wanted to do his best work, so finally, reluctantly, he let go of Bucky’s arm. “You can look now.”

Steve still treasured every one of Bucky’s smiles, but this one, astonished and grateful, had to be one of his favorites.

Definitely, since Bucky wrapped Steve in a hug and softly murmured into his hair, “Thank you.”

Steve hugged him back, and ignored whatever look Sam was throwing them, because right or wrong, he wasn’t giving this up until he had to.

They had known it was a ridiculous idea from the start. At 18 they were probably too old for Halloween costumes, anyway. And they might have abandoned it, except everyone told them that it was a ridiculous idea, and a few people even said it was impossible.
Which meant they had to do it.

It started when Steve put on the Jimmy Neutron dvd for background noise as they did their homework.

Bucky looked up from his Calculus notes and jabbed Steve in the ribs. “We should build a flying saucer, so we don’t have to do homework.”

Steve laughed. “I’m pretty sure actual rocket science uses some math.”

“I don’t mind the math, it’s the homework I hate.”

Steve understood. Neither of them much liked being told what to do. “All right. I’ll make a flying saucer for you. But not until after we’re done with these problems.”

Somewhere along the way, it changed from making a flying saucer for Bucky into making a costume for Bucky, since Halloween was coming up.

Sometime after that, it became a costume for Bucky and Steve, even though it was too late to make the saucer any bigger. The foam core was already cut, and half of it was already pieced together.

They wore matching green shirts with long sleeves, and they covered their hands and faces with green makeup, and they sprayed their hair green, too. Then they climbed into their flying saucer and attached it with two sets of old suspenders.

Mr. Barnes took a ton of pictures before they left for the party.

They had no trouble walking together. Everyone always expected them to, because of their height difference, but they’d won every three-legged race they’d ever entered. They just knew how to move together. They always had.

And move together they did. The party was a blur of hips sliding, arms wrapping, Bucky laughing and saying, “Sorry, looks like I can only dance with Steve,” and not sounding very sorry at all. The whole night, Steve felt like nothing outside their saucer mattered.

Later, back at home, back in Steve’s room, they tried to untangle themselves from the straps, but instead, Bucky slipped to his knees, holding Steve’s hips to keep steady, and ducked out of the saucer.

“Did you have fun?” he asked after he stood back up, carefully sliding the suspenders off of Steve’s shoulders.

“Yeah, Buck. It was great.” They lowered the saucer to the floor and Steve stepped out of it.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, still standing so close. “Guess we’d better wash off all the green.”

“Guess so.” They stood like that, nearly touching, not because of the saucer anymore, only because ... Because. It felt like they were at some kind of tipping point, and Steve was breathless with it.

But then Bucky just backed away and went to take a shower, without saying another word.

Chapter End Notes
Postcards from the Road to Courage is a series of ficlets from this story. Chapter one is Bucky’s pov of the night they spent in Pennsylvania. It’s also available on tumblr.
Indiana, and also Illinois

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was really hot outside, and Steve would much rather be inside the air conditioned Art Museum that was right there, but there was no way he was spending any money in Indiana.

Besides, the outdoor exhibit was fascinating. An unjuried community art exhibition on the theme of ‘Love is’ seemed like it would be full of cliches, even with the twist of requiring all the works to be on 3x3 inch sticky notes. Okay, it actually was full of cliches. But among the drawings of dogs and the endless copies of that stupid poem were some really beautiful and interesting pieces.

A cup of coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich, in bold slashes of ink. Steve was sure there was a great story there.

‘None of your damned business,’ written in beautiful script.

A lake at sunset, in soft Impressionist tones.

‘Not a noun, but a verb. Not a feeling, but an action.’

A jack-o-lantern wearing a cowboy hat, done in quick, sketchy pencil strokes.

‘Your best friend, who you really want to make out with.’

Kiss the smirk right off that mouth, Steve thought.

Oh. Shit.

Steve wasn’t at all used to admitting to himself that he wanted to kiss Bucky, but putting it in that context made it so much worse.

(Love) (Bucky) (Oh, shit)

Sam! Sam knew things. Sam ... was married to his own best friend.

Steve squared his shoulders and pushed up his glasses. It would be fine. He’d figure it out on his own. Later. Right now, he had filming to do. The sooner he finished, the sooner he could find Bucky.

And air conditioning. Air conditioning was good.

He got still shots of all his favorite sticky notes and went to meet up at the Love sculpture.

The sculpture here was shaped just like the one back home, twelve feet tall, the blocky L and lopsided O on top of the V and E, but it was incredibly different. This one was the original, and instead of being painted and polished like the one in New York, it was weathered and rough, the rusty surface of it harsh but soft at the same time. It seemed like a metaphor, and Steve read over the placard to see if there was more information.

It was created by Robert Indiana, who had changed his name because he loved the state. That was as far as Steve read before someone punched him in the arm.
Steve found himself glowering at Maria.

She frowned back at him and said, “The internet wants you to make out with Natasha, but I don’t recommend it.”

“What?”

“Have you seen our tumblr?” She held out her phone. Their Gettysburg post had over a thousand notes. As Steve scrolled through, he found that a lot of them, maybe hundreds of them, were about what a hot couple Natasha and Steve would make.

“That’s weird,” Steve said, still scrolling. Then he glanced up at Maria, who was biting her lip. “You don’t have to worry. Natasha and I are just friends.”

Maria sighed. “I’m not usually this insecure. I really like her, you know?”

“I think she really likes you, too. I mean, she actually told you she was dating you, so there’s that,” Steve said, grinning.

Maria rolled her eyes at him.

From the other side of the sculpture, Bucky’s voice said, “Hey, Natasha. What’s with Steve having all these fangirls?”

Maria and Steve met each other’s eyes. They probably shouldn’t be listening.

“They find him attractive, obviously,” said Natasha.

“But why?” said Bucky.

Steve actually did know what it felt like to get kicked in the sternum. He’d made the same kind of sound then, too. A sort of breathless wuff. Though when he’d been kicked, that sound was followed by a crunch and a shriek as Bucky broke the other guy’s nose.

This time, Steve turned on his heel and walked away, but not before he caught the look on Maria’s face.

Getting a look of horrified sympathy from Maria Hill was never a good sign.

He supposed he should be relieved that he found out now, before he had time to even think about telling Bucky --

He wasn’t relieved. It fucking hurt. Damn it, this was exactly why he shouldn’t think about it. There was a hole inside him, and he couldn’t ignore it anymore, and it was shaped like Bucky Barnes.

(“Will your heart fall out?”)

(No, it’ll just feel like it.)

Fuck.

He still had Maria’s phone. He still had filming to do. They were still in the middle of fucking Indiana. Not a goddamned thing had changed.

Steve heaved in a deep breath and walked back toward the sculpture. He met Sam on the way.
“Hey, Steve, do you mind doing the intro?” Sam asked. “The rainbow hair would be great on film.”

“Sure,” Steve said. “Why not.”

(“Will your heart fall out?)

(Will yours?)

Bucky looked up and saw Steve in front of the camera, and he frowned.

They did a few takes on the intro, then met up with the others, and Steve gave Maria her phone. As Bucky got up, Steve took a step back, and they didn’t bump into each other.

“Finally letting the world see your face, huh?” Bucky said. “What changed your mind?”

Steve shrugged. “Sam asked.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I should thank him, ‘cause that never worked for me.”

It felt satisfying in a way that made Steve hate himself a little. “Did you get all the footage you wanted?”

“Yes. How’d your sticky love notes go?” Bucky asked with a dirty smirk.

It would have been funny, normally.

“Went fine,” said Steve.

“Did you make one of your own?”

“No.”

Bucky had definitely noticed how cold Steve was being. Hesitantly, he asked, “But if you had, what would you have drawn?”

(A roller coaster with a flying saucer over it.)

“Don’t know.”

Bucky chewed on his lip, the way he did when he was nervous.

Maria called, “We need to get a picture. Come on, everybody in front of the Love sculpture.”

“I’ll take it,” Steve said, holding up the camera.

Maria and Natasha slung their arms around each other. Sam stood on one side of them, and Bucky went to the other side.

“Here, let me help,” said a voice over Steve’s shoulder. He turned to see an old man with huge glasses, wearing a suit with a museum badge. The old man said, “Go on over with your friends, I’ll take the picture.”

“Yeah, Steve, come over,” said Natasha.

Steve handed the camera to the guide. As he walked over, Bucky went to the other side of the group. It made sense, the best arrangement would put Sam in the middle, since he was tallest. Steve wasn’t quite petty enough to mess up the symmetry by avoiding Bucky.

Bucky smiled a little challenge at Steve, so Steve stepped right into his space. Bucky didn’t look so damned confident, then. He blinked and leaned forward, like he was ready to whisper something to Steve.

“Uh, fellas?” said the guide. “The picture?”

Bucky and Steve turned to face the camera, their shoulders mashing together, and Steve tried to focus on catching his breath enough so he could fake a smile.

###

Steve had a lot of experience at trying to catch his breath.

That time when he’d ‘died’ hadn’t been so bad, really. At least it hadn’t lasted long. In some ways, it wasn’t even as bad as an asthma attack.

Pneumonia, though. Pneumonia was the worst.

He’d only been hospitalized for it three times, and he only remembered two of those, although he had seen pictures of the other. His little toddler self had slept in a hospital crib with a plastic tent over it, to keep the oxygen high, and he had an IV that looked enormous against his tiny arm.

The second time, he was nine. He remembered feeling like he was drowning, and he remembered that his mom brought Bucky to visit, and Bucky had gently poked at the cannula in Steve’s nose, and they had both laughed until Steve started coughing.

The third time started when Bucky got the flu. He hadn’t been eating right, and Steve felt like if he’d tried a little harder to take care of him, it wouldn’t have happened.

He just hadn’t known how.

Wade was gone (and Steve wasn’t glad about that, he wasn’t. He wouldn’t be glad about anything that hurt Bucky so much). Bucky was lost in a way Steve had never seen before, and he refused to admit it.

Mrs. Barnes was still grieving. Hell, Bucky and Steve were, too, and it made everything worse.

And then the flu, which at least was something Steve knew how to help with. He made a lot of soup, piled Bucky in blankets, kept up a constant supply of tissues and Tylenol, and sat through every episode of Kitchen Nightmares that Netflix had to offer. He missed a date with Peggy, but she understood.

Bucky was a terrible patient, whiny and determined not to rest or stay hydrated. He got better in three days.

On the fifth day, Steve’s joints started to ache.

He didn’t mention it to Bucky.

Then came the coughing, the stuffy head, the runny nose, the fever, and Steve woke up in a hospital bed with an IV in his arm and a cannula in his nose. Drowning.

Bucky.
He was there. Too pale, too thin, but there, blessedly there. Steve wasn’t dying, wasn’t alone.

“Hey, shh, it’s okay,” Bucky whispered, catching Steve’s hand in his own. “It’s okay. Just rest now.”

Steve must have rested, because the next time he opened his eyes, there was sunlight.

After a long and disgusting coughing fit, Steve said, “Hey.”

“Guess that pneumonia vaccine didn’t take,” Bucky said.

“Guess not.”

“You always were an anomaly,” said Bucky, brushing his hand over Steve’s hair and smiling softly.

Steve huffed a little laugh. “Oh, thanks.”

“Well, you’re like a Tigger.” Bucky grinned, and Steve did his best to smile back. Bucky sang softly, “Oh, the wonderful thing about Rogers, is Steve is a wonderful --”

“Hello?”

Bucky’s head whipped around toward the doorway.

Steve didn’t have his glasses on, so he squinted and said, “Peggy?”

“Is this a bad time to visit?” Peggy asked, the most hesitant Steve had ever heard her.

“No, not at all,” Bucky said. He scrambled away from the bed and went to meet her. “Bucky Barnes.”

“Ah, the infamous roommate,” said Peggy, “Peggy Carter.”

“Is that what he calls me, his roommate? ‘Cause I think of us more like brothers.”

“He calls you his friend,” said Peggy.

“He’s right here,” grumbled Steve.

“C’mon, it’s okay,” said Bucky. He started pointing things out to Peggy, as if he was trying to put her at ease. “That’s the IV for his antivirals. That’s the sensor for his oxygen.” Shit, Steve hadn’t thought about the oxygen line. He tried to stealthily pull it off his face before Peggy noticed, but Bucky glared at him.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Steve. I will staple that god damned thing to your face if I have to.” Bucky didn’t look like he was kidding at all.

“Okay,” Steve said. Normally he’d protest, or make a joke, but Bucky had been through so much lately, and Steve had already added a lot on top of it all. “Okay.”

Bucky scrubbed his face with his hands. “Look, I’ll let you guys have some privacy. See you later. Nice meeting you, Carter.”

He was already out the door.
Now that she was close enough for him to see, Steve could understand why Bucky had tried to reassure Peggy. She looked very worried, even with the medical mask on.

He was surprised she had even come here, actually. They’d only been on a few dates. Steve wasn’t sure exactly what point in a relationship meant you should visit each other in the hospital, but he’d have figured it was after the kissing had started.

“I know it looks bad, but I’m okay,” Steve said.

Peggy tried to smile under her mask. “You’re in good hands. I’m afraid I have to go now. I just wanted to stop by and order you to get well.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Steve, almost too tired to smile.

He got out of the hospital the next day.

She never went out with him again.

He couldn’t blame her. He got sick a lot. Nobody liked that.

# # #

Steve realized it was a faulty premise.

There was a guy he followed on tumblr, a friend of Raven’s named Erik, and when he wasn’t posting rants about self-sufficiency and how everyone could raise their own chickens if they would just try, he was posting cool blacksmithing photos. Erik described himself as a bi-romantic nonsexual. Erik would probably be pissed at the notion that love had anything to do with wanting to make out, with his best friend or anyone else.

So the definition wasn’t accurate.

Steve was pretty sure he was in love with Bucky, though.

For one thing, every damned song the van played was somehow a love song, with lyrics like “you belong to me”, “ain’t misbehavin’, savin’ my love for you”, “I’ve been waiting for you for so long, so long”, and “anything to show you how much I love you”. That last one was by Kermit. Kermit the fucking Frog was singing a love song while Steve drove and Bucky sat in the passenger’s seat singing along. Bucky, who couldn’t fathom why anyone would be attracted to Steve.

Steve had a death grip on the steering wheel. He loved Bucky. But knowing it was like learning a new word for rain. It didn’t mean he could change the weather.

Three hours of love songs later, they got to Springfield, Illinois, which was so little it was hard to believe that it was the state capital. Indianapolis wasn’t like home, but at least it had some skyscrapers. Springfield was more like a suburb than a city, without any highrises at all.

What it had instead was a deep obsession with Abraham Lincoln. There were parks with his name, of course, but there were also gas stations and liquor stores named after him. His picture was on the power plant smokestack. It was weird.

From the backseat, Maria said, “Holy crap, we got an email from Hank Pym.”

“What’s it say?” asked Sam.

Maria cleared her throat and went into a nasally West Coast voice, imitating Hank Pym from the
commercials they’d heard all their lives. “Congratulations on a successful first episode. Gettysburg was an excellent choice. However, the episode would have been improved if the entire Gettysburg Address had been read by Steve Rogers, as his voice is the most presidential. Cordially, Hank Pym of Pym Technologies.”

Maria’s voice had turned utterly mechanical by the end, and grim silence filled the van.

“Mother fucker,” said Steve.

“Let me guess, I’m too urban,” said Sam, “and Maria and Natasha are too ...”

“Delicate,” said Natasha, sounding very dangerous.

“Steve just actually has a better voice than I do,” said Bucky. “Is there some age limit where we get to admit that people are racist and sexist instead of pretending they’re a product of their time?”

“Yeah, if they’re younger than 150, we get to not pretend,” said Maria. “Unless, of course, we depend on them for room and board and transportation.”

“Fuck,” said Bucky.

They were quiet for the rest of the ride, except for GLaDOS, who gave directions to the Old State Capitol. It was the actual building where Lincoln had worked as a lawyer and as a representative, the same building where Barack Obama had announced he was running for president.

It was pretty cool, but unfortunately, Steve’s mind was occupied with how to film it so that it would annoy Hank Pym, and how to casually avoid touching Bucky.

Of the two, pissing off Pym was the most fun by a long shot.

He didn’t want things to be weird again. He wanted to touch Bucky. He wanted --

God, he wanted.

The third time Steve dodged Bucky’s out-stretched hand, Bucky wheeled on him and said in a low voice, “What the hell, Steve? I thought we were past this. I thought we could -- What happened?”

(I realized that I love you, and then I found out that you definitely don’t want me.)

“Nothing happened.”

“Whatever,” Bucky muttered, and he stalked away.

Steve didn’t go after him.

* * *

“I’m Steve Rogers. I’m bisexual. And it’s none of your business.”

Steve paused the recording and played it back.

“Very presidential,” said Maria with a grin.

“That’s what I was going for.” Steve needed to get the recording done, and the fact that he wouldn’t risk being alone with Bucky if they were all in Maria and Natasha’s room hadn’t had any impact on that decision.
He started recording again, but a peal of thunder ruined the audio. He restarted, and Bucky’s phone chimed. Steve gave him a dirty look, but it was wasted, since Bucky was frowning down at his phone and didn’t notice.

“Are we in Montgomery County?” Bucky asked.

“I don’t even know what town we’re in,” Steve admitted. They’d gone south from Springfield, but that was all he knew. “Why?”

“There’s a tornado watch,” said Bucky.

“We should go downstairs,” said Sam, getting to his feet.

“Shouldn’t we check what county we’re in, first?” said Maria.

“Nobody can focus on editing with the storm going on, anyway,” Steve said. He got up and went to the door, and Bucky followed. Natasha shrugged at Maria, and they all went out into the hallway.

They were about halfway down the second flight of stairs when there was a loud crack of thunder, and the lights went out.

Steve froze, completely blind, and someone bumped into him from behind.

“Shit, sorry,” said Bucky’s voice.

Steve reached back for him, finding his hand.

“This is awesome,” said Natasha. “Nobody get your phones out. I love the dark.”

“Let’s get down to the landing,” said Steve. He was holding Bucky’s hand. Should he let go? He didn’t want to let go.

(“But why?”)

He let go.

It didn’t make sense that stairs would be so hard to navigate in the dark. Steve was pretty sure he didn’t normally look at his feet when he walked. It took forever, but they somehow made it down to the landing.

“Now what?” asked Bucky, somewhere on Steve’s left. Steve didn’t reach out for him.

“Truth or dare,” said Maria.

Sam said, “Really? Like in middle school?”

“Sorry old guy. What’s your idea?”

“Cribbage,” said Sam, totally deadpan.

Someone snorted. Probably Natasha.

Steve found a wall and sat with his back against it. “We could play Never Have I Ever.”

If the lights had been on, he and Bucky would have shared a look, deciding if they would work together, or against each other. Instead there was only a rustling sound as people sat on the floor.
“Can’t see who put their fingers down in the dark, though,” said Bucky. He sounded far away.

Natasha, nearby, said, “Oh, I know. Instead of putting down a finger, you put your hand into the middle of the circle. And then whoever asked the question guesses whose hands they are.”

Steve shrugged, though nobody could see it. “All right. Let’s make a circle.”

There was a lot of scooting and shuffling and bumping of knees, and then they were all side-by-side. Steve said, “This was your idea, Natasha. You go first.”

Natasha laughed. “Never have I ever performed The Muppet Movie.”

“Rude,” said Bucky. So that was his knee pressed into Steve’s thigh. Their fingers brushed as they both stuck their hands into the circle.

Natasha patted their hands and said, “Steve ... Bucky ... and that’s all.” She sounded like she was smirking.

“What was that for?” asked Maria.

“Because I still owe them from last time we played this.”

“At Bobby’s Halloween party? That was in high school.” Bucky sounded appalled.

“Uh huh. And you two cheated.”

“We did not,” said Bucky, while Steve said, “No we didn’t.”

Steve didn’t remember the game, but he was sure they hadn’t cheated.

“Uh, wait,” said Bucky. “Was that when Steve said he’d never kissed anyone in the room? Because that was a lie.”

“No it wasn’t. I didn’t kiss Natasha, she kissed me. Ow!” Someone had smacked Steve’s arm. Could have been Maria or Natasha.

“Stop hitting. He’s right about Nat,” said Bucky. “But you kissed my knee one time, after you put a bandage on it. Remember?”

Steve did remember, but he hadn’t expected Bucky to. “Oh, c’mon. It doesn’t count unless it’s on the mouth.”

“I strongly disagree,” said Maria, very smugly.

“Never have I ever wanted to kiss any of you,” said Sam.

Steve froze, then slowly extended his hand.

Bucky shifted beside him.

Did Bucky ever want to kiss ... someone here?

(“But why?”)

Maybe if it was dark enough, it wouldn’t matter what he looked like.

Steve had just enough self-esteem to be horrified at himself for thinking that, but not so much that
he could stop.

Then Bucky said, “You sure about that, Sam? Not even when you saw the drawing Steve did for you?”

Sam chuckled. “All right, fine. Never have I ever been to Ellis Island.”

Four hands went into the circle.

“Not even on a class trip?” said Maria.

“My school didn’t do field trips,” said Sam, patting all their hands. “And that’s everybody.”

“Never have I ever used the women’s restroom,” said Bucky. There was some movement, then he said. “Maria and Natasha. No more hitting Steve.”

“Never have I ever eaten pineapple upside-down cake,” said Steve. As expected, that got everyone except Bucky.

“You two are disgusting,” said Natasha.

“Oh, yeah. Steve only got allergies so we could win this game.”

“After all these years, it finally paid off.”

“That’s my Stevie, always taking one for the team.” Bucky’s words got slower and slower as he realized what he was saying.

Fuck it, Bucky was his friend, his best friend and Steve was lucky to have him, even if ...

Whatever. He wasn’t going to give up what they had just because he also wanted something else. He leaned over to Bucky and muttered, “Actually, I’ve never taken one at all,” as suggestively as he could.

Bucky turned, so close that Steve could hear him draw a breath to say something.

Then Maria said, “Never have I ever watched porn.”

Bucky sighed and they both put their hands in. Sam laughed and said, “Even if we limit it to the last twenty-four hours, we’d be out.”

“Whoa, what’s been going on in your hotel room?” teased Natasha, even though her hand was in there, too.

“Oh, please,” said Bucky. “What’s been going on in yours?”

“Do not answer that,” said Sam. “I really don’t want to know.”

“Never have I ever been married,” said Natasha.

Sam laughed. “Defeat has never felt so fantastic.”

The lights snapped on, painfully bright. They squinted around at each other for a moment, then Bucky got to his feet, and he hauled Steve up, and they all went back to their rooms for the night.

# # #
Kissing Bucky’s knee hadn’t been exciting or anything. The knee had still been a little dirty, and it smelled like a bandage.

Putting a bandaid on Bucky wasn’t anything new or interesting, either. They’d been doing that for each other ever since they’d discovered that Bucky was tall enough to reach the first aid kit in the Barnes’ bathroom. Mom kept her first aid kit in the kitchen, and climbing around after it always led to uncomfortable questions, so they did their bandaging at the Barnes’ place.

What made this time different was that Bucky had been pissed. He’d tripped off a curb on the way home from school, and not only had he scraped his knee, he had also dropped the card he’d made for his dad’s birthday.

Naturally, it fluttered into a puddle in the middle of the street.

Bucky wanted to go after it, but Steve flatly refused to let him run out into traffic, especially since the card was already ruined.

Bucky gave up and they walked home, Bucky cursing the entire time. He wasn’t like Steve. He wasn’t used to his body failing on him at random intervals.

So Steve waited out the tirade about the general unfairness of the universe, and he sat Bucky on the edge of the bathtub, and he cleaned and bandaged the scrape on Bucky’s knee. And when he finished, he brushed his lips against it and pulled away with the loudest, most ridiculous ‘Mwah’ sound that he could make.

So no, the kiss hadn’t been all that memorable.

Getting Bucky to laugh like that, though. That was worth remembering.

Chapter End Notes

If those sticky notes at the beginning seemed familiar, it’s because they’re inspired by some of my favorite stucky fics. This, You Protect by owlet, Just Say You Do by biblionerd07, and You Were Standing There by thebrotherswinchester.

Also, this chapter had my Stan Lee cameo.

Feel free to yell at me in the comments, and I’m also sproings on tumblr, you can yell at me there, too.
Today was bound to be better than yesterday, even if it did start with the purely torturous sight of Bucky stretching and giving a sleepy smile, with his hair all messy and his half-closed eyes a perfect sapphire blue.

He was so damned adorable it made Steve ache inside, but it was fine. Normal. Nothing new. Jesus.

Bucky’s smile deepened a little. “Mmm, your hair’s still all rainbow-y.”

“Yeah, I didn’t get around to washing it out last night.”

“I like it. You going to keep it for today? Or do I get to do new colors?”

(Get to?)

“What if I want to leave it plain?”

Bucky shrugged. “Then I get to see your real hair all day. I like that, too.”

Steve wasn’t awake enough to keep the confusion from showing in his face.

Bucky tilted his head. “What?”

“Nothing. You’re just usually not so cheerful in the morning.” Which was true, even if it wasn’t the reason Steve felt off balance.

“Well I don’t usually wake up to sunshine and rainbows,” said Bucky, and his smile was less sleepy now, and more ... (flirty?)

“Morning!” Sam said. Loudly.

“Hi, Sam” Bucky said it perfectly casually. Way more casual than Steve would have sounded if he’d been ... (flirting?)

Yeah, flirting. That really felt like flirting. What the hell? Bucky didn’t -- not with Steve.

“I hope breakfast is edible today,” Steve said, just so that something would make sense.

Breakfast was edible. Bucky stole several chocolate chips from Steve’s muffin, then brought Steve another muffin to make up for it. They chatted with Sam and looked out the window at the dense blanket of fog that had settled over the world.

There wasn’t any sunshine.

And Steve hadn’t washed the rainbow out of his hair, mostly because the idea of having Bucky put in new colors made him want to shiver, and he hadn’t figured out how to deal with that.

When Maria and Natasha came in, with their arms linked together, Maria grinned at Steve and
said, “Your hair’s so soft and pretty.”

“It faded some when I brushed it,” Steve explained.

“It’s nice,” said Natasha. “Pastel instead of primary.”

Which didn’t sound like flirting at all.

But if that’s what Bucky had been doing, he wasn’t anymore. They sat next to each other in the back seat, not touching, not talking. The quiet of the fog seemed almost sacred, and the only sound was the occasional sweep of the windshield wipers.

Bucky’s hands were tucked into the sleeves of his sweatshirt.

Steve did the same, and tried not to think about other, better ways to ward off the chill.

It was a lost cause. He already knew exactly how warm it was to curl up against Bucky’s shoulder, and he knew Bucky would let him do it.

(sunshine and rainbows)

 Might even appreciate it.

(But why?)

Or not.

Steve checked the group’s tumblr page. The Ohio post they’d put up that morning already had over two hundred notes. A lot of them were about Steve and Natasha, again.

He put away his phone and didn’t mention it to anyone. Outside the window, highway signs and farm houses swam up out of the fog and then lost themselves again.

The pink elephant was a surprise.

Steve blinked, then turned to Bucky, and found that Bucky was already grinning back at him.

Maria said, “Oh my god, check out the elephant.” Everybody else turned to look at the larger-than-life-sized sculpture. They chuckled and wondered aloud what it was doing there.

Steve didn’t get a better look. He hesitated too long, laughing silently with Bucky, and missed it.

Really though, how exciting could a twelve foot tall pink elephant be?

“Letter A in mall,” said Natasha, pointing at a sign.

Maria said, “B in Lebanon.”

The game went on from there, very slowly, until they got closer to St. Louis where there were more signs and less fog. Then it turned fast and brutal, the two of them shouting out letters and random words at each other.

“Q in Dairy Queen!”

“R in road!”

“S -- Whoa, nice ass,” said Maria.
Steve looked up to see the billboard she was ogling.

Nearly naked and gorgeously sculpted, the man on the advertisement was immediately familiar, standing with his feet wide and throwing a smoldering hot look over his shoulder.

“Oh shit,” said Natasha. “It’s Wade.”

“Wade?” said Sam.

Natasha glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “Bucky’s ex. I’d heard he was dating a photographer, but ...”

Oh, look, Maria was making that face again, all wide-eyed and horrorstruck. Steve could happily go the rest of his life without getting that look from her again.

Luckily, his hands were still in his sleeves, so no one could see how they were balled into fists.

He put on a smile and said, “Wow, Buck. Now you can tell people you dated an actual underwear model.”

“Technically, he wasn’t when I dated him,” Bucky said with an easy smile.

“Sure he was, he just hadn’t gotten paid, yet.”

“So I dated an amateur underwear model.”

“Exactly,” said Steve, with a chuckle.

It was all very convincing. Or it would have been, if Steve didn’t know Bucky almost better than he knew himself. But Steve could see the way Bucky’s jaw was a little too tight, the way his eyes didn’t quite crinkle at the corners, the way his lips didn’t curve just so.

The car was way too full of people to expect him to talk about it, though. Not that Steve wanted to talk about actual fucking underwear model Wade goddamn Wilson.

(Nobody would ever ask, ‘But why?’ about him.)

There would be time for petty jealousy later. Bucky must be feeling ... Well, he couldn’t feel good about it.

Steve pulled out his whiteboard and markers. He hesitated, waiting for Bucky to settle against his shoulder, but that didn’t happen. Given that Steve had actively dodged him yesterday, it only made sense.

He started drawing a cartoon-y mallard, with a cocky tilt to its head and a curvy smirk on its bill. He glanced over, but Bucky hadn’t caught the resemblance yet. Steve gave the duck a hooded sweatshirt, unzipped to show a t-shirt with the starship Enterprise on it.

He looked over again, just in time to see Bucky look down at his own Enterprise t-shirt and then back up at Steve. Bucky rolled his eyes a little, but he was obviously trying not to smile. That was a fight he lost, giving a lopsided grin and covering for it by jabbing Steve in the ribs, timing it perfectly so that he didn’t risk messing up the drawing.

“You’ve gotta draw his friend, though,” Bucky said. “Ducks always stick together, right?”

Steve blinked. He hadn’t thought about that. At least, not consciously. He just thought ducks were
funny.

“Yeah,” he said, turning back to his drawing. “Always.”

# # #

Steve didn’t know how old they’d been. The memory wasn’t clearly associated with any particular milestone in their past. Before Mom got sick. Before Steve ‘died’. It might have even been before they started school.

Mom and Mrs. Barnes took Steve and Bucky on an adventure. They went to the big giant park to see the woods and the pond.

“Bucky, ducks!” Steve said. Then he laughed. “It rhymes! You get to be Bucky the duck, and I get to be ...”

He frowned. Nothing rhymed with Steve.

Bucky frowned back, but only for a second. “You can be a duck, too.”

“I can?”

“Yep. Steve the duck.”

That was so nice that Steve decided to be brave. He leaned over and whispered to Bucky, “You’re my best friend.”

Steve realized, years later, that there was probably only one person who would be at all surprised by that news, and it was Bucky himself.

Bucky’s eyes went wide, and he grinned and whispered to Steve, “You’re my best friend, too.”

That called for a celebration. Steve crouched down and turned his feet out and waddled around, flapping his arms and quacking. Bucky immediately joined him, and they giggled and quacked around in circles.

“Hold on there, boys,” said Mom. “Stay with us.”

Mrs. Barnes nodded and said, “That’s right. Ducks always stick together.”

And she crouched down and flapped her arms. And Mom crouched down and quacked.

It was the funniest thing ever.

Steve and Bucky could barely waddle, they were laughing so hard, until finally Steve accidentally crashed into Bucky, and they both went down in a tangle of legs and wings, somehow laughing even harder.

Bucky got this look on his face, like the sun was shining just for him, like he’d had the best idea ever, and he whispered to Steve, “Let’s be best friends forever, Stevie.”

It was the best idea ever.

“Forever,” Steve agreed solemnly.

“Forever,” Bucky repeated, louder.
“Forever!” Steve said, really loud, right in Bucky’s face.

“Forever!” Bucky shouted back, grinning.

“Whoa,” said Mrs. Barnes. “Let’s be best friends a little quieter, please. Or else we won’t be allowed to go inside.”

“Inside what?” asked Bucky, pulling up Steve.

“The museum,” said Mrs. Barnes. She swept her arm out toward the huge, beautiful building in front of them. It had the biggest doors in the world.

“We’re going in there?” Steve asked.

Mom said, “That’s right. And you know what we have to do in there?”

“Stick together,” said Bucky.

“Like ducks,” said Steve. “Ducks always stick together.”

“Forever,” said Bucky, too softly for anyone else to hear.

“Forever,” Steve breathed.

# # #

Steve drew a duck with floppy feathers that hung down over a pair of glasses with thick, dark frames. He gave it a hooded sweatshirt and a t-shirt with the Tri-force on the front, just like his own.

It was leaning against the other duck, shoulder to shoulder. Still sticking together.

Bucky took a picture of it and sent it to Mrs. Barnes. Steve grabbed the phone from him and leaned into his shoulder, getting a picture of them together to send with it.

It was a pretty good picture. He’d caught Bucky smiling, a little surprised, but warm and fond and not at all like he was thinking about an underwear model.

* * *

Steve was grateful for the overcast sky as they waited to get into the St. Louis Arch. Or rather, the Gateway Arch, as the signs proclaimed it. The humid air wasn’t great for his lungs, but standing in full sun for half an hour wouldn’t have been great for his head, especially with all the concrete and the shiny surface of the Arch itself.

And the Arch was right there. They leaned against the cool, slick, metal surface of it while they waited, stretching up to try to reach the seam at the top of the first panel.

“I bet I could reach the second panel if somebody let me climb on their shoulders,” said Natasha, eyeing the structure as if it had personally offended her.

“And if I had a jet pack, I could reach the top,” Bucky smirked.

Natasha flipped him off, smirking back.

The line lurched forward again, and they wound their way through the security checkpoint and the
line for the tram tickets.

They had forty minutes before their turn on the tram, so they split up to wander the museum.

Bucky dashed off, which wasn’t a surprise. That was usually how they explored new places. Steve didn’t have the boundless energy that Bucky did, so Bucky always scouted ahead and then dragged Steve off to whatever he found most exciting.

It felt like nothing had been normal this week, though. What if Bucky was tired of always wasting his time and doubling back?

Steve gazed up at the big taxidermied bear that guarded the entrance, but it didn’t have any answers, so he took a few pictures and went inside the museum.

“C’mon, you’ve got to see the stagecoach.”

Steve couldn’t help his relieved smile as he turned to see Bucky coming back for him.

Bucky had already been smiling, but he broke out into a grin in response. He didn’t sling his arm around Steve’s shoulders, but the grin was still nice.

“Why a stagecoach?” Steve asked, falling into step beside Bucky.

“Because it looks like something Howard Stark’s grandparents would have made.”

It really did. Steve was glad to know that red and gold paint had a long history as symbols for being ostentatious.

Bucky took Steve to see the stuffed bison, then Steve made Bucky wait so they could get footage of Chief Red Cloud.

“Animatronics are creepy,” Bucky complained.

“I know,” said Steve. “But it’ll annoy Hank Pym so much.”

Bucky laughed. (God, he had a great laugh.) “Then I hope that Maria and Natasha do a segment on Thomas Jefferson.”

“Presidential,” Steve said, and Bucky laughed again.

They caught up with the others at the line for the tram. It turned out that Sam had done a segment on Lewis and Clark, and Maria and Natasha had focused on the history of the Arch itself.

As they all piled into the tiny capsule that would take them to the top, Natasha told them about the hot air balloon that had bumped into the Arch as it tried to go through.

“It dropped seventy feet straight down before they recovered control,” she said with relish.

Sam looked distinctly uncomfortable, with his neck tilted to fit under the lowest part of the ceiling, so Steve offered to trade places. Not because it would put him next to Bucky.

Maria put her arm along the back of Natasha’s seat, to give them both more room.

Bucky didn’t do the same. Steve didn’t either.

The capsule they were in click-click-clicked, tilting slowly to one side, then lurched upright again,
over and over, until they reached the top and climbed out.

The view was amazing. Steve had been in much taller buildings, but never like this, suspended out over nothing. When he leaned against the window, he could see straight down to the entrance.

“It’s hard to believe they built something this big just to look cool,” said Bucky. “There’s no office space in it or anything.”

“I wonder if they regret that. Did you know that more than one person has tried parachuting off of it?” said Natasha.

That sounded like a terrible idea, and Steve turned to see what Sam thought of it.

Sam wasn’t there.

The area at the top wasn’t all that big, and Sam was usually pretty easy to spot.

“I’ll be right back,” Steve said. Maria nodded, and Natasha and Bucky shrugged at each other and turned back to the window.

Steve found him in the stairway leading back to the trams. Sam had his eyes closed and was clenching both hands around his phone.

“Sam?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, without opening his eyes.

“Are you --” No, he was obviously not okay. “What’s wrong?”

Sam took a deep breath and finally looked at Steve. “I don’t like heights. Not ... Not anymore. There was a friend of mine, my wingman, Riley. He, uh -- I don’t want to tell this story here.”

“Oh. Okay.” Steve tried to remember what Sam had said to help with the migraine. “What do you need?”

“Just. Talk about something else. How’s your thing with Barnes?”

“It’s ... not? He isn’t interested.”

Sam chuckled. “He called you sunshine and rainbows, Steve.”

“Well.” Steve knew he was blushing. “That did happen. But he, uh,” say it fast, like ripping off a bandaid, “He thinks I’m ugly.”

Ripping off bandaids sucked.

Sam looked like he was both skeptical, and ready to go hit somebody. Possibly Bucky. “He said that to you?”

“Not exactly, but --”

“Then what, exactly?”

“Ugh,” said Steve. “My problems must seem so stupid to you. You’re married, you’re an actual hero, it’s --”
“Fuck, don’t call me that,” said Sam.

Steve was caught between wanting to apologize and wanting to argue his position. Sam obviously was a hero, and Steve could easily explain why, but Sam just as obviously didn’t want him to.

Sam sighed. “Your problems aren’t stupid, and I’m not interested in competing in the olympic trauma games. What would help me right now is a distraction.”

Steve pushed up his glasses and said, “Well, I heard Bucky talking to Natasha, and -- You know about the tumblr thing?”

“I know that tumblr exists.”

Steve sighed. “Okay. We have a blog there, for the group, and after our first video went up, a bunch of people said that Natasha and I would make a hot couple.”

“Wait, why?” said Sam.

“Fuck. Seriously?” Steve turned to get out. It didn’t matter where.

Sam caught his sleeve. “Stop. What I mean is, were you even in the videos before Indiana?”

The answer was no. Just his voice, and his hands, drawing. But --

“Why would they want you with Natasha when they’ve never even seen you? They don’t know that you’re all ...” Sam waved his hand vaguely at Steve.

That -- Shit. That made perfect sense.

“Oh god, I was such an asshole to him,” said Steve.

“Turns out that overhearing conversations isn’t the best way to communicate,” Sam muttered.

“Thanks for that,” Steve said, half seriously.

“You have to actually talk to him, man.”

“I know.” As soon as he figured out what the hell to say.

Whatever he came up with to tell Bucky, Steve knew his first step had to be honesty. Not just with Bucky, but with himself.

So after they rode the tram back down, and Bucky’s shoulders were still slumped even though they were in the gift shop, and Bucky put in his earbuds and peered morosely at the assortment of t-shirts instead of bouncing around the store pointing out stuffed animals and plastic dinosaurs, Steve admitted to himself that Bucky might have missed him, and was maybe even jealous of the time Steve had spent with Sam.

He tried not to take any pleasure in that idea, but ... He really wanted Bucky to care.

Steve put down the mug he’d been deliberating about (it had a cartoon-y sun peering over a cloud, turning half of the Arch into a rainbow, and it was silly and expensive, but it was sunshine and rainbows and he desperately wanted to get it for Bucky). He went over to Bucky.

Bucky looked at him, and Steve plucked at the cord for his earbuds, determined to do the one thing that nearly always made Bucky smile.
The song that was playing when Bucky handed Steve one of the earbuds wasn’t in English, but the ache of melancholy was still clear in the singer’s voice, and in the soft notes of the piano. It wasn’t what Steve would’ve pick for this, but maybe that was the point.

Steve gently swayed in time with the music, careful not to move out of the reach of the cord that tethered them together.

It got easier as Bucky started to move with him, effortlessly finding Steve’s rhythm, even though it didn’t necessarily match the music.

Bucky looked soft and sad and fond and happy, and Steve loved him absolutely.

The song faded, and a new one began. There was a moment of confusion from the sudden shift in tones.

The new song was SexyBack, of all things.

Steve blinked up at Bucky, who looked just as surprised as he was. It didn’t last long, though. Almost immediately, Bucky broke into a cocky smirk. Like a challenge. Like a question. Like an offer.

Steve laughed a little, but did his best to dance along. He felt clumsy and completely out of his element, but Bucky was glorious, all shimmying shoulders and rocking hips and so worth every embarrassing moment of dancing in a gift shop to music that nobody else could hear.

“Hey fellas.”

Steve jumped at the sound of Natasha’s voice right behind him, and it was only because Bucky grabbed his shoulder that he avoided knocking over a display of keychains.

“What?” Steve demanded, bracing himself against Bucky. He’d somehow slipped his hand through the unzipped front of Bucky’s hoodie, which meant there was only a thin t-shirt between his fingertips and Bucky’s skin. God, he could feel the bones of his ribcage. He shifted his thumb, feeling that curve before he pulled his hand away.

Natasha stood watching with one eyebrow raised. “We’re almost done shopping, so we’ll be ready to go soon.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Bucky said with a smile. “Ready when you are.”

Steve looked over at the mug he wasn’t going to be able to buy. At least, not without Bucky noticing.

Natasha narrowed her eyes and studied him. “Steve, you’re all arty. Can you help me pick out a postcard for my aunt?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’ll catch up,” said Bucky. He wandered off toward a display of angry looking stuffed bears.

“Tell me quick,” said Natasha.

“The mug with the sun and the rainbow.”

“Seriously?”
“Screw you, I’m arty.”

Natasha laughed. “All right, but you owe me.”

# # #

It was the first thing she’d ever said to him.

“You owe me.”

Steve closed his locker and turned to see the red-haired girl from his History class smirking at him. “What?”

“Mr. Webster let you answer three questions, and I didn’t get to answer any. It’s not fair that you won the candy, so you owe me,” she said.

Steve tilted his head at her and started walking toward the cafeteria. “Did you raise your hand?”

“Of course,” she said, walking with him.

“Oh.” Mr. Webster might not have seen her. He did wear glasses. Which should make it less likely that he couldn’t see. Or maybe he didn’t remember her name. But he called Steve ‘Shorty’. So maybe it was because she was a girl. “Do you want the candy?”

“No. I want you to owe me.”

She was smiling, but she seemed serious.

“And what do you want me to owe you?” Steve asked, pushing up his glasses. This was getting a little weird.

“I’ll let you know when I decide.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

“It is where I come from.”

Really weird, then.

They’d gotten to the cafeteria, and Steve dropped his books in a pile at his spot and sat down. “Raven. Hi. This is ...” Shit, he didn’t know her name.

“Natasha.” She and Raven waved at each other. “Nice to meet you Raven. Your eyeliner looks amazing.”

“Thanks!” Raven grinned. “I’d offer to give you some tips, but you clearly don’t need them.”

A hand fell on Steve’s shoulder, and he looked up to see -- “Bucky!”

Bucky set a tray full of food in front of Steve and flopped into the seat beside him. “I leave you alone for three days and you surround yourself with beautiful women. Nice.”

Raven narrowed her eyes, but Bucky flashed his most charming smile and said, “You go by Raven now, right?”

“Right,” she said, relaxing a bit. “Hi, Bucky.”
“What are you doing here?” Steve asked. “Shouldn’t you be in Spanish class?”

Bucky grinned at him. “I swapped it out for Trig instead. Which just happened to put me in your lunch hour. Lucky us.” He grabbed some french fries off the tray and ate them. “Ew, these are worse than usual. Try one.”

Steve inspected the pale, floppy fry that was suddenly dangling in front of his face before he shrugged and ate it.

It was, in fact, worse than usual.

“I thought they didn’t do schedule changes after the first day,” said Natasha.

Bucky shrugged. “I guess they make exceptions when higher math is at stake. I’m Bucky, by the way.” He stuck his hand out, and Natasha shook it.

“I’m Natasha. Are you and Steve . . . ?”

“Practically brothers,” Bucky said, leaning his head on Steve’s shoulder. “My parents adopted him four years ago.”

“It’s a legal guardianship, Buck, not an adoption.” Steve grabbed the chicken nugget that Bucky had been reaching for and ate it.

Bucky scowled a little and pulled the tray closer. “Yeah, well, nobody knows what ‘legal guardianship’ means, so it’s easier to say adopted and not have to explain.”

Steve huffed out a breath, but he didn’t say anything else. He’d be in a foster home or something if it wasn’t for Bucky’s parents. It didn’t make sense to argue semantics.

He swiped a chicken nugget right out of Bucky’s hand. Bucky elbowed him and snatched another one. Steve made a grab for it, but he was too late, which was just as well since his mouth was full. He and Bucky smirked at each other for a moment, before he realized that Raven and Natasha were staring at them.

“What?” Steve said, covering his mouth.

