Prince Charming

by Brenda

Summary

Bucky Barnes leads quite the charmed life. He has a thriving tattoo shop, a son he adores, the world’s best dogs, and a great group of friends — almost all of whom are in relationships. And maybe he’d been the one nudging them towards each other, but there’s nothing wrong with a little match-making. The world could use more romance.

As for him personally, well, he doesn’t need anyone for the long haul. Not when every girl he meets is someone who he thinks would be perfect for someone else.

But then Steve Rogers comes into his shop looking for some ink, and maybe that’s the problem right there. Maybe what he’s looking for in a relationship isn’t a girl at all.

Notes
Written for the Stucky Big Bang 2016. All art - by the incredible krimsnkrams and misspaperjoker - is in the body of the story, and also linked to at the end.
Bucky Barnes woke up to a cold, wet nose in his ear and a pressing weight on his bladder. "Mmph," he mumbled, pushing half-heartedly at the muzzle, hoping for a few more blessed minutes of sleep. Instead, he heard a pitiful whine, then the nose burrowed under his chin.

"M'kay, okay." He opened bleary blue eyes to stare into the deep brown ones of his Lab/Retriever mix, Cap, who gave him a friendly lick across the cheek. "I can take a hint."

He got a sharp bark in reply, and absent-mindedly scratched Cap behind the ears. "Don't suppose you're hiding any Advil, are you, baby girl?" Already, he could feel the beginning of an epic headache hovering behind his eyes like a vulture circling its prey. He blamed Morita. Or maybe Clint. Or maybe that last bar they'd hit the night before, with too many shots and not nearly enough water.

When he stumbled out of the bathroom and down the hall, after taking a much needed piss and brushing the fungus off his teeth, he found Morita fast asleep on his large sectional sofa. The other man was stripped to his boxers, comfortably sprawled out, and snoring loud enough to wake the dead. Winter, Bucky's Chow/Black Lab mix, was curled up at his feet, snoring almost as loudly. Bucky envied them the sleep they were getting.

The heavenly smell of freshly brewed coffee drew him into the kitchen, Cap enthusiastically nipping at his heels the way she always did. Clint was at the stove, dressed in a pair of cut-offs and nothing else, his flyaway blond hair pulled off his face by a bright purple headband. He was mixing some sort of egg and veggie concoction into a bowl while butter sizzled merrily in a frying pan. He looked remarkably awake and aware for someone who'd not only played a gig last night, but had drunk pretty much everyone under the table.

Fucking musicians, man. Bucky was positive they all had some sort of super livers or iron constitutions or some superior genetic coding.

"Coffee's ready, babycakes," Clint said, without looking up from his task. Musicians were also saints.

Bucky made a beeline for his favorite NASA mug. "I would totally marry you if the courthouses were open today."

Clint just laughed. "What makes you think I'd have you when I've got Wanda?"

"Once she realizes you're way beneath her pay grade, she'll trade up for someone better –"

"– you mean, like she did you?"

Bucky punched Clint on the shoulder, but it lacked its usual sting. It was too early for serious physical activity. "Hey, I did you a favor, introducing you two."

"That you did," Clint agreed.

After the first few, life-affirming sips, Bucky felt somewhat human enough to scrounge through his cabinets for the bottle of Advil. He washed four down with another hit of coffee, then tied his own messy mop of dark-brown hair back into a quick manbun. "Hey, wasn't Sam with us last night?"
"Yeah, he took a shower and bailed already." Clint poured the mixture onto the pan, spatula at the ready. "He and Natasha have some early appointment with, I dunno, the wedding coordinator or something. I wasn't paying much attention."

Bucky winced. "Lucky Sam. Sounds fun."

"He is getting Nat out of the deal," Clint argued amiably and, well, he had a point.

Cap gave another pitiful whine and looked up at Bucky with soulful eyes. "I think that's my cue," Bucky said.

Clint tossed him Cap's leash and body collar. "Breakfast'll be ready when you get back. We'll let Morita take care of Winter."

"Good plan." Bucky poured his coffee into a takeout mug and snapped both collar and leash on Cap. Instantly, she started tugging him towards the door. Bucky bussed a quick kiss to Clint's cheek as he walked past. "You would make a great wife, by the way, sweetcheeks."

Clint preened and gave a flirtatious wink. "Maybe I'm just holding out for someone to treat me like the princess I am."

"Awww, you know I'd treat you right."

"Damn right you would!" Clint called after him.

The morning was crisp, cool, carried the first faint tinges that fall might be on the way at some point soon. Bucky looked around while Cap did her business, admiring the way the mountains rose around him like a protective shield. The first faint rays of sunlight were peeking from behind the treetops, casting the valley below in prisms of gold. He would always be a New Yorker at heart, but there were some definite advantages to living in L.A., and a view like this was a big one.

"Morning, Bucky, how's it going?"

Bucky raised his mug in greeting as Thor and his two enthusiastic mutts came trotting towards him. Much like his dogs, Thor was a big, friendly sort, with the body of a fullback, but all of the good-natured energy of a barrel of kittens, and a grin that rivaled all of the stars in the sky for brilliance. He was also a certified genius scientist with degrees that Bucky couldn't even pronounce, let alone understood.

"Hey, man, 'sup?" he called back, squinting as the light hit his eyes. He should've grabbed his shades or his ballcap.

Thor let out a low whistle when he got close enough to see Bucky's face. "Looking pretty rough there, my friend." Grace and Hunter, Thor's dogs, barked at Cap in greeting, and all three settled into the serious business of sniffing each other's butts.

Bucky nodded and took another sip of his coffee. "Clint had a gig at Hotel Cafe. There may have been a few more bars after that."

"That explains the drunk text from Sam last night telling me to come hang."

"You made a good life choice by staying home," Bucky replied, and wasn't sure if he was joking. Cap finally got bored with her companions and started straining against her leash, eager to get going. Patience was not his girl's best virtue. "Clint's making breakfast, if you wanted to come up to the house. Looked like omelettes."
"I'm always up for Clint's cooking," Thor said, and tugged on Grace and Hunter's leashes to get them to move along. "I meant to ask how Eddie did on his science show and tell."

Bucky grinned, as he always did when anyone mentioned his son. "According to Pegs, it went great. He was a real hit, thanks for your help." Eddie had done the gravity-free water experiment and, by all accounts, it had gone without a hitch, and – more importantly – without water spilling everywhere. "If you've got time after breakfast to stick around for my Skype chat with him, you can ask him yourself. You know he loves talking to you."

"I enjoy his questions," Thor replied. "His enthusiasm reminds me why I love what I do."

"Well, if I'm lucky, he'll follow in your footsteps, not mine." Not that Bucky really cared what it was Eddie wanted to do for a living, as long as he was happy and healthy.

The dogs all insisted on stopping to scope out one of the neighbor's trees (probably because it smelled like the neighbor's boxer), so Thor and Bucky let them at it. "Speaking of, I've actually been meaning to talk to you," Thor said. "I have a friend that might be dropping by your shop later today or tomorrow."

"They looking to get some ink done?"

"Sort of. More of a cover up job."

Bucky nodded in sympathy. In his line of work, he'd spent more than his fair share of time correcting stupid and youthful mistakes. "One of those, huh."

"Indeed. And I know you've got a pretty big waiting list these days, but I was hoping you could at least meet with him."

Bucky shrugged. "Yeah, tell him to stop by, we'll have a chat." He was, thankfully, pretty busy, but he wasn't the sort to turn down a friend in need. And any friend of Thor's was a friend of his. "I'm sure we can arrange something, provided he's patient."

"I'll let him know," Thor said, and they were finally able to get the dogs to get moving again.

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Bucky's tattoo shop – Commandos Ink – was nestled in the heart of the Melrose shopping district, between a day spa and an alternative clothing store that mostly specialized in fetish wear. He ran his place with only a few simple rules – don't blow off jobs, be professional about the actual work, be creative but listen to the clients, and have a little fun with it, because, fuck, body art should be fun. He ran a full crew, with five other artists, and Tony, who pretty much ran the piercing side of the business.

Tony and Sam, who co-managed the place, had already opened shop by the time Bucky and Clint rolled in. They'd left Morita snoring on the couch – it was his day off, anyway, and Bucky knew better than to try to wake him up when he was sleeping one off.

Bucky settled into one of the comfy chairs in the lobby area with his sketchpad. He didn't have anything until his first consult at eleven – a vet looking to potentially cover up some trauma scars – so his morning was free to do a little creative freehand. Sam and Tony were sitting comfortably at their respective stations, Tony with a mug of his favorite tea (some herbal matte thing that smelled like socks and tasted a little like pot), and Sam drinking some bright green smoothie concoction. The bluesy guitar of Gary Clark Jr. was playing through the speakers, which meant Sam had picked the music.
"How did the thing with the wedding planner go this morning?" Bucky asked Sam, after everyone had gotten settled.