Raven shook her head and said, “Boys are weird.”

Steve looked at Bucky, and Bucky looked at Steve. They both nodded vigorously. “Yep, weird,” said Bucky, and Steve said, “Very weird, yeah.” And then they both laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 2 of Postcards shows the events in Indiana from Bucky's point of view. Also on tumblr, here.

AND machine-dove wrote a bit about how Carol and Sam met, and it's adorable, go read it.
Hays, Kansas

Chapter Notes

Content Note: this chapter contains homophobic slurs, gendered slurs, and other verbal bullying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Hey Bucky, I know I’m not strong or pretty or anything, and I could die from drinking a smoothie, but I love you, so ...)

Okay, leading off with a list of his own faults was probably not a good plan. Definitely not worth waking Bucky up for. They’d spent most of the day on the road after St. Louis, which had been tiring for everyone. Not tiring enough that Steve could actually sleep, though.

(Hey Bucky, I love you. I know it might not seem like it, since it only took two words for me to basically shun you, without any explanation or anything. Sorry about that.)

Shit.

(Hey Bucky, I don’t want to be practically brothers. I like you in a kissing way. Can we try that?)

Steve rolled over in bed. There wasn’t enough light to see Bucky very well, especially since Steve didn’t have his glasses on. Dark smudges for eyelashes. A tufty cloud for hair. A pouty shadow for lips.

(Hey Bucky, want a blow job? ‘Cause I could do that. I don’t know how, but I’d learn. For you, I’d learn.)

That plan certainly had its advantages. Instead of trying to figure out a way to talk through things, there’d be Bucky, gasping and arching, throwing his head back with that look on his face. Steve knew that look. He knew it because ...

Because of Wade.

It was shards of ice. It was drowning.

(How could you do that, Bucky? How could you just fuck him, in our room, in my room, without even thinking about me? You let me walk in on that. You didn’t even care enough about me to hang a goddamn sock on the doorknob. And jesus, it hurt so much, realizing that I wanted you, really wanted you, but that you wanted him.)

Steve closed his eyes and focused on taking small, shallow breaths that could fit around the ball of pain and fury in his chest.

(Why didn’t you want me? Why didn’t you pick me? Why didn’t you know that I wanted you, when I hadn’t even admitted it to myself?)

Fuck. He should have just told Bucky, should have trusted that it wouldn’t hurt their friendship.
(What does it mean when you call me your brother?)

Steve didn’t know. He needed to know.

(I like you in a naked way. Can we try that?)

There was so much they needed to talk about first.

(I love you, Bucky. Please love me back. Please want me. Please. I swear, I’ll be yours forever if you’ll please just let me.)

* * *

“Hey Steve, wake up.”

“No.”

Fuck, he couldn’t have been asleep for more than ten minutes, and he still hadn’t figured out what to say.

“C’mon, we’re running late, you’ve got to get up.”

“Said ‘no.’” Steve pulled his pillow over his head to emphasize the point.

A weight settled on the edge of the bed. “Are you -- “ Bucky broke off, probably because he knew that Steve had never in his life answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Are you sick?’ Not even when he was in the hospital. “Do you have a fever?”

Steve shoved the pillow off his head. Bucky didn’t usually ask that. Usually he put his hand on Steve’s forehead and checked for himself. “Only prescription is more cowbell.”

Bucky snorted.

Peering through his lashes, Steve could see Bucky chewing on his thumbnail, worried. He felt around, found Bucky’s hand, and pressed it to his forehead, letting his eyes fall closed again. “See Doc, I’m okay.”

God, touching was great. Why hadn’t he thought of it last night?

(Hey Bucky, want a blow job?)

Oh, right.

“I’m not making the joke about playing doctor,” Bucky said, pulling his hand away.

“That’s too bad. Bet it would have been funny.” Steve opened his eyes to see Bucky looking ... Puzzled? Frustrated?

“Maria already got the Indiana episode up, but we need to work on Illinois. They’re all waiting for us.”

Steve got up and hurried through his morning routine. Bucky reminded him to take his meds, and as they went down the hall, he handed Steve a granola bar.

When Natasha let them into the room, she said, “Maria is getting her planner out of the van, to figure out how to make up for the time we lost.”
“Jeez, I’m sorry,” said Steve. “I didn’t know we were behind.”

“We’re not,” said Natasha. “You’re only half an hour late, and we’re still a day ahead of schedule, because we did Indiana and Illinois together. She just likes to have a plan.” She smiled as if she found that adorable.

Sam looked up from his computer. “Guys, please, give me one minute of quiet so I can finish this damned voice over.”

“Yeah, sure. Go,” said Bucky.

They settled into seats, Natasha on one of the beds, Steve and Bucky in ugly chairs, before Sam started recording again.

“In 2007, when then-Senator Barack Obama was set to announce --” Sam stopped when someone’s phone rang.

Steve’s phone. “Shit. Sorry.” He dug it out of his pocket and checked the ID.

Dr. Henry Pym

“Oh Hank Pym is calling me?” Steve said. He set the phone on the desk so the others could see.

Sam reached to do something on his computer, but Natasha put her hand on his and shook her head. She turned to Steve. “You should probably answer that.”

It was surreal. World famous billionaire inventors didn’t just call people.

Steve squared his shoulders and accepted the call on speaker. “Hello?”

“Is this Steven Rogers?” said the voice of Pym Technologies. The voice of wisdom and authority and innovation.

Surreal.

“Yes, it is. How can I help you?” Steve said with the automatic politeness that Mom and Mr. and Mrs. Barnes expected of him.

“Is this true? This thing in Indiana about you being gay?” said Dr. Pym.

Bucky’s eyes went wide, and Natasha scowled.

Steve said steadily, “I’m bi, but that -- ”

“It’s true then.”

“ -- isn’t any of your business.”

“Don’t play smart with me,” Pym snapped. “Of course it’s my business. I was paying for all this for a reason, and now I find out you’re a useless fucking fairy? Well this whole farce ends right now. You can go back to your little fag roommate and stop wasting --”

The voice cut off when Steve’s fist slammed into the phone.

He hit it two more times before he stormed out of the room.
“Little weasel.”

“God, Bucky, what’d you have to bring him for?”

“Oh, so now none of us get to bring in cupcakes because of one special snowflake?”

“Tattletale”

“Loser”

“Nobody is really allergic to strawberries.”

“Do your parents make you hang out with him?”

“Asshole”

“Fag”

“Bitch”

“What’d your mom die of, embarrassment?”

“The Barnes’ must be saints to take on all that.”

“Useless fucking fairy”

###

“Steve?”

Steve pressed his forehead against the cinderblock wall of the stairway. He didn’t look up to see Bucky. “Don’t worry. I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m not.” Bucky leaned against the wall beside Steve, close, but not touching. “Some asshole just said a bunch of stupid bullshit about my best friend. There’s nothing fine about it.”

“I’m so sorry he called you that,” Steve said. He wasn’t looking at Bucky. He couldn’t. “He only said it because of me, please don’t take it personally.”

“Don’t. Don’t you apologize for him.”

“Sorry I fucked up this whole trip. Sorry I was an asshole and pushed you away. Sorry that Sam’s not going to get to see Red Rocks. Sorry -- “

“You didn’t fuck up anything. Maria and Natasha got laid because of this trip. Automatic win.”

“I miss you,” Steve whispered. He wished they were at home. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m right here.” Bucky turned his hands out, giving Steve an opening.

Steve pulled his hands out of his pockets and wrapped his arms around Bucky.

“It’s okay, Steve. We’re okay.” Bucky stroked his hand over Steve’s hair. “Can’t get rid of me that easy.”
“It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t deserve it,” Steve said against Bucky’s chest. “I thought that --”

“Shh. Stop. We don’t have to work that out right now, okay? Just let me -- Can we talk about this later?”

As much as Steve wanted to say ‘I love you’ to Bucky, he didn’t want Hank Pym to play any part in it. “Yeah. Okay. We should get back to the others, anyway.”

“Right.”

Steve clutched Bucky tighter. God, he didn’t want to let go. Not ever. He took a deep breath and tried to force away some of the tension pressing on him.

Bucky’s grip loosened, and they both pulled away from each other, Bucky’s hand lingering on Steve’s shoulder, which felt so right that Steve grabbed his wrist to keep him there.

“Your hand,” Bucky said, concerned.

Oh. There was blood. “Guess I cut it on my phone. Did I get any on you?”

Bucky shrugged. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Bucky slung his arm over Steve’s shoulders on the way back to Maria and Natasha’s room, and it was all Steve could do not to cling to him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Natasha said when she opened the door for them. “Maria’s hurt and the van is gone. Answer your fucking texts.”

“Maria?” Steve said. She had one foot propped up on a pillow, and Sam was holding a bag of ice on her ankle. They rushed over to her.

“I’m okay. I only twisted it,” Maria said. “Steve, I heard the call, are you -- “

“I’m fine,” Steve said.

Sam looked up at Bucky. “Does he ever tell the truth when he says that?”

“No,” Bucky said, studying his phone. “He’s actually still bleeding.”

Steve scowled at both of them as he grabbed a tissue to wipe off his hand. “Maria, what happened?”

“I went to get my planner and the van drove away.”

“Someone stole it?” said Bucky.

Maria shook her head. “GLaDOS said ‘Automated systems engaged,’ the engine turned over, and the van started moving. I grabbed my planner and Natasha’s sweater and I jumped out.”

“Should have left the fucking sweater,” Natasha muttered, hugging her elbows.

“Youre supposed to call the police? That can’t be legal,” said Steve.

“Who are they going to arrest?” said Bucky. “GLaDOS?”

Steve scrubbed his face with his hand. “What the fuck is going on? Hank Pym calls to yell at me
for being bi, and then he steals our van? Or, makes his own van steal itself?”

“No, he yelled at you for being gay,” said Natasha. “And useless.”

Steve glared at her. “Thank you. What we need to focus on is renting a car and getting back home.”

“She’s right, though. ‘Useless’ implies that he expected you to be useful,” said Maria.

“And I’d be useful if I was straight?”

“To Pym,” said Bucky. “Useful to Pym.” Steve shot him a little smile.

“How? Does he have a daughter he wants you to date?” said Sam.

Maria shook her head. “Not that anyone knows about. He was married for eight months, they divorced about two years ago. No kids.”

“Who was he married to?” Natasha asked, suddenly intense.

“Janet Van Dyne. She was --”

“Peggy’s fiancee,” said Natasha.

Maria’s eye went wide. “The ex who’s getting married?”

“I knew the timing couldn’t be a coincidence. I bet he expected Steve to break up the wedding,” said Natasha triumphantly.

Maria flapped her hand at the computer. “Play the recording again. Didn’t Pym say something about doing this for a reason?”

“There’s a recording?” Steve’s stomach clenched as Sam and Natasha shared a look. Natasha had stopped Sam when he reached for the mouse. Fuck. Steve didn’t want to be able to listen to that again.

Bucky frowned. “It does make some sense --”

“Not really,” muttered Sam.

“ -- but why would he think Steve would do that? Steve’s nice.”

(But why)

“Tumblr,” said Steve.

“You’re nice on tumblr,” said Natasha.

“No, I -- thanks, but I meant all those notes saying we should be a couple.” Steve was extremely grateful that he didn’t blush.

Sam said, “You think it was Pym trying to make Peggy jealous?” He didn’t sound convinced.

“It’s not that far-fetched,” muttered Bucky, and Maria nodded at him.

That was really very interesting, but, “I should call Peggy.” Steve reached for his phone. Shit. He looked at Bucky.
Bucky shook his head. “Mine is totally dead. Sorry.”

Maria sat up straighter. “You connected it to GLaDOS. You think that’s why?”

Bucky bit his lip and checked out his phone again.

“If Pym is willing to do all this …” Steve said.

Bucky looked up at him. “You need to go to the wedding.”

“She should have all the backup she can get.” God, Steve hoped this wasn’t hurting Bucky. If it was Bucky rushing off to help Wade … he couldn’t imagine.

Bucky just nodded, though. “We’ll rent a car of our own.”

“You’ll come with me?” Steve asked before he could stop himself.

“Don’t be dumb.”

(I love you Bucky. So much.)

“She’s my friend, too,” said Natasha.

“And she needs backup. Besides, we already RSVP’d,” said Maria, pulling herself to her feet.

What?

Sam grinned at Steve. “We’re a team. We’re supposed to stick together. All the way to San Francisco and back.”

Steve looked at the floor. It would have been a lot to deal with even if he had managed to get any sleep last night.

Maria nudged his shoulder and held her arms out to him. “Can I?”

“Um. Yeah. Sure.”

Did Maria hug people? Steve couldn’t remember her hugging anyone, except maybe Natasha.

Natasha came around on Steve’s left and said, “Me, too.”

That was really weird. She had never hugged Steve, even when they were (not) dating. He put his arm out and let her in, too.

Sam raised his eyebrows and held out his arms.

Seriously?

Steve nodded, though, and Maria and Natasha shuffled around to let Sam in.

Bucky looked terribly amused by the whole thing. Steve pouted dramatically at him.

Bucky sauntered around behind them all and settled his head on Steve’s shoulder. Steve leaned into him. It was nice. Really nice.

Natasha squirmed. “We still need to call Peggy.”
“And rent a car,” said Steve.

“And figure out where we’re going to sleep and how we’re going to eat,” said Maria.

Bucky laughed a little (right against Steve’s neck, oh god) and said, “It sounds so serious when you put it like that.”

Maria assigned jobs around, and by the time she got to Steve, there were none left. They all set to work, while Steve hunched in a chair and felt (useless) at loose ends.

He would have started pacing, but his ankle was pressed against Bucky’s calf under the desk, so instead he checked their tumblr page.

It wasn’t there.

Neither were the youtube videos.

He clicked back to tumbrl to see if anyone had noticed, or if all their followers had been Pym-bots. He didn’t find any mention of them, or of the program.

It was kind of depressing.

He flipped to his own tumblr page, brooklynrogers, and found five messages.

mysticblueraven (Raven from high school) - Hey, your film thing is gone. What’s up?
erikthesmith (Raven’s friend) - Fix the links on your vacation vids. They go nowhere.
devildogmurdock (Matt from Kirby) - Are you guys okay?
fkboix (Steve had no idea) - Ur vids r erased. Ur links r gonzo. Mentions get disappeared. WTF
fkboix - #5shrubs Don’t use names.

Under the circumstances, Steve decided to check out the hashtag.

devildogmurdock
They are NOT in Illinois. They must be filming a day or more in advance. It’s been raining in Indiana for the past twenty-four hours, and it was sunny in the video. Look further east.
#5shrubs #no names #find them

fkboix reblogged this
mysticblueraven reblogged this
dddugggan reblogged this from devildogmurdock and added:
Any word from Missouri? Looks like they’ve been sticking to I-70.
foggyavocado reblogged this
jonessica reblogged this from devildogmurdock and added:
Rainbow hair and hot guy spotted in security footage at Arch, Wed. AM

“Tumblr is looking for us,” Steve said, astonished. “Our blog got deleted, and people are trying to find us.”

Bucky leaned on Steve’s shoulder for a better view. “Who’s Jonessica?”

“Matt reblogs her all the time. She did that lock picking tutorial.”
“Oh, in black leather. You watched that one a lot.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. “So did you. It was interesting.”

A knowing little smile played over Bucky’s lips. Bucky’s gorgeous lips. Bucky’s lips that were right there.

Steve managed to turn back to the computer. He clicked the icon for fkboix, which was a red balloon with black diamonds drawn on it, hoping to figure out who it was.

The first page was full of #5shrubs posts. Somehow, they’d been ‘spotted’ in Kentucky and in Chicago. Steve paged back and found two more #5shrubs posts, and before that ... Hello Kitty, a collection of swords, and fan art from Fruits Basket shipping Yuki, Kyo, and Hatsuharu.

“Gotta be Wade,” said Bucky, flatly.

“We should tell someone where we are. They might be able to help,” Steve said. “I’ll send a message to Matt.”

“You okay, Stevie?” Bucky said, so low no one else could have heard.

Steve twisted in his chair. He wanted to curl into Bucky. He was so tired and --

Bucky tugged him closer and Steve twined his arms around him, not even in a hug, just a reassurance that they were both still there.

“Rough day,” Steve muttered against Bucky’s shoulder.

“Maybe it’ll get better after lunch.”

Steve snorted. “Jesus, it’s not even ten AM.”

Bucky’s shoulders twitched a little, and that was it. Steve started laughing, as quietly as he could, but then Bucky laughed too, and they collapsed into each other, giggling and gasping.

Just like that, Steve was home again.

# # #

Steve’s first two classes at Kirby had been exhausting, and he still had one more to go. On the plus side, Bucky would be there, and they even had the next hour free together. If only Steve could find him. The library was huge.

Finally, Steve rounded a set of shelves and caught a glimpse of ruffled brown hair and stylish sunglasses.

He rushed over and said, “Hi!”

That wasn’t Bucky. “Hi?” the guy said, confused, not quite looking at Steve.

Oh, this was so embarrassing. “Sorry. I was looking for a friend.”

“And I already failed your criteria? Wow, what’d I do?” The guy had a smirk that was disguised as a smile.

“I meant I was looking for a specific friend,” said Steve. “Though I guess I wasn’t too far off, since
he’s a smartass, too.”

The guy threw back his head and laughed, just once, before covering his mouth and saying, “Sorry,” in a loud whisper to the rest of the library.

Steve chuckled.

“I’m Matt,” the guy said, holding out his hand and vaguely aiming it in Steve’s direction.

Steve shook it. “I’m Steve. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m actually waiting to meet a specific friend, too. You’re welcome to sit here, if you like.” Matt moved a cane that was leaning against the nearest chair.

Steve said, “Thanks,” and set down his books.

(Glasses. Cane. Was Matt blind?)

“We’re new here. Me and my friend. My best friend. He’s my roommate, too.” Steve forced himself to stop rambling when Matt raised an eyebrow at him.

“Your new roommate is already your best friend? What are these criteria of yours?” Matt teased.

“No, I’ve known Bucky forever.”

Matt frowned in thought. “That’s lucky. They don’t usually put you in a room with someone you know.”

Steve shrugged, then realized the gesture was (probably) useless with Matt. “Yeah, I don’t know. I wasn’t going to bring it to their attention by asking.”

“Wise choice,” said Matt. Then he turned and said, “Hi, Foggy.”

A guy with longish blond hair said, “I come bearing case files,” and dropped a stack of books on the table. The expression he turned on Steve was a mixture of friendly and suspicious that was weirdly familiar. “Hi, I’m Matt’s friend, Foggy.”

“Foggy, this is Steve,” said Matt. “He called me a smartass and then he stole your seat. You should fight him.”

Foggy rolled his eyes. “But you are a smartass, Matt. I can’t fight him for being accurate.”

Matt chuckled. He tilted his head and asked, “Is that your friend?”

Steve turned around. “Bucky!”

“I looked everywhere,” Bucky said, smiling fondly at Steve before turning to Foggy and Matt with a raised eyebrow. “Hi, I’m Steve’s friend, Bucky.”

“Hello, Bucky. I’m Matt, and this is Foggy.”

“We weren’t actually kidnapping Steve. Don’t believe anyone who tells you different,” Foggy said with a grin, and Matt chuckled.

Chapter End Notes
More Postcards! Chapter 3 is a flashback from when Bucky and Steve were in high school.
“Hey,” Bucky said softly. “I think you got a text.”

Steve was asleep, and he genuinely couldn’t care less about any texts. He didn’t bother telling Bucky that, he just burrowed in deeper, because sleep was awesome, so cozy and comfortable and good.

“Steve!” snapped Natasha.

Why the fuck was Natasha here?

Bucky fiercely whispered, “Shut up,” while Steve sat up. Well, sat up the rest of the way, because he was ...

In a car. A very crowded, very warm car. Even Bucky looked overly warm, with his cheeks all pink and was that drool on his shirt? Steve wiped his mouth. Oh god, he’d been drooling on Bucky’s chest. He’d been sleeping on Bucky’s chest. He had burrowed in against Bucky’s chest. And he really wanted to do it some more.

“What?” Steve said, readjusting his glasses.

Natasha was in the front seat, next to Sam, who was driving. She looked over her shoulder and said, “Check your phone.”

It was easier said than done. He had to either press against Maria or Bucky in order to get his phone out of his pocket.

Bucky didn’t seem to mind, though. He didn’t seem to mind that Steve had been sleeping on him, either. (Maybe he had liked it, even?)

Steve fumbled with the unfamiliar phone. He’d only had it for about an hour, and it took him way longer than normal to open the message.

It was a text from Matt. Steve shifted so Bucky could read it, too.

First, I am officially taking all of you on as clients. Whatever happens next, you should have representation.

Second, I distributed copies of the file you sent me to several discrete parties, as a precaution. Now that I’m your lawyer, I strongly recommend that you let me open the file. I won’t without your permission, but you should give me your permission.

Third, if you don’t come up with your own code names for tumblr, someone else will. Do you really want a guy called Foggy to choose your names for you?

The first and third parts weren’t so bad. It was the second part that make Steve grumble to himself, “I liked sleeping better.”

“Oh. Okay,” said Bucky. “Here, I’ll text him. You can sleep.”
Steve blinked at him, but Bucky was looking away. Bucky was *biting his lip* and *looking away* and his cheeks were *pink*.

(“He called you sunshine and rainbows, Steve.”)

That was ... oh.

“Sure, Buck. That’d be great.” Steve handed over his phone, then faltered a bit. He couldn’t just nuzzle into Bucky’s chest. That would be ... (amazing). That would be wrong, without permission. Resting on his shoulder would be okay, though. They did that all the time. Steve took off his glasses and settled in.

“What he open the file, listen to the call?” Bucky asked gently.

Ugh, no. Steve didn’t want anyone to hear that. “Yeah, okay.”

“Foggy too?”

Fuck. Steve fought the urge to sigh and said, “Sure.”

“It’s not going to change how they think about you.”

“I know,” Steve lied. This conversation sucked. He wanted to go back to thinking about other things. Like Bucky acting all flustered and shy. There had to be a way to make that happen again.

Probably not by doing what they always did, though.

Gathering his courage, Steve stretched his arm out across Bucky’s waist and curled his fingers around the hem of Bucky’s shirt.

It was hard to tell with his own heartbeat thundering in his ears, but he thought he heard Bucky’s breath hitch.

After a frozen moment, Bucky twisted and pulled his arm free, so Steve ended up cuddled against his side, nestled in the curve of his arms.

Not something they always did. Though clearly they should, because it was fucking fantastic.

Steve wondered what they might have done if they weren’t in a car full of people, but this ... This was nice. Really nice. He closed his eyes and relaxed into comfort and love and Bucky.

* * *

“I’m not naming him after a Disney princess, no matter how appropriate you think they are,” Bucky said quietly.

Steve had been half awake for a while, but he hadn’t mentioned it yet. Natasha’s argument for calling Steve ‘Aurora’ had been compelling, in a way, (“He’s asleep, like Sleeping Beauty, and his hair changes colors, like an aurora. You can be Prince Charming, Bucky.”) but Steve trusted Bucky not to go for it.

“There’s nothing wrong with Disney princesses,” said Natasha.

“Says the person calling herself ‘The Spider’,” Bucky said. “Which Disney movie is that from?”
Steve yawned. Dammit. He didn’t want to move. His neck had a crick in it, and his hip ached from being twisted funny, but it was still an excellent position to be in. He didn’t have much excuse now that he was awake, though.

He pushed himself up. Bucky smiled at him, incredibly sweetly, and if Steve didn’t get to talk to him about all this soon he might actually start screaming. But unfortunately, the car was still full of people.

“Steve, what name should we pick for Bucky?” Maria asked.

Steve settled back in against Bucky’s side, Bucky’s arm still around his shoulders, and said, “Barnacle Boy.”

“Would that make you Mermaid Man?” said Bucky.

Steve laughed. “I don’t see the resemblance, but okay.”

Bucky said, “Nah, you should be Han, and I can be Luke.”

“Oh my god, we should do that for Halloween!” said Steve. “Except you should be Han. You’re taller. And you have better hair. Darker.” (And everyone knows you’re the cool one.)

“You sure? You could be Han and I could be Chewie.”

Steve chuckled. “No. I like Luke, and you’d make a good scoundrel.” He turned to see if Bucky would quote back, ‘You like me because I’m a scoundrel.’

But Maria said, “Can I be Leia?”

Natasha whipped her head around. “That’s perfect. She’s even a Disney princess. I will buy you a gold bikini.”

Maria laughed, and Sam said, “Please stop. No talking about bikinis or -- no.”

“Sorry,” Steve said. It was his fault. They’d all be on their way home if --

“Not your fault,” said Sam. “Sorry. I miss Carol, that’s all. I’ll talk to her tonight. Just, try to keep the flirting to a dull roar.”

Steve laughed. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Sam rolled his eyes. Natasha rolled her eyes. Steve knew better than to look, but yes, Bucky was smirking and obviously trying not to laugh.

Damn, Steve wanted to ...(kiss the smirk right off his face). Wanted to kiss the smirk right off his face. Hell yes.

The smirk was fading, though. Bucky was, oh, Bucky was looking at Steve’s lips and they had been flirting and ...

Why now? Why in the middle of Kansas, in a crowded car? Why right after Sam asked them not to? Dammit, they couldn’t even really talk, let alone ...

Sam was a good friend. Sam was a really great person and a good friend and Steve was not going to disrespect that.
He wasn’t.

God, Bucky had gorgeous lips.

# # #

Sitting on the edge of Steve’s bed, Bucky folded his arms over his chest. “And then Hannah Murphy kissed me. On the mouth.”

Steve scowled, affronted right along with Bucky. There had been a long list of reasons that Bucky’s day at school had sucked, most of them related to Steve being home sick, but that one was the worst.

“Why’d she do that?” Steve asked.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “She said I looked sad, and she could cheer me up.”

“I don’t think it worked.”

“Nope.” Bucky flopped down beside Steve, sharing his pillow. Asthma wasn’t contagious, so it was okay for Bucky to be close, this time.

“Are you still sad?” said Steve. If he had his way, Bucky would never be sad.

“Nah, I don’t miss you anymore. Especially now that I can smell you again.” Bucky wrinkled his nose dramatically.

Steve gave him a little shove. “Shut up, I don’t smell bad.”

Bucky grinned. “Of course you do. When was the last time you took a bath?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “In first grade. I take showers, dummy.”

“Oh, yeah? Once a week, whether you need it or not?” Bucky said, and he gave a funny little smile, with his lips sort of twisted to one side. He didn’t seem sad at all, but Steve wanted ... Wanted to cheer him up.

“I have M&M’s,” Steve said “Mom got me a whole big bag on the way home from the hospital. We can eat as many as we want.”

Bucky’s eyes went wide and he sat up. “Wow, really? You are awesome.”

Which actually make Steve feel kind of awesome. Bucky was great that way.

# # #

As soon as they crossed into Colorado, Steve said, “Hey Bucky, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

Bucky made his unimpressed face, one of Steve’s favorites, and said, “Have you been waiting for eight states just to make that joke?”
“Yes,” Steve said, grinning.

“That was terrible.”

“You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it.” Steve nudged Bucky in the ribs for emphasis.

“Well, we can’t all be ferret brains,” Bucky said. He ruffled his hand over Steve’s hair, lingering maybe a little longer than usual before settling his arm around Steve’s shoulders again.

Steve rolled his eyes and used it as an excuse to shift against Bucky’s arm.

“Oh, I forgot, I wanted to show you.” Bucky reached into his pocket and pulled out his new phone. Even as deft as Bucky’s fingers were, he had a little trouble navigating his way to the pictures with only one hand, but he kept the other where it was. He found what he was looking for and handed the phone over to Steve.

Sunflowers. It was a field of sunflowers that seemed to stretch on for miles, all of them shining bright and golden. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, it reminded me of you, because it was like a Van Gogh painting. I thought you’d want to see it.”

And now it was Steve’s turn to be flustered and shy. He wasn’t used to this at all, and he had to look away for a second.

“Sorry if it’s blurry. Sam didn’t want to stop in the middle of the highway, for some reason,” said Bucky. Steve wondered if it was a deliberate reminder that they shouldn’t (smash their faces together) do anything.

“Maybe that’s the real reason he’s the only one who’s allowed to drive the rental car,” Steve said. It wasn’t. The real reason was that Sam was the only one who already had car insurance.

“Probably good planning on their part,” muttered Natasha.

Bucky rolled his eyes. How could that be sexy? That should not be sexy.

“Terrible planning from where I’m sitting,” said Sam.

“Thank you so much, Sam. For everything,” Steve said.

Sam snorted. “Yeah, yeah, You’ll pay me back some day.”

Steve had no idea how he was ever going to do that, so he didn’t reply.

Steve and Bucky played a few rounds of Tic Tac Toe on the dry erase board, an exercise in futility since every game ended in a draw. They switched to Hangman, which lasted them the rest of the drive, all the way to a rundown apartment complex on the outskirts of Denver.

At least the mountains were worth looking at.

Maria led the way up a rickety set of stairs to an apartment with the roman numeral ten on the door. She squared her shoulders after she knocked, turning back into the detached professional Steve had known her as back before he actually knew her.

If there had been any discussion about whoever’s place this was, it had happened while Steve was asleep, and he had no idea what to expect.
But he hadn’t expected that.

A man with tufty black hair, broad shoulders and what appeared to be a permanent scowl opened the door. He stuck a cigar in his mouth and grumbled, “You the kids from Kirby?”

Even Maria blinked, though she covered it pretty well. “Yes sir. Are you Professor Logan?”

“No anymore. Just Logan. C’mon in.”

They all trailed into what might generously be called a living room. There was a ragged yellow recliner sitting in front of a small tv, and the rest of the room was filled with weight lifting equipment. Not a fancy home gym, but battered old free weights with rusty bars and a weight bench that had bits of stuffing poking out from behind the torn covering.

Logan looked them over. “They said somebody has food allergies. I’m guessing that’s you.”

His eyes had come to rest on Steve. Of course.

“Yep,” Steve said, with mostly feigned indifference.

“All right. You, come with me to the grocery store. The rest of you, move all these weights into the other room so we’ll have enough space to set up your sleeping bags,” said Logan.

Steve automatically turned to Bucky, but Logan said, “Only room for two in the truck.”

They had room for five (well, realistically, four) in the rental car. But only Sam could drive it, and Sam had done enough driving. Besides, the weights needed to be moved, and Steve wasn’t especially useful for that. Everyone else was.

Bucky had probably picked up half of what Steve was thinking, including the bit about not being useful, because he knew Steve too damned well. He smiled half-heartedly and said, “Make sure you get granola bars. And water bottles. Want me to make you a list?”

“I can handle it, Bucky,” Steve said, narrowing his eyes.

Bucky’s mouth twitched just the tiniest bit and he said, “Oh, you definitely can.”

Steve turned to leave before he could ... do ... anything.

The drive to the store was silent, except for the roar of the engine in the rattletrap old pick-up Logan drove. But as soon as they got inside the store, Logan said, “So what’s the deal here? Got a call this morning from Xavier saying some kids were in trouble, needed a place to stay, but that’s all he told me.”

“You know Professor Xavier?” Steve asked. It was a dumb question, but he was surprised that the urbane Dean of the Psychology Department was associated with Logan.

“I owe him a couple dozen favors, yeah. Now tell me what’s going on so I can pay him back a few.” He picked out a package of sliced ham and tossed it in the cart.

Steve pulled it back out and looked at the ingredients as they walked on. Ham and water. He put it in the cart again. “We won a contest, sponsored by Pym Technologies, to go across the country and film things on the way. But apparently it was all fake, and Hank Pym somehow expected me to break up the wedding between my ex-girlfriend and his ex-wife.”

Logan frowned at that. “Janet Van Dyne is marrying your ex-girlfriend?”
“Yep.”

“How long were you with this girl?” Logan asked. He dropped a stack of ramen noodles into the cart.

Steve scanned the ingredients. Safe. “Four months maybe? And she’s a woman, not a girl.”

Logan walked on. “Why’d you two break up?”

Steve clenched his jaw.

“Look kid, I’m just gathering intel. I don’t actually care about your love life, so don’t bother being embarrassed.”

Weirdly, that helped. “I was in love with someone else. I didn’t realize it, but I think she did, and that’s why she left.”

Logan snorted. “How do you not know you’re in love with someone?”

Steve had been pondering that same thing for a while, now. “Have you ever wondered what oxygen smells like?”

Logan squinted up from the package of eggs he’d been inspecting. “What kinda question is that?”

“If oxygen has a smell, you’d get used to it the day you were born. It’s always been there, so you’d never notice it. What if I was in love for as long as I can remember? How would I know?” Steve asked. He’d meant it to be rhetorical, but it came out plaintive and confused.

“I don’t think it works like that. Love doesn’t just happen to you. It’s a choice you make. It’s every choice you make, over and over,” Logan said bitterly.

“But that’s easy. I already do that. We both do that. It’s -- Oh.” Steve looked toward the exit. He really needed to talk to Bucky.

“It’s not one of the girls who came with you, is it? I don’t want any of this going down in my living room.”

“They’re women, and no. It’s not either of them.”

“Oh, it’s that guy you were making moony eyes at.”

“I was not!”

Logan broke into a grin. “That must have really pissed off Pym. Nice. You’re still not allowed to get freaky in my apartment, but pissing off Pym is always good.”

“Yeah, except for how he stole our van and left us stranded in the middle of Kansas, And he doesn’t actually know about Bucky. Bucky doesn’t know about Bucky, and you can’t --”

“Relax, kid. I told you, I don’t care about your love life.”

“As long as it doesn’t happen in your living room. I got that.”

“How the hell did Pym steal your van, though?”

Steve explained about GLaDOS, and then about tumblr, as they finished shopping and checked
out. Steve had climbed back into the truck and was buckling his seatbelt when he got a text.

Bucky- **Weights are heavy**

Jeez, he was even adorable in text form.

Steve- :( **I got coffee ice cream**

Bucky- **You are fantastic. Back soon?**

Steve- **On the way**

Bucky- **Good**

Steve typed in - **Miss you.** He blew out a breath before he hit send.

Logan snorted. “He managed to go forty whole minutes without talking to you. You sure he’s interested?”

Steve ignored that.

No reply.

Yet.

He’d probably gone too far.

Or maybe he should have said ‘I love you’.

Not in a text, though.

His phone pinged. Bucky had sent a picture. He couldn’t have many of those in his new phone, since even his sim card had been ruined by Pym.

It was from that afternoon. The two of them in the backseat, Steve with his arms around Bucky’s waist, Bucky with his arms around Steve’s shoulders, both of them with their eyes closed.

Steve let out a breathless little laugh. Natasha must have taken the picture. Bucky would have had to ask her for it. Would have had to ask Natasha for a copy of it, just so he could send Steve a hug in a text message.

Damn, Bucky was amazing.

“Yeah, you two are definitely sleeping on opposite sides of the room tonight,” said Logan.

Steve glared at him. “I’m not sure I like you.”

“Good thing I don’t care,” Logan said, laughing.

They were pulling into the apartment complex, so Steve didn’t have time to text Bucky anything creative, which was maybe just as well. He sent back - **We’re here.**

Everybody met them in the parking lot to carry up groceries. Bucky only said, “Hey,” but there was an interesting quirk to his smile, like a shared secret, that made Steve a little more aware of his heartbeat than usual.
Logan shooed them out of the kitchen, probably because it wasn’t big enough for two people, let alone six.

The living room was nearly empty, and there was nothing left to do, so Steve sat on the floor.

Maria and Bucky sat on either side of him. “Don’t worry, I vacuumed,” Bucky whispered.

“Was it bad?” Steve whispered back.

Bucky nodded, and Maria whispered, “So bad.”

“And Sam called Carol, so he’s not as grumpy anymore,” said Natasha.

Sam shot her a look. “I was never grumpy.”

“Okay, so only a tiny bit less grumpy now,” Natasha said.

Maria leaned against her. “I miss my cat.”

“I didn’t know you had a cat,” said Sam.

Maria smiled. “She’s light gray, and her name is Sparkles.”

Bucky laughed. “Really? Sparkles?”

“Why, what would you do, name it after some obscure President?” said Natasha.

“Nothing wrong with obscure President names,” said Sam.

Steve laughed. “Like Garfield.”

Natasha sprawled out and rested her head on Maria’s knee. “I miss having a couch.”

“Oh god yes,” Bucky moaned, dropping his head on Steve’s shoulder. “I love our couch.”

Steve lost his breath, right along with most of his thought process. Bucky moaning about love was a lot to take.

“I meant what I said about my living room,” Logan called from the kitchen.

“I meant what I said about not liking you,” Steve called back, and his face felt like it was glowing from embarrassment. Bucky looked up at him, hoping for an explanation, but Steve waved him off and he let it go, putting his head on Steve’s shoulder again.

Logan poked his head around the corner. “Set up those card tables so we can eat.”

Steve wondered if they were going to eat standing up, since there weren’t any chairs, but it turned out that the tables’ legs had been cut down, making them just the right height for sitting on the floor.

They all went to the kitchen and brought back bowls of ramen.

Steve had eaten ramen before, of course, but never like this, with ham and spinach and onions and a fried egg on top. The egg yolk spilled into the broth and made the whole thing richer and somehow more substantial. After five days of drive-through food, this was particularly good.

At the other table, Sam was talking to Logan about Japan, because apparently they’d both lived
there. Sometimes Steve almost forgot how cool Sam was.

Bucky pressed his knee into Steve’s. “Hey, wanna see my Ood impersonation?”

Steve’s eyes went wide as he imagined Bucky dangling noodles out of his mouth.

“Ood?” said Natasha.

Steve said, “They’re monsters from Doctor Who that --”

“They’re not monsters,” Bucky interrupted.

“Fine. Creatures. Still, no one wants to see that, Bucky.” Steve peered over his glasses at Bucky, knowing that he looked more silly than stern, because it usually earned him an exasperated laugh.

This time, though, Bucky reached out with both hands, took off Steve’s glasses, and put them on, asking, “How do I look?”

Steve squinted and leaned closer. Maybe too close, because Bucky took a sharp little breath. Oh, that was a good sound, dammit. Not fair. “Uh, blury?”

“Right,” Bucky said with a laugh in his voice. He carefully put the glasses back on Steve, and his fingers brushed softly against Steve’s cheeks.

Steve didn’t lean in and kiss him because, as always, it wasn’t the right time.

Dammit.

# # #

Steve was sitting on the floor beside his bed, staring blankly at a stuffed giraffe. Mom had gotten it for him at the zoo that summer.

The headaches were getting worse.

“Steve?” Bucky said.

Steve hastily pulled his hands away from his head, wiping his eyes on the way. “Didn’t hear you come in.”

Bucky was way too smart to be fooled, though. “What’s wrong?”

“Head hurts,” Steve muttered.

“I’ll go get your mom.”

“Don’t!” Steve immediately regretted being so loud, and he clutched his head again.

Confused and worried, Bucky turned back. “Why not?”

“I heard her tell your mom that if my headaches don’t stop, I have to go to the eye doctor. God, I feel like it’s breaking.”

Bucky sat crossed legged on the floor and put his hands alongside Steve’s, like he could help hold Steve’s head together. They sat like that for a long time, and it helped. It really helped.
Quietly, Bucky asked, “What’s wrong with the eye doctor?”

Steve didn’t know how to explain. “They’re my eyes, Bucky. What if they want to do tests on them or -- What if I need surgery?”

It was all too easy to imagine, after a lifetime of needles and procedures and scars.

Bucky started making circles on Steve’s scalp. “Not having surgery if you need it would be worse, though, right? Your mom said if they didn’t fix your heart, you might have died.”

Steve sniffled. Bucky was usually a lot better at cheering him up. “But they’re my eyes,” he whispered. “I’m scared.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispered back. “We’ve got to tell her, though. We’ve got to keep you safe.”

Because it was Bucky, Steve gathered up every bit of his courage and said, “Okay.”

When they told Mom, she hugged them together and said they were both very brave. The next day, she took Steve to the eye doctor, and Bucky went with him, all the way into the exam room. The tests were so easy Steve and Bucky spent the next hour playing eye doctor, clicking an old Viewmaster they found in the waiting room and saying, “Better here, or better here?”

And then they gave Steve his new glasses. He put them on and turned to Bucky, and he could even see Bucky’s eyelashes. Without thinking, he reached out to touch them.

“Whoa there,” said Mom.

Bucky just closed his eyes and laughed, but Steve drew back his hand and said, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Bucky said. He opened his eyes again, and they were beautiful, the color of the sky in the summer.

The whole way home, they compared how far away they could read signs and billboards, and Bucky’s eyes turned midnight blue, and electric blue, and stormcloud blue, and Steve could see them.

Steve kinda liked having glasses.

Chapter End Notes

I have two ficlets from this chapter! Both of them are part of Postcards from the Road to Courage.

Chapter 4 is Bucky’s point of view of the car ride across Kansas. (Also available on tumblr.)

Chapter 5 is Steve and Sam at Red Rocks Park. (On tumblr here.)
It was a carnival.

Nine hours in the car, Steve sitting in the front seat with Sam, not able to really talk to Bucky, definitely not able to touch Bucky, reading out directions that took them down roads that kept getting smaller and creepier, until they ended up on an actual gravel road, which Steve didn’t even realize existed in real life, and they parked in some grass at a literal fucking carnival.

He just wanted to be alone with Bucky so they could finally talk. But there was no ‘alone’ here. Here was the exact opposite of alone. In all of the vast, barren, desolate space they’d been driving through, they’d managed to find somewhere crowded and noisy.

At least the desolate parts had been pretty.

Steve dry swallowed two tylenol before he got out of the car and bounced into Bucky.

“It’ll be fun,” Bucky said, throwing his arm around Steve’s shoulders like always.

“Sure,” Steve said. He pushed his hair out of his eyes. “Fun.”

“Come on, you’ve been gloomy ever since Red Rocks. Which, by the way, totally delivered on the name. Those rocks were very red.”

Steve checked that the others were far enough away and wouldn’t overhear. “It was -- Sam had a friend who grew up near there. They were supposed to go see it together someday, but the guy died before they got the chance.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

It did suck. It sucked that ‘too late’ was an option. It sucked that while Sam was dealing with actual trauma, Steve could only think about himself. It all sucked.

“Guys! Hurry up!” called Natasha from near the entrance.

They caught up with the others at the ticket booth. A non-descript man there introduced himself as Phil and said, “If you’ll follow me?”

As they walked through the carnival, Phil said, “I’m afraid that with such short notice, our resources are a bit limited. If any of you were willing to share a tent, that would -- ”

“We can,” said Bucky. Steve braced himself, knowing exactly what was coming next. “Me and Steve are practically -- “

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” snapped Natasha. She went on in a fake-deep voice. “‘Me and Steve are practically brothers, so it’s okay that we cuddle at the lunch table. Can we do our project together? We’re practically brothers. Go ahead, try to date Steve, but don’t forget, we’re practically brothers.’ Grow the fuck up, Barnes.” She spun to face Phil. “Maria and I like to sleep together. You can put us in the same tent.”

Steve stood blinking in shock at Natasha’s tirade, so close to what he’d been thinking. “Bucky, we need to talk.”
Bucky worried at his lip and nodded. Sam shooed the rest of the group away, giving them what little privacy they could get in a crowded carnival fairway.

Steve turned to Bucky. “What your parents did for me was -- They saved me, I know that. And it was different when we were kids, but the guardianship expired, and it’s not -- ”

“Something like that doesn’t just expire, Steve. You’ll always be -- “

“Don’t call me your brother!” Steve hadn’t meant to shout, but --

“It’s the only thing that works!” Bucky shouted back “Everyone takes you away from me, teachers and doctors, and -- Everyone. And they can’t. I won’t let them.”

(“I thought they didn’t do schedule changes after the first day.”)

(“That’s lucky. They don’t usually put you in a room with someone you know.”)

(“Only immediate family members are allowed in patient rooms.”)

Oh god, Bucky had made all of that happen, had kept them together all this time, and now he looked like he wished he could snatch his own words back out of the air.

Steve needed to find a way to tell him how he felt.

He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “I didn’t mean to do it like this. In the middle of ... I don’t even know what state we’re in, but -- ”

“Please, I’m so sorry,” Bucky said. “Your mom -- I know I shouldn’t have used that, I know, but -- Please, don’t go.”

“Go? No, I -- “ Steve’s heart was racing, but somehow he felt still. All he had to do was be brave. For Bucky, he could do that. He squared his shoulders. “Bucky, I love you.”

“But?” Bucky said miserably.

Steve shook his head. “I love you. I’m in love with you. In a kissing your face, hope to get naked way. I don’t want to be your brother.”


Bucky was leaning close, reaching out, and Steve surged up to kiss him, grabbing onto his shirt for balance.

Bucky’s lips felt every bit as good as they looked. Soft and sweet and fucking perfect. So good that Steve imagined he could hear applause.

Wait.

He turned to look. Natasha was clapping. Sam was clapping. Even Phil was clapping, in a confused polite way.

Maria was holding up her phone as if she was taking their picture.

Steve frowned and flipped them all off, at the exact same moment that Bucky flipped them all off.
The two of them shared a surprised look and collapsed into each other, laughing long and loud, until Steve murmured, “God, I love you,” into Bucky’s shoulder. Then there was a lot more hugging than collapsing, and another kiss, short but wonderful, and --

“Guys,” said Sam, closer than he used to be.