"Man, I don't even know what the hell. We're picking out napkins and napkin rings." Sam sounded completely befuddled, a frown marring his handsome face. "Who cares what sort of napkins we have for the reception?"

"I guess someone does since there's a billion dollar industry devoted to weddings." Clint cuffed Sam across the back of the head as he made his way towards the coffee pot along the far wall. When he wasn't too busy being a budding rock god, he ran the head shop – Smoker's Paradise – that rented space at one end of the tattoo shop.

"Huh, I didn't figure Nat as the bridezilla type," Bucky mused.

"Every woman is the bridezilla type, given enough time and stress from over-bearing family members," Tony said, with a sage nod. "It's a sad byproduct of our capitalistic society as a whole that we've commercialized something meant to be a spiritual bond."

Tony, in addition to working at Bucky's shop, was also heavily involved in politics, and spent a large amount of his free time discoursing with various right-wing bloggers about their misguided philosophies, as well as going to political rallies and marches with his girlfriend, Pepper. Bucky was sure both of them were on some sort of NSA watch list or ten.

Clint held up a finger. "Wait, I thought last week you were saying that marriage started as a means to legally prevent women from owning their own land."

"That was last week."

Sam jerked a thumb in Tony's direction. "Nat's not even the problem. It's her mother and mine and my sister. They're driving me nuts and dragging Nat into it. Always calling and emailing and going over notes and, I mean, it's a wedding. Why can't we just show up in front of a preacher and say our vows, and have a keg party with some steaks on the grill after?"

"Because you're not marrying a guy?" Clint suggested, leaning against the counter.

"I don't think every woman wants a big wedding, Clint," Bucky said. "You remember when Becca got married – she threw a beach party and showed up barefoot and in a sundress."

"And looked stunning in it, too," Sam replied. "Maybe I should've married your sister."

"Yeah, no, that's just...no." Bucky shook his head. "I love you like a bro, bro, but you'd never survive a New York winter."

"You don't think she'd've moved out here for me?"

"Not in a billion years." Bucky loved his family to death, but they were New York down to their bones. He couldn't imagine his mom or pops or sister living on the beach with a tan. If Eddie's birth couldn't convince them to move west of the Hudson, nothing would.

"Besides," Clint said, "Nat would kill you if you dumped her, and I'd be morally obligated to help her bury your body."

"Not to mention, she's called dibs on the group if you guys ever broke up, which means I'd have to fire you, and I really don't wanna do that," Bucky added.
Tony saluted Sam with his mug. "Just ride it out, big guy. Let your moms have the wedding – you guys get the rest of your lives."

"Look at you, being all wise and shit," Sam marveled, raising his own cup in response. "Someone note the date."

"Ha, that was so clever except in all the ways it wasn't," Tony replied, just as the front bell jingled, and Sharon and Wanda walked into the shop.

"Hey boss," Sharon said to Bucky, and nodded to the others. "Boys."

"Ladies," Bucky said, as Clint walked over to wrap Wanda in a hug.

"Hey, sexy."

Wanda smacked his arm when she pulled back, but she was smiling as she did it. "We're at work, Clint. Try to be professional."

"Yeah, no canoodling in front of the boss." Not that Bucky gave a shit, really. He just liked giving Clint a hard time.

"Wait, weren't you the one that hooked them up?" Tony asked.

Not this again. Bucky groaned. "I wouldn't go that far..."

"You definitely introduced us," Wanda said, because she was the worst.

Tony gave him a wide grin. "Just like you definitely hooked up our soon-to-be newlyweds."

"Oh, and our fair Sharon and Morita of the soon-to-be epic hangover, can't forget them," Clint said, because he was also the worst.

"Our very own patron saint of matchmaking," Sam added, with his own grin.

Bucky had no idea why he even called these people his friends. "All of you can fuck right off a cliff."

"Alright, who knows what they've got going on today?" Sharon asked, taking pity on him, because she was awesome like that, and thankfully, the talk moved on to work.

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Chapter 2

Bucky straddled his chair and eyed the woman sitting in the one across from him in his office. Naomi Smith looked too young to even get a tattoo, although he’d seen her ID personally and knew she was closer to his age than not. She had great skin, too, dark and smooth; he couldn't wait to get started, to see what sort of art he could create with her as a canvas. But first things first.

"You want some water or tea or anything?" he asked. "It might help settle your nerves."

She untwisted her hands and dropped them to her lap. "Sorry," she said. "I guess I'm just a little...this is a big step."

"It is," Bucky agreed. "But nothing goes on your body that you don't sign off on. Whatever you get is up to you. I'm just here to make sure whatever you choose looks as amazing as possible." He motioned at her. "Do you mind if I see what I'll be working with?"

Naomi shook her head once, quickly, then lifted the hem of her tank top and pushed down on the waistband of her yoga pants. He let out a low, sympathetic whistle at the spider-webbing of raised scar tissue all along the right side of her stomach.

"I was lucky," she said, staring at him out of big eyes that were far too brittle for her youthful face. "If I hadn't rolled over when I did, they say I could have..." Her breath hitched.

"I get it," he said softly. He tapped at his left arm, and the multitude of scars hidden under a full sleeve tattoo. "Trust me, I know better than you think what you've been going through. How long's it been since your last surgery?"

"A year." She straightened her clothes and sat up in her seat. "The docs say I'm as healed as I'm ever gonna get, and I've been doing the reading, and...one of the guys I met in rehab – Xabi – said you did his back. Said you specialized in tattooing scarred areas."

"I do. And I'm happy to answer any questions you have."

"I just...I know I should feel lucky to be alive and I do, I do, but I...I just wanna feel pretty again," she said, in a small, wavering voice. "I wanna be able to go lay out by the pool in a bikini and not..."

"Hey, listen to me alright." He laid one of his hands over hers and smiled, his most reassuring one. "You're already gorgeous, but that's not the point. You want some amazing art on your body, I can make that happen. Just tell me what you're looking to get."

She licked at her bottom lip. "Would...you think flowers would be too much of a cliche?"

"Who gives a damn, if that's what you want." He smiled at her again. "Pretty flowers for a pretty lady, c'mon, there's nothing I'd rather do than ink them on you. So why don't we go over a few pages of some of my other work and let's see if we can come up with a few ideas just for you, okay?"

"Okay." She finally returned the smile, tremulous and only slightly watery. "Thank you, Mr. Barnes."

"It's just Bucky." He dragged a couple of sketchbooks to his lap, and flipped one open. "You ready to get started?"
"Yeah." She nodded, firmer now, and scooted closer to him. "Yeah, okay."

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It was a couple of hours later when Sam knocked on the open door of Bucky's office. "Hey, Sarge, got a walk-in asking for you. Says he's a friend of Thor's. Looks like Clint knows him, too, or something; they seem to be chummy. Oh, and Morita wandered in about ten minutes ago."

Bucky looked up from his laptop with a frown. Bookkeeping and payroll was the bane of his life, but it still had to be done. "Does he know it's his day off?"

Sam shrugged. "He's still wearing his sunglasses and speaking in grunts and ignoring everyone except Sharon. You wanna tell him he could still be passed out on your awesome sofa, be my guest, but I like my balls right where they are, thanks."

"Good point," Bucky conceded. "Send Thor's friend back here, if you don't mind. I'll avoid Morita as long as I can."

Sam chuckled. "Sure thing."

Bucky got to his feet as a tall, well-built, blond dressed in jeans and a Spartacus t-shirt and sporting a Brooklyn Dodgers ballcap walked through the door. "Hey, how's it going?" Bucky asked, holding out a hand.

"Hey, man." The other man's handshake was firm and crisp. "Steve Rogers. You must be Bucky."

"Yeah, it's good to meet you."

Steve held the handshake for another second, the look on his square-jawed face quizzical. "Sorry, it's just...have we met before?"

Bucky shook his head. He had a good memory for faces, and he was pretty sure he'd remember meeting anyone who looked like they should be modeling comic book covers. "I don't think so, unless maybe it was at one of Thor's cookouts."

"No, that's not it. It'll come to me. You just...you look familiar is all," Steve said, and finally dropped Bucky's hand with a shrug.

"Maybe I just have a familiar face." Then Bucky grinned. "Thor didn't mention you were from New York."

"I'm sorry?"

Bucky pointed at the ballcap. "Well, the hat's a dead giveaway, but I can hear it in your voice. It's kinda making me homesick." Which reminded him, he owed his mother a phone call or Facetime chat before she set the National Guard on him.

"Ah, yeah." Steve chuckled. "Yeah, born and raised in BK Heights. You?"

"Red Hook. Moved out to Los Angeles for a girl, oldest story in the books. Have a seat." Bucky gestured at one of the chairs on the other side of his desk. "So you're a friend of Thor's, huh?"

Steve settled in, stretched long legs out comfortably in front of him. "Yeah. First friend I made in this town, actually. We go way back."

Bucky took the other chair. "So what is it you do? You work with Thor in his lab...?"
"Oh, no. No, I'm the furthest thing from a scientist you can get," Steve replied, with a laugh. "I'm a director."

"Oh? Anything I might've seen?" Bucky was a sci-fi nerd and indie comedy guy mostly, but he enjoyed a wide variety of movies and TV.

"Maybe? I've done commercials and spec TV work mostly, because that's what pays the bills, but I've got two films under my belt – took them to the festival circuit, got some good reception, might be getting a distribution deal on one."

"Well, congratulations." Bucky didn't know how anyone stayed remotely sane in the entertainment business. Maybe he just had too much self-respect to deal with all the rejection that came with it. Although Steve didn't look like he was lacking in that department at all. He had an aura of quiet confidence about him that was almost soothing. Like you could follow him into battle and think you'd make it to see another day.

Steve made a vague motion at the full sleeve on Bucky's left arm. "So, uh. Wow, that's...that's some incredible work. It looks like a painting. Y'know, Van Gogh-esque."

"Thanks. Designed it myself, although I didn't do the actual work on it." Bucky offered another smile, although this one was a shade cooler than before. He already knew what Steve was going to ask next, and braced himself accordingly.

However, Steve surprised him by simply nodding again and then sitting back. "I guess I'm in good hands, then, if that's the caliber of art I can expect. It looks like you've got an entire galaxy on your arm."

"Uh yeah, not quite. Just a couple of dwarf stars and nebulae and quasars," Bucky replied, with an inward sigh of relief. Steve was the first person he'd met in a really long time who hadn't asked about the scars or why he'd chosen to cover them up the way he had. His estimation of Thor's friend went up a few notches.

"And speaking of..." Bucky motioned at Steve, all business. "Thor mentioned this was a cover-up job? Show me what you got."

Steve twisted in his seat and pulled down on the collar of his t-shirt to reveal the initials SGR done in block lettering high on his right shoulder blade. "Geez," Bucky said, clucking sympathetically. "Were you in prison or something?"

Steve huffed out an amused laugh and pulled his shirt back up, then twisted back to face Bucky again. "Nah, I got it in Basic."

Another vet. Steve's comfort level with Bucky's scars started to make a lot more sense. "Eh, same thing really. Basic's just a prison that pays a little better."

The laugh eased into a smile that crinkled the corners of long-lashed, blue eyes. "Yeah, it kinda was. You sound like you know a thing or two about it."

"Four years in the Army." And he was thankful every day he made it out alive and whole. "But I wasn't dumb enough to get anything like that."

"Yeah, I know it was stupid." Steve's look was rueful. "I mean, I was barely 18 and I did it on a dare."

"Gotcha." Bucky knew the type – more moxie than sense. Somehow, looking at Steve, Bucky
wasn't surprised that he fit that bill.

"But I don't want to laser it off or anything," Steve said. "I mean, I've been doing the reading on it, and I'm not sure that I trust it. So if you can work your magic, that'd be great. I'll give you a blank slate. Thor says you're a real artist, and looking at your arm, I trust what you'll do."

A real artist. Trust Thor to talk him up like he was the next coming of Keith Haring. "Well, luckily, what you have might be ugly as sin, but it's a pretty simple design. I'll sketch together a few things, and we can talk about where you want to go with it, see if anything jumps out at you. How much bigger are you looking to go?"

Steve lifted his hands in a shrug. "Well, I don't want a full sleeve like what you've got, but anything upper back or upper arm or shoulder is good."

That made things easier. Gave Bucky a lot of room to work with. "Any thoughts about what you might want?"

"I hear dragons never go out of style." Steve grinned again, this time showing laugh lines around his mouth.

"Dragons? Really?" Somehow, Steve didn't strike him as the dragon type.

"Maybe I see myself as Daenerys or maybe St. George."

Someone who knew their fantasy and classic literature. Bucky could definitely appreciate that in a person. "You're a Crusader, then?"

"Only about some things," Steve replied, with a self-effacing look. "But seriously, I'm cool with whatever you come up with. Just throw some drawings at me, let's see what strikes a chord."

"Alright, cool." Bucky stroked a hand over his chin, studied Steve for another moment. He'd always trusted his gut when it came to people. And Steve seemed like someone worth knowing. "Hey, so I'm closing the shop a little early tonight and throwing a few steaks on the grill if you wanted to drop by. Sort of a small friends get-together. Thor'll be there, so you'll know people. And I hear you know Clint?"

Steve nodded. "Uh, yeah, I do. I directed a video for his band awhile back, he's a real cool guy. Great songwriter."

"He is," Bucky agreed. He fully expected to lose Clint at some point, too, once his music career really took off. "Which song was it?"

"Um..." Steve's face scrunched in thought. "Beside You?"

"Oh yeah, yeah, the video where he's wandering around up in the mountains at night – wow, you shot that?" Bucky asked, impressed. "The camerawork on that was insane. The way you lit the sky like that, it was almost like the stars were reachable." Never let it be said that Bucky couldn't appreciate good art in all its forms, whether still-shot or moving frames.

"Yeah, that was me." A faint blush settled on the tops of Steve's cheeks. "Thanks. And, um, hey, I'd love to come by. Should I bring anything?"

"Whatever beer you like, but the crew keeps the liquor cabinet pretty well stocked."

Steve nodded again and ran his hands down the front of his jeans. "Alright, I can do that."
"I live about four houses up from Thor's. It's the dark green place with the wrap-around deck."

"I'll probably just park at Thor's and walk over with him."

"Cool. Alright, then, I guess I'll see you tonight." Both stood and shook hands again.

"See you tonight."

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Chapter 3

The rest of the day passed in a flurry of more consults for upcoming jobs, and doing final colors for a regular client who'd just gotten a forest scene across his lower abs and hips. It was some damn nice work, if Bucky said so himself. It wasn't often he was asked to do something truly original, and he liked stretching his artistic muscles.

He left Sharon and Wanda in charge to close the place down, and headed up over the hill to Studio City, grumbling to himself at the traffic on Coldwater the entire way. Seemed like it didn't matter what time of day it was, it was always crowded. But it was still the quickest route to get home from the shop – he wasn't crazy enough to even attempt taking the Pass to the 101, and Benedict Canyon was a little too far out of his way.

Bucky's house was a fixer-upper he and Peggy had gotten for a steal just after the Great Recession hit, when they'd found out she was pregnant with Eddie. A two-bedroom, two-bath bungalow-style with a massive wrap-around deck and a detached garage and a backyard big enough for two rambunctious pups to run around in. It had an open floor plan, with a spacious living room that bled into the dining room-slash-kitchen, hardwood floors that the dogs were constantly scuffing, and lots of windows that let in plenty of light and the cross-breeze. After he and Peggy split, he'd bought her out of her share of the mortgage, and kept up with the repairs himself (with a little help here and there from Sam and Clint), slowly upgrading the kitchen and bathrooms and wiring, the list never-ending, but also kind of fun. At eighteen, fresh out of Basic and thinking he'd be a career Army man, he'd never given owning a home any thought. And now he couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Morita's truck and Sam's convertible were already in the drive when he parked, and he braced himself for the upcoming storm as he let himself in the front door. He'd managed to avoid Morita at the shop, but he knew his luck wasn't going to hold.

Sure enough, ten seconds after the dogs came skidding around the corner to plow into his legs, both barking joyously at seeing him, Morita came barrelling into the living room from the kitchen.

"I got a bone to pick with you," he said, raising a finger Bucky's way.

Bucky just kept petting Cap's flank and reassuring her yes, he was home, he hadn't left her forever, and met Morita's glare head on. "I'm listening."

"Dude, you left me at your place this morning with your overly excitable mutts and no coffee. Who does that?"

"Hey now –"

"– Second, you love my dogs –"

"Beside the point –"

"– And finally," Bucky continued, talking over Morita, "all you had to do when you woke up was push the button on the coffee maker."
Morita pulled up short, his frown morphing into confusion. "Wait, seriously?"

"You really think I'd just up and leave you somewhere without coffee when I knew you'd be nursing a hangover?" Bucky asked, when he straightened back up.

"No?"

"Damn right, I wouldn't." He was a much better friend than that, and Morita fucking well knew it.

"You're right, you wouldn't," Morita said, looking suitably chagrined.

Bucky clapped Morita on the back as he walked past him into the kitchen to grab a beer. "Maybe you should lay off the JD, give your liver the night off."