Right. They were supposed to be doing a thing. “Yeah. Ready when you are,” said Steve.

Sam laughed and started walking. Steve and Bucky followed, twining their fingers together in a way they’d never done before.

Tents. Steve remembered, they were going to see the tents. Where they would spend the night. Where Steve would spend the night with Bucky.

Bucky had said ‘I love you’.

They had kissed.

Bucky tugged Steve’s arm, keeping him from walking into a trash can, and Steve squeezed his hand in a silent thank you. Because they were holding hands.

Steve had never slept in a tent before, had never wanted to, but right at the moment it didn’t seem so bad, being tucked away in the woods somewhere. Alone with Bucky. Not bad at all, really. He yanked Bucky out of the way of a toddler who was charging past, and Bucky ran a thumb over Steve’s hand. Jesus, that was nice. Holding hands was nice.

Phil led them around behind the House of Mirrors, and past a sign that said, ‘Authorized Personnel Only’. There they found a big open picnic shelter packed full of mismatched tents.

There were people everywhere, and the tents were so close together there was barely enough space to walk between them.

Damn. So much for privacy.

# # #

When their horrible freshman year at Kirby ended, they were finally able to move out of their dorm and spend their first night in a real apartment.

They had their own rooms again. They wouldn’t be on top of each other all the time.

Which was great.

Except.

Steve woke up in the middle of the night, and he woke up alone. He couldn’t hear Bucky breathing or softly muttering in his sleep on the top bunk. He couldn’t check up on Bucky on the way back from the bathroom.

Not that Bucky needed checking up on. But the sight of him, warm and safe with moonlight catching on his eyelashes ... It was reassuring. Steve had gotten used to it.

Bucky’s bedroom door was closed, though.

Steve wandered into the living room, not able to sleep.
There on the couch was Bucky, watching a video on his laptop with his earbuds in. Steve nudged his shoulder and Bucky jumped and almost dropped his computer.

He yanked out his earbuds. “Jesus, Steve, what are you doing up?”

“Nothing,” Steve said. He lifted Bucky’s feet and sat down, dropping them in his lap.

Bucky poked his toes into Steve’s ribs. “Aww, ya miss me?”

“Yep. Too quiet without all your snoring.”

Bucky poked him again. “I do not snore.”

He actually didn’t. “How would you know? Is that why you’re staying up, so you can listen to yourself?”

“Yes, that’s exactly why,” Bucky said, grinning. He set aside his laptop, which was still playing music videos, and snuggled into the couch.

Steve yawned. “Okay. Let me know how it goes.” He closed his eyes and wriggled deeper into his corner.

“Night, Steve,” Bucky said, so softly it was barely audible.

“Night.”

###

After they stowed their luggage in the tents, Phil gave each of them a badge so they could get free admission to the rides and the shows and they went their separate directions.

Steve and Bucky stopped at a booth for cotton candy first, and traded a stick of rainbow fluff back and forth as they wandered the fair. When they finished, Bucky didn’t dash off to find the best rides like he normally would, but he did keep stepping ahead of Steve before catching himself and slowing down again.

“You want to ride the ferris wheel?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “I don’t know. The one back home is bigger.”

“Oh. Right.” Steve followed Bucky down the fairway. It was fine. They’d ridden the ferris wheel together plenty of times. It was just -- “I wanted to kiss you at the top.”

Bucky spun around so fast, Steve walked into him. “Yeah?”

Steve looked up at Bucky. Had to look up, because they were standing so close, and he knew he was blushing and he didn’t care. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Good idea.”

If Steve had ever thought that making his intentions clear would take away the excitement, then he’d been very wrong. Instead of worrying if this was what Bucky wanted, he got Bucky looking over like he had plans. Because he did. Holy shit.

“Ferris wheel. This way,” Steve said, and he set off with a purpose. Bucky laughed a little and fell into step beside him. They made their way through the crowds and into the line for the ride.
While they waited, Steve said, “It was invented for the Chicago World’s Fair.”

“The ferris wheel?”

“Yeah. The World’s Fair before that was in Paris, and they made the Eiffel Tower. Chicago needed something to compete with that, so they made the first ferris wheel. It was bigger than this one, though,” Steve rambled, heart crashing in his chest.

“How big? Like the one back home?” Bucky asked.

“Almost twice that high. And each of the cars held sixty people.”

Bucky laughed. “Jesus. That is pretty amazing.”

“Yeah, pretty amazing,” Steve said, not looking at the ferris wheel at all.

They got to the front of the line and were ushered into a car that definitely couldn’t hold sixty people. The bar came down and locked in place, and Steve wondered where his hands were supposed to go. What the hell did he normally do with them?

The wheel lurched upward. There was no ‘normally’ for this. Normally, he wouldn’t have told Bucky he wanted to kiss him.

Bucky, of course, didn’t have any of these problems. Bucky was ... twisting his hands together in his lap.

Bucky was nervous.

Steve nudged him with his elbow. “Having second thoughts?” (please no please no please no)

“What? No! God, no.”

The vehemence was easy to appreciate, especially since they were already getting close to the top of the wheel. “Then what?”

Bucky looked at his knees. “It’s like a date. Which is great and all. I love that I get to go on a date with you. I always ... Man, I always wanted to do that. But, I don’t want to feel like we’re auditioning for each other or something. You don’t need to -- “

The ride lurched forward again.

Steve grabbed the front of Bucky’s shirt and yanked him into a kiss. Not the quick, soft, in-front-of-their-friends kind. He’d missed enough chances with Bucky, he didn’t intend to miss any more.

He tried parting his lips, hoping ...

Bucky tasted like cotton candy and secret dreams.

Steve hands finally figured out something to do, sliding over the planes of Bucky’s chest, finding muscles and ribs. Collarbone. Fine hairs at the back of his neck.

The ride lurched again, and Steve broke away, trying desperately not to sound like he was having an asthma attack as he caught his breath.

Bucky pressed their foreheads together and reverently whispered, “Fuck.”
“We were at the top,” Steve said. He ran his hands down Bucky’s arms and tangled their fingers together. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“You better not be sorry,” Bucky said.

“Not even a little.” The ride had started in earnest now, not taking on new passengers. Rolling smoothly. “Does this mean I get to call you my boyfriend?”

“Only if I can call you mine,” Bucky said.

“Absolutely.” (Mine. Yes, you can call me that.)

They were nowhere near the top, but Bucky pulled Steve forward by his jacket.

Bucky’s mouth was maybe the best thing in the world.

The ferris wheel went around five more times.

Not that Steve was counting.

(Seven times on the ferris wheel, twice on the fairway. Nine kisses. So far.)

“So, what next?” Bucky asked as they walked away. “You want to see a show? Get more cotton candy? Win me a teddy bear?”

“Whatever you want. Anything.”

Steve fully expected the speculative smirk that Bucky threw his way. He didn’t want it to be a joke, though, so Steve moved closer, his lips nearly brushing Bucky’s ear as he whispered, “Anything, Bucky. Anything you want from me.”

Bucky made a sound, a little like a laugh but more like a sigh. “Too bad we’re spending the night in the world’s most public tent.”

Steve huffed a laugh. “A teddy bear it is, then.”

Steve did win a bear for Bucky. Not just any bear, either, but a soft white bear with red and blue stars all over its fur. Bucky bounced on his toes when Steve gave it to him, and stowed the bear in the hood of Steve’s jacket.

They went to see show by a guy called Hawkeye, who combined archery with acrobatics. It was somehow both elegant and ridiculous, especially when he shot a perfect bullseye while diving off a high wire. But holding Bucky’s hand again was Steve’s favorite part of the show.

When it was time to meet for dinner, they found Maria and Natasha waiting for them by the House of Mirrors.

Maria grinned at them as they approached. “You guys are so cute together.”

Steve rolled his eyes and wondered what shade of pink his face had turned, but Bucky laughed and said, “Of course we are. We’re always cute, and together we’re exponentially cuter. It’s just math.”

Natasha snorted. “Come on, we’re supposed to meet Ororo. Sam’s already back there.”

She led the way toward the campsite, with Maria’s arm hooked around her own.
Ororo turned out to be a very tall woman with dark skin and spiky white hair. “You must be the students from Kirby. Several of --”

“Greetings fellow Scouts!” bellowed an enormous man with long blond hair, tan skin, and a neatly trimmed beard.

Ororo gave a long-suffering smile. “Several of us are Kirby graduates. Including Thor, here.”

“We have been following you on tumblr. You are the five shrubs, are you not?” said Thor.

“Right, from our initials. Sam, Hill, Romanov, Bucky, Steve,” said Maria, pointing at each of them. “I don’t know who came up with it.”

Probably Wade, Steve thought, not looking at Bucky.

“We’d love to hear more of your story,” said Ororo, and she sounded sincere. “But Thor and I have some business to attend to.”

She was looking past them, and Steve turned to see a tall, thin man with a top hat and a permanent sneer.

Ororo and Thor went to meet him, and none of them looked happy.

“Wonder what that’s all about,” Bucky muttered.

Maria leaned close and said quietly, “Top Hat Guy let some kids stay lost in the House of Mirrors for over an hour.”

“Their parents reported them missing, and there was a big search for them. It was pretty chaotic,” Natasha said. “Let’s go.”

Sam caught sight of them and waved them over to the empty seats beside him. They all sat down, and Bucky slung his arm around Steve’s shoulders, as usual.

Steve didn’t want usual. He slipped his arm around Bucky’s waist.

That was deliciously successful. Bucky wriggled closer. Wriggled. Christ. And they were crushed to together from knee to shoulder.

Steve studied the curve of Bucky’s smile and wondered how they’d survived so long without this.

Something thumped him in the arm. He turned to see Maria and Natasha looking at him expectantly.

“What?” said Steve.

Natasha gave him that look, like she was silently laughing at him, and Maria, obviously repeating herself, said, “The ferris wheel. Did you guys see the view from up there?”

“Oh ...”

“It was great,” said Bucky, sounding absolutely casual. He squeezed Steve’s shoulder.

Steve retaliated by squeezing Bucky’s waist.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “I regret everything about this.”
“I heard about what happened at the pool back in ... whatever state that was in. You have no room to talk,” said Bucky.

“That was different. She was wearing a bikini, what was I supposed to do?” said Natasha. Maria laughed.

Sam shook his head and said to the two guys beside him, “See? Been this way for the entire trip.”

“We have not! This was our first date, we weren’t ...” Steve clenched his jaw as Sam gave him a look that was both incredulous and amused.

“Do you two have a show?” Bucky asked the guys next to Sam. It was a reasonable question, since they were both dressed in black spandex, one with blue highlights and one with red. It had the added advantage of taking the attention off of Steve, who showed his appreciation by hugging Bucky even tighter.

The guy with blue highlights sat up straighter and said, “I am Kurt Wagner, known as the Incredible Nightcrawler, trapeze artist extraordinaire!”

Kurt had a German accent that reminded Steve of his Bio 101 professor, Dr. Erskine, and he found himself automatically liking him.

The other guy shot a quick glance at Natasha and Maria, then looked down at the table and said, “I’m Miles.”

Kurt gave Miles a pointed look, and Miles sighed and added, “Also known as the Amazing Spider-Man.”

“Trapeze artist extraordinaire!” said Kurt. “Your abilities are something to take pride in, Miles.”

“How about I brag after dinner,” said Miles, ducking his head.

Steve knew all too well the feeling of being stared at while blushing. “Uh, do you guys know Professor Logan?”

“The Wolverine!” said Kurt. “He was our strong man. Thor took over for him when he left. You know him?”

Bucky dragged over a pizza box and flipped it open. “Yeah, we stayed at his place last night.”

“That’s how we found you guys,” Maria added. “He put us in touch with Ororo.”

They needed both hands to eat, so Steve (very reluctantly) took his arm back and snagged a pepperoni from Bucky’s slice of pizza.

Bucky caught Steve’s wrist and looked at the pepperoni, like he was thinking about eating it right out of Steve’s hand. That was a hell of an interesting thought, but not something to do in front of everyone, so when Bucky looked up, Steve narrowed his eyes at him. Bucky narrowed his eyes right back, of course, with a quirk to his lips that made Steve want to do things. Jesus.

Bucky let go, but not before rubbing his thumb back and forth over Steve’s wrist.

Steve crammed the pepperoni in his mouth before he could do anything really stupid. In front of everyone.

He ate his pizza as fast as he could, barely registering the conversation around him. The instant he
finished, he wiped his hand on his jeans and put his arm around Bucky’s waist again.

He was pretty sure he hadn’t imagined the little sigh that Bucky gave at that. He definitely hadn’t imagined his own little sigh. He couldn’t quite believe it yet, that he was allowed to touch Bucky like this.

The guy in the top hat spun away from Thor and Ororo, who both seemed to still be in mid-lecture. Ororo looked very dangerous all of the sudden, and she said something to Thor that made him wince.

Top Hat Guy approached their table, and Miles hurriedly got to his feet.

“Lovely meeting you all,” Kurt said, also standing up.

“Yeah, bye,” said Miles. They both walked quickly away.

“Oh, what fortunate timing,” said Top Hat Guy. “May I join you? My name is Loki.” Loki sat down and put out his hand, with a smile that made Steve assume that even the name was a lie.

Bucky’s hands were still full of pizza, and everyone else was too far away, so Steve had to shake Loki’s hand. Which meant letting go of Bucky. Which sucked.

“I’m Steve. This is Bucky. And Sam, and Natasha, and Maria,” Steve said, before putting his arm back where it belonged.

Loki reeked, like he had recently discovered Axe body spray and was making up for lost time. It would have given Steve an immediate headache if he hadn’t taken tylenol when they got there.

Raising an eyebrow at Steve, Loki said, “I had heard that you two were brothers?”

“Uh, no. Bucky’s parents took me in, but -- “

“I’m adopted, too, actually. Thor is my brother.” Loki was looking more and more judgemental about the placement of Steve’s arm.

Steve clenched the bottom of Bucky’s t-shirt.

“Steve’s not adopted, though,” said Natasha. “They were never brothers.”

“My mistake,” said Loki, with a total lack of sincerity. “Have you been dating ever since his parents took you in, then?”

“Nope,” said Bucky, and somehow he managed to convey that this was none of Loki’s business, which was just what Steve had been thinking.

Loki’s eyes twinkled, like he knew he was getting somewhere. “Really? How long have you been together, then?”

Bucky shrugged. “Not so long.”

“What kind of show have you got, Loki?” asked Sam.

“I don’t perform,” Loki said, almost sneering. “I run the House of Mirrors. Unless Little Miss Storm Cloud has changed her mind.” He shot a glance at Ororo, who was still having a heated discussion with Thor.
Wow, Steve really wanted to hit this guy.

As if sensing the thought, Loki turned back to him, amused. “Excellent choice, though. Skipping right to your Happily Ever After. Why waste time?”

He got to his feet, picked up the last slice of pizza, and walked away.

Bucky stood up too, and said, “We’ll catch you guys later.”

“Have fun,” Natasha said, with one of her secret smiles.

“Of course. It’s a carnival,” Bucky said casually. He didn’t go off toward the carnival, though. He went toward the tents, with Steve trailing in his wake.

“What’s up?” said Steve.

“I’m very tired,” said Bucky, grinning. “Thought maybe we’d turn in early. Okay?”

Steve took Bucky’s hand. “Yeah. Extremely okay.”

“That Loki guy is a dick.” said Bucky.

Steve laughed. “He reminded me of Asshole Joe.”

“Oh, eww.”

“He did convince me of one thing, though.”

They had gotten to their tent, and Bucky crouched to unzip the door. “Yeah?”

“We can’t skip to the Happily Ever After, Bucky. We need to actually talk through some things.”

Bucky sighed and nodded and crawled into the tent.

###

Steve had been young enough at his mom’s funeral that he got to avoid the nightmare of the receiving line. He’d spent the day in a spare chair in a corner, with Bucky pressed against his side, sometimes holding each other’s hands, sometimes idly swinging their feet.

None of that was true at Mr. Barnes’ funeral.

Steve and Bucky flanked Mrs. Barnes as an endless string of people shook their hands, gave them hugs (whether they wanted them or not), and told them that if they ever needed anything, they should just ask. As if asking was so easy.

Steve and Bucky traded places sometimes, rescuing each other from being in front. Bucky took a few breaks to go sit outside with Wade. Steve didn’t have anyone to take breaks with, so he didn’t take any.

Thank you for coming. So good of you to come. Thanks so much for being here. We really appreciate you coming.

“What are you doing here?”

Steve was jarred from the tedium by a tall, pale man who seemed to be all points and angles.
“I’m Steve. Mr. Barnes was --”

“Mister Barnes?” the man sneered, raising a sharp eyebrow. “After all he did for you, feeding you, keeping you off the streets, you still don’t have the decency to call him ‘Father’?”

Steve clenched his jaw and balled his fists, suddenly beyond fucking caring that this was a funeral, that everyone was watching, that he should be respectful to whoever this asshole was.

“Johann,” said Mrs. Barnes, her voice dripping with condescension. “How kind of you to come. Really, you shouldn’t have.”

“I came to pay my respects, Winifred,” said Asshole Johann. Bucky turned at the name ‘Winifred’, because nobody called Mrs. Barnes that. Even her own mother had called her Fred. Asshole Johann turned to Steve and added, “That’s what family does.”

Steve decided to hit him.

Mrs. Barnes stepped between them, though, glaring up at Asshole Johann from mere inches away. “Steve is every bit as much a part of my family as I am, Johann.”

“It’s Joe, now,” said Asshole Johann.

“My apologies,” said Mrs. Barnes, not backing down one bit. “You’re right, Joe, family is important. So please, tell my boys exactly how you’re related to them.”

Asshole Joe stiffened. “I am their uncle.”

“Oh?” said Mrs. Barnes. Steve and Bucky shared a look. They had never seen her like this. Not even close. People in line were staring. “I was under the impression that Martha had divorced you years ago, Joe. And you know what that makes you to my boys? Absolutely nothing.”

Asshole Joe took a breath as if he planned to say something.

Mrs. Barnes narrowed her eyes even further and said, “I think you’d better be going. Thank you for your time.”

Asshole Joe scowled, but he walked away.

Mrs. Barnes turned her back on him, looking like five foot six inches of pure titanium. She wrapped her arms around Steve and Bucky, muttering, “Motherfucker thinks he can come in here and talk shit about my family while -- “

She looked over at the casket and started shaking.

Bucky waved for whichever of his aunts was nearest to come over. “Me and Stevie will deal with the line for a while, Mom. You need a break.”

“No, I -- “

“Yes,” said Steve. “We can handle this. Go take care of yourself. Please.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” said Mrs. Barnes. “You know what? Fuck it. We’ll all have a break. I’m a grieving widow, I’ll do what I want.” She turned to the people in line. “I’m so sorry, but my boys and I need a breather. We’ll be back in ten minutes.”

They were back in fifteen, but nobody was rude enough to complain.
In a tent

Bucky sat cross legged in the far corner of the tent, looking down at his knees.

Honesty didn’t have to be a bad thing. Steve crawled over and sat in front of Bucky. Right in front of Bucky, inside the circle of his legs, putting his own legs on either side of Bucky’s hips.

“Thought we were supposed to talk,” said Bucky. He looped his arms lightly around Steve’s waist, more warmth than pressure.

Steve shrugged and settled his hands on Bucky’s hips. “No reason to do it from opposite sides of the tent.”

“Right. Not like it’s a distraction to have a lap full of Steve.”

It was a joke. Steve knew it was a joke. (Seven on the ferris wheel, two on the fairway, nine all together.) But still ... “I guess I should start by telling you about Indiana.”

“How did I fuck things up there? I thought we were getting back on track, and then -- What’d I do?”

“Nothing. I told you, it wasn’t your fault.”

Bucky let out a long breath, as if he didn’t believe that.

Steve went on. “I overheard you talking to Natasha. You asked her about the tumblr thing -- “

“Stupid fucking Pym. God I hate -- “

Steve put his hand over Bucky’s mouth. “Let me get through this, Buck.”

Bucky nodded. Steve started to take his hand away, but Bucky caught his wrist and kept it where it was.

The distraction made it a little easier to talk.

“She said that people thought I was attractive. And then you said, ‘But why?’ and ... I figured out later that you didn’t mean it that way. And you were right, nobody actually did think I was, and I know you like me anyway, I do, but I’m -- “

Bucky pulled Steve’s hand away and said, “Whoa, what the hell? What do you mean, I like you anyway?”

“Well, you -- You do, right? You said -- And then we kissed. Nine times.” Oh christ.

“I didn’t realize we were counting, but I definitely like you. I love you. There’s no question about that. The question was about this ‘anyway’ bullshit. Didn’t you ever notice that I can barely keep my hands off of you?”

“You managed in Pennsylvania,” Steve muttered, and it wasn’t like Bucky wouldn’t hear him.

“Oh, nice try with the subject change, but Pennsylvania can wait. We’re talking about this first. What did you mean by ‘anyway’?” said Bucky.
Steve didn’t want to answer, but this whole talking thing had been his own stupid idea.

Fuck.

“I’m not pretty. I’m not strong. I’m not ... “

(Lots of paintball splatters and virtually no clothes, Wade running his hands through Bucky’s hair, Bucky clutching Wade’s t-shirt)

Bucky said, “Not an underwear model? ‘Cause I never wanted you to be.” He wrapped his arms tighter around Steve’s waist. “For one thing, you’re the strongest person I know. The world’s been trying to kill you since before you were born, and you keep knocking it on its ass.”

“Great, I managed to not die, yet. That’s -- “

Bucky put his hand over Steve’s mouth. “Shut up. Nobody talks about my boyfriend like that.”

Steve put his hand over Bucky’s, pressing it against his mouth, hoping to convey ‘I trust you’, ‘I love you’, ‘Please keep calling me your boyfriend’.

“Look, Wade is commercially viable,” said Bucky, and Steve snorted at the phrasing, straight out of Econ 101. “Well he is. He’s like a Big Mac. He even has an ad campaign.”

Steve shifted Bucky’s hand away and said, “He’d rather be a chimichanga.”

“Doesn’t matter, he doesn’t get to pick. He’s a Big Mac. And most people like Big Macs. Probably a bunch of people think Big Macs are their favorite. You, though. You’re definitely not a Big Mac. You’re ... You’re homemade apple pie. Aunt Debby’s apple pie. You’re hot and sweet and ... “

Bucky brushed his thumb over Steve’s bottom lip and whispered, “You’re my favorite. You always were. I’ve always wanted you. You’re so fucking beautiful.”

Steve swayed forward and kissed Bucky, threaded his fingers in his hair and kissed him as hard as he dared, trying to sear those words into his own mind, into his soul, to believe them completely.

Bucky loved him. Bucky wanted him. Bucky thought he was beautiful.

Steve needed oxygen. He pulled away just enough to get some air.

“That makes ten, right?” Bucky asked, only a little breathless. He unwrapped himself from Steve and flopped down onto a sleeping bag.

Easing down beside him, Steve said, “Yeah. Ten.”

Bucky rolled onto his side and kissed Steve’s jaw. “Eleven? Or is it only if it’s on the mouth?”

“No, that’s eleven,” Steve said, snuggling in closer.

Bucky grinned. “Bet I can make you lose count.”

Any attempt at a reply was completely lost as Bucky’s kisses trailed down Steve’s neck, as Bucky’s hands pushed Steve’s shirt up and off, as lips and tongue and oh jesus teeth brushed over throat and chest and ribs.

Steve pulled at Bucky’s shirt, and Bucky stripped it off like the world’s greatest magic trick. He was perfect. Lean and muscled and gorgeous.
And Steve was allowed to touch him.

He didn’t know where to start, but he started anyway, running both hands up Bucky’s stomach and chest, resting them on his shoulders.

Bucky went back to what he’d been doing, pressing fast, hot kisses along Steve’s ribs. He moved further down, to Steve’s stomach.

Steve arched his back at the feeling of Bucky gently nibbling the curve of his belly button. He would never have thought that would feel so good.

It paled in comparison to the sensation of his jeans being unbuttoned, and then unzipped -- god, Bucky’s hands were so close and Steve wanted him so much.

Bucky’s fingers, clever and wonderful, stroked across the front of Steve’s boxers, and Steve made a gasping, moaning sound that he’d never made before.

It was kinda loud.

“Tent, Bucky. You said -- We were gonna wait, but -- A pillow. I can -- I can be quiet.”

Bucky had already stopped touching him, though. “Oh jesus, Steve, I didn’t -- Sorry. I shouldn’t have -- And I’m not gonna let you smother yourself. Christ. I’m sorry.”

Steve yanked Bucky down beside him. “Stop apologizing. C’mere.”

Bucky slipped his arm around Steve’s waist, and Steve shivered.

“You cold?” Bucky asked.

Steve chuckled. “No. You’re hot.”

Bucky huffed a laugh, then lightly kissed Steve’s shoulder. “Did you lose count?”

“I forgot how numbers work,” Steve said solemnly. He traced a path with his fingers, over Bucky’s shoulder, down his back, pulled his hips closer and ... Oh. Oh, Bucky was hard against his thigh.

(Bucky wanted him. Bucky thought he was beautiful.)

“Sorry,” Bucky muttered, and shifted his hips away.

Bucky already knew damned well the state Steve was in, so Steve said, “What’s wrong, Buck? Is it ... not easy?”

Bucky gave a snort of laughter against Steve’s neck. “No, it’s, uh, it’s difficult. Real difficult.”

Steve hesitated, but it was Bucky. He could say anything to Bucky. “Because of me,” he whispered, barely managing to not make it a question.

“Because I got to touch you. I got to taste you. God, just looking at you can ... make it difficult. Want you so much.”

That was more than Steve could take. He rolled into Bucky, their bare chests pressing against each other, so much skin, and he kissed the hollow of Bucky’s throat.

Salty. It had never occurred to him that Bucky’s skin would taste salty and hot and musky. God, he
wanted to taste more, wanted to taste all of it. He licked along Bucky’s neck, pressing his tongue hard against his skin, feeling his pulse, pushing their hips together, feeling him, hard and hot and --

“Steve.” Bucky’s voice was rough and needy, and Steve wasn’t sure if he was supposed to stop or to go further.

He stopped. He really didn’t want to stop. He’d never been so turned on in his life. But he stopped.

They panted against each other, slowly catching their breath, until Bucky said, “We should get dressed.”

“Ugh.” Steve sat up. There was a shirt near him, so he grabbed it and put it on. He could tell by the scent of it as he pulled it over his head that it was Bucky’s, like he’d hoped.

He waited until Bucky finished struggling into his shirt (poor R2D2 was going to get all stretched out, and Steve didn’t care) before he climbed over and sat practically in Bucky’s lap again.

“That’s how we got in trouble before,” Bucky said. He put his arms around Steve’s waist again, though.

“If Plan A is no touching, then I’m going with Plan B,” Steve said.

“Okay,” Bucky said quietly into Steve’s ear. “But Plan C ends with me moaning your name loud enough that the whole carnival can hear it. I can’t be quiet. Not with you.”

Steve went very still and didn’t grind his hips against Bucky’s. “I really want to hear that.”

“Someplace with walls. And a door. Someplace with a bed, and lights so I can see you.”

Steve shivered again, and nodded. If they were going to stop, he had to do it now. He buried his head against Bucky’s shoulder. “Um. So. Pennsylvania?”

Bucky took a deep breath. “Right. Pennsylvania. I, uh. I figured there must have been a reason that you never told me you were into guys. Like, at all. And -- “

“I -- “ Steve started. “Sorry. I’ll shut up.”

Bucky kissed Steve’s hair. “So maybe you were tired of me always touching you. Maybe you thought that if I knew, then I’d never keep my hands to myself. And maybe I was kinda pissed and wanted to prove you wrong, or get back at you for not trusting me.”

Steve shook his head. No, no, no.

“Anyway, I stopped,” Bucky said. “And except for being awful, it went pretty well. But then that night I found you curled up on the bathroom floor, and I remembered something really, really important.”

Steve lifted his head off Bucky’s shoulder so he could look into his eyes.

Bucky smiled softly at him and said, “I remembered that you’re an idiot.”

Steve scowled and stuck his tongue out.

“You’re an idiot because you would never hurt me. Because you would suffer in silence forever instead of telling me you were in pain, especially if I was the one hurting you. And I just want to kiss your stupid, beautiful face all the time. I’d do anything not to hurt you, so I need you to tell me
when I do.”

Bucky seemed to expect an answer. Steve hesitated, wanting to say ‘You would never hurt me’, but knowing it wasn’t true. Bucky was very definitely not a mind reader, and it wasn’t fair to expect him to be. “I’m working on it. The whole talking thing. Admitting stuff. It’s -- Sometimes I don’t think about things.”

“Oh, really? Like when somebody moves in with you, and follows you everywhere, and keeps putting their hands on you, and it doesn’t occur to you that they might be in love with you?” Bucky said with his usual smirk.

Steve shook his head. “More like, if I’m wrong, if I fuck this up, then I lose everything I care about, and everyone who cares about me, so I shouldn’t even consider it. Or how, except for your mom, everyone who ever loved me is dead, so maybe it’s better that you don’t love me, but that hurts too much to think about. Or how, if I tell you that I’m into guys, you’ll realize that it’s a lie. I’m not into guys, I’m into one guy. One person. And if you didn’t want me back, then I’d never -- “

“I do. I do want you.” Bucky cupped Steve’s face in his hands. “I love you. Ever since you told me I was your best friend, back when we were ducks. I love you forever. You have to know I want you. Christ, I went on my knees for you in that alien costume -- “

“And then you walked away,” said Steve.

“You never said yes.”

“You never asked!”

Bucky closed his eyes and took a shaky breath.

“I’m sorry, Bucky. It was too important. I couldn’t just hope for the best.”

Bucky finally looked at him again. “Can you now?”

“You love me. I can do anything.” Steve smiled, because it was the most honest answer he could give.

“I do, and you can,” Bucky said, grinning. He leaned in close, but stopped just before their lips touched. “One kiss?”

As his answer, Steve closed the distance between them. It was soft, gentle, as chaste as an open-mouthed kiss could be. When they parted, Steve brushed his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “You meant one each, right?”

“Yeah. Of course,” Bucky said, without hesitation.

Delicate, tender, all of the things they’d never allowed themselves to be for each other, they more than stretched the bounds of what counted as one kiss, until Steve felt dizzy with it, lost in Bucky’s warmth, in the slow surge of his tongue, in the steady rhythm of his heart.


Bucky’s hand trailed up Steve’s chest, and for a moment Steve thought Bucky was asking him to stop, until he realized that Bucky’s thumb was carefully tracing the scar there.
Bucky whispered, “I won’t let it fall out. I’ll keep it safe, I swear.”

“It’s already yours,” Steve murmured, his lips brushing Bucky’s with every word.

“Everything for you. Every part of me.”

“I love you, Bucky. You’re my whole world.”

“Steve ... “

Words failed. They could only cling to each other and catch their breath as they let the moment subside.

Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist again. “In first grade, Sara Ramiro tried to sit next to you, so I spilled milk in her hair.”

“Bucky! That’s awful,” Steve laughed. “Um, one time after your swimming practice, I said I had a stomach ache, but ... that was not the problem. And you kept trying to rub my shoulders while you were wearing that goddamn speedo, which only made things, you know, more difficult.”

Shaking with near-silent laughter, Bucky said, “God, I remember that. Your cheeks were all pink, I thought you had a fever.”

“Oh yeah, Bucky fever. Hopeless case.”

Bucky giggled against Steve’s shoulder. “We lost the remote once, and you were looking for it under the couch, and the view was so nice I sorta forgot the remote and watched you instead.”

“Sometimes the only reason I get up early is because you never wear a shirt when you blow dry your hair.”

“I wrote our initials on the back of my Star Trek poster. With a heart around them.”

“I told Peggy you were everything.”

“You what?” Bucky said.

“I know,” Steve groaned. “Wade sort of asked me to give you guys some space, and -- “

“Wade -- What? Are you sure that’s what he said?”

“Well, it was Wade. He talked about Oreos, and how the cream filling keeps the cookies apart. Peggy figured out that I was the cream filling. Then I told her that I couldn’t leave you. Because you’re everything.”

“Ouch. She kind of overplayed her hand, but still,” Bucky said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means she wanted you to give us some space. Wade wanted the opposite.”

“The op -- Ohhh. The cream filling. And I was a cookie?” Steve asked.

“He sure wanted you to be.” Bucky took a deep breath. “Things weren’t going so good one night. Neither of us was all that interested in what we were doing. Then Wade said, ‘I bet this would be more fun if Steve was here.’”
“What?!” Steve started to get up, as if he could do something about it from here. “Who the hell would think that you weren’t enough?”

Bucky chuckled and tugged Steve back to where he’d been. “I appreciate you defending my honor, but it’s a long drive back home. Besides, I ... I told him that if you were interested, then I wouldn’t have any use for him.”

“Really?” Steve said without thinking. He felt a little bad for Wade, but --

Bucky rolled his head back. “Yes, really. You’re the love of my life, doofus. There’s nobody I’d rather share orgasms with.”

“Don’t call me doofus, assbutt,” Steve said, though ‘love of my life’ was still rocketing around inside his head.

“My assbutt is a goddamn delight,” Bucky said, and Steve could hear the smirk in his voice.


“Very smooth, Stevie.”

“Is it? That seems like the kind of thing I should investigate. Not that I don’t trust you, but this is for science.” Steve slid his hands down, just to the band of Bucky’s jeans.

“Science, huh? Well, I’ve got some experiments of my own I’d like to try out.” Bucky bent his head and went on, much more softly. “There’s this spot right under your ear. I always wondered if it was as soft as it looked. Was always so tempted to find out.”

Steve sighed as Bucky gave into that temptation, as Bucky’s lips grazed his neck, as Bucky’s fingers laced into his hair, as Bucky whispered, “Oh, it is.”

“... really want to interrupt that?” said Natasha’s voice, freezing Bucky in place.

“I think if there was anything to interrupt, we’d know by now,” Sam replied. “Nobody’s that quiet.”

“Some people are.”

“Some people think they are.”

“Some people should shut up,” Natasha grumbled.

Sam laughed softly. “You really think we should let them miss it, though?”

“No. They’ll want to see it.”

“Exactly,” said Sam. “Hey Steve, Bucky, you up?”

Bucky whispered, “God, yes,” into Steve’s ear.

Trying not to laugh, Steve said, “Yeah.” It came out rough and breathless, and Steve’s cheeks heated while Bucky’s shoulders twitched with silent laughter.

Natasha muttered, “I tried to warn you.”

“I’m a grown ass man, I can handle a dick joke,” Sam replied. Then louder, he said, “Get out here,
you’ve got to see this.”

“Just a second,” Steve said, his voice remarkably normal. He got up, took a step, and caught his jeans before they fell down.

Why did jeans zippers have to be so damned loud?

Bucky snorted at the sound.

Steve jabbed a finger at him. “Your fault.”

“I’m ... sorry?” Bucky said, standing close, not sounding sorry at all.

Steve tugged him even closer and whispered, “We’re doing that again.”

“Soon as we get four walls.”

“And a bed.”

“And a light.” Bucky ran his thumb over Steve’s cheekbone.

Steve caught Bucky’s hand and kissed the palm of it before he turned to unzip the tent.

They stumbled out. As they put on their shoes, Natasha smirked at Bucky and said, “Nice shirt.”

R2D2 was all stretched out. The shirt clung to Bucky in the best way, highlighting his broad chest and slim waist. Steve looked up at Natasha and said, “Thanks.”

It was his shirt, after all.

She smiled at him, without a trace of sarcasm, as if she was genuinely happy for him. His own smile probably made him look like the love-addled doofus that he was, and he didn’t care.

“Come on,” said Sam. “Out to the campfire.”

They followed Sam through the jumble of tents and out of the picnic shelter, to a circle of chairs set up around a fire.

A guy wearing sweatpants and no shoes was stretched across two chairs, with an old shaggy dog asleep under his knees. Phil sat beside him, with a beer in his hand. Thor and Ororo sat together. Loki was by himself, glaring at the sky.

Steve looked up too, and might have fallen over if not for Bucky’s arm around him.

The sky was magnificent. Worlds better than the Planetarium could ever be, as if every star in the universe was shining just for them.

Steve wrapped both arms around Bucky and held him close, feeling microscopically small under all of that majesty.

Bucky was so beautiful, silhouetted against that impossible sky, his eyes wide with astonished wonder.

“Amazing, right?” said Sam.

Bucky whispered, “Billions and billions,” and Steve nodded.
They stared for a long time, lost in their own thoughts, until Bucky suddenly laughed.

“What?” Steve murmured.

Bucky grinned at him. “You love me.”

“You love me,” Steve said back, and his heart felt as vast as the sky, filled with the certainty of those statements. He pressed his cheek against Bucky’s chest, breathing in the smell of him. The smell of home.

Bucky kissed the top of Steve’s head.

“Hey,” Steve said, turning to Phil. “What state are we in?”

The guy with the dog raised his beer and said, “Confusion, usually.”

Steve blinked.

Phil laughed. “Sorry, inside joke, but Clint started it and now we all have to go.” He threw his arms wide and said, “Bliss.”

Ororo called out, “Satisfaction,” and Thor chuckled as if he had something to do with that.

“Delight,” he bellowed.


Natasha said, “Contentment.”

“I don’t know,” said Maria. Then Natasha whispered something in her ear. Maria laughed and said, “Anticipation.”

“Frustration,” said Sam, though he sounded amused.

“Same,” said Bucky, vehemently.

Figuring that it was too dark for anyone to see him blush, Steve said, “Adoration.”

“Aww, I should have taken yours,” Bucky said.

“They both work, believe me,” Steve said, and he stretched up for a soft kiss.

Then Phil called out, “Wyoming!”
Reno, Nevada

Steve yanked a pair of suitcases out of the trunk of the car. He didn’t bother checking whose they were, since they were all going to the same place.

They’d spent over eight hours on the road, watching the endless nothing roll past the car windows, before finally arriving in Reno, Nevada. They’d eaten leftover carnival pizza at a rest stop somewhere near the border. Steve had gotten a text from Matt, but he’d put off answering it. The whole day had been extremely boring, except ...

Bucky was there. His voice rumbling in Steve’s ear. His smile tinged with a surprise Steve understood completely. His hands brushing against Steve at any excuse, real or imagined.

Steve had done the same, touching, touching, touching. Bucky’s knee, Bucky’s shoulder, Bucky’s elbow. So close to what he wanted, but nowhere near what he wanted.

It was delicious. It was frustrating. Like the smell of fresh cookies that he wasn’t allowed to taste.

Steve had barely been able to focus as they met a quiet, reserved woman named Wanda Maximoff, Head of Magic Security and Loss Prevention. He didn’t figure out until later that Magic was a casino, where Wanda caught card-counters and thieves. At the time, he’d been preoccupied with thoughts of how he and Bucky had fallen asleep last night, in their separate sleeping bags, Bucky reaching one hand out, Steve lacing their fingertips together, both of them whispering ‘I love you’ in the dark.

Wanda hadn’t been comfortable taking a bunch of strangers into her home for the night until she’d at least had dinner with them. They’d ended up going to a Taco Bell instead of the fancy buffet she’d planned to take them to, though, because Steve was too fucking delicate to risk eating somewhere that might mix up the strawberry shortcake spoon with the chocolate pudding spoon.

They had passed the interview in spite of that. Or maybe because of that. How scary could they be when she knew that she could take Steve out with a well placed juice box? She’d given them her information and they had followed her to her house, out in a quiet suburb in the desert.

Bucky kept shooting glances at Steve as they carried in their first armload of gear. He’d been doing that for the whole trip, every time Steve picked something up, like he thought Steve would crumble under the weight.

“I can handle it, Buck,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. He was supposed to be admitting things, so he might as well start there.

“I know,” Bucky said.

He glanced over again.

Steve stopped walking. It was tempting to put down the luggage, but that wouldn’t exactly help his case. “What? They aren’t even that heavy. Why do you -- “

Bucky broke into a kind of smile that Steve wasn’t used to at all. A smug, mischievous, sexy smile. “I dunno, Steve, my hot boyfriend is lifting heavy things, why would I possibly want to look at
Dammit, Steve couldn’t help looking stunned. He managed not to say ‘Really?’ Instead he blushed and said, “Oh.”

(“My hot boyfriend”)

Maria and Natasha were already coming back for a second load of gear, with Sam and Wanda close behind, so Steve guiltily hurried to the house. They dropped their stuff in the living room, and Steve turned to Bucky, and --

He wasn’t even sure who started it. Just that Bucky ended up against the door, sliding his hands down Steve’s back. This was such a bad idea. Steve kissed him, hard and breathless, gripping his hair as gently as he could manage, which probably wasn’t all that gentle. Bucky grabbed a double handful of Steve’s ass, oh dear god, that was good, and dragged their hips together.

Very bad idea.

Steve hooked one leg up around Bucky’s waist, grinding into him. Finally, hot, glorious friction in all the right places. Yes yes y--

“Whoa! Hello!” said a voice Steve didn’t recognize.

Steve tried to spin around, and wasn’t especially successful until Bucky let go of him.

“Uh, hi,” Steve said, squaring his shoulders and looking into the eyes of a guy with platinum blond hair and a snarky grin.

“I’m Wanda’s brother, Pietro,” the guy said, half amused, half challenging.

“I’m Bucky, and this is Steve. We’re -- ouch.” The door had opened behind him, hitting him in the back. They shuffled out of the way and let Maria and Natasha bring in more luggage.

“We left some for you,” Natasha said pointedly.

“No problem,” said Steve. He took Bucky’s hand and led him out the door. They nodded at Sam and Wanda as they crossed paths again, and as soon as they were behind the relative shelter of the open car trunk, Steve tugged Bucky in for another kiss. This time with no grinding, although Steve was pretty sure he was never going to be able to stop thinking about that.

“So, looks like we’re not getting walls or a bed tonight,” Bucky said, leaning his forehead against Steve’s.


Bucky made a sound somewhere between a growl and a whimper, and his hands tightened on Steve’s hips.

“Right here in the trunk,” Steve said. It was mostly a joke. “There’s room. What could possibly go wrong?”

Bucky chuckled. “Backseat. There’s more padding, and we won’t get locked in.”

“Plus, romantic moonlight through all the windows.”

“Yeah, all the windows. At least until we steam them up.” Bucky slid his hands under the hem of
Steve’s shirt, brushing the skin above his hips.

Steve shivered. “Don’t tempt me, Buck, I’d do it.”

“It’s your turn to be the responsible one.” Bucky shifted his hands to the small of Steve’s back and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“My turn? Shit, we’re in trouble,” Steve said, and Bucky did his best to distract him, kissing along his jaw and down his neck. “Um, illegal. It would probably be illegal to get you in the backseat and tear off all your clothes. Kiss my way down and --”

Bucky bit into his shoulder, and Steve arched against him, hard.

“Not helping, Bucky! Jesus.”

“Neither were you!”

“Okay, okay.” Steve’s mind scrambled for a reason to stop. There had to be one. Had to. Oh yeah. “We’d get arrested. The others would have to bail us out. They’d call your mom. That’s not how we want her to find out about us.”

“Fuck.” Bucky stepped back. “You’re right, that would be bad.”

“Right. Bad.” Steve looked at Bucky, muscles on display as he crossed his arms over his chest, that gorgeous smirk just waiting to be kissed. “I still want to.”

Bucky grinned. “I like this thing where you tell me stuff.”

That was too close to a challenge for Steve to pass up. “Every time you smirk I want to kiss you until you can’t breathe.”

Bucky blinked for a moment. Then, of course, he smirked, very deliberately.

“You’re a menace,” Steve said, yanking Bucky down by the front of his shirt and kissing him. Not until he couldn’t breathe, but long enough to prove his point. “An absolute menace,” he whispered against Bucky lips.

“You love me,” Bucky whispered back.

“I do.” Steve sighed. “We gotta get back inside, though.”

Bucky shook his head. “Not ‘til you say the other part.”

“You love me,” Steve said, and he couldn’t help but grin.

Bucky nodded. “Damn right.”

They gathered all the remaining stuff from the car and carried it to the house. It was a little weird, going into a virtual stranger’s house without even knocking.

It was a little weirder that once they were inside, they found Wanda and Pietro juggling.

Pietro called, “Back already?” without missing a beat, and Wanda laughed. She looked so much younger than before, happy and carefree. She and Pietro were tossing four or five balls in various colors back and forth with dizzying speed. Steve knew from experience that he wasn’t capable of anything like that.
Steve and Bucky finally put down the luggage and sat on the floor in front of the couch, which was occupied by Sam, Maria, and Natasha. Bucky slipped his arm around Steve’s waist, and Steve settled in closer.

Wanda and Pietro juggled in increasingly complex patterns, until finally Pietro caught the balls one by one, gathering them in his arms. He and Wanda bowed at each other, and then at their guests.

Wanda swept her hand out at them and said, “It’s your turn now. Entertain us!”

Bucky looked at Steve, and Steve gave a tiny shake of his head. They both turned to Sam, who was looking at Maria and Natasha.

“Dance with me?” said Maria.

Natasha laughed. “Thought you’d never ask. Tango?”

“You guys want music?” Bucky asked, pulling out his phone.

“Why not?” said Natasha, not taking her eyes off of Maria. “Get a camera, too.”

“Good plan,” Maria said softly.

Steve handed Sam a camera, and once it was set up, Maria bounced up and held out her hand. Natasha took it, pulled herself to her feet and pressed herself against Maria.

Bucky counted down on his fingers. When he reached zero, he pushed play.

Of course Bucky would have the perfect music for an impromptu tango. Sultry and smooth, like the dance.

Like the dancers.

They were magnificent. Steve couldn’t tell who was leading, and he wasn’t sure it mattered. Maria dipped Natasha so low that her hair brushed the floor, and they rolled back upright in smooth tandem, all coiled strength and barely restrained passion, flowing together through moves and countermoves.

There was a stunned silence when they finished, followed immediately by applause, and when Maria kissed Natasha the two of them sagged into each other, so relaxed and comfortable together that Steve felt a pang of envy.

He turned and found Bucky looking back at him. Bucky’s gaze slowly dropped, sweeping over Steve, all the way down and all the way back up before meeting Steve’s eyes again.

(“My hot boyfriend”)

Steve bit his lip to keep from lunging at Bucky’s mouth, but he ended up drawing Bucky’s eyes there, and they leaned toward each other like they were pulled by gravity.

A foot nudged Steve in the back, and Pietro stage whispered, “That’s not the kind of show we were looking for.”

Bucky blew out a breath in annoyance and sat back.

A moment later, he smiled and squeezed Steve’s hand.
“You’ve got a friend in me,” Bucky sang, with no more warning than that.

Steve sang back, “You’ve got a friend in me.” It came automatically, from all the times they’d sung along while watching Toy Story.

“When the road looks rough ahead.”

“And you’re miles and miles from your warm soft bed.” Steve barely suppressed a laugh at how appropriate it was. The whole song seemed to have changed, full of lyrics like, “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you,” and “None of them will ever love you the way that I do,” and “You’re gonna see, it’s our destiny.” Lyrics that sounded different now that he knew Bucky was singing just for him. Lyrics that were so much better now. God, everything was better now.

When they finished singing, the applause was nice, but Bucky’s eyes, dark gray like his hoodie and sparkling as he smiled at Steve, well, those were nicer.

# # #

Steve and Bucky had tried juggling together, once. They’d even had the foresight to do it at the park, where they wouldn’t break any of Bucky’s parent’s things.

The trouble was, Steve sucked at it. After half an hour he was exhausted from running after all the balls he’d missed, and annoyed at how patient Bucky was trying to be. He gave up and handed all the balls to Bucky, saying he would just watch for a while.

He did watch. It was impossible not to watch. It was the end of summer, and Bucky’s shirt clung to him, showing off how much his muscles had filled out since school had ended. He looked so much older. In a few weeks they’d start high school, and who knew if they’d ever get to see each other there?

Without Steve in the way, Bucky was great at juggling. (Bucky was great at everything.) A group of girls stopped walking so they could look at him. Probably not just because he was juggling, either, not with the way they were all giggling and whispering to each other.

“Steve, look,” Bucky said, and he juggled two balls in one hand, awkwardly, but successfully, while making hilarious faces.

Steve grinned at him. He would have said something funny, but one of the girls abruptly sat beside him on the bench.

“You know that guy?” she asked, with a predatory smile.

“Yeah,” said Steve. “He’s ... “ Steve didn’t want to say he’s practically my brother, though. “We live together.”

The girl’s eyebrows shot up.

“Not like that. His parents ...” But he didn’t want to tell her his whole life history, either. “Yeah, he’s my best friend, but if you want his number or something you’ll have to ask him yourself.”

“There’s no need to be rude about it,” she said, as if he’d been the one who’d plopped down without being invited.

“Steve!” said Bucky. “Bet I can flip that skateboard!”
Steve turned back to see Bucky pointing over at a lonely lost skateboard they’d noticed earlier. He had a smile so bright and beautiful, Steve could hear the girl beside him catch her breath, and the sound filled him with a searing frustration. That look was for him, not for anyone else. But he buried the feeling, because wanting it to be true didn’t make it true.

“I bet you can,” Steve called back. “Might not be a good idea, though.”

It was too late. Bucky was already standing on the skateboard, making it hop under his feet, as if he’d done it countless times, even though Steve knew he hadn’t. His audience of teen girls seemed to approve of this new performance, which was all the encouragement Bucky would need.

“Do you think he’d give me his number if I asked, though?” the girl on the bench said.

Steve tried not to glare at her. “I have no idea.”

“Steve,” Bucky called again. Steve turned just in time to see him hop higher, popping the skateboard as he went, making it twist in the air.

But he came down wrong somehow. He crashed to the ground with a sickening thump, right on top of the skateboard.

Steve moved faster than he knew he was capable of, launching himself across the grass and over to Bucky’s side.

“Jesus, Buck, you okay?”

Bucky looked up at him with his jaw clenched and said, “No.”

Shit. “Really?” Steve asked, uselessly hoping that it was a joke.

“No okay,” Bucky said, still not moving to get up. “Hurt my arm.”

Steve pulled out his phone and called Mrs. Barnes, who called Mr. Barnes, who took them to the hospital. While they were waiting for Bucky to get a cast put on, a nurse overheard Steve explaining to Mr. Barnes what had happened, and she laughed and said to Bucky, “Guess you learned your lesson about showing off for girls, huh?”

Bucky faked a laugh and didn’t answer.

Steve didn’t think it was funny, either.

# # #

“What about you?” Pietro said to Sam, jabbing him with his elbow.

“Oh, well, I do good voice-overs?” Sam said.

“You do great voice-overs,” said Maria.

“Very presidential,” added Natasha.

Sam laughed. “Thanks. I don’t think that’s the kind of entertainment we’re going for, though. All right, hang on.”

He went to the middle of the room and started doing stretches, rolling his shoulders, touching his toes. He carefully tucked in his shirt, did one more toe touch, then braced his hands on the floor and slowly lifted his legs straight up, into a handstand.
He held the position for a beat, before leaning precariously to the left and slowly raising his right arm until it was parallel with the ground. He shifted back to center, and did the other hand for good measure.

Then he slowly did the splits. While still doing a handstand. He rolled down until he was rightside up again, with his legs making a v around his arms. He held that position, then rolled back up again, and all the way over, curving into an upside down u with his feet behind his head before he arched up to stand on his feet again.

After they finished blinking in awe, they all clapped and cheered.

As Sam sat back down, Bucky said to him, “You’re wrecking the curve. Tone it down.”

“Not a chance. You better up your game,” Sam said, raising an eyebrow.

Bucky narrowed his eyes and started to get up.

“Bucky, no.” Steve grabbed his wrist and hauled him back down.

Bucky frowned at him. “Bucky, yes. I could do a handstand.”

“I’m sure you could, but this is not the place to learn,” said Steve. It probably would have worked, too, if Natasha hadn’t chosen just that moment to walk across the room on her hands, making Maria cheer.

Bucky patted Steve’s hand and leapt up. Sam got up too, saying, “Let me help. I can at least defend the breakables.”

Sam muttered some instructions to Bucky, and Bucky listened very seriously, which was a rare and adorable thing.

Bucky nodded, stepped forward as he bent down and kind of rolled up onto his hands, with Sam hovering nearby just in case. Bucky’s loose change tumbled out of his pockets, and his shirt fluttered down around his face.

It was one hell of a view.

“See Steve?” Bucky said.

“Uh-huh,” Steve said weakly.

Maria said, “Same. Wow.”

Steve would have glared at her, but that would mean looking away from Bucky’s … everything. Arms and chest and those abs, oh god.

Natasha said, “Yeah, he was on the swim team. You get used to it after a while.”

Steve shook his head, because that last part wasn’t true at all, and someone patted him on the shoulder. He tucked his knees up under his chin, as if curling into a ball would somehow shield him from the mountain of desire he was suddenly buried under.

This wasn’t cute sparkly butterflies. It was an ache, an itch, a scorching need.

(The salty hot taste of Bucky’s skin, his pulse against Steve’s tongue)
Oh, he need to not --
(Bucky’s fingers -- )
think about --
(stroking across the front of Steve’s boxers)
that.

Bucky tumbled awkwardly to his feet. He laughed and fistbumped Sam, then turned and grinned at Steve.

Steve didn’t know what his own face might be doing, but as soon as Bucky saw it, his smile faltered. In rapid succession, Bucky’s expression flickered from joy to surprise to desire to pride to some mix of all those and more.

Steve scrambled to his feet. He grabbed his bathroom bag from the pile in the corner and said, “I’m going to go brush my teeth.”

He didn’t hear whatever Pietro said to that, but both Bucky and Natasha said something back, which wasn’t a good sign.

He just needed a minute. Just a minute to process all this. A minute without strangers, without Sam and Maria and Natasha. Just a minute.

Leaving the door open in a half-conscious rebuke to whatever snide remarks had been made about him, Steve dug out his toothbrush and toothpaste, and brushed his teeth.

Bucky appeared in the doorway, leaning on the frame and watching Steve brush.

Steve waved at him and kept brushing.

Bucky looked at the floor. “You don’t usually notice that kind of stuff.”

Steve spit out the toothpaste and said into the sink, “I always notice. I just ... “

“Don’t think about it?” Bucky finished.

Steve shrugged. He rinsed his mouth and put away his toothbrush. Bucky found his own toothbrush and toothpaste, and started brushing. Steve sat on the edge of the tub and watched.

“You remember when you broke your arm?” Steve asked as Bucky was finishing.

Bucky gave him a look. “It was pretty memorable, yeah.”

“You were trying to do tricks on a skateboard. Was that . . . ?” It was excruciatingly embarrassing to ask, but he wanted to know. “Were you showing off for me?”

“Who else would I be showing off for?” Bucky said, annoyed. He might not even remember the crowd of girls staring at him. Holy shit.

Steve got up and crowded Bucky against the wall, both hands on his hips. In a low voice, he said, “It worked. You impressed me. You always impress me. God, you don’t even know what you do to me. What I want to do to you. You’re -- ”
“Hey,” said Natasha from the hallway. “Oh. Nevermind.”

Steve leaned his head against Bucky’s chest. “It’s fine, Natasha. What’s up?”

There was a hint of laughter in her voice as she answered. “I got a text from Peggy. She wants to know if you’re bringing a date to her wedding.”

Steve looked up at Bucky, who still seemed a little stunned by the whole shoving him against the wall thing. “Will you go with me?”

“As a fake date?” Natasha said, just like Bucky had said to her at the beginning of the trip, almost a week ago. “With pining and drama and angst?”

Steve smiled, his eyes still on Bucky. “No. A real date. You’d have to hold my hand and let me kiss you at least twice.”

Bucky faked a frown and shook his head. “I know how much you hate weddings. You’re getting at least four kisses. Five if you dance with me.”

Steve sighed, even though it didn’t make sense to be relieved. “Thank you,” he said, and leaned his head against Bucky’s chest again.

Bucky rested his cheek on Steve’s hair. “My pleasure.”

---

The wedding had been planned for months, the way weddings are, somewhere upstate. Bucky wasn’t impressed with the idea in general, and adamantly reminded anyone who would listen that at 12, he was too old to be a ringbearer.

Anyone who would listen usually meant Steve, who had his own reasons to be against the event, since it would take Bucky away from him for a whole weekend. Still, it was fun to listen to Bucky complain, and to hear him describe the tuxedo he’d be wearing in glowing tones. Steve was looking forward to the pictures that Mr. and Mrs. Barnes would bring back.

Then everything changed.

Mom was sick.

It was cancer. It had started in her lungs.

Steve asked if she would need surgery. She said no, but not in a way that made him feel any better.

The next day, Steve found himself being bundled into a rented car, alongside Bucky, to go to the wedding with Mr. Barnes. Mom and Mrs. Barnes were staying behind.

There was something ominous about the way they said they were making plans, though Bucky didn’t seem to notice.

Steve didn’t tell him.

He shoved down everything else and acted as normal as he could. It only worked because Bucky was distracted, by the joy of having Steve there to complain to, by the sights along the way, by Mr. Barnes playing alphabet games with them.

Somehow that was the scariest part, because Mr. Barnes was always kind, always willing to listen,
but he was also quiet by nature, happy to let Steve and Bucky entertain each other.

Mr. Barnes knew about Mom, and he was helping Steve not think about it, and it was terrifying.

As soon as they arrived, at a horse farm with a big white party tent set up on the hillside, Bucky was swept away by a set of aunts to get ready.

Mr. Barnes let Steve play games on his phone until the wedding started.

Bucky looked beautiful, following the flower girl up the aisle and grinning just for Steve.

The rest of the wedding was boring. Steve only had one thing to think about. By the time it was over, he felt like he’d been twisted tight, like a wind-up toy whose key was turned too far.

Bucky noticed as soon he found them, but he waited to say anything until they were sitting at a table in the reception tent while Mr. Barnes went to get cake. Even then, he only said, “Steve?”

“Mom has cancer,” Steve said, too clinical, too loud.

Bucky’s eyes got huge, and he said, “Jesus.” He thought for a moment, chewing his lip, then he tried to smile. “You could live with me. Just until your mom gets better. I’ll take care of you.”

It was almost funny, and it felt absolutely true, except ... Steve was smart enough to know that getting better didn’t seem to be an option, and he was scared enough to not want to say it out loud. He didn’t even want to think it out loud.

He tried to lock it all way, tried to be brave, but Bucky’s eyes welled up with tears as if he’d heard it anyway.

Bucky wrapped Steve in a tight hug and said, “It’s not like I’ll ever get tired of you. And Mom and Dad love you. I’ll talk to them. We’ll figure out something.”

Mr. Barnes came back with three plates, and he didn’t say anything. He just set down the cake and put his arms around them both.

“Dad,” said Bucky, his voice breaking. “We gotta --”

Mr. Barnes said, “I know, Bucky. I know. Steve, we were going to wait to tell you, but your mom wouldn’t want you to worry, so I’ll tell you now. Your mom and Mrs. Barnes are filing paperwork so that we can take care of you when your mom can’t. Just like she would for Bucky. It’s not an adoption. Sarah will always be your mom. But you’ll have us, too. Okay?”

Steve wasn’t going to be able to talk without sobbing, so he nodded against Mr. Barnes’ shoulder, with both of his arms still around Bucky.

“We’ll always be your family. We all love you,” Mr. Barnes said.

Steve could feel Bucky nodding, and he hugged him tighter, rumpling his tie, crushing the pink rose on his lapel, leaving tear stains on his jacket.

Steve didn’t cry again until a month after the funeral.

Chapter End Notes
If the ending of this chapter was somehow not enough angst, there's more to be found in Chapter 6 of Postcards.

It's Bucky's pov from the time Steve had pneumonia. Steve was a little too sick to remember some of the details.

Also available on my tumblr.
Wanda's Living Room

The text didn’t wake Steve up, because he’d never gotten to sleep.

All of them, Sam, Natasha, Maria, Bucky and Steve, were lined up on the floor in Wanda’s living room.

Bucky wasn’t asleep, either. They had unzipped their sleeping bags and layered them together, and he was curled up against Steve, his bare leg hooked over Steve’s knee, and his breathing changed every time Steve moved. Steve imagined running his hand up Bucky’s thigh, and wondered what Bucky’s breathing would sound like then. Wondered what Bucky’s skin would feel like just there, under the edge of his boxers. Wondered if he really could make Bucky moan. Wondered if Bucky would say, “Steve,” with his voice all ragged and hoarse.

Except everybody else was in the room, and they would definitely hear.

So, no, he hadn’t been asleep when he got the text, and Bucky hadn’t been, either, probably for similar reasons.

Steve dragged his jeans over and dug his phone out of his pocket, then fumbled around for his glasses.

It was a text from Foggy.

Karen said to tell you that guy is a bic uely dick.

What guy? Who the fuck was Karen? Why was Foggy drunk texting him?

He shrugged and put the phone away.

It buzzed again.

Foggy- Steve

Thats a fucking hate ctime

you can’t let Pym get way with thlat.

Steve sat up and reread both texts. Bucky hooked his chin over Steve’s shoulder and read along.

“Who’s Karen?” Bucky muttered in Steve’s ear.

Steve texted Who’s Karen? and turned his phone on silent. He leaned against Bucky while he waited for a reply.

“What time is it there?” Steve whispered. It was one thirty for them.

Bucky counted off on his fingers and whispered, “Four thirty in the morning.”

“Jesus. I guess it is the weekend, but -- “

“Fuck off,” Maria mumbled, though she was obviously still asleep.

Steve and Bucky shared a look, and Steve had to turn away before he started laughing.
Bucky held up a finger, then crawled over to the pile of luggage in the corner. He came back with Steve’s whiteboard and dry erase markers and wrote, “So we don’t wake anyone up.”

“Nice,” Steve wrote. His phone lit up with a new text.

Foggy- **Shes my sectetary.**

**Office manager.**

**For our office. Not jsut mine**

Great. Who else knew about Pym’s call? How many people worked for Matt, anyway? Had Jonessica heard it by now? Had they sent a copy to Wade?

Foggy- **you haveto release the tape, Steve.**

**Like on youtube or somethien**

**Everyboyd should know what a big ugly dick tht guy is.**

Steve texted back, **Good night Foggy**, put the phone back into the pocket of his jeans and shoved them aside.

Bucky bit his lip in thought. He wrote on the board, “Are you going to release it?”

“You think we should?” Steve wrote.

Bucky shrugged. “I think Pym should pay.”

For what he said about Bucky? Hell yes. Steve couldn’t think past the rage he felt at that.

He blew out a breath and wiped the board clean.

“I miss watching tv,” Steve wrote, because it was true. And because he wanted to change the subject.

Bucky took back the marker, his hand lingering on Steve’s for a moment. “I miss always knowing where the bathroom is.”

Steve sketched out a rough floor plan of the house, with a big X where the bathroom was.

Bucky drew a stick figure, gave it a pair of glasses, then drew a weird, lumpy, squiggly rodent thing and an arrow pointing from it to the stick figure’s head. Steve frowned at it until Bucky wrote, “Ferretbrain.”

Steve shoved Bucky’s shoulder and stuck his tongue out at him. Bucky grinned and drew a tongue on the stick figure.

He pondered a moment and wrote, “Why don’t you draw me anymore?”

Oh, no. Steve felt all the warmth drain away from him. He didn’t want to talk about that. Not at all.

“I mean, not as a duck,” Bucky added. “You used to. Why’d you stop?”

Steve actually considered lying. Considered it strongly enough that he was ashamed of himself. But he’d promised to tell Bucky things.
He didn’t want to write the words, though. Instead, he started to draw.

###

Steve hadn’t thought anything of it when Bucky mentioned that Wade Wilson was in his Intro to Astronomy class.

Steve knew of Wade from high school, but he didn’t think they’d ever met. At the time, the only notable thing about Wade was that he’d reportedly told his entire English class that he was pansexual, which led to Steve looking up what pansexual meant. If Wade had said that, then Steve kind of admired him for it. Steve didn’t really want to have sex with anyone (well ...) but he liked to think he’d be open to falling in love with someone from any gender.

Other than that, Wade was just a face in the hallways. A handsome face, probably one of the best looking people in their school, to anyone who was into dark hair, broad shoulders, and charming smiles.

(Steve was into all of those things, but not particularly in the form of Wade. He didn’t know Wade well enough to like him that way.)

So Steve was happy that Bucky knew someone at their new school, but that was all he thought about it, distracted as he was by learning the campus and getting used to sharing a room with Bucky.

Bucky came back from class and told Steve about funny things Wade had said, how they’d laughed over stars with names like Betelgeuse and Aldebaran. Steve laughed too. Laughing with Bucky was always a good thing.

Bucky came back with a story about Wade telling some assholes who were harassing a kid in the hallway to fuck off, and how Wade chased them down when they didn’t. Steve avoided mentioning what happened the last time he’d tried that. Bucky didn’t need to know about every bruise Steve ever got.

Bucky came back and said that Wade was into paintball, and he had plenty of extra guns. Steve, knowing that he’d only hold Bucky back and end up making them quit early, said he had some research to get done, but Bucky could go ahead, if he wanted.

Steve wished ...

Well, he wished a lot of things.

Later that night, Steve opened their door, and when he saw what was happening inside, he spun on his heel and left. He wandered down the hall and propped himself in the corner of the stairwell.

He wasn’t mad. He was confused and lonely and ... And he wanted to scream. Wanted to rage and howl and throw Wade down the fucking stairs. Steve had never been under the misconception that the world was fair, but this was **Bucky**. The one safe place in Steve’s world. Wade couldn’t have him, he couldn’t, it wasn’t **fair**.

Steve sat on the floor and curled in on himself and cried, because Wade was strong and brave and funny and everything that Steve could never be.

After that, Steve tried not to be around them when they were together. He tried not to think about it, just like he didn’t think about anything else that he’d lost. It was only sometimes ... When he saw someone with golden hair like his mom’s, or when he saw someone in a uniform like the one
his father had been wearing in Steve’s only memory of him, and now, when he saw Wade holding Bucky’s hand or touching his hair (his hair, Bucky never let anyone touch his hair, Steve had never gotten to touch Bucky’s hair) ...

It only hurt sometimes, so he didn’t let himself think about it.

###

The drawing was fast and rough. Bucky. His head thrown back. His expression on the knife edge between pleasure and pain. His hand clutching at the t-shirt of a broad shouldered man that Steve couldn’t bear to give a face.

Bucky clenched his jaw when he looked at it.

Steve tried to write out an explanation.

“I couldn’t stop seeing it.
You were all I ever wanted
And you were his
I couldn’t have you
I couldn’t put that look on your face
It would never be for me
No one would ever be for me.”

His chest ached and he reminded himself to breathe, a deep shaky breath that made his eyes sting.

Bucky wiped off the board and took the marker.

“I never meant for you to see that
Fuck, I hated just thinking about you with Carter
Seeing it would have been worse.”

Steve frowned at the board.

“Peggy and I only went out a few times.
She kissed me in the airport, when she left
That was the most we ever did.”

Bucky stared at that for what seemed like a long time.

A tiny part of Steve wondered if Bucky was going to change his mind about all of this, now that he knew that Steve was ... That nobody ... That he hadn’t ever done that.

Bucky put down the board and whispered, barely loud enough to hear, “I’m sorry, Steve. I didn’t mean for -- God, I fucked everything up. I should’ve been with you. That’s what I wanted, but ...
I’m sorry.”

Steve twisted around and whispered in Bucky’s ear, “It was my fault, too. I didn’t deserve to have you if I wasn’t brave enough to be honest. But I’m trying to be. I love you, Bucky.”

Bucky crushed Steve against his chest. “Love you, too. I’ve always -- “

“Touch that and I’ll light you on fire,” said Maria.

Steve and Bucky gave each other a wide eyed look, but Maria was wrapped around Natasha, eyes closed, seemingly asleep.
Still, as a precaution against immolation, Steve grabbed the whiteboard and scrubbed it clean.

While Bucky’s arms slipped around his waist, Steve picked just the right memory. He settled in and sketched out a drawing of Bucky with messy hair and an adorably sleepy smile, lying on a pillow.

Underneath it, Steve wrote, “I wanted to kiss you that morning.”

He hesitated, then added, “I want to kiss you every morning.”

Bucky took back the marker. “It’s after midnight. Technically, it’s morning right now.”

Steve turned so he could watch Bucky wiggle his eyebrows suggestively. It was unsurprisingly adorable. Grinning, Steve drew a frowny face wearing glasses and wrote, “Is it still my turn to be responsible?”

Bucky thought about it for a moment.

“We’ll be responsible together. We’ll do all the important stuff together.”

Steve grabbed the marker and put the cap back on it. He shoved the board and the marker aside and found a safe spot for his glasses. When he pulled Bucky down onto the floor, their legs tangled together, but not in a way that would end with them rocking their hips into each other, because they were being responsible. Together.

Bucky held up three fingers. Three kisses. Enough to enjoy it, but not enough to get too frustrated. Steve nodded.

The first kiss was slow and soft.

The second kiss was harder and wetter.

The third kiss was sloppy and hot and they both tugged on each other’s hair and broke apart gasping.

The fourth kiss didn’t really count. A soft, dry brush of lips as they whispered ‘good morning,’ and ‘good night,’ to each other, before Bucky settled his head against Steve’s chest so they could finally get to sleep.

* * *

They’d only been on the road an hour or so, after grabbing a fast food breakfast, when Natasha noticed the highway signs and said, “We’re going to Lake Tahoe?”

“You said you wanted to see it, so … Yes?” Maria said, sounding nervous.

She didn’t seem nervous after Natasha hugged her and thanked her. Steve was pretty sure they snuck some kissing in there, too, but he carefully avoided watching. Instead, he leaned toward the front seat and listened to Bucky and Sam.

“Okay, some of Marvin Gaye’s songs count as classics,” Bucky was saying. “But his best stuff isn’t even fifty years old, yet.”

“Fifty? Jesus, who do you listen to from more than fifty years ago? Don’t tell me you’re all about the Beatles,” Sam said, shaking his head in derision.
“The Beatles aren’t much older. Their best stuff was in the late sixties, early seventies. No, real classics are like, Fats Waller, and the Andrews Sisters.”

Sam gave him a skeptical glance before snapping his eyes back to the road. “You expect me to just believe that you listen to that stuff?”

Bucky grinned and got his phone out. He pulled up a list on spotify and started a song.

“Sam Wilson, meet Fats Waller,” said Bucky.

Sam rolled his eyes. “I know who Fats Waller is, Barnes.”

Bucky ignored him in favor of singing along with the music, “Ain’t misbehavin’, saving my love for you.”

“Hey, that was on the radio in Indiana,” Steve said. He remembered being really annoyed with it, at the time.

Bucky turned to look at him. “Well, yeah. I played this whole list.”

He handed back his phone, and Steve scrolled through it.

Love songs. They were all love songs, including the one by Kermit. Steve checked the name of the playlist.

‘SGR’

Oh Bucky.

Steve’s chest tightened. If he’d just listened. If he’d thought about it even a little bit. But he hadn’t let himself.

It was a different kind of honesty. So much more than not lying. It was seeing the truth, even if it might hurt, and then working to make things right. That was what Bucky deserved, what Bucky needed. What Steve would give him, from now on, no matter the cost.

So that morning, Steve didn’t just notice when Bucky’s eyes were the same exquisite shade of blue as the lake and the sky. He also noticed that when they got to Donner Pass and Steve made a stupid cannibalism joke, Bucky chuckled instead of giving his unimpressed look. And when they they got to Sacramento, Bucky started drumming on his knee, in time with the music, but with a nervous flick to his fingers.

Bucky was upset, and getting more upset the further they went. The closer they got to San Francisco. The closer they got to Peggy. It wasn’t hard to see, once Steve let himself look, and it wasn’t hard to understand, once he let himself think.

If it was Wade instead of Peggy --

(You were all I ever wanted And you were his.)

If it was Wade instead of Peggy, Steve would want to write ‘Property of Steven Grant Rogers’ across Bucky’s forehead.

(“Everyone takes you away from me. Everyone. And they can’t. I won’t let them.”)

Maybe Bucky would want that, too.
Okay, *that* was a little extreme, but they could do the next best thing.

“Hey Bucky, let me have your arm for a minute.”

Bucky gave him a weird look, but when Steve wiggled a marker at him, he twisted his arm around to where Steve could reach it from the back seat. It seemed really uncomfortable, so Steve gave up any plans to draw something complicated and went with the simplest message possible. He drew a big red heart, and inside it he wrote, “SGR + JBB”.

“Okay,” Steve said. Bucky took his arm back, glanced at it, and laughed. Steve had already pressed himself to the back of Bucky’s seat and wrapped his arm around to give him the markers.

“Oh, I get to do you?” Bucky said.

Steve snorted. “Well, yeah, but for now, just draw.”

Bucky craned his head around to give his unimpressed look, and Steve grinned.

Maria whispered, “Draw diiiicks,” and Bucky laughed and uncapped a marker.

Steve gave a mental shrug. He had trusted Bucky with more important things.

After several ticklish moments, Bucky said, “You’re done.”

He hadn’t drawn any dicks. On Steve’s forearm there was a big blue heart, encircling “JBB + SGR” in Bucky’s swooping, precise handwriting. As soon as it was dry, Steve ran his thumb over it.

He’d always talked about getting a tattoo, but he’d never settled on a design that was worth the risk of infection. This, though. This was something he wanted to keep forever.

He reached around again and did his best to give Bucky a hug. Bucky hugged Steve’s arm in return, which wasn’t especially satisfying, but he’d take what he could get, for now.

###

Some part of Steve had probably known even before the phone call.

But then there had been the call itself. Not a text, which would have been normal, but a call, with Peggy’s name on the id, at ten o’clock at night.

Well, shit.

“Hello?” Steve said, making it a question in spite of himself.

“Steve!” Peggy said, over loud music in the background. “I wanted to share the good news! I got an offer today to work for Stark Industries!”

It was a great opportunity. They were one of the best tech companies in the world.

They were also based in San Francisco.

Steve said, “Wow, that’s amazing.”

“We’re at a bar called Luke’s! You should come celebrate!”
Celebrate. Because she was taking the job. Of course she was taking the job. She’d be a fool not to, and Peggy was anything but a fool.

“I, uh, I don’t think I can make it out tonight,” Steve said. It wasn’t like he was leaving her in the lurch. She obviously had other people to celebrate with. People who could drink, and dance. People she’d told the news to before him. “I’m not quite over the pneumonia, yet.”

The worst part was, it was true, and just thinking about it made him cough again. He hastily covered the phone so Peggy wouldn’t hear.

Bucky’s head appeared from over the side of the top bunk. His eyes were pale gray, like his sweater.

“Oh,” said Peggy. “Well, I’m sure we’ll get to see each other again, before — “

“Yeah, of course we will,” Steve said, interrupting because he didn’t want to hear the rest of that sentence. “Have fun. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Goodbye, Steve,” said Peggy. It wasn’t the last time she would say it, but it had a certain finality to it anyway.

They hung up, and Steve coughed some more. Bucky asked if everything was okay, and Steve told him everything was fine, but Bucky insisted on making hot tea for him, like he’d done every night since the hospital.

Two weeks later, Steve met Peggy at the airport. He had been scrambling to make up for the classes he’d missed while he was sick, and Peggy was busy taking finals so she could graduate early. They hadn’t found time to do more than text each other.

This was their last chance.

It wasn’t like the movies. There wasn’t anywhere to sit and talk, at least not on this side of the security checkpoint. So he waited in line with her as she checked her bags, helping her carry them even though she was better at it than he was, and then there was nothing else to do.

She turned to him, looking beautiful, as usual. “It was wonderful getting to know you.”

“Yeah, you too. You’re -- You’re really great, Peggy.”

“Thanks. So are you.” She sighed. “I guess I should be going. Goodbye.”

“Bye,” said Steve, and his voice sounded a lot steadier than he felt. He squared his shoulders and started to hurry away, so she wouldn’t see --

“Wait.”

Steve turned back around, and Peggy was suddenly very close. She put her hand on his shoulder and pulled him in.

She kissed him, slow and sweet, but he barely had time to react before it was over. “I wanted to try that at least once,” she said. She smiled sadly at him. “I hope you find the one who makes you truly happy.”

Steve refused to burst into tears in the middle of the airport, so he couldn’t answer.

Peggy gave him a little wave, and then she walked out of his life.
San Francisco, California

They pulled up to the kiosk at the entrance to the huge Stark Industries building, and Maria handed forward her phone for the guard to scan, like something straight out of science fiction.

The scan worked, the gates opened, and the phone suddenly brought up a map directing them to a parking space near the front doors. A single, exact parking space that was apparently waiting just for them.

Steve expected they’d be met by an armed guard or something, but the doors slid open automatically as they approached, letting them into a bright, airy foyer with a big white desk at the far end.

Near the desk was a group of kids. Well, teenagers. Young adults?

One of them, a tall guy with tinted glasses, squared his shoulders and approached them. “Are you the group from Kirby?”

They all nodded, and Maria shook his hand. She ran through introductions, and he did the same, rattling off, “I’m David. This is Billy, Teddy, America, and Kate.”

Steve had no idea which name went with which person. Billy and Teddy were probably the tall blond guy with the pierced ears and the short dark haired guy he had his arm around, and Kate and America were probably the two dark haired young women. It stood to reason that the one in the awesome stars and stripes jacket was America, assuming the jacket was hers. After all, Bucky was currently wearing Steve’s jacket, and Steve was wearing one of Bucky’s hoodies, and he was pretty sure the sweater Maria was wearing was the one she rescued from GLaDOS, which was Natasha’s.

David led them down the hallway to a ... Steve didn’t know what to call it. It was a big room, with comfy chairs and couches scattered about. There were several desks with computers, and a few actual drawing boards, but there was also a pool table, and a climbing wall. The nearest drawing board was covered with sketches of kittens surrounding what looked like a design for some kind of brainstorming app.

“Heads up!”

Steve looked up to see a frisbee flying at his face.

He reached up on instinct and snagged it out of the air, surprising even himself.

“You are so awesome!” said Bucky, laughing. He jogged several feet away and held up his hands in the universal gesture for ‘throw it here’.

Steve did, with a casual flick of his wrist that sent the disc in a perfect arc to Bucky. Bucky barely paused between catching it and sending it back, wickedly fast, but Steve still managed to grab it.

He threw it to Sam next, who caught it with the same easy grace that he did everything else before tossing it to Bucky.

Playing frisbee indoors was fun. Steve wasn’t exactly sporty, but it helped that there was no sun or pollen in here, and that there weren’t points involved. Kind of like he imagined gym class would have been, although Bucky always told him gym class sucked.
Everyone else seemed to be involved in an impromptu darts tournament, in which Natasha was somehow coming in a distant second to Kate.

Steve was starting to lose his breath and should probably have already quit, when David said, “Lunch time!”

Steve hid his sigh of relief and fell in next to Bucky as they all made their way down the hall.

# # #

With only two days of school left, there wasn’t much to do, so Steve waited while Bucky leaned into his shoulder, and then went back to drawing. It wasn’t a very interesting drawing, and it wasn’t going to make Bucky laugh, but Steve couldn’t always help that.

It was a sickly little dog, wearing a graduation cap.

Bucky frowned at it, and Steve turned to a new page.

He started sketching an otter. “You know I never took gym class? Not once.”

“You didn’t miss anything good,” Bucky said.

“It’s supposed to be required for graduating.” He tried to give his otter a sword, but it didn’t work out, so he erased it.

Bucky frowned again, this time at Steve. “Not if you have a waiver. What, you think they’re gonna withhold your diploma unless you run some laps?”

“No.” Steve gave up on drawing for the moment and tapped his pencil on the paper. “I guess I wonder if they should.”

“Well that would be pretty fucking shitty.”

“I could have at least tried,” Steve said. “Everybody else did.”

Bucky exhaled slowly and said, “Oh yeah? So you’re the first person in the whole world to get a gym waiver? You’d think they’d send you a plaque or something for that.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah, we can hang it in the hallway, right next to your medal for being the biggest pain in the ass.”

Bucky jabbed him in the ribs. “Pretty sure I only got silver in that one.”

“That’s not silver, Bucky,” Steve said solemnly. “That’s pure platinum.”

“Bite me, Rogers.” said Bucky, shoving Steve’s shoulder.

Steve snapped his teeth a few times and dug his fingers into the back of Bucky’s knee, making him squirm.

It rapidly devolved into a brief and intense tickle fight, which ended when Bucky shoved Steve away and said, “Besides, if you took gym class you’d get all sweaty, and be even stinkier than usual.”

“I do not smell bad!” said Steve. He really didn’t, he was sure.
Bucky put his nose against Steve’s shoulder and made a loud sniffing sound, followed by fake gagging noises. He collapsed with his head on Steve’s chest, not quite concealing a smile. “Think I’m dead. Poisonous fumes.”

“Pfft,” said Steve. “You’re awfully noisy for a dead guy.” He lifted his hand, but didn’t run his fingers through Bucky’s hair. He just nudged him on the shoulder, lightly enough that he wouldn’t move away, and then reached for the remote to turn on whatever movie was handy.

# # #

The cafeteria was as sunny and inviting as the rest of the building had been, with big windows overlooking a pond.

Maria shot a worried look at Steve as they got in line and whispered to him, “Are you ... Is a cafeteria okay for you?”

After he’d made them all eat at Taco Bell in Reno, it was hard to blame her for asking, so he didn’t clench his jaw. “I won’t know until we get up there. If it’s self serve, I can ask if there’s something in the back that I can have, or I can go sit in the car and have a granola bar. It’s fine.”

Maria frowned but didn’t say anything more about it.

He didn’t want to ask for special food, or be singled out, or share his medical history. He didn’t want to put his life in the hands of strangers, and just hope that they would take him seriously.

Bucky slipped his hand into Steve’s, and Steve let a tiny bit of his frustration drift away. Bucky loved him. Bucky thought he was somehow worth all the trouble.

“Hey, you must be here for the PJ’s wedding,” said a weirdly familiar voice behind them.

Steve turned to see a man with dark hair, dark eyes, and an iconic mustache. Howard Stark’s mustache. On Howard Stark’s face. In Howard Stark’s building.

“I ... Uh, yeah, we’re here for the wedding,” said Steve, a little thrown by the idea of chatting with the youngest multi-billionaire in the world. “I’m Steve, and this is Bucky. My boyfriend.”

Bucky shot Steve a surprised and very happy look.

“Mr. Stark grinned. “Not used to saying that, huh? Go ahead, you can say it again. I don’t mind a bit.”

“No, it’s okay,” Steve said, blushing. “I plan to have lots more chances.”

Bucky gave a soft little laugh. God, it made Steve want to kiss him.

“I’m Maria,” said Maria, smoothly covering Steve and Bucky’s failure to introduce anyone else. “This is Natasha, and this is Sam. I guess you probably already know these guys.” She waved her hand to indicate Billy and Kate and all the rest.

“I do,” said Mr. Stark, waving at them. “And you folks drove all the way from New York, right?”

“Some of us did more driving than others,” said Natasha, patting Sam’s shoulder.

“Well, it’s great that you get to be here. Rehearsal dinner tomorrow, and then finally the wedding. I think I’m almost as excited about it as they are. They’re a terrific couple, and ...” Mr. Stark sighed happily, “You know, every wedding is a reminder that it won’t be too long before we have a whole
generation that doesn’t remember a time when we couldn’t get married.”

We?

“You are married,” said America, with a big smirk, as if this wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation. “Like, straight married.”

Mr. Stark smirked right back. “And yet, I’m still bi. Go figure.”

David grinned and fist bumped him.

Steve was trying not to look stunned, but he was probably failing. Mr. Stark shrugged. “The press usually ignores it, unless they feel like starting a rumor about me cheating on my wife. Did you guys see anything good on your way over? That’s one hell of a trip.”

Sam, always an expert in rescuing conversations, said, “It was pretty amazing to stand on the same steps that President Lincoln and President Obama had, back in Illinois.”

“I liked Lake Tahoe,” said Natasha, glancing at Maria. “It was really beautiful.”

“There were also some excellent sights in Ohio,” said Maria, not breaking her professional persona at all, even though she was probably referring to the sight of Natasha in a bikini. Or out of it.

Howard turned to Steve and Bucky.


Sam didn’t even throw up his hands in frustration at them all.

They had reached the front of the line by then, and Steve could see that the cafeteria was self serve, but he decided to try asking if he could get something that hadn’t been set out yet.

He plastered on a smile and said to the cafeteria lady, “Hi. I was wondering if -- “

“Are you the group from Kirby?” she said.

“Yes,” said Steve, a little annoyed at the interruption. “I was wondering -- “

“We have some meals set aside for you. No strawberries, pineapple, or celery, right?”

While Steve blinked in surprise, Bucky said, “Right. That’s great, thanks.”

“No problem at all.” The lady grinned and her eyes flicked quickly over Bucky. She didn’t seem to notice that his jaw was too tight for a real smile, or that his shoulders were tense. “They’re right over here.”

It had to have been Peggy who had the meals prepared, and Bucky obviously wasn’t comfortable with the idea that she was watching out for Steve. As dumb as that was, it was also kind of sweet.

They all grabbed their trays and settled in at a table. Steve hooked one ankle around Bucky’s, pressing their knees together, but it wasn’t enough.

He didn’t like the idea of saying ‘I love you’ in front of Kate and America and David and everyone. It felt like it should be private, just between them. So he pulled out his phone to send a text to Bucky.
I missed call. Shit, he’d forgotten to turn the sound back on after last night.

“I got a voicemail from Foggy,” Steve said, setting his phone in the middle of the table. He hit the button to play it before he could linger too long on how much this reminded him of another call they’d all heard.

“Hey Steve,” said Foggy. “I wanted to apologize for the texts I sent last night. It was unprofessional of me to call Pym a big ugly dick, even though he clearly -- “

Matt’s voice in the background said, “Foggy ...

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I’m sorry for drunk texting you, and I shouldn’t have pressured you to take any course of action, even if it was one that would humiliate that, uh, that person. So please let us know what you’d like to do in relation to the hate crime that was perpetrated against you and Bucky -- ”

Steve felt like he might have been able to be rational about it if it was just him. But when he thought about what Pym called Bucky … That he tried to reduce someone so strong and brilliant and perfect down to one ugly word ...

Steve’s hands clenched into fists, and he couldn’t think about it.

Dammit. Matt was saying something in the background, and Steve had promised himself that he would see the truth, whether he liked it or not.

He reached over and took Bucky’s hand.

Foggy said, “There’s precedent, Matt! Steve, if you or Bucky want to press charges, or take other action, just let us know. Call us anytime. We are one hundred percent on your side”

Steve looked up from the table to meet the eyes of his friends. Maria, with her hands folded neatly in front of her, biting her lip. Natasha, seemingly impassive, except Steve knew better. Sam, so full of compassion it made Steve’s chest hurt.

And beside Sam sat Howard Stark, his eyebrows drawn together in concern and possibly anger. “That sounded pretty serious. Anything I can help with?”

It seemed naive, but Steve believed that Howard actually cared. Stark Industries was Pym Tech’s biggest competitor, and nobody had more to gain financially from any damage done to Hank Pym’s reputation, but after just a few minutes of conversation, Steve was ready to accept that Howard wanted to help for reasons that had nothing to do with business.

Bucky and Steve turned to each other. They had a silent conversation, all head tilts and nods, and when it was over, Steve said, “Mr. Stark, could we talk to you in private?”

“Absolutely. Bring your lunches.”

* * *

The worst part was listening to the call again. It was fast, though. Much sooner than Steve expected, there was the sound of his fist hitting the phone, one, two, three times, and Bucky’s voice saying, “Steve, wait, I -- Fuck!” just as a door slammed closed.

“So, um, after that GLaDOS, I mean, the van … ” Steve said, determined to get through this, despite the furious sympathy in Howard’s eyes, and the way Bucky was standing with his arms
crossed over himself. “It drove away. By itself.”

Maria said, “If we hadn’t been running late, we’d all have been in it at the time. As it was, I had the chance to jump out even though the doors locked themselves.”

Bucky muttered, “Jesus.”

Steve faked a chuckle. “And your mom said sleeping in late never did anyone any good.”

Bucky pretended to smile in return.

“Authenticating the voice shouldn’t be a problem,” said Mr. Stark. “My team won’t have any trouble cracking whatever program Pym is using to delete your mentions online, either. I can have a million hits on that recording by morning.” He flipped open his laptop, as if he was ready to start right now.

“No,” said Steve. His heart wasn’t even hammering, though everyone in the room turned to him in surprise.

Mr. Stark squinted at him. “What do you mean, ‘No’?”

“I mean, I’m not going to release the recording, Mr. Stark,” Steve said.

“Call me Howard,” said Mr. Stark, absently. “You can’t just let Pym get away with this.”

Steve clenched his jaw. “I’m not going to let the whole world hear him say that about Bucky.”

Bucky looked slightly horrified. “Steve -- “

“No,” said Steve. “I’m not doing that to you. No way.”

“Could Bucky release it?” asked Maria, not looking at Steve.

Howard shook his head. “The call was between Pym and Steve. They’re the only ones who can legally record it.”

“Also, I wouldn’t go against what Steve wanted, even though he’s being a dumbass,” said Bucky.

Steve glared at Bucky.

Natasha glared at him, too. “He doesn’t want millions of people to see you as a victim It’s not that hard to understand.”

Howard threw his hands up. “Look, I wasn’t going to bring this into it, but ... If I can get your recording out there, prove that Pym is a homophobic asshole who’s dragging his company down, then the Board of Directors at Pym Tech can get enough votes to kick him out of the company. I have some connections there, and they are just waiting for an opportunity like this.”

“Hoping to improve your bottom line?” said Natasha.

Howard frowned at her. “My bottom line is doing just fine, thanks. Replacing Hank will help Pym Tech more than it will Stark Industries. He does stupid shit like stranding a bunch of college students in the middle of nowhere as part of a vendetta against his ex-wife. Not exactly good business sense. And I happen to like his ex-wife, and those college kids. Taking him out is better for everyone involved.”
Steve squared his shoulders. “We can cut out the last part, and just release what he said about me.”

“Bullshit!” said Bucky.

“People call me that anyway.“

“No,” Bucky stepped in front of Steve and frowned down at him. “We go together, or we don’t go at all.”