Morita following, holding up his bottle of Bud. "Already planning on sticking with the hops."

"Good call," Bucky told him, and walked out onto the back deck, the dogs trotting at his heels.

Sam and Natasha were lounging on one of the outdoor chaise sofas, along with some pretty brunette Bucky didn't know, who was sitting next to Nat.

"Hey, Bucky," Nat said, smiling his way. "Come meet Jane."

"Hey." Bucky shook Jane's hand and returned her very sexy, dimpled grin. "Nice to meet you."

"You too." She gave him a surreptitious, but very thorough, once over. He couldn't say he minded the attention. "Hope you don't mind me crashing your party. Nat said it was cool."

"Yeah, it's fine," he told her, giving her his own look. Interest engaged and returned. "Make yourself at home." Then he bent to brush a kiss to Nat's cheek. "Good to see you, doll."

"You too," she said, with a small smile that he knew from experience meant she was well pleased with herself. She'd been trying for months to hook him up with a girlfriend as thanks for introducing her to Sam.

He looked at the group, going into host mode. "Can I get anyone a drink or...?"

Nat and Jane held up their glasses of wine, and Sam held up his bottle of Sweetwater IPA. "We're good," Sam said. "You need any help getting the steaks on?"

"Nah, you've got ladies to entertain," Bucky said, with a grin for Nat and a quick wink for Jane, which she returned. Which boded well for the rest of his evening. He was never going to say no to flirting with a pretty girl. "Plus, I can hear Clint's bike pulling up, and you know how he gets around the grill."

Natasha shook her head fondly. "I swear, he thinks this actually is his kitchen."

"May as well be, as much as he cooks in it." Bucky wasn't about to complain, either, not as long as he was getting something out of it. And Clint was one hell of a cook.

"I wish I had friends that would take over mine," Jane said, longingly. "My best friend can't boil water, and I'm not much better."

"Well, you're welcome to come over anytime and let Clint use you as a guinea pig," Bucky replied.

Clint strolled onto the deck a minute later, rubbing his hands together. The dogs made a beeline to
him, with more enthusiastic barking and tail wagging. "Alright, let's get this party started," he stated, with a wave to Sam and Nat and Jane after giving Cap and Winter their expected love.

Bucky held out his fist for Clint to bump against it. "You grab the steaks. I'll get the grill started."

It wasn't long before the rich scent of grilling meat filled the air. Wanda and Sharon showed up not too long after, bearing a Greek salad big enough to feed an army (Sharon was constantly trying to get everyone to eat more greens), and a ton of corn on the cob.

Bucky stuck to his host duties – kept everyone's drinks filled and whipped together a couple of quick veggie and hummus trays for everyone to munch on – and was in the kitchen chopping some more carrots, and striking up a mild flirtation with Jane (who was, in addition to being quick-witted and easy on the eyes, smart as fuck), when Morita found him again.

"Hey, I didn't know you knew Steve Rogers."

"What?" Bucky asked, knife pausing in mid-cut. "Who?"

"Steve Rogers," Morita repeated, and jerked his thumb to the front door.

Bucky peered past Morita into the living room, and saw Thor and Steve letting themselves in, arms laden with six-packs. "Oh, yeah. And, I don't. He came in today for a consult, and I invited him tonight. Clint and Thor said he's cool."

"Yeah, my brother's worked as a gaffer for him on a few jobs. He's a good director, and a good guy. Not Hollywood at all." To Morita, that was the highest compliment in the world.

"Good to know. Hey Thor, Steve." Bucky raised his hand in welcome. "Put 'em in the fridge, grab one, and join everyone else on the deck out back."

"You got it," Thor replied, and gave Jane one of his patented charming smiles as he fished two beers from the fridge. "And you are...?"

"Jane Foster," she replied, with a flirtatious grin, which she transferred to Steve. "Nat didn't tell me all her friends were this good looking."

"Oh, I'm not." Steve tucked his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans and blushed. "I'm just here with Thor, I don't actually, uh..."

"He's a new friend, just like you," Bucky said, mostly to save Steve from tripping over his own words like he'd never seen a pretty girl before in his life. Poor guy looked about ready to have a heart attack, which was surprising, considering he was a director. Bucky would have thought Steve would be old hat at actresses coming on to him, even if it was only to score a gig.

"Well, then, here's to new friends," Jane replied, and Bucky had no idea how she did it, but she somehow managed to make it sound outrageously suggestive. Bucky liked her a lot already.

"Morita, it's good to see you again," Steve said, and exchanged a quick, one-armed hug with him. "How long's it been?"

"Too long, my man, too long. Bucky here tells me you were in for a consult? You finally getting rid of that monstrosity on your back?"

Bucky rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Yeah, yeah, it's not that big."
Morita grinned. "No, but it is that ugly."

"I don't think it's that bad," Thor offered, and handed Steve his bottle. "But if you're looking for a tattoo of any kind, Barnes is the best."

"And yet you've never let me get you in the chair," Bucky said, as he resumed chopping the rest of the carrots.

"We'll wear him down one day," Morita said. "C'mon, come say hi to everyone."

Jane and Thor followed Morita outside, but Steve paused. "Do you need any help or...?"

"I'm almost done, but thanks." Bucky arranged the rest of the carrots, celery, and pita chips on the tray. "Seriously, go on out, let Thor introduce you to everyone. They may look scruffy, but I can personally vouch for all of them."

Steve chuckled. "I'm used to scruffy. You wouldn't believe the types of people manning film sets."

"Yeah, I guess that's true." He picked up the tray. "But since you're here, you mind getting the door?"

"Sure," Steve said, racing ahead of him so he could slide the glass door open.

"Thanks." He moved out to the deck and set the tray down on the patio table, then nodded Steve's way. "Everyone, this is Steve. He's a friend of Thor's. Steve, this is everyone."

"Hey." Steve held up a hand in welcome, but Bucky could see the tight grip he had on his bottle of beer.

"Hey, Steve, get over here, let me introduce you to my girl," Clint called, and waved Steve over to the grill.

"You'll like Wanda," Bucky told him, and nudged him in Clint's direction. "She also works for me."

"Okay." Steve gave him a small, but genuine smile, and walked Clint's way.

Bucky headed over to Thor. "Hey, does your buddy have any sort of social anxiety or anything?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Steve?" Thor asked, with a frown. "Not normally. Why?"

"Dunno, I just get a nervous vibe off him. Could be I'm imagining things."

Thor clapped him on the back with a nod. "I'll keep an eye out."

The next second, the dogs came barreling up the steps from the back yard and made a beeline right for Steve. He dropped to his haunches immediately, and held out a hand. "Well, hello there," he crooned, delight crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Who might you two be?"

"That lovely lady is Cap," Bucky said, pointing at the golden lab, "and the scruffy-looking scoundrel next to her is Winter. They pretty much adore everyone, so don't take it personally when they ditch you in a few minutes for a better offer. And don't, under any circumstances, take your shoes off unless you want Cap to hide them under the deck, and unless you want a sore arm, don't let Winter con you into playing catch. He's pretty tireless."
"Nah, they're great, aren't you guys," Steve said, scratching both dogs behind the ears. Then he looked up, giving Bucky the full weight of that bright smile. "How old are they?"

"Three. I got 'em not too long after I opened my shop." Eddie had been begging for a puppy for about as long as he could talk, and well, there wasn't much point in getting one dog. Everyone needed a friend.

"Well, they're gorgeous." Steve got to his feet, but kept his focus on Cap and Winter, who were both gazing up at him with the sort of utter adoration they normally only reserved for someone who had pizza or bacon.

Sam walked up and stuck out a hand. "Steve, right? Sam Wilson. We met today at the shop."

"Yeah, hi." Steve asked, and offered his own hand. "Nice to meet you."

Bucky left them exchanging small talk with each other to go catch up with Nat. Steve was in safe hands with Sam.

***

As the evening progressed, Bucky thought he must have imagined Steve's initial discomfort, because every time he looked over, Steve was in the middle of an animated discussion with one of the groups. Bucky saw him talking to everyone, from Jane to Morita, and his body language was open and relaxed and chill. Maybe Thor had talked to him or maybe he'd just relaxed all on his own.

After a couple of hours, the party started breaking off into smaller groups – Clint corralled a few people to the living room to play CoD, with Natasha was holding court at the dining room table over a pitcher of her homemade margaritas (which Bucky knew from personal experience were as lethal as they were tasty), and the dogs were happy enough to divide their attention between the two.

Bucky settled himself on the chaise, and fired up the joint Clint had given him earlier that evening. He didn't often indulge, but he was in the mood for mellow tonight. In the mood to gaze up at the stars and just let the world settle around him. He wasn't much for delving into introspection – God knew he'd had enough of that when he'd been laid up in an Army hospital recovering from all his injuries – but he didn't figure it was hurting anything if he still did it sometimes.