That was --

That was perfect. Steve clutched the front of Bucky’s shirt and yanked him into a kiss. He didn’t care who was watching, didn’t care that the kiss was too hard, didn’t care that it made his lips hurt a little. Bucky didn’t seem to care, either, as he dragged Steve up against his chest. “Yes,” Steve said breathlessly. “Okay, yes. Together or not at all.”

Bucky leaned their foreheads together. “We have to stop Pym.”

“I know,” said Steve, loosening his grip on Bucky’s shirt. “But I’m not going to sell his message for him. We release that recording and we put everything in his words, on his terms.”

“What we need is our own message,” said Sam, thoughtfully.

Howard leaned forward. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Sam, sounding more and more sure of himself. "Yeah. We show regular LGBTQIA folks, as many as we can manage, just living our lives, being in love, taking care of each other. Friends and families and neighbors. Put the recording in that context, so Pym stands out as the shitty bastard he is. And we do a voiceover about how the words he used hurt all of us, but they don’t define us, and they won’t stop us.”

Sam Wilson was a goddamn gift.

Steve looked up at Bucky, and Bucky smiled at him and said, “Pym did ask for video content.”

Steve laughed. “If only we knew a group of award winning film students who could give it to him.”

###

The thing was, none of their classes were going to overlap.

Bucky was curled up on his beanbag chair, and Steve was hunched in his spot on the bottom bunk, and he’d been peering over Bucky’s shoulder at the schedule he’d been working on, and Steve wasn’t planning to take any of those classes.

And Bucky hadn’t asked.

Scheduling classes their Freshman year had worked out pretty easily, since they could take some intro courses together. It was maybe the only easy thing about Freshman year, as it turned out, but at least he’d had that.

But Sophomore year was looming at them, and ... What if it was over? What if they were falling apart, like everything else had fallen apart? (Wade and Peggy and Mr. Barnes, all of them gone in one way or another.) What if Steve would only see Bucky for holiday dinners at Mrs. Barnes’ place? Bucky would marry somebody, maybe have some kids, and Steve ...
“Hey, are you taking anything good?” Steve asked, rather than chase that thought any further.

Bucky turned to look at him. It was one of those rare moments when Steve suddenly realized how close they were, Bucky’s face mere inches away. So close.

“Uh, no, not really,” Bucky said, turning back to his computer. “Physics. Dynamics. What about you?”

“User Interface Design. History of Non-Western Art.” (Nothing you’d be taking. Shit.) “I’m not quite done planning, yet.”

“No?” Bucky turned to him again, almost (hopeful?) surprised. “We could ... “ He bit his lip and glanced at the course list, and a slow, brilliant smile spread over his face. Bucky had an Idea. “Digital Broadcasting sounds like a fun class. We could take it together.”

“Yeah,” said Steve. He never had been able to resist one of Bucky’s Ideas, and he didn’t plan to start now. “Yeah, that sounds great.”
Maria and Natasha got footage of Billy and Teddy curling on one of the couches in the big common room, reading comic books together. Steve and Bucky filmed America and Kate holding hands while roller-skating down the halls. Howard arranged for Sam to visit Northstar Accounting, to film an older couple named Jean-Paul and Kyle playing a Wii skiing game.

They had all assembled in Howard’s office again to plan their next move when a familiar, lovely voice from the doorway said, “Howard, I understand you’ve kidnapped my guests.”

“Pegs!” said Howard. “They came of their own free will, I promise.”

Peggy smiled at him and took in the whole group, sitting around with their computers open. “So, has he already given you all jobs? It usually takes him at least an hour to do that.”

“Funny,” said Howard. “No, this is ...” He didn’t seem sure how to finish that sentence.

“We’re making an uplifting video about what a jerk Hank Pym is,” said Natasha.

Peggy’s eyes widened. “Did he do something else? Is Janet --”

“Janet is fine,” said a voice from behind Peggy. Janet had dark eyes, sleek hair and dark red lips. She was even prettier in real life than in the pictures Steve had found online, back before the trip started.

Peggy whirled around, a big, soft smile blooming on her face, and suddenly she was more beautiful than ever. Pym was a complete idiot to think anyone could come between them. Janet looked like a princess whose fairy tale had come true, leaning in for true love’s kiss, which Peggy very happily supplied.

Peggy turned back to the group, still smiling. “If you’re all done here, we can head back to our place.”

* * *

Peggy’s place was cozy and comfortable and, unsurprisingly, did not have a bunch of extra rooms for them. There was an office, which had enough space for one person to sleep, so Sam would get some privacy.

Steve and Bucky shared a look with Maria and Natasha. Nobody was especially looking forward to spending another night piled in the same room, but it wasn’t like they could complain.

They set up their computers in the living room and got back to work on the video.

It was Maria’s idea to use the #5shrubs hashtag to ask for material. Almost immediately, photos and videos started coming in from across the country. Jonessica sent photos of her friends, Trish and Claire, getting married at the New York Botanical Garden. Phil and Clint sent in pictures of themselves giving their dog a bath, with the mountains of Wyoming in the background.

Wade sent in photos of himself kissing a dark-haired man who was holding a camera and laughing. Steve glanced over, but Bucky only shrugged and said, “They’re good pictures.”

Steve leaned into Bucky’s shoulder anyway. Nobody would notice them in their little corner of the
living room floor, halfway hidden by a big leather recliner.

They transferred over the video of Maria and Natasha dancing, which looked almost as beautiful on screen as it had in person, all sensuous strength and sincere adoration.

Raven sent in a makeup tutorial she’d made. Her friend Erik, the blacksmith guy, sent a series of pictures of himself cooking dinner with ...

“That’s Professor Xavier,” Bucky said, sounding just as surprised as Steve felt.

It was. And now that he knew, Steve figured he should have recognized that the cool ironwork on Xavier’s wheelchair was obviously Erik’s design. He’d just never had reason to put those things together.

Maria uploaded a video from her phone, of Steve and Bucky, framed in front of the lights of the ferris wheel. There was no useful audio, but Steve knew that Bucky was saying, “I love you. Jesus, I love you so much,” while Steve grabbed onto his shirt, and the kiss they shared was soft and sweet and fucking perfect.

Bucky nudged Steve’s shoulder and gave him a questioning look. Steve laughed. “Definitely put that in. If I ever get famous for anything, I want it to be that.”

Bucky smiled almost shyly and pressed a delicate kiss against Steve’s temple. Steve loved him so much it ached, and all he could do about it was rest his head on his shoulder and murmur, “I love you, Bucky.”

“Wish I could take you home,” Bucky whispered against Steve’s hair. “Wish I could be alone with you, even just ... Just to talk. Just to hold you. I --”

Steve wondered if it would make things better or worse to tell him that he felt the same way. He looked up into Bucky’s eyes, sky blue, full of love, full of want. Better or worse, he should tell him. “I wish we could, too. But we’ll get there.” He couldn’t help but sigh and add, “Someday.”

He caught Bucky’s wrist, and traced over the heart he’d drawn there.

Bucky’s eyes brightened and he started to get up. “We forgot your markers in the car.”

Why was that good news? Oh! “We’d better go get them.”

He took the hand that Bucky offered and hauled himself up. They got the keys from Sam and rushed outside.

Steve climbed into the backseat beside Bucky and closed the door. He looked around at all the windows and frowned. “Not especially private.”

“Better than Carter’s living room.”

Steve tugged Bucky over and buried his nose in the crook of his neck. Bucky melted against him with a sigh.

“That time when we didn’t go to the pool, I think it was in Ohio?” Bucky said. “I was gonna try to talk you into kissing me.”

Steve didn’t want to go down the road of ‘I wish’, so he said, “Yeah? How were you going to do that? I want to hear this.”
“I don’t know, I was gonna wing it. ‘Hey Steve, I put on too much chapstick, you want some?’” Bucky leaned back so Steve could see him pucker his lips dramatically.

Steve grinned. “That is a terrible line.”

“You would have turned me down?”

“Not a chance.”

“Then it’s not a terrible line. Any line that ends with you kissing me is definitely not terrible.”

“Oh, I see. ‘Hey Bucky, your lips look awfully cold. Want me to warm them up?’”

Bucky snorted. “But Steeeeve, I’m cold all over.”

“Hmm, this survival guide says that the only solution is thorough skin-to-skin contact, under lots of blankets.”

“That is one good survival guide.” Bucky squirmed around so that his head was in Steve’s lap. “I figure we have about two more minutes before anyone comes looking for us, so ... I wanted to say I love you. Out loud. I’m tired of having to whisper it. I love you.”

Steve knew he must have the dopiest smile on his face, but he didn’t care. “I love you, too. Wanna go find a rooftop to shout it from?”

Bucky shook his head, rolling his skull gently against Steve’s thigh. “The only person I need to tell is right here.”

Steve brushed his fingers over Bucky’s hair. “I like it. Being in love with you. ‘S nice.”

Bucky’s smile was so bright and beautiful it made Steve’s heart clench. Bucky twisted around and buried his face against Steve’s stomach (and Steve barely suppressed a squeak). “You’re fucking perfect, you know that Stevie?”

“No,” Steve said with a breathless laugh, “But you can keep trying to convince me.”

“You’re my favorite person in the world.” Bucky’s fingers crept in under the edge of Steve’s shirt, grazing the skin at his waist. Steve closed his eyes, and his focus narrowed down to just the feeling of Bucky’s touch, and the sound of Bucky’s voice saying, “I love everything about you. I love that you’re my best friend. I love that I’ve known you my whole life, but you still surprise me. I love --”

Steve’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

“-- that your phone goes off so I don’t end up giving you a blowjob out in broad daylight.”

“Pretty sure that last part should go on a different list,” Steve said, scowling as Bucky moved away from him. “And we weren’t even close.”

He pulled out his phone and read the text.

Natasha- **You guys die out there?**

He texted back- **Not even a little**

“We’d better go,” said Steve, very reluctantly opening the door. “They’re doing all this work
because of me, I shouldn’t stay out here being selfish.”

Bucky chuckled as he climbed out beside Steve. “That’s something else to add to the list. You inspire all these people to do something great, and it only makes you think you should work harder.”

Steve shrugged. “It was Sam’s idea.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and they started back toward Peggy’s place. They were almost to the door when he said, “Shit,” and turned around. “Forgot the markers!” he called over his shoulder, already halfway to the car.

Steve waited where he was, knowing he couldn’t hope to catch up. When Bucky got out of the car again, Steve took a deep breath and shouted, “Hey Bucky! I love you!”

Bucky grinned and threw his arms wide, markers clutched in one hand. “I LOVE YOU, STEEEEVE!” He charged in and swept Steve into a huge hug that left them both laughing all the way inside.

###

As soon as they got back from school, Steve and Bucky flopped on the couch.

Natasha flopped down in between them.

It wasn’t that Steve had forgotten she was there while he was telling Bucky about his day on the way up the stairs. It was just that he’d expected her to sit in the empty chair beside them.

It was probably easier to share their notes with all three of them together, though. He dug his folder and his book out of his backpack and flipped to the section they were supposed to be reading.

“Okay, so Juliet is daydreaming about marrying Romeo,” Steve said. He started reading aloud from the book.

‘Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
and he will make the face of heaven so fine,  
That all the world will be in love with night.’

Steve shrugged. “I’m marking that down as foreshadowing.”

“But why cut him out in little stars?” Bucky asked, leaning around Natasha to look at Steve.

Natasha shook her head. “It’s about sex.”

“No, it’s not,” said Steve.

“‘And he will make the face of heaven so fine,’” Nathasha read, emphasising the word ‘fine’.  
"She’s saying he’s super hot.”

“Oh, and cut him out in little stars is like ... fireworks,” said Bucky. “Sexy fireworks.”

“She’s talking about dying, there’s nothing sexy about that,” Steve said.

“But not like, dying, dying. Just a little death.” Natasha smirked like that was supposed to mean something.
Steve caught Bucky’s eye, but he didn’t seem to get it, either. Natasha dragged out her phone and started typing. “La petite mort,” she said, as if saying it in another language would help. When she found what she was looking for, she read out loud, “‘The lessening of consciousness due to orgasm.’ ‘The little death of orgasm.’ ‘The feeling of ultimate release that --’”

“Oh, okay, jeez.” Steve glared at his book because Shakespeare himself wasn’t around to be glared at.

“Everything’s about sex, Steve,” Natasha said, very seriously.

“Anyway,” said Steve. “In the next part she says ‘That all the world will be in love with night And pay no worship to the garish sun.’ Which is the opposite of what Romeo said about her, earlier, ‘Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon.’ So that falls under comparison and contrast.”

They muddled through the rest of the section, and Natasha packed up her things and went home.

Bucky was sorting his papers into their folders when he looked up and asked, “Are you mad at Shakespeare?”

“No reason to be,” Steve said, cramming his book into his bag.

Bucky smirked. “Yeah, but are you?”

Steve hesitated for a moment. “It’s not ... The little death? It just doesn’t make sense. It’s not like that at all.”

“It’s okay, Steve, you can use the word orgasm.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Orgasm. Whatever. It’s a stupid saying and --” He knew he could trust Bucky not to make fun of him. “It’s not as if I was getting off on it, all those times. The allergies and the pneumonia and whatever. Dying sucks, I don’t --”

Bucky was looking at him all wide eyed and horror struck.

“It’s fine, Bucky, really. It’s no big deal.”

Bucky frowned for a moment, then he got a gleam in his eyes. He dropped to his knees and said, “Arise, fair Steve, and kill the odious Shakespeare, who makes stupid metaphors and ... I can’t really do iambic pentameter, but you’re way cooler than him.”

“Get up, Romeo. Don’t worry about it. Besides, I’m way too late to kill Shakespeare. Unless he’s a vampire or something, and then I probably couldn’t take him.”

“Sure you could. You just need garlic or something,” Bucky said, grinning as he got to his feet. “Go give Dad puppy eyes, I bet you can get him to make pasta carbonara. Just don’t tell him about killing vampire Shakespeare, you know how he feels about Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“I do not give people puppy eyes,” Steve said, trying to scowl.

Bucky scoffed. “Please. You have the best puppy eyes. It’s ridiculous. C’mon, before he starts making chicken soup or something.”

Steve did not do puppy eyes.

But Mr. Barnes did make pasta carbonara.
Bucky and Steve somehow got stuck sitting across from each other instead of next to each other at Peggy’s dining room table. Being able to see Bucky more easily didn’t make up for not being able to hold his hand or press their knees together.

Bucky was mostly staring at his plate, idly pushing around a pile of rice, and didn’t notice when Steve tried to make faces at him.

Natasha had been telling Maria about meeting Peggy for the first time, and how they managed to get thrown out of a local bar. Steve hadn’t been part of that circle, so he could only listen politely and nod along.

Janet turned to Bucky and said, “Did you know Peggy at school, too?”

Bucky looked up and faked a smile. “Oh, no, we never even really met.”

“We did, though,” said Peggy. “In the hospital, remember?”

Oh. Oh, wow, the hospital. Bucky had been singing. Bucky had been running his fingers through Steve’s hair and singing about him being wonderful.

Even back then, Bucky thought he was wonderful. That was --

Peggy had walked in on that.

Shit.

Steve looked up at her, hoping she’d see the apology on his face.

She smiled knowingly and shook her head as if it was no big deal. She reached over and twined her fingers between Janet’s, then grinned at him, looking rather triumphant. He couldn’t blame her, Janet seemed pretty amazing.

Bucky was staring down at his plate. “I remember meeting. But I’d just gotten over the flu and I hadn’t had any sleep that night. Wasn’t exactly at my best, so I was sort of hoping you’d forgotten.”

Steve laughed a little. “Don’t worry, Buck, at least you didn’t have tubes up your nose or anything. That would have been embarrassing.”

Bucky snorted softly, and Peggy grinned.

“And what about you, Sam?” Janet asked. “Did you know Peggy?”

“No, ma’am. She was before my time,” Sam said, aiming his easy smile at Peggy.

“Don’t act like you’re not old,” said Natasha. “You’re only later than her because you were out para-rescuing.”

“Para-rescuing?” said Peggy. “Janet and I went skydiving earlier this year. It was so exciting! We could do it again tomorrow. Howard could arrange it. We could all go.”

Sam didn’t flinch or look away or anything, but he seemed distinctly uncomfortable, and Steve hadn’t forgotten the conversation they’d had at the top of the Arch. Sam didn’t like heights, for reasons too horrible to want to share with everyone.
“I can’t go in planes,” Steve said. It felt really loud, and he kind of wanted to crawl under the table as all eyes turned to him. Sam looked relieved, though, so Steve went on. “I, uh, heart problems. And ears. Doctors say it’s a bad idea.”

“Oh,” said Peggy. “Well, we certainly wouldn’t want to go without you, Steve.”

(Bucky stabbed at his green beans.)

“And we have a wedding to prepare for,” Janet added with a grin. “Wouldn’t that be a fun way to get married, though? Plunging through the sky together?”

“Or scuba diving,” said Peggy. “Why didn’t we think of that sooner?”

“No idea. We should have. Here we are trying to avoid adventure, instead.” Janet frowned down at her plate.

“Hank Pym is no adventure,” Peggy scolded. “He’s an unmitigated ass who will have no part in our lives ever again, if I can help it.”

The look on Janet’s face was extremely, uncomfortably familiar. She looked just the way Steve felt whenever someone (Bucky, it was almost always Bucky) tried to stand up for him. As if the gratitude at having help was being overwhelmed by the shame of needing it, which only led to more shame for not properly appreciating it. He watched Janet tamp down all those feelings, as she shot a wry smile at Peggy.

“So, dessert?” Janet asked.

They had dessert, vanilla ice cream with hot fudge, and they washed the dishes, which reminded Steve of the dwarves descending on Bag End, and they worked some more on the video. They planned to release it tomorrow at noon. Maybe if they finished soon enough, Pym would be out of the picture before the start of the wedding.

Finally, everyone started to droop, so they rolled out their sleeping bags.

Natasha and Maria set theirs up in the dining room, and Sam was in the office.

Which left Steve and Bucky alone in the living room.

They had walls. It was the closest they’d gotten to their promise of walls and a bed and a light. They didn’t have a bed, and there were two open doorways, which meant that they couldn’t have much light, either, just the glow from the streetlight outside. But they had walls, which ought to mean something.

Or maybe not. Bucky was curled up with his back to Steve, every line of his body radiating tension. It wasn’t hard to understand, with the way he’d almost flinched every time Peggy said Steve’s name, and ...

And the picture, neatly framed and nestled on a shelf among various treasures of Janet and Peggy’s. A collection of tiny seashells. A silvery wasp with golden gems.

A drawing of the library at Kirby, in a deceptively loose style that Steve had been particularly proud to achieve.

Nobody else would have recognized the work as Steve’s, or known that Steve had drawn that particular building because it was where he’d first met Peggy.
Steve rustled the covers in order to give some warning before he reached out, angry at himself for hesitating to touch Bucky.

Bucky didn’t roll away, and Steve’s relief at that was bitter and confusing.

Pushing the feeling aside, Steve focused on rubbing his thumb into the knotted muscle of Bucky’s shoulder, even though the angle for it was all wrong. Usually they were sitting on a couch together when Steve did this.

There was a couch right there, but Steve didn’t want ‘usually’. After another minute, Steve pressed firmly against Bucky’s shoulder, to get him to roll onto his stomach.

Steve climbed over him and sat gingerly on the back of his thighs. He ran both hands up along Bucky’s spine, leaning close to whisper in his ear, “This okay?”

Bucky closed his eyes and nodded.

His t-shirt was soft under Steve’s hands, and Steve could feel the heat of his skin through it as he massaged his shoulders, trying to work away all the frustration and pain he’d caused Bucky by bringing them here, to Peggy’s house, for Peggy’s wedding.

He moved lower, down Bucky’s back, down to his waist.

“Do ... do you want to take your shirt off?”

Bucky cracked an eye open, giving a look that Steve didn’t quite understand.

“It’s okay, you don’t --”

Bucky twisted his arm around, grabbed the back of his shirt and dragged it off, all in one smooth movement.

“-- have to,” Steve finished. “Jesus.”

He hadn’t meant to say that last part, but ... Jesus. All that skin, broad shoulders, narrow waist, all that strength and --

“What about you?” Bucky asked into his pillow.

Steve managed to not say ‘What?’ or ‘Why?’ He just blinked for a second and decided he’d give Bucky anything. He fumbled his way out of his shirt and tossed it in front of Bucky’s face.

Bucky turned half-way around, chewing on his bottom lip as he looked Steve up and down. Their eyes met for a moment, and Bucky put his hand on Steve’s thigh and rolled over the rest of the way. Steve gasped quietly at the sudden movement underneath him, and his eyes fluttered closed, but he opened them again just as quickly.

He brushed his fingertips down Bucky’s chest, oh so softly, and this time it was Bucky’s eyes that fluttered closed. Steve kept going, hands slipping over Bucky’s abs, down to his belly button. It had felt so good when Bucky had nibbled just there. Steve wondered if he could make Bucky feel that good.

He knew he wanted to try.
Bracing his hands on Bucky’s hips, Steve leaned down. He started by trailing his nose along Bucky’s stomach, breathing in the warm, musty smell of him before pressing his lips to a ridge of muscle. Bucky shivered, and Steve hesitated, but he didn’t seem to want to stop, so Steve went on. He grazed his teeth over Bucky’s skin, gently, gently, and suddenly Bucky’s hands were in his hair, guiding him up and up, giving Steve time to nuzzle and kiss along the way, at his ribcage, over his chest. When he got up to Bucky’s neck, he licked along his collarbone, and Bucky’s breath stuttered. That was so good. Steve licked again, up along the tendon there, and Bucky’s hands left his hair and trailed down his back, down to his hips, dragging them together.

Steve found Bucky’s mouth, lips already parted as his breath quickened, and he kissed him, hard and deep and wet. Bucky arched his hips up, just a little but oh god so perfect.

Whatever kind of noise Steve made, it was enough to make Bucky go still beneath him for a long moment.

“Should we stop?” Bucky finally whispered.

Steve knew Bucky. Knew him so very well. He wouldn’t have asked like that if stopping was what he wanted. “No. Don’t stop. Bucky, please, don’t stop --”

His embarrassing litany was cut off when Bucky rolled them over and Steve found himself flat on his back with Bucky over him.

Bucky kissed Steve’s neck at the same time that he rolled his hips, and ohhh, Steve was going to make that sound again and Bucky was going to stop and stopping was so bad.

Steve reached out and caught his t-shirt, still on the pillow where he’d tossed it. He jammed it over his mouth, determined to be quiet, he could be quiet, it was a bad idea, some part of him knew that, but he couldn’t think of why, so it must not matter, couldn’t matter like this did.

Nothing could matter like the sound of Bucky’s breath, sharp and hot, the feel of Bucky, so hard against him that Steve wanted to cry out with the pure pleasure of it.

Steve gasped, so close --

Oh. Oh no.

No no no.

Steve remembered why covering his mouth was a bad idea, as his lungs struggled to bring in the next breath of air.
Steve knew he was having an asthma attack even before he drew in the first gasping, wheezing, choking breath of it. He knew, and he kept the t-shirt clamped over his mouth to muffle the sound, hoping to stave it off just long enough, please ...

Bucky knew at that first wheeze. Or at least at the barking cough that immediately followed it.

Everyone else probably knew soon after that, because Steve could not stop coughing. And in between coughs there were the increasingly loud and desperate gasps for air.

Bucky had already leapt off of him, and Steve felt the aching loss of him, as if he’d lost ... As if he’d lost Bucky, barely dressed and grinding their hips together and burying soft moans against Steve’s shoulder.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Bucky whispered fiercely. He was darting around the room, thrashing through piles of their bags. The sight of him, naked except for his very distinctly tented boxers, did nothing to make Steve feel better about the situation.

Steve managed to drag himself upright, dizzy with the horrible conflicting messages his body was throwing out, torn between the best thing he’d ever felt, and one of the worst. Each cough somehow felt bigger than his entire body. He needed his inhaler, and his inhaler was in his jacket, and his jacket ...

Shit. The last time he remembered seeing it was in Howard’s office.

“Guys?” said Maria, and Natasha flipped on the light. Great. Now they could see him, all ghostly pale and half naked, the scar on his scrawny chest gleaming bright red while he struggled to do something as simple as breathing. His stomach was starting to ache from the full body effort of it.

“Jacket,” said Bucky. “Where the fuck is his jacket! I left it right there by the couch!” He tore through the pile of suitcases again. (His boxers weren’t tented anymore. Steve knew that nothing else was going to happen tonight, but he was still sad to see that go.)

Sam had come in at some point. Natasha ran past him and yanked open the hall closet. “Bucky!” she called, loudly enough to be heard over all the coughing. She tore Steve’s jacket off a hanger and threw it across the room.

Bucky caught it and jammed his hand into the inner pocket. He crashed to his knees, which had to hurt, but he didn’t seem to notice as he dragged out the inhaler and shoved it at Steve.

Steve gasped the medicine as deeply into his lungs as he could manage. He could feel it starting to work, his airways ever so slightly relaxing, trying to give up their fight against the invading dust particles from the shirt Steve had so stupidly breathed through. He triggered the inhaler again.

Why couldn’t he just be normal? Dizzy and nauseous and humiliated, Steve looked up at the sound of his name.

“Steve?” Peggy said softly.
He didn’t know when she’d come in, and he wished she hadn’t come in at all. The fewer people who saw him like this, the better, but it was too damned late for that.

Bucky lurched to his feet and planted himself between them. “Leave him alone! I’ll take care of him myself!”

Oh, Bucky.

Peggy leaned in and said, right in Bucky’s face, “Well I certainly never doubted that!”

Bucky sort of crumpled in on himself. His head dropped and his shoulders slumped and he said something to Peggy, too quietly for Steve to hear.

She blinked and looked at Bucky with genuine compassion. “Of course,” she said. Her hand moved, as if she was going to pat him on the shoulder, but she thought better of it. Instead she turned around and announced, “Crisis averted, then. This calls for tea and cookies. Everyone into the kitchen.”

Natasha teased Peggy about saying ‘cookies’ instead of ‘biscuits’, and Peggy said that she’d been cured of that the first time she’d heard of ‘biscuits and gravy’, and then they were far enough away that Steve could let his shoulders slump.

Bucky knelt down beside him. He spent a long moment just looking at him, making sure he was breathing well enough, before gathering him into a hug. He kissed Steve’s head and said, “Just one minute, okay?”

Steve nodded, not wanting to hear how ragged his voice would be.

Bucky picked up his hoodie and came back to get Steve to his feet. He guided him to the big leather recliner, dragging one of the sleeping bags along behind them. “C’mere,” he said, dropping into the chair. He pulled Steve into his lap, and bundled him into the hoodie.

Steve tried to focus on feeling grateful, instead of ... (helpless useless pathetic)

His breathing was almost regular now. Regular enough for him to notice the way he was shaking. He stuffed his inhaler in his pocket and leaned back, trying to relax into all of Bucky’s warmth. Bucky pulled the sleeping bag around them both and threaded his fingers into Steve’s hair, rubbing soft circles behind his ears.

“They’d be just as worried if it was Sam or Natasha,” Bucky said quietly. “They know you’re strong, they’re only worried because they care about you. Because you’re wonderful, Stevie. We all care about you. You’re the best person in the world and we all -- We all love you. You’re amazing and beautiful and perfect and we love you. I love you. It’ll all be okay. We don’t have to figure this out right now. We’ll find a way through it, I promise.”

Find a way -- What? Steve turned to glance at Bucky, who seemed very concerned, despite what he’d said. It was only an asthma attack. If Steve hadn’t --

Oh. Bucky didn’t know.

Shit.

“I was --” Steve cleared his throat. He sounded just as bad as he thought he would. “My shirt. I covered my mouth with it and ... dust.”
“You did what?” Bucky said, his hands going still.

Steve shrugged. “Needed to be quiet.”

“You idiot,” Bucky said, sort of wonderingly.

“I didn’t want to stop.”

“Oh, because stopping like this was so much better,” Bucky said, and Steve could hear in his voice that he was rolling his eyes.

“In another minute it would have been,” Steve rasped.

Bucky snorted. “Yeah, both of us having big wet patches on our shorts would have improved this situation tremendously.”

Steve ground his teeth together. He just wanted one normal goddamned thing, and even Bucky didn’t understand.

“Shhh,” Bucky said, although Steve hadn’t made any noise. He rubbed Steve’s shoulders. “I’m just relieved, is all. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life being afraid that I was going to kill you whenever we had sex.”

(the rest of my life)

“And you’d be dead, so you wouldn’t care, but I’d have to be the one to call and tell Mom.”

Steve chuckled a little.

Bucky grinned. “Imagine that phone call. ‘Hey Mom. Remember Steve? Yeah, of course you do. Well, I sort of orgasmed him to death. No, we weren’t even doing anything kinky, I just -- Yeah, I’m gonna miss him too.’”

Laughing was still harder than it ought to be, so Steve used his inhaler again. When he finished, he said, “I’m sorry, Bucky. I didn’t mean to -- I should have been more careful.”

Bucky nodded.

Steve’s shoulders slumped. “The thing is, Bucky …” He looked deeply into Bucky’s eyes. “The thing is, you leave me breathless.”

Bucky’s face shifted from earnest to incredulous to unimpressed, until he couldn’t fake it anymore and he shook his head and laughed. “I love you, doofus.”

###

Steve should have texted, instead of just showing up like this, but he hadn’t planned it. He’d sort of been wandering and ended up here. So, he knocked.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and Mrs. Barnes blinked at him in surprise. “Steve?”

She gave him a hug. Just a quick nice-to-see-you hug, but Steve clung to her, and his eyes welled up with tears. Fuck, he hadn’t meant for this to happen.

“Oh honey. Come inside.” Mrs. Barnes kept her arm around him and led him to the couch.
Steve sat down and wiped his eyes with his palms. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have come, I didn’t --”

“Of course you should have come,” said Mrs. Barnes. “I’m still your mom, even now that you’re all grown up.” When Steve nodded, she kissed his forehead, the way she used to when she tucked him in bed at night.

“It’s been a week. Since she left.” He fiddled with the tassels on one of the throw pillows. “It’s fine, really. I’m just lonely. She’s gone, and Bucky’s never around, and Natasha acts like it’s my fault that ... that Peggy went away. Nobody talks to me anymore.”

“Bucky’s not around?”

“He says he’s giving me space.” Steve rolled his eyes, blinking away more tears.

Mrs. Barnes smirked. “So he’s hiding because he doesn’t know how to talk about things.”

“I don’t need to talk about things,” Steve said, and Mrs. Barnes gave a tiny, exasperated sigh. “I just don’t want to be alone all the time.”

“Well, maybe that’s one of the things you two should talk about,” she said, as if her patience was wearing thin.

Things had been really horrible for her lately, and here he was dumping his stupid problems in her lap. “Anyway, how are things with you?”

“Oh, fine.” She shrugged. “I joined a book club. I’m thinking about learning to knit.”

Steve frowned at her. “Maybe you should learn to cook, instead.”

She smacked him with a pillow and laughed. “Steven Grant Rogers, how dare you imply that I’m a bad cook? Just yesterday I made a perfectly good ham sandwich.”

Steve told her that sandwiches don’t qualify as cooking, and they cheerfully argued the matter for a while, before he left to go back to the dorm.

When he got there, Bucky’s bunk was empty, like it had been when Steve had left that morning. He curled up on the corner of his bed to watch a nature documentary about chipmunks.

It was better than silence, anyway. A little.

Two hours later, in the middle of a documentary about groundhogs that was even worse than the one about chipmunks, Bucky came back into their room. “Hey,” he said, already reaching for his jacket.

“Hey. Do you have plans?” Steve said in a rush. “We could watch something.”

Bucky blinked at him. “Uh, yeah. If you want.” He flopped onto the far end of Steve’s bunk. “Groundhogs? Is this what we’re watching? Did I -- Are you punishing me? With groundhogs?”

“Yes,” Steve said, deadpan. “Next it’ll be marmots. And if your attitude doesn’t improve after that, then it’ll be nothing but platypuses.”

“Shouldn’t that be platypi?” Bucky said.

“Don’t know. Guess we’ll have to watch and find out.” Steve dug his toes in under Bucky’s thigh. God he’d missed him.
Bucky made his eyes wide and put his hand on Steve’s ankle. “No, Stevie please, I promise I’ll be good. No platypuppies.”

“Pretty sure it’s platypoodles.”

“No, platypoodles are a specific breed of platypuppies,” Bucky said, grinning. “Like platypeagles.”

Steve smiled. “Platypitbulls.”

“Platypugs,” said Bucky, and they both giggled.

# # #

It was Bucky who called Peggy in from the kitchen “Do you mind if -- We could all watch some tv?”

“Certainly.” Peggy handed him the remote and went to get the others.

As they came in, Steve said, “Maria. Whiteboard?” His voice sounded awful enough that he didn’t need to explain. When she gave it to him, along with a marker, he wrote, “Thanks” and showed her. She smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

Bucky found an episode of Iron Chef and turned it on. Steve wiped the board clean and waited until everyone was distracted by Battle Vanilla.

He’d left so many things unsaid, before. Far too many things.

He wrote, “Peggy likes scuba diving and jumping out of airplanes. I can’t do that kind of thing.”

Bucky gave his actual unimpressed look. It wasn’t as cute as his fake unimpressed look.

Steve shrugged and wrote, “When she left, she said that she hoped I’d find the one who makes me happy.”

Bucky frowned at that for a moment, and Steve added, “I found you.” He glanced at Bucky, who wasn’t smiling, but at least he’d stopped frowning. Steve wrote, “You’ve always made me happy. I don’t have any regrets or second thoughts.”

Bucky slipped his arms around Steve and nuzzled into the back of his neck. “Love you,” he breathed, the words ghosting warm and soft over Steve’s skin. He took the marker.

“Anyone would be lucky to have you. And I’m not used to being lucky yet, but I trust you.”

Steve twisted around, turning his back to the the others to give them what little privacy he could, and he ran his fingers gently along Bucky’s bare chest, tracing an imaginary line up his breastbone. In a rough whisper, he said, “I’ll keep yours safe, too.”

“I know you will,” Bucky murmured. “It’s all yours.”

* * *

Steve woke up in the morning with his face buried against Bucky’s shoulder, and a quiet voice saying, “-- so perfect and strong and gorgeous and mine. My best friend. Love of my life. I never want to spend a second away from you. But I really gotta pee, Stevie. Please wake up.”

Steve chuckled and slipped off of the chair. He took Bucky’s hand and led him to the bathroom, grabbing his glasses along the way.
They took turns looking away while the other used the toilet. After they washed their hands, Steve asked, “You want me to stay here while you take a shower?”

Bucky crowded up against him. “You want to take a shower with me?”

“We did say that we would do important things together,” said Steve, grinning up at him.

Bucky started to slowly unzip Steve’s hoodie. “Showers are important.” He pulled open the sides of the sweatshirt and looked Steve over. “Damn. If I start touching you -- It’s a bad idea, isn’t it?”

Steve softly thumped his head back against the wall. “It’s a great idea. Someday.”

Bucky sighed and closed his eyes. “Okay. Get out before I ravish you.”

“I’d ravish you first.” Steve lightly shoved Bucky’s shoulder, pushing past so he could get through the door.

He got out his suitcase and found his sweatpants. After he put them on, he picked out the biggest shirt he had, a My Neighbor Totoro shirt that had been too cute to pass up, even though it was two sizes bigger than he liked. He set it aside and went through Bucky’s stuff, finding boxers and jeans and socks. He bundled those with the shirt and set them against the bathroom door.

When he came back, the kitchen light was on. He zipped up his jacket and padded inside, where he found Janet measuring out coffee grounds.

She smiled at him. “Good morning. This will be done soon, if you’re interested.”

“No, thanks, I, uh, I can’t have a lot of caffeine.” He shrugged.

“Hot chocolate?” she asked. Steve hesitated, not wanting to make more work for her. She smiled. “It’ll give me an excuse to make some for myself.”

Steve laughed. “All right, then.”

She brought out mugs and a box of instant cocoa packets. “Should I make enough for -- It’s Bucky, right? Your boyfriend?”

“Yes. He’d like some, too. My boyfriend. Bucky.”

She laughed as he blushed. “Have you two not been together long?”

“Um. We’ve been best friends all our lives, and it’s been two and a half days since we started, I don’t know, dating? We went to the carnival together, that counts as a date, I guess.”

Janet shrugged. “I think dating is overrated, anyway. I mean, it can be lovely, there’s just a certain falseness to it. You know? Wearing clothes you never wear in order to go places you never go and do things you never do. I don’t miss it.”

The kettle had come to a boil, so she poured water into two of the mugs and gave one to Steve, along with one of the cocoa packets and a spoon.

As he stirred his cocoa, he said, “You and Peggy didn’t date?”

“Ah, well, that was different.” Janet laughed, and Steve joined her, because she was enchanting. “Peggy and I were hired by Stark Industries almost at the same time, but in different sections. We always ended up at the same conferences, though, and somehow we began a tradition of having
pajama parties. We’d get together in a hotel room and wear our fuzziest pajamas and play
BioShock half the night. It turned out to be a much better way to get to know someone than
wearing fancy dresses and going to fancy restaurants.”

“I can see how it would be, yeah,” Steve said with a grin.

“You two must know each other pretty well already, though. Does it seem as if everything is
moving fast now, after so long?”

“God, I wish. I mean ...” Steve sipped his drink and blushed while she finished laughing at him. It
didn’t take long. “We’ve been on the road this whole time. It’s not really up to us how fast anything
goes, right now.”

“It was wonderful of you all to come. I’m so sorry for everything that happened.”

“You’re not responsible for any of that,” Steve said.

Janet studied her mug. “It was because of me. And the program that deleted your mentions on
tumblr was my design. I developed it while I was working for Pym Tech. There’s a confidentiality
clause, so you’re not allowed to know that, but ...”

“Still not your fault. You designed it, but you didn’t use it on us.”

She shrugged.

“Well, you gave me hot chocolate, so we can call it even.”

“Hot chocolate?” said Bucky from the doorway.

He was wearing the Totoro shirt and making big puppy eyes in hopes of getting cocoa. He was the
most adorable thing ever.

Steve barely noticed crossing the room. He felt like he’d been pulled along on a string, and
suddenly he was smiling up at Bucky from inches away. He wanted to kiss him, wanted to trail his
fingers over his shower-warm skin, wanted to --

He sighed. They weren’t alone, and they weren’t going to be alone any time soon. He handed the
cocoa to Bucky.

“This yours?” Bucky asked, looking at the mug. It was white with little pink butterflies all around
the rim.

“Yours, now. I’m going to take a shower.”

“Oh, thank goodness. I can barely stand the smell of you.” As if to somehow prove his point,
Bucky stuck his nose into the crook of Steve’s shoulder and sniffed loudly.

Steve huffed a laugh and jabbed at him to cover it. “Quit.”

“But I’m not done yet,” Bucky said against Steve’s skin. He sniffed again. “Mmm, terrible.”

“Weirdo.” Steve ducked away before he ended up kissing him senseless.

“You love me,” Bucky said softly as Steve left the kitchen.

“I know,” said Steve. It worked, Bucky laughed.
On top of Steve’s suitcase was a stack of his clothes, topped with a t-shirt that had a picture of Jiji the cat, from Kiki’s Delivery Service.

Bucky’s t-shirt.

Steve grinned all the way to the bathroom.

# # #

Bucky didn’t have a particular mug of his own.

They had plenty of mugs in their apartment, of course. The random, anonymous mugs that somehow accumulate in a cupboard while no one is looking. There was one with a teddy bear holding a cluster of balloons, which might have been part of a get well thing for Steve. There was one with faded snowflakes around the edge. One with the logo of an office supply store. A few that were plain black. Bucky would grab whichever one was easiest to reach, without seeming to think much about it, as long as it wasn’t Steve’s mug.

Steve’s mug was bright blue, with a yellow giraffe on it. The giraffe was holding a droopy flower in its mouth, and smiling. It was extremely cute.

He’d won it at Coney Island. He and Bucky had been turned loose by their parents, and Steve had seen it in a display case and decided to get it for Mom.

Steve wasn’t that great at skee ball, and the mug cost a ridiculous number of tickets, so it took a long time, and a lot of tokens. Bucky sighed so much as he waited that Steve finally relented and let him help. Bucky was good at everything, so it went a lot faster after that.

Mom loved the mug. She hugged him when he gave it to her, and she used it for coffee every morning.

Later, Steve used the mug for milk every morning. He used it long after the giraffe started to fade. He used it after the handle developed a crack. He used it after the top edge got chipped. He used it after the edge cut his lip.

Bucky wandered in while Steve was holding a paper towel to his mouth. He frowned at Steve’s cut, and he frowned at the mug still in Steve’s other hand. “Maybe you should use it to hold your paintbrushes or pencils or something.”

Steve shook his head. “I can just drink out of the other side. It’s fine.”

Bucky didn’t say anything, even though it was very obviously not fine.

Two weeks later, a package showed up with Steve’s name on it. Inside was a brand new mug, just like the old one, but without the chip and the crack and the fading. Steve carried it down the hall and knocked on Bucky’s door. When Bucky opened it, Steve didn’t say anything. He just smashed him into a hug, being careful not to hurt the mug.

He used it for milk every morning, and he loved Bucky a little more every time.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 7 of Postcards from the Road to Courage is Bucky's pov of how they spend the rest of the day.
Stark Mansion

The rehearsal party was just like every party. Noisy, crowded, and full of competing perfumes and colognes.

Steve took Bucky’s hand and led the way out of the ballroom, with its marble floors and crystal chandeliers, and into a back hallway. He wasn’t sure if they were supposed to be in this part of the mansion, but they’d passed a bathroom this way before dinner and Steve needed a break.

The floors here looked like bamboo, and the lights were regular curly fluorescent bulbs inside frosted sconces. It was so ... normal. Howard’s products were known for being flashy red with gold trim, but his home seemed, well, homey. Aside from having a grand ballroom and a private beach.

The beach. Steve wished they could go there again. They had talked and laughed, and Bucky had kissed him instead of going swimming. It was almost like being alone with each other.

Steve went into the very normal bathroom, splashed some water on his face, and came back out.

Bucky looked him over. “Where’s your meds and stuff?”

It was a reasonable question. Especially after last night. And Steve wasn’t wearing his usual jacket, since Howard had arranged for all of them to get custom-tailored dress clothes. He opened his suit jacket to show Bucky the inner pockets, stuffed full of all the little things he needed to keep him alive.

“You got pockets?” Bucky sounded sort of delighted and jealous at the same time.

“You didn’t?”

Bucky shook his head and opened his jacket to reveal the satiny inner lining.

“It’s blue,” Steve said, reaching for it without thinking. It just looked so tempting, bright and shiny amongst all that gray. Bucky looked great in gray, because Bucky looked great in everything, but it made his eyes turn all stormy. Even just the bit of blue from the lining turned his eyes a shimmery electric blue. Steve ran his fingers lightly over the inside of Bucky’s jacket before he really realized what he was doing.

He didn’t pull away, though. Instead, he slipped his arms around Bucky’s waist and smiled up at him. Being allowed to touch Bucky was so great.

“Hell, if I’d known you’d react like that, I’d have shown you sooner,” Bucky said, grinning and putting his arms around Steve’s shoulders, careful not to wrinkle him.

“It’s not actually the suit I’m interested in,” Steve said in a stage whisper. “Did I mention how good you look, though?”

He had, three times, but Bucky grinned and said, “Nope.”

“You look even better than usual, and your usual is pretty fucking amazing,” Steve said, making little circles with his fingertips on Bucky’s back.

Bucky brought his hand up as if he meant to run it through Steve’s hair, but he didn’t. He settled it on Steve’s arm, instead. “You look pretty great yourself. I mean, it’s not my favorite, but it’s pretty
great.”

Steve blinked. These were by far the nicest clothes he’d ever worn in his life.

“My favorite,” Bucky said, “is when you wear old sweats and a beat up t-shirt, and you start painting and forget everything else. You have bare feet and messy hair and a paintbrush in your teeth and I just want to curl up and watch you all day.”

Probably nobody else had ever seen Steve that way. There was nobody else he was that comfortable with. Nobody he was truly himself with.

Only Bucky.

Steve was finding the words to tell Bucky that, when something hard hit him in the back of the head.

“Ow?” Steve said, rubbing at the spot while Bucky glared down at whatever had just bounced off Steve’s skull.

It was a toy car, all shiny red chrome with gold trim. Bucky grabbed it off the floor.

“Hey!” called a very young voice from down the hall. “No fair! That’s mine!”

Without turning, Bucky gestured at Steve and shouted back, “Yeah, well he’s mine, and you just hit him in the head.”

Steve snorted. He couldn’t help it. It was funny, and he wasn’t at all used to hearing Bucky say ‘he’s mine’.

Behind him, there was a jumble of responses. “Oh, no!” and “You’re not even supposed to be here!” and “But it’s miiiine!” and, much more quietly, “Say sorry and they’ll give it back.”

It was a group of little kids, one of them covering her mouth, one wearing glasses and propping his hands on his hips, one of them holding a controller, and one whispering calmly.

The one covering her mouth darted forward and looked gravely up at Steve. “Are you okay? Do you need a grown up? Is it bleeding?”

Steve decided not to be annoyed at the thing about needing a grown up. He supposed that being one didn’t mean never needing one. “I’m okay,” Steve answered. “It just surprised me. No bleeding. See?”

He scrunched down so she could look at the back of his head. She poked at his hair, and he could hear her sigh in relief. “Tony didn’t mean to hit you,” she said. “Right, Tony?”

The kid with the controller, presumably Tony, hung his head. “Right. Sorry.”

“Still not supposed to be here,” grumbled the kid with glasses, and the whispering kid shushed him.

Tony strolled forward and stuck out his hand. “I’m Tony, and that’s Pepper and Bruce and Rhodey. His real name is James, but nobody calls him that.”

Steve glanced up to see Bucky trying not to laugh, then turned back to Tony and shook his hand. “I’m Steve, and this is my boyfriend, Bucky. His real name is James, too, but nobody calls him that.”
Tony and the whispering kid both looked delighted. The kid with the glasses, Bruce, glared at Bucky. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

“We’re Mr. Stark’s guests,” said Bucky. “He invited us.”

Bruce turned to glare at the other kids, but a voice from down the hall distracted him. “Guys? Did you get -- Oh!”

He was a teenager, probably, although he was a little shorter than Steve. He looked at Steve and Bucky, and his eyes went wide.

Rhodey said to the newcomer, “Hi, Nate. Bruce is mad again.”

“Am not!” shouted Bruce.

Nate had been shooting glances at Bucky and Steve, but now he knelt down in front of Bruce. “You want to talk about it?”

Instead of shaking his head, Bruce swung his whole body from side to side, looking at his feet.

As soon as Nate started to get back up, Bruce said, “I didn’t get a turn and now they stole Tony’s car and they weren’t supposed to be here but Tony invited them and what if he likes them more and now nobody likes me.” And he burst into tears.

Nate looked fairly baffled by that, but he said, “Do you want a hug?” It was apparently the right thing to ask, because Bruce launched himself into Nate’s arms.

Tony handed Pepper the controller and patted Bruce’s head. Pepper handed the controller to Bucky and patted Bruce’s shoulder. Rhodey somehow worked himself into the middle of them and hugged Bruce.

Bucky and Steve shared a look, neither of them knowing what they should be doing. Finally, as Bruce settled down into sniffs instead of sobs, Bucky shrugged and bent to set the toy car and the controller on the floor so they could go.

The movement caught Tony’s eye. He turned and announced, “You should read us a story!”

“What?” Bucky said.

Nate frowned. “Tony. You know what the rules are.”

Tony sighed. “I gotta ask.”

“And?”

Tony rolled his whole head back. “I gotta let people say no.”

“That’s right. Try again,” Nate said, smiling encouragingly.

“Will you please, please read us a story? Pleeease?” By the last ‘please’, all the other kids joined in too, and Bruce ran over and hugged Steve’s knee.

Nate turned his encouraging smile on Steve and Bucky.

“Uh,” said Steve. They really should be getting back to the big room full of what seemed like hundreds of strangers. He turned to Bucky, who seemed completely amused by the whole thing.
“Okay.”

“YAAAAY!” The kids all shouted and ran off down the hall. Tony dashed back and grabbed the car and the controller from Bucky and raced away again to give them to Bruce. He showed Bruce what buttons to use, and the car lifted straight up and flew down the hall, with all the kids running along behind it.

“I’m Nate,” said Nate, clearly waiting for them. No chance to be alone, then. They all started down the hall.

“I’m Bucky. This is Steve. My boyfriend.”

That was a phrase that wouldn’t get old any time soon. Steve grinned and took Bucky’s hand.

“I know you,” said Nate. Steve and Bucky glanced at each other, nonplussed. Nate went on.

“You’re on the internet. Everybody’s seen you. I was watching from the beginning, because I follow this one blog, Jonessica.” Nate’s eyes went wide. “Do you know her? Like, in real life?”

“No,” said Steve. “Just on tumblr.”

Nate seemed a little crestfallen, but he got over it quickly. “Anyway, I saw all your videos, even before they got deleted, but they’re back and the new one is awesome, and sooo popular.”

Bucky lifted one shoulder and said, “Well, that’s good news.”

The new video had gone up at noon, as planned, and Janet had set up a complicated sounding program that would override Pym’s attempts to delete it. She did the same for all the episodes they’d released earlier, and all their mentions online. They didn’t need to be the #5shrubs anymore, though there hadn’t been any time to go online anyway.

The kids were in a room full of plump chairs with plenty of blankets and pillows and stuffed animals. They were all standing around a big open box. Tony was wearing a flower crown and trying to get Bruce to wear one that matched it, and Rhodey was sitting patiently while Pepper, who was wearing a pirate hat, adjusted a set of bunny ears on his head.

“You gotta dress up for story time,” Tony explained, very seriously. Bruce frowned at him, but finally relented.

Then they all turned to Nate and Bucky and Steve. Oh boy.

Nate immediately grabbed a fireman’s hat and put it on. Tony carefully looked over the contents of the box. He reached for something, but Pepper shook her head and pointed at something else. Tony shrugged and picked it up.

Rhodey had already pulled out a second headband with bunny ears and he held it out to Bucky. “So we can match, like our names.”

Bucky smiled and crouched down, and Rhodey put the ears on him. It was so incredibly cute, Steve pulled out his phone and took a picture. Bucky narrowed his eyes at the sound of the shutter click, but he didn’t say anything, just wiggled his nose at Rhodey and made him laugh.

Pepper looked up at Steve, with Tony right behind her. She held out a shiny, delicate tiara, and Tony said to Steve, “You get to be a princess, because you’re pretty and nice.”

“I’d be honored,” Steve said. He squared his shoulders, pushed up his glasses, and got down on
one knee, bowing his head to be sure they could reach. He’d much rather be a princess than impart bullshit ideas about gender roles to a bunch of little kids, even if it did mean that Bucky was going to send pictures of it to everyone they knew.

After Tony and Pepper finished adjusting the tiara, Steve looked up, and Bucky put out a hand to pull him to his feet. He didn’t seem to have taken any pictures. Steve raised an eyebrow at him.

Bucky leaned in and whispered, “If I tell you you’re pretty, will go down on your knees for me?”

Steve ignored the certain knowledge that he was blushing furiously and said, “You wouldn’t need to bother feeding me a line. I mean, I don’t --”

“It’s not a line,” Bucky said with an annoyed little pout. He cupped Steve’s chin and ran his thumb over his bottom lip. “You are pretty.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, probably crimson by now. “But the answer is still yes.”

Bucky was about to say something, but they were interrupted by Tony yanking on Steve’s sleeve and saying, “Story time. Come on.”

Bruce handed Bucky a Stark tablet with a screen full of icons of children’s books. Bucky opened one of them and handed it to Steve.

“Frog and Toad!” Steve said. “You’ve got to read it with me.”

Bucky smiled, and that’s how they ended up accidentally missing most of the rehearsal party.

# # #

Steve was eating macaroni and cheese, and explaining to Mom that it was his favorite kind, even though it was from a blue box, and blue was Bucky’s favorite color, but it was okay, Bucky didn’t mind, when Mom’s phone rang.

Mom answered it, while they were eating, so it must be important. When she hung up, she told Steve that she was going down the hall for a few minutes, and he had to stay here.

She did that sometimes, going to check on the neighbors whenever someone was sick, because she was a nurse, which is like being a hero.

She came back even before Steve was finished with lunch, and she sat down and folded her hands the way she did when she was about to tell him something important. “I’m sorry, honey, but Bucky’s not going to be able to come over today. He’s not feeling well, so he’s going to the doctor.”

Steve wasn’t sure why he stood up. He just ... wanted to do something. Wanted to help.

But he didn’t know how.

“Is he gonna have tests?” Steve knew about tests, and he didn’t want Bucky to have any. Tests were the worst, except for -- “Is he gonna have surgery?”

“No surgery,” Mom said. “They’ll swab his throat, and they might give him antibiotics. The pill kind.”

Steve knew about antibiotics, too. He’d had them as pills and shots and an iv. Pills were easy. Steve nodded his acceptance.
He had to wait a whole entire day before he was allowed to see Bucky again, and on the way over, Mom kept saying that Bucky needed to rest, and Bucky would be tired, and they couldn’t stay long.

Bucky was tired. Steve could tell, because he didn’t even get up when Steve came in. He just waved a little and said, “Hi.”

Steve’s mouth dropped open. “You sound like a frog.”

Bucky gave a sleepy smile. “Hi-ho, Kermit The Frog here.”

Steve laughed, even though Kermit was supposed to be his part, and Bucky didn’t actually sound like Kermit at all. “Wanna be frogs?”

Bucky started to struggle to his feet, and Steve remembered what Mom had said. If Bucky got too tired, they’d have to go.

Steve said, “Or we could read about frogs.”

Bucky sagged back down, obviously relieved, and Steve went to find a book. He came back with three. One was a book about all kinds of animals, but there was a frog on the front, right between a dog and an elephant. The other two were Frog and Toad books.

Steve crawled up onto the couch and settled in beside Bucky, leaning against him so they could both see the pages, and he opened Frog and Toad Are Friends. He read the part about Frog running up to Toad’s door, and then he waited, and after a second, Bucky read, in a sleepy Frog voice, “Toad, Toad, wake up. It is spring!”

They read through the whole book like that. Bucky almost fell asleep waiting for his part in Frog and Toad Together, but he woke up when Steve sighed, and he joined back in.

Bucky did fall asleep during the book about alphabet animals. All the way asleep. He didn’t notice when Steve sighed. He didn’t even notice when Steve climbed off the couch.

Mom was in the kitchen with Mrs. Barnes. Steve knew he should go get her and they should leave so Bucky could rest. He was on his way to do just that, but ... he didn’t want Bucky to be lonely when he woke up.

Bucky was his best friend, forever, and he should never, ever be lonely.

Steve bit his lip. Bucky was resting. Really well. So Steve quietly pulled out Bucky’s crayons and a piece of paper, and drew a duck to keep Bucky company. He thought for a moment, then added another duck, because ducks always stick together.

# # #

Tony, Bruce, Pepper and Rhodey sat quietly through several picture books. Mostly quietly, anyway. Minus the giggling.

Steve and Bucky shared a chair, Steve perching on the arm so they could stay close without rumpling each other’s suits. Bucky was doing the voice of Mr. Putter, an old man with a pet cat named Tabby, and Steve was narrating.

Together they read - “Tabby,” said Mr. Putter, “it is time to pick the pears.”
The kids giggled at Bucky’s old man voice, because it was perfectly adorable.

They turned the page, and Steve was preparing to read about how Tabby loved it when Mr. Putter said it was time to do something, when Howard walked in.

“Daddy!” squealed Tony. He shot across the room. Rhodey, Pepper and Bruce followed suit, and all of them crushed Howard in a hug around his knees.

“Hey kidlets! Just about time for bed. Go get your jammies on,” said Howard.

“Aww,” they said together. Tony said, “But Dad, Princess Steve is reading to us.”

“Princess Steve will want to get back to his other friends, and you guys need to get to bed or we won’t be allowed to have sleepovers any more,” said Howard.

There was general grumbling, and Bruce looked ready to cry, but Rhodey said quietly, “Can Princess Steve and Bucky Rabbit finish this book, please?”

Howard’s face scrunched up in his efforts not to laugh. He cleared his throat and said, “That sounds like a very reasonable compromise, if it’s okay with them.”

“That okay with you, your highness?” said Bucky.

“Don’t start with me, Barnes.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Princess Steve.”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “You ready, Honey Bunny?”

Bucky grinned and gave a smug little shimmy of his shoulders, as if that was what he’d been aiming for, and Steve couldn’t help but smile, even though that would only encourage him.

They somehow managed to get through the rest of the story. When they got to the part with Mr. Putter’s neighbor, Pepper said, “Can Mister Howard be Mrs. Teaberry?”

Howard said, “Of course,” and even did an old lady voice. It was a big hit with the kids, and they all ran off happily to get ready for bed, with Nate trailing along behind them.

Steve tugged off Bucky’s bunny ears and put them back in the box, along with the tiara.

Bucky shook his head. “Dethroned already. Such a shame.”

Steve rolled his eyes.

As they all walked down the hall, Howard said, “You know, I could have my driver take you back to your hotel, if you’d rather not be at the party.”

“Oh, we’re not staying in a hotel,” Steve said. Bucky elbowed him in the ribs and he added, “And your party is great.” It was great, for a party.

Howard laughed. “You don’t have to feed my ego. Unless you were angling to get a party of your own. I probably owe you one for that video of yours.”

“No offense, but we didn’t really do that for you,” Bucky said, with his charming smile that took away any sting his words might have had.
“I know,” said Howard. “That’s one of the things I liked about it.” He pushed open the double doors they’d arrived at, and suddenly they were back in the party.

Ugh, it was still so crowded.

Howard gave them a knowing grin and waved someone over. When the man arrived, Howard said, “Jarvis, you got a minute? These guys need a ride out of here.”

“Of course, right this way gentlemen,” said Jarvis, turning toward the doors.

“No, but --” said Steve, because Peggy and Janet were still here, and there wouldn’t be anyone to let them in.

“Don’t worry about a thing, it’s all taken care of,” said Howard. He caught a drink off the tray of a passing server and tipped it at them. “Have fun, fellas.”

Howard was whisked away by the crowd, leaving Steve and Bucky with Jarvis.

“Ready?” Jarvis asked.

Bucky shrugged and they followed Jarvis outside, to a waiting limousine. It was red with gold trim, of course, and the back seat had enough space for at least six people. Not that they needed the room. They happily sat right next to each other. With the tinted windows and the screen separating them from the driver, it was as much privacy as they’d had since they’d left home.

It seemed a shame to waste it, so they didn’t. They tangled into each other as much as they could without ruining their new clothes, and they spent the whole drive holding on to each other and trading soft kisses. It was almost a disappointment when they arrived at --

This was not Peggy’s place.

 Jarvis opened the door for them, and they stumbled out, a few steps away from the lobby of a hotel. “Mr. Stark made arrangements for your rooms,” Jarvis explained. One of the hotel employees hurried over to him and handed him a set of key cards. “These are for you,” said Jarvis, handing over the cards. “Your luggage should already be inside. Enjoy your evening.”

They watched Jarvis hurry back into the car. He must be a pretty busy guy, Steve thought dimly.

A hotel.

They were spending the night in a hotel.

Bucky gave Steve a wide eyed look and said, “Howard Stark might be my second favorite person in the world.”

Under the circumstances, Steve couldn’t disagree.
When the door to their hotel room closed, it made a loud click. Bucky tugged the handle anyway, as if to be sure. As if he couldn’t quite believe this was all real.

A door, four walls, a bed, and a light.

Finally.

Maybe they were both a little nervous, but when Steve smiled, Bucky smiled back, complete with eye crinkles. Anytime Bucky smiled at him like that, Steve knew they were okay.

Oh jesus, they were so much better than okay.

Steve reached out and tugged at Bucky’s tie, trying to loosen it without strangling him. Bucky’s eyes fell closed as the tie slid silky soft from beneath his collar. Trailing his fingers down, Steve unbuttoned Bucky’s jacket, opening it to reveal the bright blue lining inside, like a secret treasure just for them. He slipped it off Bucky’s shoulders and folded it over a nearby chair.

They worked together, unbuttoning Bucky’s shirt, at the cuffs and all the way down his chest, before Bucky leaned in for a kiss. His mouth was so warm. Every part of him was warm, always that comforting heat, everywhere. Steve wanted to melt against him, but there were still all these clothes in the way.

With their lips still touching, Steve yanked off his own tie and tossed it aside. He would have dropped his jacket on the floor too, but Bucky took it from him, moving away and carefully draping it over the chair.

Fighting his way out of his shirt and pants and socks might have gone faster if Steve had looked at what he was doing, but he couldn’t stop staring as Bucky stripped down to just his boxers and sat on the end of the bed, staring right back.

When Steve got within reach, Bucky caught him around the waist and pulled him close. He looked up into Steve’s eyes with a smile so soft and wondering that Steve could barely believe it was for him.

It was. It was. It was just for him, all for him, only for him.

“I love you, Bucky.”

“Love you so much,” Bucky murmured, leaning his head against Steve’s chest. He kissed Steve’s scar, again and again, tracing it all the way down his sternum and continuing past it, down to his ribs, as far as he could reach.

He looked up, with wide eyes, and his mouth was lush and red, lips parted as he caught his breath. So goddamn beautiful. He got to his feet, suddenly pressing all of his warmth against the whole length of Steve’s body, everything Steve wanted, right here, right now.

Steve let out a sigh and trailed his hands up Bucky’s arms and around his shoulders, cupping his head and pulling him into a kiss. The slide of his tongue was mesmerizing, a delicate push and pull that Steve could only break away from because of the promise of so much more.

Gently, Bucky pushed Steve into the middle of the bed. That was exactly where Steve wanted to
be, and he tugged Bucky on top of him as soon as he had the chance.

Bucky chuckled and kissed Steve’s jaw. His neck. His shoulder. He crawled lower, paused to kiss his ribs. Nibbled along his stomach until Steve arched up and whimpered.

“Fucking gorgeous,” Bucky said, breathing the words across Steve’s skin, bracing his hands on Steve’s hips, holding him in place.

He moved lower.

Trailed his nose along the front of Steve’s boxers.

Arching up didn’t work with Bucky’s hands pinning him down. It would have been annoying, if it wasn’t also the best thing that had ever happened. Steve held back a moan and clenched at the bedspread.

Bucky slipped his fingertips under the waistband of Steve’s boxers and looked up, waiting for an answer to a wordless question.

The answer was yes.

Steve nodded jerkily and lifted himself up so that Bucky could pull them off. Which he did, dropping the boxers on the floor somewhere before crawling up between Steve’s knees. Steve’s eyes fell closed as Bucky kissed the inside of his thigh, and he gasped at the feeling of a warm hand wrapping around his cock, and an even warmer mouth enveloping the head of it.

He reached out unseeing, grasping at Bucky’s shoulder. Everything went still for a moment, then Bucky caught Steve’s hand, lacing their fingers together and running his thumb over Steve’s wrist, back and forth, picking up the same rhythm with his mouth.

Oh. Oh christ it was so good, so ... (important) ... amazing. He moaned, making no attempt to be quiet, focusing instead on trying desperately not to thrust up into Bucky’s mouth, into all that liquid heat. No wonder Bucky had held his hips. He wanted --

(important, it was important, really important)

He was so close, everything else could wait, it was --

(important, all the important stuff, we’ll do all the important stuff -- )

“Wait,” said Steve.

(No, don’t wait, stopping is bad, stopping is the worst.)

Bucky immediately yanked away, not touching him at all anymore, and oh hell, stopping was the worst, and now Bucky looked worried.

“Sorry,” Bucky said. “Sorry, I --”

“It’s good, you’re so good,” Steve said, overwhelmed by the truth of that statement. “Oh so good, I just -- Together. We said, important stuff, it’s important, we should, together.”

“You mean like --” Bucky made a gesture with his hands, describing a maneuver that Steve knew he wouldn’t be coordinated enough to pull off safely.

“No, just -- At the same time. Here. C’mere.” He tugged Bucky by the shoulder, bringing him up
beside him where he could see his eyes, bright, clear blue. He brushed his fingertips over Bucky’s boxers, too lightly to even feel anything underneath them. “Want you with me. At the same time.”

Bucky’s eyebrows shot up. “At the same -- Simultaneous?”

“Yes!” That was the word.

“You want simultaneous orgasms?”

“Yes. Isn’t ... Can we do that?”

“We can sure as hell try, jesus.” Bucky wriggled around, probably taking off his boxers, but if Steve looked --

Oh jeez, he looked anyway, because Bucky was glorious and naked and hard and right there.

“Okay,” said Bucky, “Scale of one to ten, how close are you?”

“Uh, seven.” Seven was a number. Bucky’s hand trailed down Steve’s hip and -- “Oh, god, nine?”

Bucky took his hand away, and Steve made a horribly embarrassing noise, exactly like a whine. Bucky kissed him and said, “I’m gonna need a second to catch up.”

“Yes, Bucky, please hurry, I want -- Can I touch you?”

“Yeah.” Bucky’s voice trembled a little, even on just one syllable. “God, yeah.”

This was actually happening, he was finally touching him, coarse hair, velvety skin, hot like every other part of him, finally, finally.

“You’re so beautiful, Buck. Want you so much. Want to make it so good for you. Want --” Steve bit his lip to stop the endless stream of words, and focused on building up a rhythm and not being too rough on dry skin.

“It’s -- you can talk,” Bucky said. He hitched in a shaky breath as Steve stroked him more firmly. “Love your voice. Steve -- Oh fuck, you’re hot. Love how you talk.”

“Oh.” That was more than enough encouragement, and Steve stopped holding back. “Love you, Bucky. Jesus, you’re so hard. Just for me. Always wanted to get my hands on you. Make you feel good, make you come, make you mine. Wanted to touch you and taste you and be with you. So perfect for me, baby, think about you all the time, want to -- ahhh ...” Steve lost track of his words for a second at the feeling of Bucky’s hand wrapping around his dick again. “Oh fuck that’s so good, Bucky you’re so good, everything I want, so perfect, love you forever. Best thing in the world. Hands are a goddamn miracle. Love you, love you, god I love you.”

Steve stopped talking and bit his lip. He had to wait. He could wait for Bucky. He could do anything for Bucky.

“Steve.”

He could wait, he could, even with Bucky saying his name like that, all wrecked and rough and --

“Please, please, Steve, now, please --”

“Oh. Oh, yes, ohhh --”
Steve was lost in absolute bliss, in the feeling of Bucky pulsing against his hand, in the sound of them both gasping and moaning and panting together.

Together.

They traded loose, breathy, open mouthed kisses, murmuring “Love you,” and “Always yours.” After he’d caught his breath and come back to himself a bit, Steve wished for a way to wipe off his hand. “I should have realized it would be twice as messy. Eww.”

Bucky laughed, clear and free and a little bit wild, and he dragged Steve against him, warm skin touching everywhere and --

“Ack, sticky, Bucky.” Steve didn’t try to pull away, though, just shifted even closer.

Bucky kissed his hair. “We were sticky anyway.”

“We should clean up.”

“Yeah, okay.” Bucky kept his arm tight around Steve and wriggled them both off the bed. They stayed pressed together all the way to the bathroom, Steve giggling and stumbling along backwards and trusting Bucky not to run them into anything. Bucky grabbed a pair washcloths from the rack and ran them under hot water, and they wiped themselves off.

They brushed their teeth, holding hands and staring sidelong at each other. Steve couldn’t decide whether it would be worth never getting to wear clothes again if it meant that Bucky would be naked all the time.

Probably.

They’d have to turn up the thermostat, though. He couldn’t quite suppress a shudder as they climbed under the cold covers.

Bucky noticed, of course. “C’mere,” he said, tugging at Steve’s arm. He slipped Steve’s glasses off and set them on the bedside table, then dragged Steve over on top of him, running his hands lightly over his back. “See, you’ll be warmer here, because hot air rises.”

“You’d know all about hot air, Buck. Pretty much an expert on that.” Steve knew Bucky would smirk, he didn’t have to look. A quick glance confirmed it, though. Gorgeous.

“It’s my expert opinion that you gotta stay right here.” Bucky nuzzled his nose up against Steve’s temple and whispered, “Right here.”

Steve let himself relax completely, melting against Bucky as if they could share the same skin. “Okay.”

He could feel Bucky melt, too, everything but his arms, looped around Steve’s waist, holding him steady.

“Always,” Bucky sighed, and they slowly drifted off to sleep.

Together.

* * *

Bucky was awake.
Steve wasn’t sure how he knew, since he hadn’t opened his eyes yet, but he knew. He tilted his head and kissed whatever part of Bucky was closest. Felt like the hollow under his collarbone. Nice. Steve kissed it again.

They’d ended up side by side, with their legs tangled together. Bucky hugged Steve a little tighter. “You meant what you said, right?” he murmured. “You always mean what you say.”

“Yeah.” Steve finally opened his eyes. “Why, what’d I say?”

Bucky huffed a laugh, though it ended abruptly. “It’s just ... I was kind of worried. I mean.” He went quiet for a long moment. Steve was debating whether to say anything when Bucky finally went on, much more softly. “I’ve been a disappointment before.”

Before? What ...

(“Things weren’t going so good one night. Neither of us was all that interested in what we were doing.”)

Wade. Wade and his goddamned unstoppable mouth. Wade, who had said, “I bet this would be more fun if Steve was here.” Wade, who must have said a hell of a lot more than that to make Bucky think of himself as a disappointment, and who had walked out right afterwards.

Steve had been angry when Bucky told him, but now he was fucking furious. He wanted to find Wade, and he wanted to hurt him, he wanted --

None of that would help Bucky though, which meant none of that mattered, so Steve shoved it all aside.

“You could never be a disappointment,” Steve said, careful to keep his voice steady.

“You don’t --”

“Listen to me.” Steve propped himself up so Bucky could see his face. “We might try stuff we don’t like, or we might have times when things don’t work out.” For now, Steve didn’t mention his own worries over whether there’d be things he just couldn’t do, because this was about Bucky. “We might have disappointing times, but you will never be a disappointment. You’re my best friend. I wanted to spend forever with you even before I knew that sex existed, and I’ll never stop wanting to be with you. Ever.” It was dark, and they were naked and tangled up together, so Steve told the whole truth of it. “And you were better than good. You were magnificent. I would have said so at the time, but that was way too many syllables.”

Bucky twisted around, nudging Steve until they ended up curled together with his head pillowed on Steve’s shoulder. “I honestly didn’t know it could be that good. You -- You’re so fucking hot, Steve. I knew you were gorgeous, I knew you had great hands, but god, you’re amazing.”

Steve couldn’t begin to reply to that. All he could do was stroke Bucky’s hair and say, “I love you.”

Bucky sighed contentedly and ran his fingers aimlessly over Steve’s chest.

Drifting along in the sheer pleasure of Bucky’s touch, Steve closed his eyes and relaxed into his pillow, still tangling his fingers in Bucky’s hair.

Bucky’s stomach rumbled.
Loudly.

Steve bit his lip so he wouldn’t laugh, and his own stomach gurgled back a reply. That was it. They both cracked up with the kind of unfettered laughter than only happens between best friends in the early hours of morning.

Still chuckling, Bucky patted Steve’s belly and said, “Are you hungry?”

Steve snorted long and loud, which started a new round of snickering.

“C’mon,” said Bucky, ”maybe there’s something to eat in the basket thing.”

“There’s a basket thing?”

“Yeah, on the table. Didn’t you see it?”

“There’s a table?” said Steve. Bucky started giggling, and Steve added, “I was distracted!” That only made Bucky giggle harder, so Steve gave up and joined him.

“Okay, okay,” said Bucky, catching his breath. “Let’s see what we got.” He rolled out of bed and turned on the bedside light.

Steve scrambled for his glasses.

Oh, Bucky was so damned gorgeous, completely unselfconscious as he strolled across the room, hips swaying the way they always did. The effect was so much more devastating without clothes in the way. Steve crawled off the bed and followed helplessly.

By the time he got to the table it was already half covered with stuff Bucky had pulled out of the big decorative box. Steve took out a bundle that had a tag with Bucky’s name on it and handed it over. Bucky untied the ribbon and unfurled a pair of flannel pajama pants, black with funny little robots all over them.

“Oh, Janet said that was how she and Peggy dated, wearing fuzzy pajamas and playing video games. And Howard called them the PJs,” said Steve.

Bucky laughed and put the pajamas aside, with the chocolate covered pretzels and the box of sugar cookies and the deck of cards.

Steve’s pajama pants turned out to be white, with the same robots on them. He tossed them over beside Bucky’s, like an unspoken agreement that nothing would come between them during the little time they had here. Bucky drifted closer, until their shoulders brushed together, and Steve leaned into him.

As Bucky looked over a notecard full of information, maps and instructions on having their laundry washed and a phone number for calling Jarvis, Steve reached into the box again, and came up with a jar labeled ‘Whipped Coconut Oil with Lavender’.

Why? Surely nobody would just eat it. He read the label on the back, which said that it had a soothing lavender scent, that it was edible, that it was excellent for full body massages, and that it should NEVER be used with latex condoms.

Oh.

He set the jar on the table.
Bucky picked it up. After he looked over the label, he said, “Huh. You think Howard gave this to everybody who came for the wedding, or is it just for us?”

“I don’t know which would be worse,” Steve said. “No, it’s definitely worse if it’s just for us. Jesus.”

“It’s neighborly,” Bucky said. He smirked his perfect smirk and raised his eyebrow and there was no question what he was thinking.

The trouble was, Steve had a shitty heart. What if -- He shrugged, probably not as casually as he’d have liked, and reached for the box of cookies.

No. He knew better than this. He should just talk to Bucky. He could trust him with anything, no matter how embarrassing or weird. “I don’t --”

“I got tested,” Bucky said, surprisingly loud. He bit his lip and looked at the table.

“What?”

“I got tested,” he said again, this time in a more normal voice. “Two times. I wanted to make sure, in case -- But we could -- If you wanted condoms, that would make sense. Hell, there’s probably some in here.” He flicked a hand at the box.

“Oh,” said Steve. He took a second to regroup. “Well, getting tested is good. And two times should be plenty, so that seems fine and ... I hadn’t thought about it, but I don’t think we need them.”

Bucky finally met his eyes again, and gave a tight little smile.

“The thing is, I don’t know if twice in one night ...” Steve caught himself pressing his fingers to the scar on his chest, and made himself stop. “I’ve never tried. Even by myself. Didn’t want to find out I couldn’t. I just ... I don’t know if I can, and ...”

“Oh,” Bucky said, like it was nothing. “You want to try? You want to not try? You want to fool around and see where things go?”

Steve hated the idea of giving up. Hated it.

He also hated the idea of giving less than his best efforts for Bucky.

“Am I allowed to not?”

Swiping his hair out of his face, Steve looked up.

Bucky shrugged. “Sorry, I’m just not seeing how it’s bad news that I get to put my hands all over you when we wake up. Sounds like the best possible morning to me.”

There was a whole list of things that Steve felt like he should say. Sorry. Thank you. You’re fucking perfect and I’ll never deserve you. Instead he threaded their fingers together and leaned
into Bucky’s shoulder.

“You figure eating the cookies is worth brushing our teeth again? Or should we just go back to bed?” Bucky asked. There was only the tiniest lift at the corner of his lips, but Steve knew Bucky.

“You just want to go to sleep so the morning will seem sooner.”

“The morning will be sooner. Time is a product of our consciousness, so if we’re asleep, it goes faster.” Bucky had said this enough times before that his voice took on an almost sing-song quality.

Steve dutifully replied, “Time is a measurable constant, and it doesn’t change based on our perception.”

But instead of going into his usual line about how perception is reality, Bucky tugged Steve toward the bed and said, “Nah. Besides, seeming faster is good enough for me.”

“Wait.” Steve grabbed his jacket and fumbled in the pocket for his phone. He ignored the way he was blushing and said, “Don’t want to miss my alarm.”

Bucky grinned.

Steve grinned back and followed him to the bed, dropping his phone on the nightstand. Bucky turned out the light, and Steve curled up against him under the covers. Although maybe he shouldn’t have, under the circumstances. “Is this alright?”

Bucky snuggled into Steve’s shoulder and wrapped an arm around his waist. “Best night of my life, so yeah, it’s pretty alright.”

“Mine too,” Steve said. He trailed his fingers into Bucky’s hair. Bucky made a contented little sound, so Steve kept going, enjoying the soft fall of the strands and Bucky’s warm steady breath against his chest. “Love you so much.”

“Love you too, Stevie.” He’d either said ‘Stevie’ or ‘sweetie’. Steve’s hand went still as he replayed it in his head. Would Bucky call him sweetie? He never had before, but -- “Is that okay?”

Sweetie it was, then. Steve shrugged with the shoulder that didn’t have Bucky on it. “I ain’t exactly sweet, but sure.”

“Clearly you’ve never tasted yourself.”

“Shut up,” Steve said, snickering. “Go to sleep, I want to get up early tomorrow.”

“I cannot believe you went there.”

“I can’t believe I get to go there again.”

“You’re perfect and I love you.”

“You’re exquisite and I adore you.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”
Steve could see the early morning sunshine through his eyelids, and he buried his face against his pillow. As he woke up a little more, he realized that his hand was draped along the curve of Bucky’s ribs, and neither of them were wearing a thing except the covers they were under. He couldn’t resist shifting his fingers, feeling the shape of the muscles, the slide of skin against skin. Bucky’s hand moved in response, his thumb lightly tracing the angle of Steve’s hipbone, back and forth.

Steve shifted, tilted, found more skin to press against, cozy-warm and intoxicating. He ran his nose up Bucky’s neck, and along the stubble of his jaw. He kissed him there, and under his ear, and along his throat. Bucky tugged Steve even tighter in his arms, dragging their bodies together, and oh, it wasn’t too soon for Steve to do this. Oh, thank goodness. He rocked his hips, and Bucky arched against him, making a soft noise in the back of his throat, part moan, part humm.

“God, I love that sound,” Steve whispered against Bucky’s temple, rocking his hips again.

Bucky slid both hands down along Steve’s spine, down to his waist, down to -- Steve’s alarm started to beep.

He stretched over to the nightstand to shut it off, and when he turned back -- Worried. Bucky looked worried and sleepy and gorgeous. “Can -- um. If we take a break now, would that be okay or -- if it wouldn’t then we can -- I just --”

“Yeah, a break is fine.” Steve knew Bucky loved him and wanted him and -- “Why, though?”

“Bathroom,” Bucky said. “And we could brush our teeth, ‘cause I wanna kiss you. I don’t -- We might not get a room to ourselves again until we get home. I want to make it good.”

“Oh.” Well that was a hell of a reason. “Yeah, okay.”

They both dashed for the bathroom, and Steve somehow got there first. They ran through their usual morning routines as quickly as possible. As soon as Bucky finished rinsing the toothpaste out of his mouth, Steve pushed him lightly against the wall. He kissed him, long and slow and deep, stopping sooner than he’d have liked, because he couldn’t breathe through just his nose for very long. It made him dizzy, and he wanted to be dizzy for better reasons than that.

Like the way Bucky’s hands had slipped down, down, down, and caught Steve’s ass and lifted him closer. Steve automatically hiked one knee up around Bucky’s hip, changing the angle so they could slide against each other, and god it was so damned glorious.

Bucky lifted him even higher, and Steve went with it, until he ended up with his toes just barely touching the floor, no way to steady himself unless -- He wrapped that leg up around Bucky’s hips too, clinging to his shoulders and hoping Bucky could take the weight.

Of course he could. He gave a surprised little squeak, which Steve found incredibly endearing, and said softly, “You gonna let me carry you to bed?”

Bucky knew how Steve felt about being carried, it was no wonder he was surprised. “Yeah,” Steve said. “But only ‘cause we’re naked.”
A breathless laugh was the only reply he got. Bucky shifted his arms so that Steve was wrapped more securely and he turned for the door. Steve closed his eyes and leaned his head on Bucky’s shoulder to stave off the disorientation of moving backwards with no control. For his own sake as much as for Bucky’s he whispered, “I trust you.”

“I’ve got you. I promise.”

“I know.” Steve was love-struck enough to add, “You always do.”

“It’s only fair. We both know I’d be a mess without you.”

Steve wanted to ask what that meant, but they were tipping over, and suddenly he was on the bed, flat on his back with Bucky caught between his thighs. Steve stifled a groan, not very successfully, and twitched his hips up. Oh yes, that was a very, very good idea. Maybe a little more friction than was ideal, with all of Bucky’s weight to grind against, but --

Bucky hoisted Steve further up the bed, then reached over to the nightstand. A second later he slid his hand between them and -- Ohhhh so slick and hot. Bucky’s hand wrapped around both of their cocks, coating them in what had to be the coconut oil they’d found last night, and suddenly everything was perfectly slippery.

“God, Bucky.”

Bucky slid both his hands up Steve’s chest, watching closely as he did. “You’re so beautiful,” he sighed, and the look on his face was beyond sincere, it was reverent, it was adoring.

Steve knew that he would never be able to capture that look with pen and paper, but oh, he wanted to spend the rest of his life trying. This wasn’t Bucky on the knife-edge between pleasure and pain. This was pure, radiant bliss.

“All for me.” Steve hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but Bucky looked up into his eyes.

“All for you.” He dipped his head so their lips could meet, a soft brush that was barely a kiss. “Everything for you. My sweet Stevie.”

They kissed again, soft, slow, boundless, and Steve whispered, “I love you,” though the phrase seemed inadequate. “I love you Bucky.”

Bucky slid his hand between them again, and Steve buried a moan against his shoulder at the feeling, holding Bucky as close as he could.

The slick friction of their erections sliding against each other was delicious, but no more important than their arms around each other, than the past they’d shared or the future stretching out before them. It was glorious and hot and wonderful, the way they knew each other, the way they trusted each other. It was overwhelming in its rightness.

Steve couldn’t find the words for any of that. He tried, whispering, “Love you so much. You’re so fucking good. Love everything about you, baby. Always, always yours.” On and on, only stopping when Bucky pressed their mouths together again, harder than their last kiss, hungry and deep, and Steve met him in intensity, sucking on his bottom lip when he finally started to pull away.

“Soon?” Bucky asked, his voice catching.

Steve trembled, which was probably answer enough, and said, “Yes.”
Tangling his hands in Bucky’s hair, Steve yanked him in for another kiss. It was rough, probably too rough, and he tried to ease off a little, but Bucky’s hips stuttered and he groaned into it. Steve arched up to meet him and ohh, that pushed him right over the edge, and Bucky was coming too, pulling his mouth away to gasp Steve’s name. Together, together, beautifully, perfectly together.

They caught their breath for a moment. Steve let go of Bucky’s hair, running his fingers through it as he went. Bucky rolled to the side and pulled a handful of tissues from the nightstand. Those hadn’t been there last night, but neither had the coconut oil, and Steve suddenly realized why he’d gotten to the bathroom first. Bucky reached over to clean off Steve’s stomach, and Steve took some of his kleenexes so he could return the favor.

They took a shower together, indulgently draping themselves against each other under the warm spray, each of them making sure the other got very thoroughly clean. There was a lot of giggling involved, and also a lot of kissing, before they finally dragged themselves out and dried each other off. Watching Bucky blowdry his hair was even nicer when he didn’t wear pants. After he finished, he turned the hairdryer on Steve, who swatted him away, complaining about frizz and split ends as if he knew a thing about the subject. Bucky laughed and shook his head, but he relented, and they settled on the bed, pulled up the covers, and turned on the television.

They were in the middle of a show about baby elephants when Steve got a text. The show was probably cute, but Steve had his head on Bucky’s shoulder and his arm around Bucky’s waist and he hadn’t been paying attention to anything else.

Bucky reached over to grab the phone from the nightstand and read it. “Nat wants to know if you can redo her spiderwebs. She wants to have them for the wedding.”

Steve frowned. “We’d have to put on clothes. But I guess so.”

Bucky started typing in a reply, saying, “At great personal sacrifice, Steve agrees to draw on you.”

“Make sure you tell her our room number,” Steve said. He rolled off the bed and found their luggage. “Ugh, I don’t want to put on jeans just to change out of them again for the wedding.”

Something soft hit him in the back of the head. He turned around to find his new pajama pants on the floor, and Bucky grinning at him from beside the table.

As they each pulled on boxers and pajama pants, Bucky said, “I’d offer to put chalk in your hair, but it’d be rude to upstage the brides.”

Steve scoffed and rolled his eyes, but Bucky gave an annoyed little pout and said, “I’m serious. You’re too gorgeous anyway, but with rainbows … It’s just not fair.”

Too happy to hold back, Steve leaned into Bucky for a quick kiss.

Or maybe not so quick, because suddenly there was a knock at the door.

Steve scrambled into yesterday’s t-shirt as Bucky let in Natasha and Maria.

They looked really, really happy, walking in with their arms around each other, wearing matching pajama pants (green and light blue, both with robots).

Sam, however, looked miserable. He shuffled into the room and settled in one of the overstuffed chairs.

“We found him moping in the hallway,” Natasha said, with that smile she got when she was
secretly laughing.

Sam shook his head at Steve, gingerly. “Not moping. Looking for the ice machine. How did your night go?”

He looked like he regretted that question before he even finished asking it.

Steve was already blushing furiously, even before Bucky chuckled. Shooting a look at him did no good whatsoever. It just meant Steve got to watch as a dirty-hot smirk curled across Bucky’s lips.

The wanting hadn’t gone away at all. It might even be worse, now that Steve knew ...

(Bucky’s voice, wrecked and rough. Bucky’s hand, slick and hot. Bucky’s face, reverent and adoring. Bucky, Bucky, Bucky.)

Steve smirked right back, and very deliberately looked Bucky up and down. That got Bucky to bite his bottom lip, which was ridiculously hot, and Steve counted it as an absolute success.

But they weren’t alone anymore. “Are you okay, Sam? What happened?”


“Oh.” Steve knew how to handle that. He fetched a big glass of water and a few ibuprofen, and he held them out for Sam.

“No, I’m all right,” Sam said.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Is there some reason not to?”

“Because I’m fine,” Sam said.

Steve had heard these arguments plenty of times, just usually from the other side. “You’re not proving anything by being in pain here.”

“I can handle it, Steve. It’s okay.”

Nobody else was worried, of course, because it was Sam. Sam wasn’t frail or sickly or --

“Just take the fucking meds, Sam,” Maria said, loudly enough to make Sam flinch.

“Yeah Sam, take the pills,” said Natasha. She wasn’t as loud, but she had a terrifying glare and a bunch of markers that somehow looked dangerous in her hands.

Bucky shrugged. “It’s your choice, but you should probably just take them. ‘Cause the next step is we start singing.”

Sam frowned like he didn’t believe that.

Bucky started singing. “It’s been a hard day’s night ...”

“Oh not the Beatles,” Sam groaned. “Okay, okay. I’ll take them if you’ll stop.”

Bucky stopped, and Sam took the pills and drank the water.

“This is peer pressure,” Sam said. “I just want that on record.”
“Duly noted,” said Maria. “You should also eat breakfast.”

Natasha perked up at that. “We can order room service. And Steve can draw while we wait.”

Steve took the marker she shoved at his nose, and the arm that she held out. He set to work recreating the spider-web design on each of her wrists, and the little red spiders hiding inside.

After he finished, while Natasha was admiring her spiders, Steve held out his hand to Maria.

“Ooo!” She grinned and gave him her arm.

“No peeking,” he told her. The design had been in his head for a while now, he’d just been waiting for the chance to use it. It would have looked like lacy filigree to most people, but as soon as he said she could look, Maria recognized it as --

“Dicks! Steve, you drew dicks!”

For a second he was worried, because wearing dicks to a wedding was maybe not that appropriate, but she threw her arms around him and squealed, so it must be okay.

“You want me to do the other arm?” he asked into her shoulder.

She pulled back and looked over the drawing. “Um, you know what? No. Because on the one hand, I like dicks, but on the other ...” She swept out her undecorated arm toward Natasha, who laughed and leaned into her.

“Sam, did --” Steve broke off when he realized that Sam was asleep, his head resting on the table beside a plate of scrambled eggs. Room service must have delivered their breakfast while Steve was busy. “Bucky, you want any drawings?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, and he hurried over from where he’d been packing their things. Grabbing a bagel on the way, he handed it to Steve and offered his arm, saying, “Anything you want.”

Steve bit into the bagel. What he wanted was to give Bucky everything. To show every corner of his heart, and how Bucky had filled them. It was an impossibility, but it was what he wanted.

He settled in and started to draw.

He drew a Ferris wheel. He drew a rainbow with the sun peeking over it. He drew a pair of ducks, leaning their heads together. He drew a roller coaster, and a flying saucer above it. He drew stars, trailing all the way up to Bucky’s shoulder.

He drew until there was no more room.

Frowning, he capped his marker, and suddenly Bucky was kissing him, and that was absolutely right. Steve kissed him back, parting his lips and giving an eager little humm. Bucky definitely didn’t mind. He tangled both hands in Steve’s hair.

Steve’s hands found their way to the hem of Bucky’s t-shirt, and slipped under it. Mmm, skin was so good.

“Guys, guys, look,” said Maria, tapping on Bucky’s ankles.

Natasha turned up the volume on the television.

“Matt!” said Steve, uselessly, since the onscreen text identified him as ‘Matt Murdock - Attorney
for the online group known as #5shrubs’. Still, he hadn’t expected to see him on tv. He looked
terrific, wearing a suit and stylish dark glasses and his hair swept to one side. Steve had never seen
him dressed as a lawyer before.

“...not an extraordinary claim, much as we’d like it to be,” Matt was saying. “Slurs and hate
speech are everyday occurrences.”

The reporter gave a predatory smile. “Surely you aren’t suggesting that a man like Doctor Pym
would --”

“I’m suggesting that things like money, power, and fame do not confer an immunity to
wrongdoing.”

“Nice,” said Sam, blinking sleepily and joining them all on the bed.

The reporter raised an immaculately sculpted eyebrow and turned to face the camera. “For a
different perspective, we turn to James Morita, Vice President of Communications at Pym
Technologies. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us today
Mr. Morita. How do you respond to these accusations against your company?”

“To my knowledge, Ms. Garner, there have been no accusations against the company,” said Mr.
Morita. He seemed very serious and buttoned down, and Steve’s heart sank a little at what he
thought was coming next. “We do take this new information very seriously, however.”