He was just on his second toke when he heard the glass door sliding open. Bucky didn't turn, but he held up the joint. "You're welcome to share with me, just make sure the dogs don't get out. Smoke's not good for 'em."

The door shut again, and Steve Rogers dropped next to him. "You sure you wouldn't rather be alone?" he asked. In the silvery light from the moon, his face was all harsh angles. He looked a little like he belonged on an ancient Roman coin. Regal in both looks and bearing.

"Nah, it's good." Bucky actually wasn't looking for company, but Steve seemed like a pretty mellow guy. "The crew bugging you out?" They were sometimes a lot to take for newbies.

"Not really, it's just...sometimes it takes me a minute to get settled in a new environment. Especially around a bunch of new people. Socially, I mean."

Ah, so that explained Steve's earlier skittish behavior. Bucky's heart went out for the guy. That had to suck.
He held out the joint. "You want a hit?"

"Sure." Their fingers brushed when Steve took it and the lighter. "You'd be surprised how hard it is to find good pot in this city."

"Nah, the soil out here's all wrong for weed, so I'm not surprised at all," Bucky replied, lazily watching as Steve took a long pull. "But renting out space to a head shop is a good way to get access to the killer shit from Oregon."

Steve laughed, low and pleasant, as he gave Bucky back the joint. "Yeah, I guess that would help."

They passed it back and forth for awhile, the silence between them easy, and Bucky went back to studying the stars again. The brilliant canopy of light up above, offering possibility without end. All of the wonders of the universe so close it seemed like you could reach out and touch them, and yet so far away they'd barely been able to make it out of their tiny corner of the galaxy.

"It's crazy sometimes to think about it, y'know," he drawled, the words coming a little slow now that the pot was starting to make its way through his system. He couldn't say why, but hanging out with Steve like this felt familiar. Like they'd done it before a hundred times already. "I mean, what we're staring at is a bunch of long dead stars. It's like this crazy sort of time travel, but really fucking beautiful, y'know? We only see this tiny fraction of what's out there. It's just...really incredible, I mean, thinking about all of the really awesome and super cool shit that's just...I dunno, it's just cool is all."

"Wow." Steve slouched against him, a solid line of companionable warmth where they touched, thighs and hips and arms pressed together. "You always this much of a hippie when you're stoned?"

"Dick," Bucky replied, fondly. "And here I was thinking we were friends."

"Sorry, I was –"

"Nah, it's cool. We're cool." He patted Steve's knee clumsily. "It's good that you know how to dish it out already. You'll fit right in."

Steve let out a small laugh. "Yeah, uh, that's...cool."

"Anyway, sorry for getting all geeked out. I just...like astronomy." He nodded to the telescope that was set up at the far end of the deck. "Studying stars and nebulae and black holes and all that."

"Pretty sure I could've guessed that from your tattoos," Steve said, with a brief smile to show he was joking. "But, I mean, look at it this way. You mentioned you think it's like time travel, right? Which, okay, that's...really cool. Maybe there's someone out there, millions of years in the future, who's looking at our planet right now and wondering about us. Me and you, sitting right here on your deck at your house, full up on great food and great beer, and alive. This moment, right here, we're eternal for that someone else."

"See, that's more like it." Bucky smiled over at Steve, happy that he got it. Someone else understood what he saw when he looked up at the night sky. He felt this giant swell of kinship, like he'd just gained a new friend for life.

"Well, you're not the only one who has a crush on Neil DeGrasse Tyson."

"Good, now I know who to call when I have episodes of StarTalk to catch up on and Thor's not around," Bucky replied. "And, speaking of, since we're getting to know each other and all, got a question for you."
Steve slouched further against the cushions. "Sure."

"I know how you met Clint and Morita. But how'd you meet Thor?" They didn't seem like they ran in the same circles at all. Bucky had only gotten to be friends with him because they were neighbors and walked their dogs around the same time most days.

"Oh, um. He didn't tell you?" Steve's voice was raspy from the smoke, but Bucky detected a note of embarrassment, maybe.

"Tell me what?" Because, whatever it was, it had to be good.

Steve took another long drag, and held it in for a few breaths more than necessary. "Well," he started, "did Thor tell you he wanted to be an actor when he first came out here to L.A.?

"No shit, really?" Bucky asked, taking the joint back. Smoke filled his lungs, rich and sweet, as he lolled his head against the back of the sofa.

"Yeah, really," Steve confirmed. "Which is how we met."

"At an audition?" With Steve's all-American looks, Bucky totally could see him as someone who'd pursued acting first, then got the directing bug.

Steve gave him another enigmatic look. "He really didn't tell you?"

"No?"

"Well..." Steve drew out the word dramatically slow. "Thor wasn't finding much luck with regular gigs, and, you know, student loans being what they are, he answered this ad for a job in the Valley."

"And?" There were plenty of studios in the...oh. The Valley. Bucky's head popped up. "Wait, wait. Are you trying to tell me that Thor did porn? My neighbor, Thor? My nerdball scientist neighbor, Thor?"

"Yep," Steve said, with a decisive, if somewhat wobbly, nod.

"Holy shit. Really for real?"

"Gay and straight films," Steve confirmed. "I can give you titles, if you want. For that matter, Thor probably has them at the house. It's not like he's ashamed of them."

"Holy shit," Bucky repeated, because this was the funniest damn thing he'd heard all month. Then straightened, because, wait a damn minute... "Wait, you said you... You're in them, too? That's how you met?"

"Oh no, no no no, I didn't. I mean, I wasn't... I wasn't in the shoots. Jeez, I'm, uh..." The tips of Steve's ears went a nice shade of red, visible even in the low light from the crescent moon overhead. "Let's just say, you've met Thor – he's not exactly a small dude."

"Ah, right. Got it." Which, having seen Thor shirtless on more than one occasion, it wasn't that surprising to imagine he'd be that big everywhere. But still. Bucky'd had a porn star as a neighbor for years and never even knew. He was a little ashamed of himself. "Although, it's not like you're some scrawny guy, either," he added, because fact was fact.

"Uh, thanks...that's, uh...um. Well, anyway," Steve hurried on, still a very vivid shade of red, "I met
him because the TV show I was ADing for was on location at this house in the Hills that also rented themselves out to porn shoots, and someone got their times mixed up, so our crew shows up while the porn crew is still there."

Bucky winced. "Awkward."

"It was actually kinda funny. Anyway, Thor was one of the guys at the shoot, and we sort of got to talking while the directors of both crews were working out logistics."

"You normally strike up conversations with porn actors?"

"No," Steve chuckled. "But, Thor's...you know how friendly he is. He just wandered over, still naked and oiled up from his scene, and started asking me about the best place to go in Hollywood for Thai."

"Yeah, that sounds like Thor, alright." Bucky could totally see it, too. Casually naked Thor striking up a conversation with the first friendly face he could find, and Steve not giving much of a damn that the person he was talking to had just been having sex on camera for money. And hey, good for them. The world was far too uptight about sex, anyway.

"Alright, so you mentioned you were ADing. Is that what got you into directing? How'd you go from the military to Hollywood?"

"Uh, that actually happened while I was still in the Army. I was assigned to do a short film for my unit and I got...I guess you could say I fell in love with the process."

So, Steve had probably been in public affairs or media relations or whatever. "That's great, though." Bucky gave Steve a hazy smile. "You got any ideas about what sorts of films you wanna make or are you still just winging it?"

Steve took another drag off the joint, then passed it to Bucky in a long hiss of smoke. "Well, here's the thing. Plenty of people come into this town with ideas about the sort of career they wanna have. The whole, one for me, one for the studio, philosophy of filmmaking. And me, all I wanna do is tell stories. I could care less about the genre, I'm just...it's people, y'know? How we're all bound together, no matter how different we are." His hands, long-fingered and expansive, waved when he talked. "I think we're all living the same life, really. We all want the same things, have the same needs – family, love, security, the need to be understood, a place to call our own. It's the journey that's unique. And that's what I want to show, that journey...aaaand I'm totally babbling your ear off, I'm sorry," Steve finished, with a sheepish shrug.

"No, no, you're good," Bucky told him, and patted Steve's shoulder to show he meant it. "Eloquent. I mean, fuck, if I had any cash to spare, I'd totally bankroll you myself after hearing that speech." Passion like that was what kept the world an interesting place. And the world, in Bucky's opinion, could use a lot more of it. "Not too many people out there actually chasing their dreams. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Steve cast him a sideways glance out of partially lowered lashes.