Maria shared a look with Natasha.

“This information,” Ms. Garner said, lingering on the word, “seems highly controversial. What --”

“There’s no controversy,” said Mr. Morita. “I think we can all agree that those words should never
have been said. By anyone.”

The reporter frowned. “Well certainly Doctor Pym is from a different generation. We have to make
allowances --”

“Our motto at Pym Tech is ‘Living in the Future, Today’. A motto that has been with the company
from the beginning, I might add. And while bigotry may have been more prevalent in the past, it
was still just as immoral, despite being common. So I don’t believe any allowances need to be
made, no.”

There was a moment of silence as Ms. Garner blinked in surprise, before she finally said, “Should
we expect some kind of formal apology from Doctor Pym, then?”

“I can’t speak for Hank, but I can tell you that the Board of Directors will be meeting this afternoon
to determine where we go from here. For myself, I’d like to congratulate these students on their
fine work. Speaking out against prejudice is difficult enough, but doing so in such a positive
manner shows great moral character, as well.”

A tiny strangled squeak escaped Ms. Garner’s lips. She plastered on a smile almost immediately,
though, and introduced a segment about some chip company changing their logo.

Maria slowly smiled. “Well, either Pym’s losing his job, or Morita is. He didn’t even let them ask
whether it was Pym’s voice. No room for deniability at all.”

“‘There’s no controversy’,” Bucky said. “He actually said ‘There’s no controversy.’”
“He changed ‘accusation’ to ‘information’,” said Natasha. “I like this guy.”

“The meeting is at the same time as the wedding, too. That should keep Pym busy,” said Sam.

Natasha’s smile faded. So did Sam’s. He said, “It should, though. He can’t miss a meeting like that.”

“Throw away his whole life’s work just for revenge or whatever?” Bucky said. He might have meant for it to sound like an impossibility, but if he had, he’d missed the mark.

Steve said, “It’ll probably be fine.”

They sat in silence, and not one of them seemed convinced.

“Matt was great,” said Maria.

Steve grabbed onto the change in conversation. “Yeah, he looked fantastic on camera.”

“Is that something we do now?” said Bucky. “Talk about hot guys in front of each other?”

“I never said he was hot,” Steve said, not sure how he felt about that idea.

“He was hot,” said Natasha.

Maria nodded. “Those lips? Yes please.”

Sam shrugged. “He’s alright.”

Bucky was raising an eyebrow, so Steve shrugged. “The first time I saw him, I thought he was you.”

“Except you immediately started flirting with him.”

“I did not flirt with him! I didn’t even know him.”

Bucky and Maria both tilted their heads, while Natasha looked like she’d just figured out something important.

“What?” Steve said.

“Nothing,” said Natasha, but she went on when he frowned at her. “Back in high school. I was trying to have this mysterious allure, and now I find out that you’re only attracted to people once you get to know them.”

“Too late now, sucker,” said Bucky, throwing his arms around Steve. “He’s all mine.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “He was yours then, you were just too dumb to admit it.”

Bucky shrugged, still wrapped around Steve, and Steve hugged him and said, “You weren’t dumb.”

“That was a plural ‘you’, by the way,” said Natasha.

Bucky squeezed Steve tighter so he could reach all the way around and flip Natasha off, and that put his neck right there in kissing range. Sure, Steve could resist, but he wasn’t going to, especially since it made Bucky squirm so nicely. “She’s right,” Steve whispered between kisses. “I was
always yours. And you were dumb.”

Bucky laughed, jabbed Steve in the ribs, and said, “You were dumber.”

“Yeah, probably. Good thing you love me anyway.”

“Yeah, good thing.”

Then Sam whacked them with a pillow.

# # #

She just started showing up in places.

It wasn’t creepy or anything. Steve went to his locker, and Natasha stopped by and said hello. Steve went to lunch and Natasha caught up with him in the hallway and walked beside him, without saying a word. Mr. Webster told the class to pair up for a project, and they were the last two without partners.

They had similar schedules, that was all.

He didn’t know why she would be sitting on the bleachers by the pool, but there she was when he got out of Chess Club. He gave a mental shrug, sat down beside her and pulled out his History homework.

Learning about the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg was really fascinating, in a horrible way, but it was almost instinctive to look up at the sound of Bucky’s laughter.

Bucky was only goofing around in the pool with his teammates (their hands on his bare shoulders and water trailing down his neck and the flex of his arms as he splashed at them and want and want) (don’t think about it, just don’t, it will only hurt), and it wasn’t anything interesting so Steve turned back to his homework.

“Hey.”

“Huh?” Steve blinked up at Natasha, somehow managing to be surprised that she was still there.

She flashed a crooked smile. “You mind if I try something?”

“No?”

She leaned toward him, slowly, and he waited, and --

Her lips were soft. Softer than he would have expected, if he had ever expected anything like this. But he hadn’t, which was why he never really got around to responding.

She pulled away, looked him over very carefully, and said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome?” Steve said. The words seemed too loud in the sudden quiet around them.

She picked up her Trigonometry book and said, “Do you know anything about secants and cosecants?”

“Uh, no. Bucky probably does, I could ask him, when he’s done.”

“Don’t worry about it. We can work on History instead. What was Burnside’s problem?”
“I think the crater was just steeper on one side, and he couldn’t see it from where he was.”

“Well, perspective is important,” she said, with that little smile that always made him feel like she was laughing at him.
The Wedding

Chapter Notes

THIS CHAPTER IS UPSETTING

Please check the tags for potential triggers. Take care.

There had to have been a sign before it all went bad, but Steve never figured out what it might have been.

The venue was amazing. There were soaring Ionic columns and a bronze recast of Rodin’s The Thinker and a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Bucky kept flipping open his jacket because he knew Steve liked the blue lining, and Steve reached for him every time he did it, because he knew Bucky liked being reached for. They showed up at just the right moment, not late, but not so early they had to socialize with many strangers, and they were seated near the back, near where the guards were stationed, which made everything less worrisome.

The brides were achingly beautiful. They walked down the aisle side-by-side, like the partners they were. Janet’s dress fluttered around her, highlighting her elfin features and the rich warm tones of her skin. Peggy’s dress was sleeker, clinging to her curves, showing how solid and strong she was.

At some point, Steve realized that they had found a shade of lipstick that suited them both, and he laughed a little, knowing that they’d done it so they wouldn’t mess up each other’s makeup when they kissed. Bucky glanced over, and Steve shook his head and smiled. Maybe weddings weren’t so bad. Not with Bucky smiling back at him like that.

The lady performing the ceremony spread her arms wide and said, “Welcome friends. What a joyous occasion to gather here today. To celebrate the joining of Janet and Peggy, to give witness to their love, to recognize by law the truth in --”

At first, Steve thought it was Tony’s toy car. It flew in a quick circle around the dias, then stopped, hovering in the air. But it was a little bigger than the toy car, and faster, and -- And it started to shriek, a horrible high pitched noise that got louder and louder and cut off abruptly as the flying thing dropped to the floor, hidden behind a vase of flowers.

There were nervous chuckles and whispers, a polite version of general confusion, stuffy and formal. Until the lady performing the ceremony leaned against Peggy, sagging as if she had fainted.

Sam jumped up and ran toward the dias, and Bucky and Steve followed. So did Maria and Natasha, all of them faster than Steve, focusing on what was important and leaving him to catch up.

It was absolutely the right thing to do, and Steve didn’t blame them a bit. None of them had any way of knowing what would happen.

But suddenly Steve couldn’t breath, and it wasn’t because his lungs had shut down. He had been grabbed from behind, and his tie was cinched tight around his throat.
Something hard pressed roughly against the side of his head, and a familiar voice said, “Stop. Nobody move.”

It was the voice of wisdom and authority and innovation.

The pressure on Steve’s throat eased a little, but the pressure on his temple didn’t. Sam and Maria and Bucky and Natasha and everyone looked around at the sound of Hank Pym’s voice.

All of their faces turned to masks of horror, confirming Steve’s suspicions about what was aimed at his head. Bucky started to step toward him, but Sam clamped a hand on his shoulder and he froze.

This couldn’t be happening. Where the hell were the guards? Pym wasn’t even strong, it was the one time in his life when Steve could have won in a fight, if it wasn’t for the gun.

The gun the gun the gun, there was a gun against his head, he could die like this, so far from home, at a goddamned wedding, the gun the gun the gun.

Pym shoved Steve forward, toward the dias, and everyone moved back to give them room. Maria forced Natasha aside, and Sam pushed Bucky out of the way. Howard darted to the front and pulled the flower girl and the ring bearer away and into the crowd.

Janet was shaking so hard Steve could see it from halfway up the aisle, and Peggy was furious and terrified and holding Janet’s hand. Steve couldn’t see Bucky anymore, they’d gone past him, and he couldn’t turn to look back and all he wanted in the world was to see Bucky again.

“I have a proposal for you, Ms. Carter,” Pym said, as if this was a business meeting and he was in charge. “What’s yours for what’s mine.”

“Neither of those things are true,” Peggy said. “Janet doesn’t belong to you. She never has. She only belongs to herself.”

“Don’t you speak for her!” Pym snarled, shoving the gun harder against Steve’s head. Steve was pretty sure he couldn’t get away with kicking him, but the idea was becoming more and more tempting. “Janet, come back with me, where you belong. You don’t want his blood on your hands.”

“No,” Steve said.

“You think I won’t?” Pym said, almost conversationally.

“It won’t be her fault, whatever you do.”

Pym laughed. That was a sound Steve never wanted to hear again, but it wasn’t as bad as what came next.

“Last words?” Pym said.

The gun the gun the gun. Steve’s thoughts narrowed down to the one thing that mattered most. “Natasha. Don’t let Bucky watch.”

The sound Bucky made was pure anguish.

Steve couldn’t think about it. He wasn’t going to spend his last moments crying. Not if he could help it.

Pym shook Steve, like a dog with a rabbit, and snarled, “You useless --”
“Hank Pym,” said a voice. Pym started to turn around, dragging Steve with him, and there behind them was Professor Fury, looking huge and terrifying in his black leather jacket. “Tell me, do you have an invitation, or did you just decide to drop in?”

Fury’s eye lingered on Steve when he said the word ‘drop’, and there was no time to think, the element of surprise was nearly gone already, so Steve just reacted.

He threw himself onto the floor.

There was a pop, not what he thought a gunshot should sound like at all, so very near his head as he went down. He almost didn’t make it to the floor, but Pym wasn’t strong enough to take Steve’s full weight in one hand, and Steve landed flat on his back.

Everything happened at once after that:
- Sam appeared and grabbed Steve’s shoulders.
- Something made Pym fall down.
- Someone picked up Steve’s feet.
- Lots and lots of shouting.
- Steve was carried off, really fast.

Steve swatted at Sam, and kicked at whoever had his feet. “Lemme go.”

The guy he was trying to kick, a huge man with a huge mustache, said, “Hang on, kid, we’re almost clear.”

“I don’t need to be clear, I need to get to Bucky. Put me down! Goddammit, where’s Bucky?”

“I’m right here.”

His face was pale, almost gray, and there were tear streaks down his cheeks. and he was the most beautiful thing in the world. He grabbed Steve and didn’t let go. Sam and the other guy must have set Steve on his feet at some point, because the only thing holding him up now was Bucky.

“You’re really okay?” Bucky asked and his voice was so small. He should never sound like that.

(He should never scream in anguish, either, and Steve still wasn’t ready to deal with that.)

“I’m not hurt. I love you. I’m okay, and I love you. You’re okay? Is everybody --”

Someone was crushing into him from behind, so Steve looked over his shoulder to see Janet, hugging Steve and Bucky together.

“Steve, I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, no,” Steve said. “None of this was your fault.” Oh god, he didn’t want to let go of Bucky, not even a little, but ... He kept one arm tight around Bucky’s waist and reached out with the other to pat Janet’s shoulder as she clung to him.

Peggy stepped in and hugged Bucky, which seemed to surprise both of them. They whispered to each other, too quietly for Steve to hear, before Peggy broke away and wrapped her arms around Janet.

“Steve, do me a favor,” said Sam, back from wherever he’d run off to. Probably helping people. That’s who he was. Steve felt a flash of guilt, because all he’d done was get dragged around.
“Yeah Sam, anything. Uh, thank you for ... Thanks. What’s the favor?”

“Sit down, drink this, and take these.” Sam held out a water bottle and some pills.

Steve glared at him.

“Don’t give me that face,” said Sam.

“That’s not a favor. That’s --” Pity. The last thing Steve ever wanted.

Sam leaned close to talk in Steve’s ear. “I almost lost another friend today, and I need to make sure he’s taken care of. Please, just ... For me, okay?”

Well, fuck, Steve couldn’t say no to that. “Alright, fine. Where --”

The huge guy from before held out a chair and plopped it down behind Steve.

“Thanks,” Steve said, sitting down and trying not to pout like a little kid.

Bucky faked a laugh. “Wow Sam, what the hell did you say to get him to follow orders like that?”

“Just the truth,” Sam said. He gave Bucky a weird look that Steve didn’t understand, distracted as he was by not having Bucky’s arm around him and taking the pills Sam gave him and having the strange giant so close to him.

“I’m Steve, by the way. Sorry for kicking you earlier.”

The giant laughed. “I’ve had worse, believe me. Tim Dugan. Nice to meet ya.”

“His name’s Dum Dum, don’t let him fool you,” said Sam.

Tim scowled at him. “You really want to go there, Tweety Bird?”

“Did the two of you serve together?” asked Peggy, still holding Janet in her arms. (Bucky was standing to one side of them, with his hands in his pockets, and Steve scrunched deeper into the chair.)

“Yes ma’am, 58th Rescue Squadron,” said Tim.

Peggy rolled her eyes. “Don’t ‘ma’am’ me, Timothy. We’ve discussed this.”

“Yes boss,” Tim said with a laugh in his voice.

Steve tuned out of the conversation. If he didn’t already have bruises on his neck, they’d be there soon. He pulled his tie off and unbuttoned his collar so he could press the cold water bottle against his throat.

Bucky flashed a little smile and said. “Hey, I’ll be right back.”

He walked away without waiting for a reply, and Steve watched as Natasha caught up with him on the way to wherever he was going.

“Seen me die plenty of times. No big deal.” Steve wasn’t sure which was worse, that it was true, or that he’d said it out loud without meaning to.

“Steve?” said Sam. “You with me?”
“Yeah, I’m fine. Hey, what happened back there?”

“Can you tell me where you are?” Sam crouched down by the chair.

Steve gave an annoyed huff. “San Francisco. We’re at Peggy’s wedding. What happened with Pym while I was collapsing on the floor?”

“Professor Fury kicked the gun out of his hand and put him in an armlock,” Sam said, as if that was just a normal thing.

Steve blinked at him. “Okay.”

“Yeah, I didn’t know he could do that, either,” Sam said. Steve forced a laugh.

Janet and Peggy were surrounded by people. Maria was talking to Fury. Howard was entertaining a group of little kids.

Pym --

“Pym’s gone.” Steve lurched up out of the chair and crashed into Sam. “I have to find Bucky, I have to keep him safe, what if Pym -- I gotta find him before --”

Sam gently held onto Steve’s elbows. “Pym was arrested. They cuffed him and took him away. He can’t hurt Bucky.”

But keeping it together wasn’t an option anymore. “Sam I need him, I can’t do this without him, I just got him I can’t lose him, he’s not safe, he needs to be safe.”

“Okay. Okay. We’ll call him, alright? You’ve got your phone?”

Steve yanked open his jacket, too fast, the button flew off, but he got his phone out and -- “It’s not working. Why isn’t it working? It’s brand fucking new, I need --”

“We’ll use mine.” Sam got out his phone, (faster, come on) and swiped the screen, but nothing happened. “What the hell?”

Steve hooked around Sam and took off at a run. He had to find Bucky, had to, no matter what Sam thought. Sam didn’t try to stop him, though. He just kept pace behind him as he went.

Steve wove through the crowds of people milling around in their suits and dresses. He ran through the doorway that Bucky had gone through and found himself in a long hallway, almost empty, except --

Sauerting along, shoulder to shoulder with Natasha, crooked smile on his lips, there was Bucky. Steve kinda wanted to punch him. Wanted to grab him, throw him against the wall, hold him forever, grind into him, cry against his shoulder, scream in his face.

Instead of any of that, Steve squared his shoulders and froze in place a few steps away.

Sam shifted, but when Natasha shook her head minutely he stopped again, waiting.

Bucky didn’t stop. He crashed softly into Steve and wrapped his arms around him. “You okay?”

“No.” His voice was raw from the running and the sobs that wanted to escape and being yanked around by his tie. “Don’t do that again.”
“Okay.”

“I’m serious. Don’t you fucking leave my sight, no matter what happens.”

“I won’t.”

Steve felt like he was falling apart, and he didn’t particularly want everyone in the world to see it. He leaned his forehead against Bucky’s chest.

That was when he started to understand, because Bucky was rigid against him, tightly controlled, holding everything inside.

How much had it cost, knowing that Steve was about to die in front of him one last time?

(Don’t let Bucky watch)

Steve glanced over at Natasha. Sam was patting her shoulder, and she was wiping tears off her lashes in that careful way people do when they’re wearing eye makeup. God, he wished they could all just go home.

“Bucky.”

“Yeah?”

“I still don’t like weddings.”

Bucky laughed. It was mostly fake, but it was a laugh. He tugged Steve around and slung his arm over his shoulders. “I guess we should get back in there, huh?”

“Guess so. Just ... Please stay with me.”

“I swear I will,” Bucky whispered, a frown trembling across his face for a split second before he could hide it.

They made their way back, and Sam gave Steve a look and pointed at the chair he’d abandoned, which still had the unopened water bottle beside it. Steve started to protest, but Bucky flopped into the seat and pulled Steve down with him, into his lap.

Steve twisted around so he could see him. “Are you alright?”

It seemed better than saying ‘I know you’re not okay, and I don’t know how to help.’

Bucky chewed his lip. “Um. I will be?”

“Bucky --”

“Can I just take care of you for now?” Bucky said, with a smile that was probably meant to look bright and casual.

Steve didn’t want to make things worse, so he played along, sighing dramatically and saying, “I suppose. Anything I can do? I mean, besides sitting on your lap like a damned teddy bear?”

Bucky twisted the top off the water bottle and handed it to Steve.

Swallowing hurt a little, but Steve was pretty good at covering, and Bucky was looking away.
Howard whistled loudly and waved for people to come over. Steve started to get up, but when Howard saw them, he went to them, apparently expecting everyone else to do the same.

Maria, Natasha, and Professor Fury stalked over. Janet and Peggy broke away from their well wishers and joined them. Sam was already there, and his friend Tim was beside him.

Howard was clutching a handful of circuitry. “From that drone Hank sent in. Set off a fucking electromagnetic pulse,” he said. “Asshole must have wanted to take out all the cameras and phones. I can bring some people in to get everyone’s devices back on line, but we need to make sure anyone with a pacemaker gets checked out.”

Janet turned, wide-eyed. “Steve? Do you?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Judge Martinez has a pacemaker, I think,” said Peggy.

Sam said, “The one doing the wedding? The EMTs are with her now.”

“I’ll go make sure they know,” said Tim, already on his way.

“But what about the wedding?” Maria said.

Janet pretended to smile. “We can reschedule.”

“I can do the wedding,” said Howard. “I thought up vows and everything. Can I do it? Let me do it, come on.”

“It takes a little more than willingness, I’m afraid,” said Peggy.

Howard laughed. “I’m not willing, I’m eager. And I’ve been ordained. Back before Prop 8. I wanted to do my part, help as many people as I could. I’m licensed in California, Nevada and Oregon.”

Janet and Peggy met each other’s eyes.

Janet smiled first, and Peggy followed.

“Yes?” said Peggy.

Janet took her hands. “Yes.”

“Yes!” said Howard. He found a nearby chair and stood up on it, tossing the bits of the drone on the floor. “Attention everyone! I have a few announcements to make. First, if anyone has a pacemaker or similar medical device, please go visit with the medical personnel in the back. Second, in about an hour, we’ll have some help on site to get your phones and cameras working again. Third, we came here for a wedding, and we’re going to get one!”

Maria started clapping, and soon nearly everyone joined in.

Howard grinned and waved for quiet.

“If today’s events have proven anything, it’s that nobody in the world is more powerful than the love between these two. Tony, I’m gonna need those rings. Bring ‘em up here.”

Tony dashed in with a ring pillow under his arm, like a tiny football player in a tuxedo. Howard
took the pillow and ruffled Tony’s hair, which got an ‘aww’ from the crowd.

Holding out one of the rings, Howard said, “Peggy, do you take Janet to be your wife, to share your weaknesses so that she can share her strengths, to be her voice of reason and her call to adventure, to stand proudly at her side and be humbled by her love for you?”

Whatever Peggy was expecting, it wasn’t that. She laughed, blinked the tears from her eyes, and said, “I do.”

She slid the ring onto Janet’s finger, and kissed the back of her hand for good measure.

Howard held the other ring out. “Janet, do you take Peggy to be your wife, to share your weaknesses so that she can share her strengths, to be her voice of reason and her call to adventure, to stand proudly at her side and be humbled by her love for you?”

“I do.” Janet bounced on her toes as she slipped the ring onto Peggy’s finger, and her smile was magnificent.

“By the power vested in me by the state of California, I hereby pronounce you wed. You may kiss the bride.”

They did, throwing their arms around each other and kissing each other breathless to the sound of cheers and whistles.

Bucky laced his fingers between Steve’s. “There, now it’s not a wedding anymore. Just a party. Although, I do remember you promising that you’d kiss me if I danced with you.”

(“You’re getting at least four kisses. Five if you dance with me.” That’s what Bucky said, all the way back in Nevada.)

“Pretty sure you got that backwards, Buck.”

“Yeah? You promised that you’d dance with me if I kissed you?”

Steve shrugged. “Sure.”

That was the closest he’d gotten to a real smile from Bucky since -- since the gun. Steve smiled back, and Bucky pulled him closer on his lap, letting go of his hand so he could thread his fingers through Steve’s hair and draw him in.

The kiss was delicate. Careful.

Short.

“Princess Steve!”

Tony was already climbing into Steve’s lap by the time Steve opened his eyes.

“Princess?” said Natasha.

Bucky smiled. “He got crowned at the party last night.”

Once Tony finished his climb, he hugged Steve tight.

Steve patted him. “Hi there.”
“Hey buddy,” said Howard, rushing over with his arms out to pick up Tony. “What do we say about interrupting people when they’re kissing?”

Tony scowled and clung to Steve. “But I can’t wait ‘til later, he might die.”

Howard cringed, Maria flinched, and even Natasha looked pretty horrified. Bucky’s hand crept around Steve’s waist.

“No, Tony,” Steve said, hugging him. “I’m not gonna die, I promise.”

“Good, then you can read to me every night.”

“Well, no. I have to go home. To Brooklyn.”

“Now?!” said Tony, sounding more upset than he did about Steve dying.

“Pretty soon, yeah.”

“You’re staying tonight, though,” said Howard.

Maria shook her head. “We need to get on the road in about an hour. There are people letting us stay with them all along the way, we can’t reschedule everything.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” said Howard. “Stay in my hotel tonight, I’ll fly you home tomorrow.”

Natasha and Maria turned to Steve with matching sympathetic looks.

Sam turned to Howard. “Thank you for the offer, but I can’t fly.”

Steve had never in his life been the second person to say that kind of thing. He could already tell that it was a lot nicer than being the first. “I can’t fly either,” he said. “You guys could, though.”

Maria shook her head,

“We’re a team,” said Natasha.

Steve smiled. “That’s a relief, ‘cause I don’t know how we’d have done it without you.”

“No, guys, I’ll have Jarvis drive you,” said Howard. “I need him for tomorrow, but -- actually, we could all go together. You ever been to Vegas?”

“You’re gonna what?” said Bucky.

Howard pointed at him. “First thing tomorrow, we leave for Vegas. Then you go home in the limo. And no more sleeping on floors, that’s what hotels are for.”

“Really, it’s the least he could do,” said Professor Fury, appearing out of nowhere behind Howard.

“Nick!” Howard turned and grinned at him. “You’re damn right. What else should I be doing? Say the word and I’ll handle it.”

“I have some thoughts. But first ...” Professor Fury looked around at all of them. “Each of you did great work on your trip, and your video at the end was excellent. You’ve made Kirby University proud. And you.” He turned to Steve. “What you did today took a hell of a lot of guts. Sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”
Steve shifted Tony on his lap. “It wasn’t --”

“Shut up,” Bucky whispered. “Don’t say it wasn’t.”

Steve squared his shoulders and looked up at Professor Fury. “Thank you.”

Fury gave a sharp nod. “I’m afraid I don’t have the shiny medals that you were supposed to get from Pym Tech, but there is cake. Enjoy.”

He nodded at Howard, and the two of them walked off together, Fury saying something about making sure the gun gets evaluated, because non-standard does not equate to non-lethal.

“Is he a pirate?” said Tony.

Steve laughed, startled out of wondering about the gun. “I don’t think so, but I can’t say for sure.”

“Does he read stories?”

“Absolutely,” said Bucky. “You should go ask him.”

Tony scrambled off and ran after Fury.

“C’mon,” Bucky said. “I owe you a dance.”

“Sure.”

They stood up and clutched onto each other, nowhere near as casual as they’d sounded. With his face against Bucky’s chest, Steve muttered, “There’s no music.”

“I don’t care,” Bucky said, holding him even tighter and swaying to the beat in his head.

Chapter End Notes

So.

If, for some reason, you happen to need a bit of fluff, I've put up Chapter 8 of Postcards from the Road to Courage. A door, four walls, a bed, and a light, from Bucky's point of view.

As always, feel free to yell at me in the comments.
It was the same hotel room. Steve could almost pretend that today hadn’t happened.

But it had.

The reception had gone on for hours. Eventually, someone got the sound system working again, and there was a lot more dancing.

Bucky only danced with Steve, staying at his side like he’d promised, and the haunted look never left his eyes.

Tony actually did manage to get Fury to read to him, a picture book about a pig who was “Not relaxed!” It was hilarious, and Steve wished he had the chance to record it, so he could enjoy it when things were more normal.

They went back to the hotel. They brushed their teeth. Bucky handed Steve some painkillers, and Steve took them without protest.

If there was some kind of checklist for how to start a migraine, Steve would have ticked off every box today, with weird smells, off schedule meals, too much sunlight, and, oh yeah, extreme stress.

Bucky changed into pajama pants and a t-shirt, so Steve did the same. They climbed into bed, on top of the covers, and Bucky turned on the tv, but turned off the lights. In the gloom, Steve could barely make out the lines of the Ferris Wheel and the rainbow and the ducks he’d drawn on Bucky’s arm just that morning, so long ago.

There were no guidelines for this. No memories of how they’d gotten through these things before. Asthma attacks and anaphylaxis and pneumonia, sure, but nothing like this.

Bucky curled on his side and settled his head on Steve’s chest. The warm weight of him was the most reassuring thing Steve had felt since -- (The gun against his head and don’t let Bucky watch and a desperate cry like Bucky’s world was ending)

Steve ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair, not sure who he was trying to comfort.

They were quiet for a long time, ignoring the television. Some history show.

“I threw up,” Bucky said.

Steve’s hand stilled. “What?”

Bucky didn’t look up. “That was ... That was why I left. There were bruises. On your neck, he put bruises on you, there were bruises and ... god, Steve, I’m so sorry, I just couldn’t --”

He sobbed and clutched Steve tight, and Steve held on to him and wished -- oh he wished he could take it all away, make it not have happened. He made soothing noises, a litany of “shh” and “okay” and “alright”, but it didn’t seem to matter. He couldn’t fix anything.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said, working himself down to a sniffle. “I know I shouldn’t have left you alone like that.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay. I just didn’t know where you were, and -- I panicked. I might have yelled at Sam about keeping you safe.”
“I yelled at Natasha,” Bucky said against Steve’s stomach, his voice breaking again. “She did what you said, she didn’t let me watch and I thought ... The gun went off and they carried you away and I thought ... And I was going to kill him. They wouldn’t let me, but I was going to, and then you were alive so I didn’t but I was going to.”

“Oh.”

Bucky finally looked at him, then. His eyes were red and frustrated and hurt and confused.

The confusion, at least, was something Steve could help with. “If he did that to you, and I had the chance? That’s what I’d do.”

Bucky shook his head. “You’re better than that.”

“I’m not, Bucky. Not if ... Not if I lost you like that.”

Chewing on his lip and pondering, Bucky looked up at Steve again. “You’re not disappointed in me?”

“No. God no. None of it was your fault, and ... I love you. I love you so fucking much. More than anything.”

With a small watery smile, Bucky shuffled up higher on the bed beside Steve. He leaned in, hesitantly, and kissed Steve under the ear, feather-light. He moved over a little, and kissed him again, under his jaw. And again, over a little more, and Steve realized that Bucky was kissing all the bruises there.

He tilted his head back to give Bucky access, but his glasses slipped. He figured he’d better take them off before things went further, and he rubbed a little at his eye as he did. The painkillers had been a good idea, he should thank Bucky later. He should demonstrate how thankful he was.

The silky press of lips along his neck was distracting in all the best ways. Steve trailed his fingers down Bucky’s side and found the hem of his shirt. He slipped his hand under it, onto the warm skin of Bucky’s back. Bucky was so perfect. Steve took a breath to tell him so, but Bucky talked first.

“We can just cuddle, right?”

Oh.

“Yeah. Okay,” said Steve. He wasn’t a hypocrite, he wouldn’t push for more.

Did asking why count as pushing for more?

Bucky ran his fingers through Steve’s hair, gently massaging his scalp.

(Probably kissing someone’s bruises wasn’t all that sexy. Probably it was a reminder of all the things Steve hadn’t done. Wasn’t strong enough or brave enough to do. Pym shook him like a toy and he didn’t even fight back and now --)

“Could you --” Steve cut himself off. Jesus, no, he wasn’t going to ask that.

“Could I what?”

“Nevermind.”
Bucky’s hands went still. “You said you’d let me take care of you.”

He had said that. He trusted Bucky. Completely.

Steve could only whisper it, though. “Tell me you still want me?”

“Wh --”

“We don’t have to do anything, it’s no problem, I just --”

He couldn’t talk anymore with Bucky kissing him. Oh thank goodness.

“Of course I want you,” Bucky said, and kissed him again.

Steve tried not to be too incredibly needy in kissing him back, but he might have failed. That little whine in the back of his throat almost certainly gave him away.

Bucky leaned their foreheads together. “I always want you. I just thought you had a headache.”

“I do, but--” With Bucky holding him, the words finally tumbled out, with no context at all. “I couldn’t fight him. I couldn’t do anything. I didn’t do anything, Bucky, I just let him -- I let him --”

“No. Steve, no, you were -- Fuck, you kept yourself alive, and that was a god damned miracle, and then, even with -- Even with what he did, you were still fighting, you were trying to make it okay for Janet, and trying to -- To protect me, god, Steve, I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Steve was shaking, squeezing Bucky’s arms much too tight and clinging just as desperately to every word he said. “You’re the only thing that helps.”

“I’m here, I’m with you.” Bucky buried his nose against the crook of Steve’s shoulder, pressing their chests together and blanketing Steve in all his warmth. “I’m with you, I’m with you.”

There was a familiar, soothing cadence to the words, and Bucky repeated them like a mantra until Steve was finally able to loosen his grip and stop shaking.

Softly, softly, Bucky cupped Steve’s face in his hands and brushed away his tears. “I love you, and I want you so much. You’re the best, bravest person I’ve ever known, and I wish I was half as strong as you. Wanting you is like breathing. I could never stop.”

Steve whispered, “Love you, Bucky.”

“I love everything about you.” Bucky brushed tender kisses across Steve’s face. Cheekbone, eyebrow, the tip of his nose. “My favorite part is your big beautiful brain.” He stretched up and kissed Steve’s hair. “You’re fucking brilliant, but you also think about things. You care about things.”

“That’s --” Steve started to argue, but Bucky didn’t let him, pressing their mouths together in a fierce, greedy kiss, so much more intense than the gentle tone of his words. Steve fell into it, letting the fight go out of him, entrusting Bucky with everything.

Pulling away just enough to talk, Bucky said, “This mouth. God, I love this mouth.” He traced his thumb against it, keeping Steve from talking. “Gorgeous lips. Sexiest voice I ever heard. That’s an excellent mouth.” He kissed him again, just a brush of lips. “So goddamn kissable. Really excellent.”

He shuffled lower. “Now I already told you about this spot.” With his lips pressed just below
Steve’s ear, Bucky murmured, “I’d watch you draw or do homework, and I’d think about how soft your skin must feel right here. And I’d ache to touch you. Wanted to get you in my room and touch every bit of you. Wanted to make you feel so good.”

“You do,” Steve said. “You make everything good.” He could feel Bucky’s lips curve into a smile against his neck, and he sighed, “Love you.”

Bucky tugged at his shirt, so Steve propped himself up to let him take it off, watching as he trailed his fingers up Steve’s ribs along the way.

After he tossed it aside, Bucky slowly ran both hands over Steve’s stomach and chest, all the way up to his collarbones, stroking them with his thumbs. “Kinda want to throw out all your shirts, so I can see you like this all the time.”

Steve huffed a laugh and shook his head.

“And this? Oh, this is definitely one of my favorites,” Bucky said, bending down to kiss along the curve of Steve’s bellybutton, making him squirm like every other time. “Christ, I just love that.”

He did it again and again, kissing, licking, biting, until Steve said, “Bucky.”

Bucky looked up with a crooked smile. “I’ve got other favorites too, though.”

He slipped his fingers under the waist of Steve’s pajama pants, and Steve lifted up to let him pull them off, along with his boxers.

Delicately, delicately, Bucky brushed his lips over the inside of Steve’s thigh. “Such gorgeous legs. Long and lean. Having them wrapped around me was the best thing that ever happened.” He sucked at the skin there, and Steve whimpered and arched his back. Bucky sighed. “You are absolutely perfect.”

Sitting up, Bucky tugged at Steve’s wrist. Steve forced himself to let go of the bedspread, which he’d apparently been clutching as tightly as possible, so that Bucky could take his hand.


Steve lunged for Bucky’s mouth. It was a sloppy, hurried kiss, the best Steve could manage under the circumstances. He broke away to tug at Bucky’s shirt.

“I wasn’t done yet,” Bucky said, pulling his shirt off.

Before he even finished, Steve had his hands on him, sliding up his back, wishing he could touch all of him at once. He slipped his hands down, pushing at the waist of Bucky’s pajamas. “Need you with me.”

Bucky’s smile was sweet, wondering, so unbelievably beautiful. “God, I love you.”

He took his pants off.

Oh finally. Steve climbed into Bucky’s lap and wrapped himself around him as much as humanly possible. He buried kisses along Bucky’s shoulder and neck.

Bucky hugged Steve against his chest. “Need you with me, too. All the time.”
“You’ve got me. All the time.” Steve rocked forward, and Bucky grabbed him by the hips and pulled him impossibly closer.


They ground against each other, and Steve sighed against Bucky’s shoulder, completely at a loss for words. They went on and on, losing themselves in each other, letting the world fall away. Bone, muscle, skin, pleasure, love and love and love. Nothing else mattered.

Eventually it ended, with slow hands and hushed moans and a mess that Bucky wiped away with his t-shirt. They curled up under the covers together, as thoroughly entangled as they could manage.

“I will love you for the rest of forever, Bucky Barnes,” Steve murmured against Bucky’s chest. He didn’t care a bit how corny that was.

Bucky ran his thumb back and forth over Steve’s ribs. “Okay. Same.”

Steve chuckled. “Okay.”

They quietly drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Fitful.

Steve decided that was the word for it. It felt like they couldn’t sleep more than ten minutes before one of them would shift around, seeking the reassurance of more pressure, more contact, more proof that they’d both come through okay.

“You want to watch something?” Steve said, tired of pretending to sleep.

“Yeah.” Bucky found the remote and turned the tv back on.

They propped their pillows against the wall and sat up, but Steve didn’t bother putting his glasses on. He curled up and used his finger to doodle imaginary hearts and stars and flowers across Bucky’s chest.

“What should we do when we get home?” Bucky asked quietly. He was trailing his fingers along Steve’s spine, up and down, oh so gently.

“Hmm. Spend about four days making out on the couch and never leaving the apartment.” Steve traced a heart shape right over where Bucky’s heart was.

Bucky gave a sleepy grin. “You always have the best plans. What I meant was, where should we sleep? Your bed, my bed?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” Steve laid his hand out flat on Bucky’s stomach and blinked at him. “We can sleep together every night. All the time.”

“Well yeah, that’s the general idea. It’s what we’ve been doing,” Bucky teased.

“But we’ll be home. I could just ... Kiss you. Whenever I want. Walk up to you in the kitchen and kiss you while you’re making breakfast.”
“Cereal might get soggy.”

“Do you know how cute you are in the morning? We’ll probably never get crispy cereal again.”

“We could wait and pour the milk after we’re done kissing.”

“I won’t ever be done kissing you.” To prove his point, Steve kissed Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky gave a contented sigh. “Soggy cereal it is, then. I’m not passing up kisses. Oh, and when we watch stupid history documentaries, you can sit on my lap. And not wear a shirt.”

“Oh can I? That’s really nice of you, Buck. Thanks.”

“I’m a generous guy.”

Steve giggled helplessly. “No, you are though. You’re the best. You’re my favorite person in the entire world.” He went back to his imaginary drawing, tracing his own name right across Bucky’s chest. “I’ve lived with you for so long, but now we’ll get to actually live together. I can’t wait to be home with you.”

“I want you in my bed,” Bucky said, his voice going soft and dark.

Steve stretched up to kiss him. “Then that’s where I want to be.”

They spent the rest of the night under the glow of the television, dozing and giggling and occasionally kissing, but always, always touching. Even when the morning found them, they stayed within close reach, through showering and brushing teeth and getting dressed. Through breakfast and watching cartoons and dragging all their luggage downstairs as they went to meet with the others.

Jarvis found them in the lobby and led them out to a limousine that resembled a bus more than a car, though Steve had never seen a bus that was bright red with gold trim. The door of it opened as they approached, and someone in a suit hopped out.

That was as much as Steve could take in before Sam barreled past, shouting, “Carol!”

She was as tall as he was, and her grin was just as wide as his as she hugged him fiercely.

“What are you doing here?” Sam asked, straightening out some of the wrinkles he’d made in her jacket.

“I got a call last night, requesting my presence. Seems there are some witnesses who could use a little protection. Official business, though, so it’s classified.”

“Ah,” said Sam. “Well, if it’s classified, then I suppose you can’t drone on about it.”

She nodded. “Exactly. So, these are your friends?”

Sam said hurriedly, “Yeah. Bucky, Steve, Maria, Natasha. This is Carol. Carol, this is them. Get in the car, please.”

Carol waggled her eyebrows and grinned. They took each other by the hand, hurried into the car, and closed the door, disappearing behind the tinted windows.

Bucky snorted. “Pretty sure it’s against regulation for her to make out with her husband in public.”
“Oh.” Steve tried to imagine going a week without Bucky. “Yeah, I can’t blame them.”

A second later, Howard came tumbling out of the car, laughing. “Somebody is having a lovely morning!”

They all took as much time as they could loading their things into the back, then Jarvis knocked on the door and Sam opened it, looking significantly more rumpled than he had before, and also a lot happier.

The limo was enormous inside, with three couch-sized benches that all faced the middle, and a bar along one side. Steve and Bucky ended up in the back, on the smallest bench, and it wasn’t like they minded the close quarters.

“We should probably get through all the news first,” said Howard once the door was closed. “I can’t believe I let Fury get out of this job. Okay. Hank Pym is claiming that this was just a misunderstanding over a little prank he was playing.”

Jaws dropped all around the car. Natasha looked ready to jump out and hunt Pym down herself. “Does he make a habit of pranking people by trying to kill them?”

“Knowing him? It’s entirely possible,” said Howard. “He thinks he can get away with it based on the gun he used. It was a modified pellet gun, designed to look like a handgun.”

“Didn’t he –” Carol glanced at Steve, but she went on, “Against someone’s temple like that, a decent pellet gun could easily be lethal.”

“It was an excellent pellet gun, and he claims he knew no such thing,” said Howard.

Maria scowled. “Would a jury really believe that Pym didn’t understand how guns work?”

“Would a jury believe the very rich, very famous old straight white man?” said Sam, scrubbing a hand over his face.

Natasha shook her head. “And he’s had years to make connections with all the right people, from the police force to the judges.”

“Which might be why the DA is putting off bringing him up on attempted murder charges,” Howard said. “Pym certainly knows which pockets to pad. He managed to bribe Rumlow Security into giving him access to the wedding, and they had to know that they’d never be hired again if something like this got out.”

“They’re just going to let him go?” Bucky said, his voice gone bitterly cold.

“I think that’s where I come in,” said Carol. “I’m here to make sure you guys get home with all your pieces intact, just in case you get called to testify. I can’t give any details, but it’s possible that someone used elements from a top secret weapons project in your presence. If that happened, then the person responsible, who is already in custody, would be in very big trouble with the US government. Especially since his board of directors is totally hanging him out to dry on this.”

“Great. So what he did to Steve is fine, but using a toy helicopter to knock out some phones and cameras, that’s bad,” said Bucky, scowling.

“Sorry, but as far as the Department of Defense is concerned, yes,” Carol said. “The rest of it is not our jurisdiction.”
Steve squared his shoulders. “He won’t be able to hurt anyone anymore though, right? Janet will be safe?”

“Janet will be safe.” Carol eased her hand over onto Sam’s. “All of you will be safe. Pym will probably never be free again.”

It wasn’t exactly justice, but it would have to do.

Steve nodded and slipped his arm around Bucky’s waist.

“Oh, so, that’s out of the way,” said Howard, heaving a sigh. “On to the good stuff. In appreciation for your excellent work, Pym Technologies is granting each of you a full ride scholarship, up to a PhD. And they’re paying off any student loans you already have.”

“That -- What?” Bucky said.

“Yep,” said Howard, grinning as they looked at each other in shock. “That includes books and materials, of course. As Jim Morita said, ‘Money can’t buy happiness, but neither can student loan debt.’ He would also very much like for you to not sue the company.”

“He was the guy on tv,” said Steve.

Maria laughed. “He’s the acting CEO of Pym Tech. It was all over the news.”

“We didn’t watch the news. We were busy,” Steve said primly.

As expected, that got smirks all around. It also got Bucky to nuzzle into his shoulder, which was a very welcome bonus.

Steve laced their fingers together and cuddled up against him.

They talked about silly things, showing around the picture that Peggy had sent of the sunset over a tropical beach, and debating scenarios for how Professor Fury had lost his eye. They talked about Maria’s cat and Natasha’s dance classes and how Sam and Carol met.

Steve drifted off during a discussion about the merits of tumblr versus Facebook. They all agreed that tumblr was better, but it somehow seemed important to agree on why. Leaning against Bucky, Steve let his eyes fall closed a little too long and lost the conversation completely.

* * *

Something was weird. Steve wasn’t quite awake enough to figure out what, but it was definitely weird.

There was a very familiar ‘click’ sound, and ... Steve’s arm settled against his side.

He forced his eyes open. Oh, right, they were in the big car-bus, he must have fallen asleep, and why was there stuff on his arms?

No, not stuff. Drawings. There were drawings on both of his arms.

A detailed spider on his wrist, with a red hour-glass on its belly.

A stick figure dangling from a parachute.

A plane with a yellow haired pilot.
A funny red robot.

A weird, loopy heart shape, way up under his sleeve. He tilted his head at it.

“Dicks?” Steve said. Two dicks, bumped against each other in a heart shape. He looked up to find Maria sheepishly grinning at him. “You drew dicks on me?”

“Umm ...“

Steve couldn’t help but laugh. He laughed until he toppled over, then propped himself back up and hugged Maria. He hugged Natasha, too, because she was close enough to reach. He turned and shoved Bucky. “I can’t believe you let her draw dicks on me.”

“I was distracted.” He trailed his fingers down Steve’s left arm, which was covered in red and blue stars.

Steve cupped Bucky’s face in his hands and kissed him. “Thank you.” He kissed him again. “It’s perfect.” He turned back to the others, who were all smiling and possibly snickering at him. “Sorry, none of the rest of you get kisses. But ... Thanks guys.”

He kissed Bucky again. Just because he could.
Las Vegas looked like ... well, it looked like Vegas, a weirdly beautiful monument to capitalism, all glitter and neon lights.

Howard proudly led them on a tour of the Stark Hotel-Casino, which was pretty amazing. It was decorated with pride flags of every variety imaginable, and had something called the Ace Oasis, enclosed in a shimmery beaded curtain, and another area with signs proclaiming it to be a ‘Flirt Free Zone’.

“Now this is my favorite part, of course,” said Howard, leading them into a big open chamber that had a giant mural of a beach on the back wall. There were palm trees and flamingos and a sequined rainbow overhead. Howard chuckled as they looked it over. “Because everyone deserves the chance get married immediately, by an Elvis impersonator.”

Steve smiled at the thought. That was barely like a wedding at all, that was --

That was --

No months of planning, no long ceremony.

It could all be finished so fast, there wouldn’t be time for too many catastrophes.

It was perfect.