"Like I said, grew up in Red Hook. Joined the Army out of high school for the GI Bill, did two tours in Afghanistan, then when...well, anyway, I met a girl and followed her out here when my tour was up. Got my degree at UCLA while doing my time apprenticing at a tattoo shop on the Strip. Then I bounced around a bit, went to Japan and Argentina for a few months to learn some different techniques, then settled back in L.A. I've had my own shop for about four years now."
Every word was true, but carefully edited. There were things he wasn't comfortable talking about with anyone, not even a fellow vet.

"Married, kids, family, anything like that?"

Bucky nodded, his smile softening as he thought about Eddie. Light of his fucking life, that kid was. The one perfect thing he could say he'd done in this world. "Yeah, I have a son. He's six and all energy. No wife...we weren't married when we found out she was pregnant, and it seemed counter-productive to do it after the fact. It's funny, though, she actually wound up marrying a guy from my unit."

"Talk about awkward," Steve remarked, with a grimace.

Bucky waved it off. "Nah, it's fine, Daniel's a great guy; Pegs couldn't have chosen anyone better. Anyway, they moved to San Fran a couple of years ago when she got a job offer there. And, you know, it sucks not having my kid in the same city, but I see him as often as I can."

Steve's eyes were as bright as the stars overhead, and filled with compassion. "That's tough. I'm sorry."

Bucky shrugged. He didn't love it, but he was used to it by this point. "I see him more than you think. There are tattoo conventions up that way all the time, and he comes down here a lot – long weekends and such. And I take him back to Brooklyn a few times a year to visit my folks and my sister, so it's... We have a pretty open arrangement. And we talk every day on Skype. Eddie, he's amazing, you know, he's just a good kid. Smart like his mother, thank God," he said. "What about you?"

"My dad died before I was born, so it was just me and my mom growing up. She died when I was twenty-one. It's...it's fine," Steve said, when Bucky made a sympathetic noise. "She'd been sick a really long time."

"Still, it couldn't have been easy, losing a parent." Bucky couldn't imagine life without his – without that solid foundation they'd given him and Becca – and their unconditional love.

"Thanks, but it was...I'm used to being on my own," Steve said, like that was somehow supposed to make it alright. "I, uh, no kids. I do have an ex-wife, but it didn't last long. We met when I was in the Army, right before I shipped out. We were both young and stupid and it, I don't know, seemed pretty romantic, having a spouse when you're off fighting the good fight. All very Greatest Generation, like a John Wayne movie directed by Frank Capra, you know." He let out a small laugh. "But – and I'll deny this if you ever repeat it – but real life isn't like the movies. I guess you live and learn, right."

Bucky nudged his shoulder to Steve's, the feeling of kinship growing. "Amen, brother. Amen."

Steve gave him another small smile, one that seemed weighted, like maybe it was cementing something inside himself or...hell, Bucky was bordering on stoned, so maybe he was imagining things. Then Steve rocked to his feet on wobbly legs. "Thanks for the talk. I'm gonna see if I can find Thor before I get too comfortable out here and fall asleep."

"Well, don't be a stranger now that you know where I live," Bucky replied, and held out a fist.

Steve bumped it with his own. "I won't," he said and, with another smile, headed inside.

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Thirty minutes later, pleasantly buzzed and about ready to call it a night, Bucky hauled himself from the chaise and headed into the house. The kitchen and dining area were empty, but when he turned to head into the darkened living area, he ran into Jane coming down the hallway that led to the bedrooms and bathrooms.

"Well, hello there, stranger," she said, patting his chest. "I was starting to think you'd ditched your own party."

"Just been hanging out on the deck." He smiled down at her. Wondered if her hair felt as soft as it looked. "Where's everyone else?"

"Oh, um." She tucked herself under his arm, smiled winningly up at him. "Sam and Nat crashed in the guest room, Clint and Wanda and Sharon and Morita all left about fifteen minutes ago after cleaning the kitchen —"

"— I was wondering why it looked so spotless."

"Yep, there you go."

"And what about you?" he asked, tightening his arm around her waist a fraction, to gauge the reaction. She just twisted so she could loop her arms around his neck.

"Well, I'm glad you asked." She peered up at him through partially lowered lashes. "Nat and Sam are my ride home. You got a place I can crash tonight?"

Her lips were distractingly close to his own. And her breasts felt amazing up against his chest. "Sure," he murmured, barely aware of what he was saying.

"Good," she replied, and pulled him down for a slow, and very thorough, kiss.

By the time they parted, he had her ass cradled in his hands and her legs were locked around his waist. "We're doing this, right?" she asked, with a quicksilver smile that finished sending all the blood in his body south.

"Uh, yeah, if you want, absolutely," he said, and claimed her mouth again as he started to head into the living room, mostly because his couch was closer than his bedroom.

The moonlight shining through the front windows was bright enough Bucky could see Steve and Thor, their legs entwined together, and trading lazy, open-mouthed kisses and lazier touches. They both looked supremely blissed out, like they'd be happy to stay cuddled close together just like that all night, making out nice and easy.

"Wow," Jane breathed, and shifted against him. "That's...really hot."

Guys didn't do it for Bucky, but he had to admit, Jane had a point. There was something really hot about the slow, familiar way Steve and Thor were touching each other. Something erotic about the shift of hard bodies and the small, contented murmurs they were making with every kiss. Suddenly, Bucky had no problems believing that Thor had, not only done porn, but had been good at it. Still, they were on Bucky's couch, and he had pretty strict rules about who got to fuck on it.
"Alright, you two, I know you've got a bed just down the street from me," Bucky said, and had to bite back the laugh when Thor and Steve both blinked owlishly up at him.

"Oh hey there," Steve drawled, sounding eighteen shades of debauched. Then he nodded at Jane. "Ma'am."

"Wow, aren't you adorable."

"Thor, take Steve home and go fuck on your own bed. The only person allowed to have sex on that sofa is me."

"If you insist," Thor sighed, but obligingly got to his feet and pulled an unresisting Steve to his.

"I do. Have fun," Bucky told them, and nuzzled Jane's neck. She smelled absolutely incredible.

"Yeah, you too," Steve replied, sounding amused – Bucky didn't bother to lift his head to check – and the front door shut behind them a moment later.

Jane shifted against him, and bit at the shell of his ear. "Okay, you need to take me to bed. Now."

He laughed, delighted with her and the world, and started down the hallway. "Yes ma'am," he said, and lost himself in her kiss.

***
Chapter 4

Bucky woke up the next morning to Cap's cold, wet nose against his neck, just like always. "Cap, baby girl, c'mon, ten more minutes," he mumbled, and rolled over, only to encounter a warm, lush body plastered against his own. Right, his brain supplied. Jane Foster. Nat's friend. Who'd sucked his dick like she'd been going for gold, then ridden him until he'd been a blissed out hollow of a man, and glad of it. No wonder he felt like he'd been well used.

"Wassat?" Jane blinked bleary eyes up at him. "Oh hey."

"Hi there." He pressed a quick kiss to her neck. She was still sleep-warm – it was way too tempting to curl against her and drowse for another hour.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Cap let out a mournful bark. "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming, I promise," Bucky said, and smiled in apology at Jane. "I gotta go walk my dogs. I'll be back in twenty minutes, tops, then breakfast and coffee are on me."

"Breakfast? Coffee?" She blinked at him again, and shoved a handful of tangled sex-hair out of her face. "Seriously?"

"I never joke about coffee." Some things in life were sacred.

"Wow," she breathed, and stared at him, those pretty brown eyes wide with surprise.

He had a feeling he'd missed something. "Wow?" he repeated, lost.

She let out a low laugh and brushed a kiss against the corner of his mouth. "You're kidding, right? You're already the best one-night stand I've ever had, just for offering to feed me the morning after."

"That doesn't say a lot about any of the men you've slept with."

"That doesn't say a lot about men in general."

"Good point." He rolled out of bed to tug on his briefs and a pair of shorts, Cap prancing around him excitedly. Jane just sat up, the sheet pooled around her, and watched with blatant appreciation.

"Seems a shame to be covering all that up."

He pulled on the nearest tee he could find, and shoved his feet into his flops. "Yeah, well, you shouldn't feel obligated to do the same."

She chuckled, low and wicked and damn, she looked good sitting in his bed. "Maybe I'll just lounge around awhile and wait for you to get back."

His dick was very much on board with that plan. "Sure. Um...there's a brand-new toothbrush in the medicine cabinet, towels in the other cabinet...help yourself if you want. Or, y'know, you could wait until I get back to shower."

"You offering to scrub my back?"

He patted Cap's flank, and gave Jane his most flirtatious smile. "And anything else you want."

She lounged back against the pillows and lazily stretched. "In that case, you're on."
After Bucky got back from walking the dogs and setting them loose to run around the backyard, it was another hour before he and Jane emerged from the bedroom, finally clean and dressed, both of them starving and in desperate need of caffeine. He directed her to have a seat at the table and got coffee going. Then he peered in the fridge to see what he had.