It could happen right now, if ...

“Hey Bucky ...” Steve took Bucky’s hand and slowly went down on one knee, his heart beat crashing in his ears.

“Wait!” Bucky said, surprisingly loud, his eyes going wide. Instantly, he dropped down in front of Steve and squeezed his hands. “We promised we’d do important stuff together, and it’s -- Please tell me you weren’t just tying your shoe. It’s important, right?”

He was chewing on his bottom lip, and Steve hurriedly nodded and said, “Yeah. It’s important, Buck. It’s -- It’s so important.”

“Oh Stevie.” Bucky took a deep breath. “On the count of three?”

Steve grinned at him. “Right. Simultaneous.”

That smirk just begged to be kissed, and Steve was long past being able to resist. He tangled his hand in Bucky’s hair and pulled him in. Bucky met him halfway, crushing their mouths together enthusiastically.

After a long, really nice moment, they broke the kiss and their eyes met.

“One.”

“Two.”
“Three.”

“Will you marry me?”

They blinked at each other. They hadn’t talked about how to answer. Another blink later they collapsed against each other with laughter. Steve finally got a bit of control of himself and pushed Bucky away just enough to look in his eyes.

“Yes,” they said together, and laughed again.

There was cheering behind them.

Steve had kind of forgotten anyone else was around, but now he realized that all of their friends were watching with big smiles on their faces, and Maria was holding her phone out, recording them.

“We’re doing this now?” Howard asked, delighted.

“Yes,” said Bucky, and Steve said, “Right now.”

It wasn’t quite that simple, of course. Filling out forms on the Stark tablet took a few minutes, then Howard made a big production of shaking their hands before sending them off to the Marriage License Bureau.

“Nervous?” Bucky asked against Steve’s shoulder as they cuddled together in the back of the limo.

“No, not about that.”

“I figure we have a couple of ways we could distract ourselves,” Steve said. “We could listen to your music, or we could make out.”

Bucky laughed. “Gee, this new phone, I haven’t really figured out all the music stuff. I think we’re stuck with option number two.”

“Oh darn,” Steve said, already tugging at the neck of Bucky’s shirt so he could kiss along his collarbone.

It worked wonderfully well. Steve had no idea how much time passed before they had to show their identification at the drive thru window to get their paperwork, but he hadn’t spent any of it worrying about the wedding.

They got back to the casino, and found that the mural of the beach with the flamingos was gone. In its place was a starry sky, soft and brilliant with the Milky Way stretched across it.

Maria grinned when she saw them staring at it. “Do you like it? It reminded us of Wyoming.”

“It’s perfect,” Bucky said, squeezing Steve’s hand, and Steve nodded. It was perfect.

Howard set aside the marriage license and bounced on his toes. “Ready when you are.”

Natasha and Maria stood beside Bucky, and Sam and Carol stood beside Steve, and as soon as they were all arranged, Howard began.

“We all know why we’re here, so let’s go. Bucky, do you take Steve to be your husband, to share
your fears so that he can share his courage, to let him take care of you the same way you’d take care of him, to talk to him and listen to him and always be his friend?”

Bucky looked right at Steve, right into him, and said without hesitation, “I do.”

Natasha handed a ring to Bucky. Steve had no idea there were rings, but he wasn’t about to slow things down by asking where they had come from. He put his hand out, and Bucky slipped the ring onto his finger, and Steve grabbed Bucky’s hand and didn’t let go.

They both turned to Howard, and he smiled and went on.

“Steve, do you take Bucky to be your husband, to share your fears so that he can share his courage, to let him take care of you the same way you’d take care of him, to talk to him and listen to him and always be his friend?”

“I do,” Steve said, and he grinned at Bucky, who was already grinning back.

Steve took the ring that Sam handed him and carefully slid it onto Bucky’s finger.

“By the power vested in me by the state of Nevada, I hereby pronounce you wed. You may kiss the groom.”

Steve grabbed the front of Bucky’s t-shirt and yanked him close, and Bucky tangled his hands in Steve’s hair. They kissed. Fast for the first one, the one that marked the end of the wedding, and long and deep and slow for the next one, the one that started their marriage.

“Guys,” said Howard. “You gotta sign the paper. Come on.”

“Oh.” Bucky smoothed Steve’s hair back down, and Steve tugged some of the wrinkles out of Bucky’s shirt.

They all signed the paper. Sam and Natasha signed as witnesses, while Maria and Carol signed a fancy sticky note, as unofficial witnesses.

Howard signed the line for the minister, and that was it.

“We’re married,” Bucky breathed.

It fit so perfectly that Steve laughed.

Bucky grinned at him. “What?”

“You love me.”

“Of course I love you, you’re my husband.”

Steve launched himself at Bucky, and Bucky caught him without even staggering. He wrapped himself around him and did his best to kiss him breathless. “And you’re mine,” Steve whispered between kisses. “Nobody can ever take us away from each other. We won’t let them.”

Bucky shoved his face into the crook of Steve’s neck. “Fucking love you,” he said in a shaky whisper.

“Love you too. Forever and ever.” Steve slid down onto his feet again, kissing whatever parts of Bucky were handy. His shoulder, his cheek, his ear. Christ, every bit of him was deliciously kissable.
“Hey guys,” said Natasha. “Do you want to email a copy of the wedding video to your mom?”

Steve actually gasped, and Bucky looked at him, wide eyed, and said, “Oh shit.”

“Not until after we call and tell her we’re dating,” Steve said to Natasha.

She laughed out loud. “Oh, you have to put that on speaker.”

Bucky groaned and pulled his phone out.

On the third ring, Mrs. Barnes picked up and said, “Hello?”

“Hey Mom, it’s us. Sorry we didn’t call sooner, we had to get new phones.” Bucky cringed a little and shrugged. It was true in a way, but Maria was already pointing and laughing.

“Both of you?” Mrs. Barnes said. Sam bit his lip and turned away, clearly trying not to laugh.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “It’s kind of a long story though, and we had something else we needed to talk about.”

“Oh?”

All in a rush, Bucky said, “We got married, Mom.”

“To each other. In Las Vegas,” Steve added, wincing at the abruptness.

“Congratulations! It’s about time. You two have been practically married for years now.”

Pretty much everyone in the room laughed at that, while Steve just stood there with his mouth hanging open, and Bucky rolled his head back and said, “Mo-o-om.”

“Honey, if you wanted to keep it a secret, then you shouldn’t have made a video with the two of you kissing in front of a ferris wheel.”

“You saw that?” Steve said.

“Everybody saw that. Don’t you two watch the news anymore?”

“We’ve been busy.” Steve knew as he said it that he was going to wish he hadn’t.

To her credit, Mrs. Barnes tried. There was at least a full second of silence before she snorted, then snickered, then full out laughed.

“God, Mom, no,” Bucky said. Sam and Carol were laughing so hard they had to prop each other up.

“I didn’t even say anything!” Mrs. Barnes said between giggles.

“You’re embarrassing my husband, Mrs. Barnes,” said Steve, mostly so that he could use the words ‘my husband’. “Did you want us to email you the video of us getting married?”

“Of course. But you’ll have to stay on the line and talk me through how to play it.”

“I can do that,” said Howard. “What’s your email address, ma’am?”

Bucky eagerly handed over his phone.
Steve grinned at Bucky and said in his old man Buster voice, “Why, back in my day all we had were steam-powered laptops.”

“And an icon was something you chiseled into a stone tablet, like nature intended,” Bucky said in his old man Charlie voice.

Mrs. Barnes said, “I’m still on speaker, right? So they’ll hear me if I tell them to stop being a couple of smartasses?”

“They’ll hear you,” said Howard, “but I can’t guarantee they’ll listen.”

Steve and Bucky giggled at each other and walked away so Howard could talk to Mrs. Barnes in peace. The closest they could get to being alone was a quiet corner of the room that was somewhat obscured by a pillar, so that was where they went.

“I figured she’d be at least a little surprised,” Steve said, slipping his arm around Bucky’s waist.

“I told her I wished ... After the thing with Wade, I went over to see her, and uh, while I was crying I said I wished I could make you fall in love with me.” Bucky gave an embarrassed little shrug.

Oh Bucky. Steve hugged him tight. “Well, you’re pretty fantastic. I think with some dedicated wooing, you could probably make it happen.”

“Wooing, huh?”

“Of course. I can’t just go falling for every guy that comes along who happens to be smart and funny and kind and beautiful and my best friend in the whole world. Gotta have standards.” Steve trailed his fingers over Bucky’s chest, because nobody was watching, and Bucky’s chest was gorgeous. “Don’t want you thinking I’m easy.”

Bucky chuckled. “Nah. You’re homemade apple pie, there’s nothing easy about you. But god are you worth it.”

Before Steve could think of a retort, Bucky was kissing him, sucking at his lower lip and pulling their hips together.

“That’s some A+ wooing, Bucky,” Steve said, breathless. “You win. I’m absolutely in love with you.”

“I think I’ll keep trying anyway.” Bucky kissed his way down along Steve’s neck. “How do you feel about -- Could I take your name?”

Steve hadn’t thought about it at all, and probably wasn’t thinking very clearly now, either. Not when he could feel his own pulse against Bucky’s lips. “You want to? I could take yours.”

“You can take anything of mine that you want. But ...” Bucky leaned back and met Steve’s eyes. “It’s your mom’s name. I don’t want you to lose that.”

“Oh.” Steve needed a second to recover from the feeling that his heart had suddenly tripled in size. He settled his forehead against Bucky’s chest and muttered, “Do you know how fucking perfect you are?”

“Is that a yes?”

Steve managed to look up into Bucky’s eyes again. (They were a deep, sapphire blue. They were
the most beautiful eyes in the world.) “Of course it’s a yes. You can have everything. What if ...
It’s not the same, but I can change my middle name to Barnes.”

“Steven Barnes Rogers.” Bucky took Steve’s hand and threaded their fingers together, their new rings clicking softly against each other. They hadn’t had any time to look at them before, but Bucky’s ring was a simple band of gold with rounded edges, exactly like Steve’s.

Steve nudged Bucky in the ribs. “Hey. Dance with me, Rogers.”

Watching Bucky’s face go from happy to surprised to overjoyed was definitely on the list of the best things Steve had ever seen.

“Really?” Bucky said with a huge grin.

“C’mon, you gotta, it’s a once in a lifetime thing.”

Bucky threw his head back and laughed. There wasn’t any music, but Bucky raised his arms and swayed to his own rhythm, so close that Steve could feel the heat of his skin.

There really was no worst case scenario here, so Steve copied him, bumping gently against him every few beats until Bucky slid his hands down to Steve’s waist, biting his bottom lip and looking at Steve with so much desire as he rocked their hips in tandem that the bare space between them was instantly charged with want.

Music started from somewhere, reminding them that they weren’t alone. Steve sighed and led Bucky out into the circle of their friends.

Sam smiled at them from beside the sound equipment and wrapped his arm around Carol. Maria and Natasha stood leaning into each other, and Howard actually clapped as Steve looped his arms around Bucky’s neck and followed Bucky’s lead.

Bucky pulled Steve closer, moving with the music and singing along so faintly that only the two of them could hear, “I’m so in love with you. Whatever you want to do, is all right with me.”

Steve just focused on Bucky. He didn’t worry at all that everyone was watching, and a moment later they all started dancing along, too.

After the song ended, Howard gave Bucky his phone back and said, “I guess you guys are doing presents now?”

Bucky and Steve exchanged a confused look. Natasha handed Steve the box with the mug from St. Louis, and he gave it to Bucky, a little guiltily since he knew Bucky didn’t have a present for him.

After he opened it and pulled out the mug, Bucky smiled, but Steve couldn’t resist the urge to explain.

“That morning you said you didn’t always get to wake up to sunshine and rainbows, so I thought that maybe you should.”

Bucky caught a strand of Steve’s hair and ran it through his fingers. “I meant you, you know. Sunshine and rainbows, that’s always been you.”

It seemed ridiculous that Bucky could still make him blush, but that didn’t keep it from happening. Steve smiled anyway and said, “Yeah, I know. But now you get me and the mug.”
“I love it. Thank you.” Bucky kissed the corner of Steve’s mouth.

Sam held out a box, and Bucky took it and handed it to Steve.

The box had ‘Fragile, handle with care,’ stamped across the top, so Steve opened it gently, and pulled out a glass sphere, swirled with red and blue, the colors twining around each other, always distinct, but always connected.

“It’s beautiful. Is it from the Conservatory, back in Ohio?” Steve said.

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I was still trying to figure out how to show you, instead of just saying it out loud. I love you, Stevie.”

“I love you, too.” Steve nestled the sphere back in its box and handed it to Natasha. He cupped Bucky’s face in his hands and kissed him, thoroughly and with feeling.

“Get a room,” Howard called. Bucky and Steve looked up to find him grinning and holding out a set of key-cards from the hotel.

Steve reached out to grab them, and Bucky said, “Oh hell yes. Thank you!”

They ran away giggling, surrounded by the laughter of their friends and a shower of sparkly confetti.

* * *

Before the door to their hotel room had even closed behind them they wrapped around each other, pausing only long enough to flip the lock. The heat of Bucky’s fingertips as he slipped his hands under Steve’s t-shirt was enough to make Steve’s eyes flutter closed. Bucky murmured, “Look at you.”

“Are you saying I’m pretty?” Steve said, peering up through his lashes.

(“If I tell you you’re pretty, will I go down on your knees for me?”)

Bucky was clearly thinking of the same thing. He sighed and brushed his thumb over Steve’s bottom lip. “Oh, sweetie, you are. You really, really are.”

Nipping at Bucky’s thumb seemed like a very reasonable thing to do, under the circumstances, and it made Bucky’s breath catch, so sucking a bit seemed equally reasonable.

“Fuck, Steve I will never deserve you.”

Steve sighed dramatically. “Is this about that time I threw up on your shoes, because I already said I was sorry.”

“What -- No. And that was my own fault. I made you go on the roller coaster right after you ate.”

“I didn’t have to go,” Steve said, as if he’d ever been able to say no to Bucky’s Ideas. “I didn’t have to get it on your shoes, either.”

Bucky’s eyebrows shot up. “You did that on purpose?! Those were good shoes.”

He hadn’t done it on purpose. If he’d had any choice in the matter, he’d have thrown up in a trash can or a toilet, or preferably not at all. Steve shrugged and said, “See, you’re right, you don’t deserve me. But it’s too late now, ‘cause you’re stuck with me.”
That earned him a big goofy frown from Bucky. “Those were my favorite shoes, Steve.”

“Oh come on, it’s not like they’d fit anymore,” Steve said, bringing Bucky’s hand back up and kissing his palm.

“Still, you should pay me back.” There was a gleam in Bucky’s eye, the best kind of dangerous, and Steve already knew he was going to say yes to anything Bucky wanted.

Just for appearances sake, Steve said, “Pay you back how?”

“Let me carry you to bed,” Bucky breathed into Steve’s ear. He lightly brushed his lips against Steve’s temple and added, “Please?”

“Christ,” Steve sighed. “You were a lot easier to say no to before we got married.”

“That was my plan all along. Don’t worry, I promise to only use my powers for good.”

“You’re always good. Everything about you is good.” Steve kissed along Bucky’s neck and down to his collar.

“If I remember right, you had a rule about carrying you. I’m supposed to get you naked first.” Bucky slid Steve’s shirt up, ducking down and kissing Steve’s ribs.

Steve raised his arms and shrugged out of the shirt. “I don’t think that was how the rule was supposed to work.”

“That’s okay.” Bucky licked his lip as his eyes roamed over Steve’s chest. “It’s still a great rule.”

Steve unbuttoned Bucky’s jeans and fumbled the zipper open. He didn’t even wait for them to fall before he slid both hands under them and cupped Bucky’s ass through his boxers. “The rule definitely said you had to be naked, too.”

“Excellent rule.” Bucky stepped out of his jeans, and he unbuttoned Steve’s. Steve pulled Bucky’s shirt up, and Bucky reached back and stripped it off in one smooth motion. Someday, Steve wanted to learn that trick, but he certainly wasn’t going to waste time on it now. His jeans were falling around his knees, and Bucky’s hands were sliding their way under his boxers, and god Bucky’s skin was always so warm. He shoved down Bucky’s boxers, lingering a moment as his fingers traced over Bucky’s thighs.

Bucky shimmied the rest of the way out of his underwear, which was all it took to make Steve breathe a little moan of a sigh and take off his own boxers. He leaned into Bucky, wrapping one leg up around his hip. Instead of picking Steve up, Bucky turned and braced him against the wall and, oh, friction. Wonderful, glorious friction.

“Christ Bucky, the feel of you. Your whole body is a damned miracle.”

Bucky laughed against Steve’s neck. “I fucking love how you talk.”

“It’s your own fault. You’re irresistible. Can’t stop telling you how beautiful you are. How good it feels to get my hands on you. The taste of you. Want you in that bed. Wanna get my mouth on you.”

Bucky pulled Steve up tight against his chest and carried him to the bed, where he stopped and frowned. Steve looked over his shoulder to see what the problem was.
The bed was covered in stuff. Steve couldn’t identify most of it from where he was, but he recognized a box of condoms, a set of handcuffs, and what looked like two pairs of lace boxer shorts, all neatly laid out for them.

Bucky muttered, “Goddamn it.”

“I thought you said it was neighborly.”

“That was before it was in my way.”

“Come on, it'll only take a minute to clear it off.” Steve unwrapped his legs from around Bucky and wriggled to the floor.

He climbed onto the bed and set about gathering things. The chocolate kisses all went into a pile on the nightstand. He found a new jar of whipped coconut oil, the same kind they’d used before, and set it aside within easy reach. The box of condoms he tossed overboard, along with the feather boas that had far too high a chance of setting off an asthma attack from feathery dust.

He pushed up his glasses and settled back on his heels to examine a fuzzy bit of red fabric. He was pretty sure it was a blindfold, though why anyone would want that, he couldn’t imagine. Not being able to see Bucky seemed like an incredibly awful idea.

Bucky crawled over, snagged the blindfold and threw it aside, He wrapped his arms around Steve, pressing tender kisses against his shoulder and trailing his fingers over his chest, and his cock bumped against Steve’s hip, so hot and hard Steve got a little dizzy at the feeling of it.

“You don’t need any of this,” Bucky said, low and soft into Steve’s ear. “Lacy underwear or body paints or whatever. You don’t need to be decorated or flavored. You’re so fucking gorgeous, Steve. Want you so damn much. All the time.”

Steve twisted around to brush Bucky’s mouth with gentle kisses. He liked how simple and easy it had been between them so far, and handcuffs and warming gels were complications he really didn’t need, and he’d probably been about five seconds away from freaking out over the idea that he wasn’t giving Bucky enough, that he was letting him down somehow.

“I love you Bucky. I can’t believe I get to be married to you.”

Bucky grinned. “That did happen, right? It wasn’t just a really great dream?”

Steve held up his hand and wiggled his fingers, showing off his ring. “You’re my husband.”

“I am.” Bucky shoved all the remaining stuff off the bed and flopped onto his back, laughing.

Steve crawled over him and straddled his hips. He bent down to trace kisses over Bucky’s throat, to lick the tendon there and taste the salt of his skin.

“That does it, this is officially the best day ever,” Bucky sighed, staring at the ceiling.

Steve looked up. There was a mirror up there, and Bucky was staring at Steve’s backside. Just to see Bucky’s reaction, Steve shimmied a little.

Bucky grabbed Steve’s ass in both hands and arched up against him, and Steve moaned and laughed at the same time.

“Christ Bucky.” He laced his fingers in Bucky’s hair and kissed him, parting his lips and softly
pressing in with his tongue, and Bucky was right with him, Bucky was always right with him, kissing back, the push of his tongue matching the rhythm of his hips, surging up hot and hard and glorious against him. And yeah, Steve had planned to do this differently, and he swore to himself he was going to learn to give Bucky a blowjob someday, but this was too fucking wonderful to consider stopping for anything, so he reached for the coconut oil.

Bucky didn’t even question it, he just followed Steve’s lead and dipped some out, meeting Steve’s gaze, his eyes -- Oh god his eyes, so beautiful, so adoring, so goddamn perfect.

“I love you,” Steve murmured, curving up to make room for Bucky’s hand. “I love you, I’ve always loved you. You’re the best part of my life, and I love you.”

“Love you,” Bucky said back, “Love you, love you.”

For a moment, Steve lost himself in the grasp of Bucky’s fingers, the slide of Bucky’s cock, the heat and the love and the motion of Bucky, Bucky, Bucky.

He wanted Bucky to feel that way too, though. He reached down, completing the circuit of their hands, enclosing both their cocks but making sure to run his thumb along the length of Bucky’s.

“Steeeve,” Bucky sighed, rolling his hips with pleasure.

“Bucky, you’re mine, you’ll always be mine.”

“Yes,” Bucky said, locking his eyes on Steve’s, making it another vow. He stroked a little harder and a little faster.

“And I’m yours.” Steve moaned, but went on talking, giving Bucky everything. “I’ll be yours forever and you’ll stay, I know you will, you’re mine, you’re mine.”

“Oh fuck yes, yours, always yours.”

Just like that, Steve was close, so close, and he recognized the way Bucky’s hips twirled, losing their steady rhythm, and he knew Bucky was close too. Steve gasped, “Please,” and Bucky’s reply was nearly wordless, a low, rough groan with a ‘yes’ inside it, and oh ‘yes’ was right. Steve echoed it back. “Yes,” already coming, already flying apart, and Bucky was with him, and everything was right.

Bucky sprawled out, breathless and blissful, and Steve was fiercely, joyfully proud at the sight. There was a box of tissues by the bed, and he grabbed a few and cleaned off Bucky’s stomach. When he was done, he bent down and brushed a kiss right over Bucky’s heart.

“Back before, you were putting chalk in my hair, and all I could think about was how much I wished I could make a painting or a sculpture of you,” Steve said, resting his head on Bucky’s chest and skimming his fingers over the lines of his ribs. “You’re so beautiful, and I just wished I could have some part of you. Some little piece of you that was only mine. And now -- God, I’m so lucky.”

Bucky sighed contentedly and hugged Steve against him.

“Hey Bucky?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you still looking at my ass?”
“It’s so cute, Stevie. It’s all perky and sweet.”

Steve giggled helplessly. “You’re my favorite. I love you forever.”

“Love you too. I’ll stay with you. Forever and ever.”

* * *

In Vail, Colorado, their room at the ski resort had a tub big enough for them to take a bubble bath together. Steve chased streams of water with his tongue, down Bucky’s neck and chest and stomach. It was nicer than all the fantasies he’d ever had while waiting on the bleachers by the pool.

* * *

In Kansas City, Missouri, Steve decided that lace boxers weren’t the worst idea, and Bucky looked really fantastic for the few seconds it took to take them off, but he looked even better without them.

* * *

In Columbus, Ohio, Bucky modeled for Steve. It wasn’t the first time he’d done it, but it was the first time he’d done it naked. Steve got very thoroughly distracted about a third of the way through, and never did finish the sketch.

* * *

In Brooklyn, New York, in Bucky’s bed, in their bed, they simultaneously gasped each other’s names, and slept soundly for the rest of the night, tangled in sheets that smelled like home.

They spent the next four days making out on their couch and not leaving their apartment for anything.

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue next chapter!

And there was a disturbing lack of angst here, so Chapter 9 of Postcards shows Bucky telling his mom about breaking up with Wade.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10 of Postcards shows what happened their first night back at home.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brooklyn, one year later.

Steve blotted a bit of excess paint off the paper with his thumb and wiped it on his sweatpants. Normally he’d have used his shirt instead, but he hadn’t thought to throw one on when he’d rolled out of bed and set to work in the early morning light.

He should have finished the painting sooner, a seascape in warm sunset tones, but it was almost done now, with plenty of time to dry before the party tonight.

As he looked it over again, coming out of the hyper-focused haze he’d fallen into, Steve realized that Bucky was awake now, sitting cross legged on the floor and watching with a contented smile.

Steve pretended not to notice. He added a touch more violet to the shadowing on a rocky outcrop, and leaned back again, settling his hand on his hip and ‘accidentally’ tugging his pants a bit lower. He checked the reference photo. Checked the painting. It really was almost done.

He dipped his liner brush in the dark orange, but even as he rolled the bristles into a point he changed his mind and washed it out. He leaned back again, and hooked his thumb into his waistband. Tugged his pants even lower.

Bucky crawled over, so fast it must have made his knees hurt, and pressed a kiss to the newly exposed skin at Steve’s hip. Steve grinned and dropped his brushes into the old mug where they belonged before running both hands into Bucky’s hair.

“Morning,” Bucky said between kisses, working his way up Steve’s ribs. “You done painting?”

“Yeah, I guess I am. What do you think?”

“Beautiful. So fucking beautiful.” Bucky’s eyes hadn’t strayed from Steve’s chest as he kissed his way higher, up to his collarbone.

Steve sighed and let his head fall back. “You wanna get back in bed?”

“Nah.” Bucky kissed Steve’s jaw, his cheek, and Steve chased his lips for a deep wet kiss that might possibly change Bucky’s mind. Bucky moaned a little as he broke away. “Okay, yes, I do want to. But we’re gonna be stressed out tonight, and I’m gonna need you.”

There were a lot of things they said to each other these days, “I love you,” and “I’m yours,” and “Forever,” but “I need you,” was the rarest. The last time Bucky said it was when he called Steve out of class and wrapped his arms around him right there in the hallway, because the news had broken that Hank Pym had been sentenced to twelve years in prison. They went home and Bucky
curled around Steve and whispered into his skin about how terrified he’d been that day, how he was a better person with Steve in his life, how he loved him with all his heart, all his soul, everything he had. Steve didn’t remember much of what he’d said in reply, just that words hadn’t been enough and they’d both been reduced to tears and kisses and caresses, closed up safe in their room with the covers pulled over them.

Steve looped his arms around Bucky’s neck. “You’ve got me. Always.”

Bucky smiled softly and leaned in for another round of kisses, not in any hurry at all. They had the whole morning free, with nothing to do but get ready to go out that evening.

There was a loud gurgling sound, from the general direction of Steve’s stomach.

Bucky stopped kissing and looked down. “You didn’t eat yet?”

“Um. Oops?” Steve said with a shrug.

Bucky sighed and patted Steve’s belly. “Don’t worry, tummy. I’ll get some food for you.”

The scolding look he sent Steve’s way as he went into the kitchen only made Steve laugh and follow along.

“It’s okay, Buck. I can handle it.”

“Nope. I love that tummy. I love it so much, I’m willing to toil away over this hot toaster to get it some breakfast,” Bucky said, slotting in a pair of frozen waffles.

Steve hopped up to sit on the counter, and Bucky immediately crowded into the space between his knees. That was all the invitation Steve needed to wrap his ankles around Bucky’s thighs and bend down for another kiss. “My tummy is eternally grateful for you. And so is the rest of me.”

Bucky slid warm hands up Steve’s back and leaned against his chest. “It won’t be like last time. I promise. I’ll stay right with you, every second.”

“Hey.” Steve nestled his chin against the top of Bucky’s head and held him close. “None of that was --”

“Remember those handcuffs we got?” Bucky interrupted. He looked up at Steve, not quite managing a wicked grin, not with that plaintive look in his eyes. The subject of what Bucky thought he should have done differently at Peggy and Janet’s wedding was one they’d gone over many, many times by then, and Steve was willing to let this one slide. Bucky seemed relieved as he went on. “We could cuff ourselves together through the whole party. No way we’d get separated then.”

Steve kissed Bucky’s forehead. “Yeah, that wouldn’t be awkward at all. And I’m sure nobody would comment on it, either.”

“Maria would take pictures,” Bucky said, trailing his fingers along Steve’s ribs.

“And Natasha would put them up on tumblr.” Steve brushed his lips against the delicate skin right beside Bucky’s eye and got a quiet sigh in return.

“Howard would reblog them, and we’d end up on some list of America’s Kinkiest Couples.”

Steve chuckled and ran his nose along Bucky’s jaw. “That hardly seems fair to all the actual kinky
“Eh. What can ya do?” Bucky said. He kissed along Steve’s collarbone until the toaster popped. “Breakfast’s ready.”

“Just two more minutes,” Steve said, running his fingertips under the hem of Bucky’s shirt.

“Nuh uh. I made a promise.” Bucky ducked down and planted a very wet kiss on Steve’s belly.

If Steve had been able to stop giggling he’d have given Bucky a stern look, but instead he ruffled Bucky’s hair and scooted off the counter.

Between bites of waffle, Steve said, “Hey, can you do my hair later?”

“Hell yes.”

“You’re sure? Could be dangerous. Don’t want you getting chalk all over your shirt.” Steve batted his eyelashes innocently.

Bucky bit his lip like he wanted to laugh. “Gee, I hope we can come up with a way to prevent that.”

“Yeah, me too.” Steve didn’t even try not to laugh as he reached across the table to hold Bucky’s hand.

It was the best kind of day, the kind spent tangled up together on the couch, laughing at nature documentaries and trading kisses. The kind they got almost every weekend.

Steve still couldn’t quite believe how lucky he was.

* * *

The party had seemed like a fun idea when it started.

Howard had mentioned that some important conference was happening in Manhattan, and Peggy and Janet would be in town for it too, and since it was “the anniversary of when I married you guys,” they should all get together.

Steve and Bucky had told Mrs. Barnes about it, and she sort of assumed it was a really big party. And apparently she’d gotten in touch with Howard, or maybe Maria or Sam or Natasha had. Maybe all of them.

Howard was seemingly incapable of keeping anything simple, anyway. Like when he’d asked them to read a story for Tony over Skype, and they’d somehow ended up with an entire box of costumes and props, an apartment full of camera equipment, and a weekly ritual of live-streaming to a gaggle of small children.

The end result this time was that the quiet little anniversary dinner they’d wanted had turned into a huge anniversary party. In a hotel ballroom. With a dress code. And printed invitations for all of Bucky’s aunts and cousins and everyone they’d ever met.

Nobody was saying that it was like the big wedding they’d never had, but Steve and Bucky were both thinking it.
Steve took Bucky’s hand as they walked through the double doors and looked over the room. There were flowery centerpieces on every table and a fucking rose covered arch set up to one side. “You were right. I’m going to need you, too. Jesus. We don’t have to do a receiving line, do we?”

“We are not doing a receiving line,” Bucky said.

“Fellas!” Howard called, striding over to them with a drink in hand. “Great to see ya!”

“We’re not doing a receiving line,” Bucky repeated with a tight smile.

“I wasn’t asking you to,” Howard said. “What’s the trouble?”

He looked genuinely worried, so Steve tried to explain. “Just ... After what happened last time ...”

“Last time?” Understanding dawned on Howard’s face. “This is the first shindig you’ve been to since the thing with Hank? Christ, I didn’t --”

“No, it’s fine,” Steve said, even though he’d been trying not to use that word so much anymore. “It’s great, really --”

Howard grimaced. “You know, I could pay people to kiss my ass, I don’t need it from you.”

“Hey, fuck you,” Steve said kindly. He gave Howard’s shoulder a shove and got a smile in return. “We appreciate this. We want to be here. We want to see everybody.”

Bucky nodded. “But no receiving lines. And no, you know, ceremony or anything. Please.”

“Not a problem. Though I wish you guys had told me sooner, I wouldn’t have hired the harpist,” Howard said, with an enigmatic smirk. He raised his glass to them and wandered off before they could ask any questions.

“Bucky! Steve!”

They turned in tandem, still holding hands.

Wade strutted over to them, grinning.

Steve smiled a little and said, “Hi.”

“Nice suit!” Wade said, looking him up and down. “Wow, do you hear that? That is the sound of a dozen new fantasies being born.”

Bucky scowled. “Wade, he’s my husband.”

“Oh it’s not just him, you’re in here too,” Wade said, tapping his temple.

“That’s not better,” Steve snapped.

“Sure it is. Some things are just made to go together. Pitchers and catchers. Cuffs and collars. Tops and --”

“Stop,” said Steve.

Wade sighed and started making weird gestures around his mouth.

Finally Steve couldn’t stand it any more. “What are you doing?”
Talking only out of one corner of his lips, Wade said, “Sewing my mouth shut.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It really is.” Wade mimed throwing something over his shoulder. “Anyway, congrats on the whole being married thing! You know the video of your proposal still comes around my dash sometimes? Automatic reblog. That shit is fucking adorable.”

Wade had tons of followers, and he still occasionally did #5shrubs posts, saying they’d been spotted buying groceries or visiting the Met. Those posts were usually accompanied by a note saying that Hank Pym had been spotted in his jail cell, again. Steve was petty enough to find that amusing.

“I guess I never got to thank you for all the stuff you did with tumblr and everything last year. It was a big help,” Steve said.

Bucky faked a smile and added, “We all really appreciated it.”

“Pfft, no problem. I’d --”

“Wade!” somebody called from behind him.

Wade spun around. The guy approaching him hurried over, and he nearly dropped the big box in his hands when Wade kissed him so hard he bent backwards. The guy didn’t seem to mind.

“This is Peter Parker,” Wade announced once his mouth was free. He leaned his cheek against the top of Peter’s head and added, “We’re lovers.”

Peter winced. “Wow, that was the most embarrassing possible word choice, Wade. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, sugar,” Wade said, and he kissed the tip of his nose.

Peter blushed and turned to Steve and Bucky. “Sorry if I was a little late. I had to go back for my phone. And Wade forgot your present.”

Wade grinned. “I had other things on my mind. And in my hands. And in my mouth. And --”

“Okay!” Peter desperately held out a big pink box to Bucky.

“It’s a Hello Kitty toaster,” Wade explained, unnecessarily, since it wasn’t wrapped. “I know the invitation said no gifts, but --”

“It did?” Peter said. “You never told me that.”

“But it’s so cute! It burns her little face right onto the bread! They needed it.”

Peter sighed. “Steve, Bucky, thanks for inviting us. It was nice to meet you. We’re just going to go ... be somewhere else. Happy anniversary!”

They watched Peter half-drag Wade away, muttering about ‘No gifts means no gifts, now they’re gonna think we’re rude’. Steve was pretty sure he heard Wade reply, ‘That ship sailed a long time ago’.

Steve took a deep breath and let it out slowly while Bucky set down the toaster.

“Does that bother you?” Bucky asked. “Being around him?”
Steve shrugged. “Not really. He’s just Wade.” Bucky didn’t look terribly convinced, and Steve had actually thought about this a lot, so he went on. “I used to be jealous, but ... He never woke up next to you and sang Disney songs together all morning. He never ate burnt cookies with you in the middle of the night. He doesn’t get what I get. You love me.”

Even though they didn’t usually do this in public, Bucky leaned in for a slow, deep kiss. When he finally broke away, he said, “I can’t wait to get home and ravish you.”

Steve bit his lip and looked up through his lashes, the way Bucky liked. “Oh yeah?”

Bucky grinned and murmured in Steve’s ear, “I’m going to get you out of that suit and into our bed. Then I’m going to kiss my way up your thighs --”

“That’s going to be difficult, since they’ll be wrapped around your hips,” Steve murmured back. “I’m going to moan in your ear and slide --”

“Hey! Mom! Hi!” Bucky said, looking over Steve’s shoulder. Steve turned around to see Mrs. Barnes walking their way.

“Sorry I --” She frowned, looking back and forth between them. “Seriously boys? You can’t get through one party without --”

“We weren’t doing anything,” Steve said quickly.

Too quickly. Mrs. Barnes raised an eyebrow. “I do not want a repeat of New Year’s.”

“I thought we all agreed to never talk about that,” said Bucky.

Mrs. Barnes nodded. The three of them stood in silence.

“You were half an hour early,” Bucky said, at the exact same moment that Mrs. Barnes said, “You were in my house.”

“Please don’t,” Steve said, because it had been his idea, and she had been early, and they had been in her house.

They all looked away from each other.

“But we were all the way back in Bucky’s bedroom,” Steve said. “And the door was closed.”

Bucky added, “It’s not like we were on the couch.”

“Did you -- Nevermind. I don’t want to know if you’ve ever done that on my couch. I didn’t want to know that you’ve ever done that at all.”

Bucky frowned. “Well of course we have. We are married.”

“But I almost walked in on it!”

“You shouldn’t have been early.”

“It’s my house!”

Steve ran his hand through his hair. “Hey, you want a toaster?”

Mrs. Barnes tilted her head at him. Bucky, clearly delighted to talk about literally anything else,
grabbed the box and held it out to her, saying, “Look, it’s adorable. You need it.”

“Uhh, sure. I’ve always wanted to brand my toast. Just in case there are toast rustlers around.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and tried to hide his smile, and Steve chuckled.

Mrs. Barnes set the box aside and pulled them both into a hug. “Happy anniversary, boys. I’m so happy for you and ...” She pulled away and looked at them, turning solemn. “George and Sarah would be happy for you, too. They’d both be so proud of you.”

She patted each of them on the shoulder and slipped away, wiping at her eyes.

Steve blinked at Bucky, and Bucky blinked at Steve.

Half a second later, Bucky gently pulled Steve against his chest.

“She doesn’t usually say their names. She never --” The ache of loss was sharp and tangible, even after all this time, and Steve hid his is face against Bucky’s shoulder. “I just wasn’t expecting it.”

“Yeah. I miss them, too.”

“She loved you, you know. Mom loved you a lot.”

Bucky held Steve a little tighter. “She snuck me in to see you at the hospital, once. You had pneumonia, and they said that only family members could visit, and she didn’t bat an eye, she told them I was your brother. She squeezed my hand, and --”

Steve’s shoulders hitched with the effort of holding back tears.

His voice ragged, Bucky went on, “That’s how I know she loved me. ‘Cause she knew how much I love you.”

Steve took a deep, shuddery breath. He pulled some tissues out of his jacket pocket and reached up to wipe Bucky’s cheeks dry, and Bucky plucked one away from him and returned the favor.

Looking into Bucky’s eyes, Steve said softly, “Silver gray, like early morning fog.”

It was a game they’d been playing ever since Steve had told Bucky that his eyes changed colors.

Bucky gave a watery smile and answered the way he always did, “The perfect blue, like the summer sky.” He brushed his fingertip over Steve eyelashes and added, ”Just, a little rainier than usual.”

Steve chuckled and sniffled and kissed the corner of Bucky’s mouth. “Christ, we suck at partying.”

Bucky laughed. “Well, we’re an old married couple now, so I guess we’re allowed.”

“Still, we probably shouldn’t spend all night hiding from everyone.”

“Maria and Natasha have a table.”

Steve took Bucky’s hand and led the way.

They were nearly there when Janet came out of nowhere and threw her arms around them. She laughed and said, “Thank you for the painting.”
Peggy reached from behind Janet to hug all three of them at once. “She was so surprised, you should have seen it.”

“Happy anniversary,” Bucky said, smiling easily. He and Peggy had struck up a friendship over tumblr, and she’d asked through him for Steve to paint something for Janet. He’d based it on the picture of the beach from Janet and Peggy’s honeymoon, and luckily, it had dried in time for the party.

When they all broke apart, Maria grinned and set her phone down, having obviously been recording them.

“Hey there,” said Natasha. She had her hands clasped under the table, which was really unusual body language for her.

Steve puzzled over it for a moment as he sat down, then he said, “Oh! Did you get them?”

She smiled and slowly lifted her hands. Each of her wrists had been tattooed with the same spiderwebs Steve had drawn on her for the wedding. He knew that she had planned it, and he had drawn them for her again so she could show the tattoo artist exactly what she wanted, but he hadn’t gotten to see the final product.

He looked them over, hovering his fingertips just above her skin. The lines were beautifully precise, and all the little spiders were right where he’d placed them. “They look great.”


“Oh god.” Steve closed his eyes and blushed.

Bucky laughed. “It’s your own fault.”

“Why, what are they?” Janet asked.

Maria pointed at her left shoulder blade. “Filigree dicks.” Then she pointed to the other one and said, “Tessellating vaginas. Steve designed them, and I’ve never seen anyone blush so hard in my life. It was fantastic. I thought he was going to spontaneously combust.”

Steve pouted dramatically at Bucky as everyone laughed. Bucky laughed too, and gave Steve a quick kiss.

“Too bad you can’t show them yours,” Janet said to Peggy, with a wicked grin. Eyebrows went up all around the table.

“You can’t just leave us hanging,” Maria said. “Tell.”

Peggy looked at the ceiling. “It’s a spray of stars and roses.”

“And one little wasp.” Janet said adoringly. She brushed her fingers over Peggy’s hip, presumably where the tattoo was, and Peggy caught her hand and brought it up to kiss her fingertips.

Steve stole a quick glance at Bucky, who absolutely noticed because he was looking back with a dopey smile that made Steve melt.

Bucky didn’t have any tattoos. Steve had dropped lots of hints, but Bucky had brushed them all off. Steve had assumed it was because Bucky knew that as soon as he got one, Steve would too, and Bucky was trying to protect him from his own shitty immune system.
He’d been making an effort not to assume as much though, so one day Steve finally just came out and asked, “Why don’t you want to get a tattoo?”

Bucky looked down at his hands and said softly, “Wanted to be a blank canvas. In case you wanted to draw on me again.”

“Oh.” Steve absorbed that revelation for a moment and asked, “Could I ... How do you feel about paint?”

The way Bucky looked up fast, with his eyes wide and hopeful, answered that question pretty well, but Bucky still said, “I’m in favor of it,” in a husky voice.

That evening was the source of some of Steve’s favorite memories. Abstract swirls of blue and black twining across Bucky’s skin until Steve couldn’t hold back and dragged his fingers over them, blurring them with his need to touch and taste, until both of them were panting and smeared in color and moaning each other’s names. They had leaned against each other in the shower afterwards, pressed seamlessly together under the spray. It made Steve’s breath catch just remembering it.

Bucky probably knew exactly what Steve was thinking, and his lips brushed Steve’s ear as he whispered, “We have all day tomorrow. We can do whatever we want, for as long as we want.”

Steve sighed a laugh, but before he could reply, Sam sat down beside them.

“Wow, you two never switch it off, do you? It’s been a year, the honeymoon’s supposed to be over.”

That comment might have held more weight if Sam wasn’t grinning and idly toying with a strand of Carol’s hair as she settled in beside him.

Carol smiled at Sam. “Remember what you told me, the first day you met them?”

Sitting up straighter Natasha said, ”What?”

“I said that as soon as Bucky told me, ‘Don’t worry, we’re definitely not a couple’, I knew they were a pair of lovesick idiots.”

“The exact phrase you used was ‘ridiculously cute’,,” Carol said.

Sam pretended not to hear her and shook his head at Steve and Bucky. “I still can’t believe you two, pining for each other all that time. I asked Carol out the first day I met her.”

“And then you jumped out of my plane before I could answer, ya dweeb,” Carol said, shoving his shoulder.

Sam grinned. “Baby, you weren’t supposed to tell them that part. Now I won’t look cool.”

“You’re plenty cool,” Carol said, and kissed him on the nose.

Bucky pulled Steve closer and announced, “Also, we are ridiculously cute.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Steve said, grinning and clinking their water glasses together.

“We can all drink to that!” Janet said, raising a glass full of something pink, with an umbrella on top.
Most of the party passed in a blur. Howard joined them at their table, and showed them the plans for the tiny robot-dinosaur-princess he was designing with Tony. Every single one of Bucky’s aunts showed up, and they all brought their families. Raven came, and introduced her boyfriend, Hank McCoy. She looked happier than Steve had ever seen her, and she blushed when he told her so. Matt and Foggy were there, along with their office manager, Karen, and the three of them danced together and laughed together and slung their arms around each other.

There weren’t any harpists, or any receiving lines, or any big toasts. Steve danced with Bucky twice, and demanded kisses in return each time, and Bucky was happy to pay.

When they got home, Bucky changed into sweats and collapsed on the couch instead of their bed. Steve didn’t even question it, since he was too wired for bed anyway. He dropped his head in Bucky’s lap and handed over the remote control.

“So glad to have some quiet,” Steve murmured.

Bucky ran his fingers through Steve’s hair as he found something to watch, probably getting chalk all over his fingers. Steve luxuriated in his touch, closing his eyes and giving a soft sigh.

“It was nice though, right?” Bucky said, “Seeing everybody and all.”

Steve snickered. “Seeing Wade try to dance on a table.”

“Pretty sure he would have started stripping if Peter hadn’t stopped him.”

Steve could hear the frown in Bucky’s voice, and he snuggled in closer. “Nice party, though. Even without the stripping.”

Bucky huffed a laugh and then sighed contentedly, and Steve melted back against his thigh.

This was the best part. Of all the benefits of sharing a life with Bucky, and oh there were so many, this comfort, this warmth, this solid, unquestionable support was always the best part.

“What are you grinning about?” Bucky asked quietly, tracing a finger over Steve’s lips.

“You love me.”

“Absolutely. And you love me.”

“Completely.”

Steve didn’t need to look to know that Bucky was smiling softly down at him.

He looked anyway.

He always would.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your kudos and comments, for reading, for sharing, for taking this ride with me. You’ve been so great. Thank you, thank you, thank you.
End Notes

My [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com).

Many thanks to my beta readers, [machine_dove](https://www.tumblr.com) and [rayskeptic](https://www.tumblr.com).

Works inspired by this one [The Courtship Habits of the Red-Winged Falcon](https://www.tumblr.com) by [machine_dove](https://www.tumblr.com).

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