"You allergic to anything?" he asked.

"Just stupidity and the misogynistic assholes in my lab."

"Well, I don't see either of those in my fridge, so I think we're good." He pulled out eggs and cheese and a few of the wrapped veggies from last night. A big plate of scrambled eggs sounded good, and it would also feed Sam and Natasha, whenever they decided to wake up and join the land of the living.

"So, you mentioned last night you're a scientist?" he asked, giving her a quick glance in between chopping cilantro and peppers.

"Yeah, astrophysics." She sat back at the table, cradling her full mug in both hands as she took a sip. "Oh, wow, these are really good beans."

"Yeah, I have a buddy that brings me his family's special Kona blend from Hawai'i whenever he has to come to the mainland for business," he said, and poured his own mug. "Astrophysics, huh. Like, studying stars and planets?" he asked, intrigued.

"Well, my specialty is wormholes, but yes, that's the basic gist."

"No shit. I'll have to pick your brain later."

"Yeah, you a space nerd?" she asked, with a smile. "Not that it wasn't super obvious from your tattoos or anything. The detail is surprisingly accurate."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should."

"I should've introduced you to my neighbor. Quantum mechanics and spacetime and all that – all that Star Trek stuff – that's his specialty right there." Thor was the rare scientist (not that Bucky knew all that many) who could talk about the math and mechanics of what it was he did for hours and make it super easy to follow along. Which, now that Bucky knew about Thor's previous porn career, was even more hilarious.

"Yeah?" Jane asked, cupping her chin in her palm. "Who's that?"

"Uh, Thor. He was at the party last night. Tall. Blond. Build like a brick shithouse, but he's got like, two doctorates or some shit. You kinda met him when he was making out with Steve on the sofa."

Her lips curved up in another one of her winsome smiles. "Which one was he, though? Because I remember two hot, built blonds from last night making out on your sofa."

Oh, right. Steve definitely fit the bill to a tee, although Bucky thought Steve's physique came more from being outdoors than hours at the gym. He looked...real. Not sculpted. "Thor's the, uh, the bigger one," he replied. "With the longer hair."
"Oh yeah." She nodded and took another sip of coffee. "Well, if he and his boyfriend are ever in the market for a threesome, let me know. I'd climb either of them like a tree, absolutely."

Which, now that Bucky was thinking about it, he would lay money on her wearing the both of them out before they even put a dent in her stride. "I'll keep that in mind."

Then she gave him a quizzical look. "Is this a thing for you or am I just special?"

"Thing?" Bucky asked, just as confused.

"You offering to hook your one-night stands up with your friends the day after."

"Yes," Natasha stated, wandering into the kitchen wearing a t-shirt that came to mid-thigh, and – if Bucky knew her at all – nothing else underneath, her bright red hair pinned off her neck in a messy ponytail. "It's his thing."

Jane twisted in her seat to look at Natasha. "Go on."

Natasha grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured a cup of coffee, completely at home in his kitchen. Which, to be fair, she was certainly around often enough. Technically speaking the guest room was Eddie's bedroom when he stayed over, but he tended to crawl in Bucky's bed to curl up with him and the dogs more often than not; so, most of the time, it was a place for his friends to crash after a late night.

She leaned against the counter, and gave Bucky a fond smile. "Well, after he broke up with me, he hooked me up with Sam. After he slept with Sharon, he hired her and introduced her to Morita and they've been dating ever since. After he slept with Wanda, he nudged her in Clint's direction."

"Nat, c'mon, not this again –"

"Oh, and let's not forget he hooked the mother of his kid up with one of his Army buddies, and even stood up for them at their wedding," Natasha continued, grinning at Bucky over the rim of her mug.

"Okay, that was different," Bucky protested, because Peggy and Daniel getting together was totally not in the same league as the others.

She arched an eyebrow his way. "Was it?"

Jane turned back to Bucky, her smile impish. "This is fascinating. You're like a girlfriend whisperer."

Was it hot in here or was it just him? "Well, I wouldn't –"

"Let's just say he's a lot better at setting his friends up with each other than he is with setting himself up with anyone," Natasha said, and brought the pot to the table to refill everyone's mugs before taking one of the empty seats.

"Which, I gotta be honest, is weird, because you seem like a nice guy and you're pretty easy on the eyes and you're damn good in bed –"

"Did he do the thing to you with his tongue where he –"

"– Oh yeah." Jane sighed, in unison with Natasha. "That was a very nice surprise."

"I'm gonna just...make breakfast," Bucky said, and started chopping vegetables again in earnest. At
this rate, his blush was going to be a permanent part of his face. Hopefully Sam would wake up soon to rescue him before things got too hairy.

***

Breakfast turned out to be a pretty chill affair. Well, it was after Jane and Natasha managed to embarrass the living hell out of him by comparing his sexual prowess. (He was never, ever hooking up with another one of Nat's friends ever again, pinky swear.) Sam, thankfully, finally stumbled out of the guest room to deflect some of the attention, and Bucky'd managed to regain some of his equilibrium by the time they finished eating and did the dishes.

Sam and Nat left not too long after – Sam was opening the shop with Sharon, and Nat had a shoot to get to – and Jane left with them, but not before giving Bucky a very thorough kiss goodbye and another thanks for a great night and for breakfast. Bucky was still smiling when he poured himself another cup of coffee and let the dogs back in the house, and got out his laptop for his daily Skype chat with his son. Thank God for modern technology, which allowed him to stay a vital part of Eddie's day-to-day life.

Peggy's face – as flawless and gorgeous as ever – popped into view the second Bucky logged onto his account. "Good morning, James." Aside from his mother and grandmother, she was the only person who ever called him by his given name.

"Hey, Pegs." He saluted her with his mug. "You're looking perfect as always."

She smiled at him fondly. "And you still need a haircut."

"The ladies – yourself excluded – like it long," he replied, with a grin. "Where's the little guy?"

"He's finishing up a drawing to show you. I told him you didn't have much time this morning to chat, but, well, he was very insistent..."

"Hey, you can't rush genius," he said, settled back in his chair and scratching Winter behind the ears when he laid his head on Bucky's thigh. "Catch me up on the gossip in the meantime. How's Daniel, how's work?"

"Work is...a little insane right now, but I'm sure you know the feeling."

"Do I ever." Not that Bucky's job was remotely on the same level as Peggy's. She was an in-house security consultant for a Fortune 150 company, which sounded pretty badass on paper (and she was, no two ways about it), but mostly – to hear her tell it – it involved sitting around in an awful lot of meetings. Which sounded exactly like his idea of the Seventh Circle of Hell.

"And Daniel's good. Says he's looking forward to your rematch," she said, with a rueful, fond smile.

"Looking forward to kicking his ass again," Bucky replied, with a grin. He and Daniel had started boxing each other when they'd served together, and had kept it up ever since.

"You two," she sighed, like she couldn't lay the beatdown on both of them with one hand tied behind her back. "And you? How's the shop?"

"Business is good, can't complain. I've got a gig up in Sacramento at the end of the month. I was hoping I could tack on a day and see Eddie."

"Of course," she replied. "He'd be thrilled to see you. You don't need to ask permission, you know
"I know, I just..." He shook his head. Two years since the move, and it still sometimes hit him the wrong way. "You know what, forget it, I'm just...what is it the kids say – having a moment?"

She got that stubborn tilt to her chin that meant she wanted to argue the matter, but thankfully acquiesced. "If you insist."

"I do." He was a part of Eddie's life. Just because their arrangement wasn't conventional didn't mean anything. He wasn't the only long-distance parent in the world.

They spent the next couple of minutes talking about Eddie's adorable (Peggy's word) crush on Ms. Martinelli and Mr. Thompson, who both taught at Eddie's school, and it was light and easy the way conversations with Peggy almost always were, but Bucky couldn't help the sense of relief when he heard the thundering of footsteps and the high-pitched shout.

"MOOOOOOOOOM IS DAD STILL ON THE VIDEO????"


"Kay cool, I wanna...HI DAD!!!!" A mop of curly brown hair and a gamine face framed by liquid brown eyes and a mischievous grin popped into view.

"Hey, buddy," Bucky replied, returning the grin ten-fold. "I heard you were drawing a picture for me."

"Mmhmm." Eddie nodded proudly, then shoved a sheet of paper up to the camera. "It's Cap and Winter."

"I can see that." He really couldn't – the dogs were more roundish shapes with stubby legs and ears than anything else, but Eddie had thoughtfully labeled both shapes with his dogs' names in wobbly block lettering. And hey, not everyone got the artistic talent gene, and that was fine. As long as Eddie was having fun with it, that was all that mattered. "It looks great," he said. "You gotta save it for me so I can hang it up at the shop with the others."

"When'm I gonna see you?"

"Soon," Bucky promised. "I'll be in the area at the end of the month, so that's about two weeks."

Eddie's face scrunched up in thought. "How many days is that?"

"Um, sixteen from today."

"Kay." Eddie turned to Peggy. "We gotta put a thingy on the fridge to mark the days."

"We will, darling," she said, and smoothed back his hair. "Your father was asking me about how you're doing in school. Did you want to tell him yourself?"

"Sure!" Eddie launched into a rambling story about his bestest friends Howie and Anna and how they shared everything at lunch, even the gross foods Anna's mom liked to pack, and waxed rhapsodic about how pretty and nice-smelling both Ms. Martinelli and Mr. Thompson were and how he'd gotten every word right on his spelling test, even the super hard ones, and oh the book Mom was reading him was the best because there were spooky ghosts in it from outer space, Dad, isn't that cool...?
And Bucky, heart brimming over with all the love ever for this little guy who'd managed to be the best of him and Peggy combined, leaned back and savored every single word and every infectious laugh.

***

One of the nicest perks about being his own boss was setting his own hours. Sure, Bucky's days were pretty packed, between all of his clients and the off-site conventions and shows and the more mundane aspects of the business end of things, like making sure all the bills were paid on time and all that, but he wasn't punching a clock and he didn't have to get up at the asscrack of dawn the way he did back in the Army, and no one was shooting at him or shouting orders in his face. It was a pretty good gig, all things considered.

Sam and Morita were in the middle of working on their own clients when he walked in, but Tony and Clint were hanging in the lobby area, both of them flipping through their phones. The Foo Fighters were playing, Dave Grohl shouting about not owing anyone anything, which meant it was Morita's day to control the playlist. "And, the prodigal son graces us with his presence," Tony exclaimed, looking up with a sunny look.

"I should be saying that to you. What happened to you last night?"

Tony shrugged and slouched back against his chair. "I may have spent the night in jail."

"Again?" Bucky asked, wandering over to see what Morita was doing. He was inking in a swarm of butterflies in flight across an older woman's shoulder blade – it was coming in nicely. The colors were gorgeous.

"I seem to be a magnet for the police, what can I say."

"What were you protesting this time?"

"Unfair labor wages for undocumented workers."

"Of course you were." Bucky moved over to Sam, who was inking in a Mickey and Minnie set onto the forearm of a guy who looked like he belonged on an Olympics wrestling team. "Who bailed you out?"

"I did," Morita replied, glancing up from his work. "I thought about letting him stay there and stew for awhile, but I guess I was in a generous mood this morning."

"You adore me," Tony replied. "And I did offer to blow you as thanks."

Clint snorted in amusement. "Please don't tell me you took him up on it."

"Fuck that. Even if I swung that way and Sharon was cool with it, I know where his mouth has been," Morita scoffed. "My dick has standards."

"Are you implying mine doesn't?" Tony asked.

Sam laughed and shook his head. "Man, your dick wouldn't know standards if it came wrapped up in a day-glo condom ribbed for her pleasure. C'mon now."

"Pepper might disagree."

Clint looked up from his phone again. "I thought you two were on the outs this month."
"Sure, but that's this month," Tony replied. Pepper, it should be noted, was far too good for Tony in just about every way, and Tony would be the first person to admit it. Which was why they were on the outs more often than not.

"You boys are way more entertaining than reality TV," Morita's client commented.

"Why thank you," Tony said, with a huge grin. "See, someone around here appreciates me."

"It's not that we don't appreciate you, Tone, it's just..." Bucky gestured at him helplessly.

"We just don't see the appeal," Morita finished.

"Your loss," Tony replied, then shrugged when everyone just looked at him. "I happen to be excellent at sucking cock."

"I..." Bucky pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's way too early to be thinking about this." Not that he ever wanted to think about Tony in any sort of sexual position ever, no matter what time of day it was.

"What, don't tell me you're shocked I'm pan."

"Tony, at this point, I wouldn't be shocked if you were a furry," Bucky answered, then immediately shuddered at the mental image. If he kept it up, he was going to scar himself for life.

Tony just gave a thoughtful hum. "While I have done the occasional round of roleplay, I can't say that I entirely understand the impetus behind dressing like beavers in order to go at it like them. But hey, live and let live, I always say."

Clint made a face like he was going to say something, then shook his head. "I can't even comment."

"I either need more caffeine for this conversation, or this needs to wait for Sharon and Wanda to get here so they can make some sense of it."

"You ever thought about getting a camera crew in here to get all this?" Sam's client asked.

"I know I'd watch," Morita's client said.

"Yeah, that's never happening," Bucky said. "Kat von D can totally have the monopoly on tattoo reality shows – I'm actually trying to run a legit business."

"I resent the implication that I would ever work for a legit establishment," Tony said.

Bucky opened his mouth to argue, but was saved by a walk-in who wanted Tony to pierce his eyebrows and lower lip, and then Bucky's noon appointment arrived, and the conversation was shelved for the rest of the day.

No doubt about it, he worked with a crazy cast of characters. Not that he'd have them any other way.

***
(Art by Krimsnkrams)
Bucky was pretty jam-packed over the next two weeks – between a couple of clients who needed some complicated and intensive work done, and prepping for this class he was co-chairing on new methods for tattooing burn victims, he barely had time to breathe, let alone think about anything else. So when Steve Rogers strolled into the shop just as he was putting finishing touches on a set of tribal armbands for a client, he inwardly winced. He hadn't given Steve's cover-up any thought at all since the day they met.

"Hey, Steve, gimme ten minutes," he called, over the buzzing of the needle in his hand.

"Sure," Steve replied, and started looking over all of the art and tattoo photos framed on the walls of the lobby. Not all of it was Bucky's – every artist who worked at the shop was well-represented – but he had a fair amount up there. Work he was pretty proud of. He wondered if Steve was looking for inspiration for his own ink.

He tapped at a couple of frames out of Bucky's line of sight, then the corners of his mouth tugged up. "These your son's?"

Bucky didn't even need to see the photos in question to know what Steve was talking about. "They are," he said, shading in the last of the inner band with deft, even strokes. "Eddie Barnes originals, hanging in my humble shop. Would you believe someone actually has the fox inked on their body and it's not me?"

"No shit?" Steve sounded delighted.

"This college kid, I can't even remember her name, thought it was – and I quote – whimsical." Bucky grinned at the memory. Eddie'd actually been in the shop that day to watch as Bucky'd done the tattoo, and his excitement had made the whole experience pretty magical. One of Bucky's best days at work without a doubt. "Eddie thinks he's famous now, and I don't have the heart to tell him different."

"Hey, man, for whoever got the tat, he is," Trey, Bucky's client, said.

"Good point."

Steve walked over to the display cases housing the array of glass pipes and bongs, and bent to get a better look. "Wow, some of these are really nice. Upscale paraphernalia, who knew."

"If you see anything you like, I'll give you my favorite director discount," Clint said, from where he was propped on his elbows against the back counter.

Steve let out a small laugh. "Favorite director, huh?"

"Hey, you made me look downright romantic and mysterious, man. That's, like, some genius-level shit right there."

"You got that right," Bucky chimed in, and turned off the machine, studying his work with a critical eye. Pretty fucking good, if he said so himself. He snapped a few shots on his phone for his portfolio, then smiled at Trey. "Okay. Sharon'll wrap them up for you and give you instructions on aftercare, but if you have any questions, take one of my cards. Call or text or email me anytime, okay?"
Trey gave him a thumbs up. "You got it, boss."

Bucky left him in Sharon's capable care while he peeled off his gloves and walked over to Clint and Steve. "Hey, good to see you."

"You too." Like last time, Steve's handshake was firm and warm, and the look on his face was open and friendly. "Sorry to just drop in on you like this, but I was down the street looking for a few props for a shoot and I figured I'd see how things were going."

"What kind of props?" Clint asked.

"Oh, uh, sunglasses mostly. Early '70s kitschy, if possible."

"Let me get Wanda on that," Clint said. "She's always at the thrift shops and shit – bet she could find something like that for you pretty quick."

"Sure, if she wants to, I'd really appreciate it. That'd be great." Then Steve turned back to Bucky. "You got a minute to talk or...?"

Bucky checked his phone. "Yeah, I got about thirty before my next appointment. Let's go grab a cup of coffee."

They walked down the block to Peet's and placed their order. After their names were called, Steve led the way over to a small window table. "How's everything been?" Bucky asked, once they got settled.

"Good, busy as hell. Just came off of shooting two commercials back-to-back and now I'm hip-deep in prepping for this video shoot, so it's been a lot of 14 and 15 hour days," Steve replied, and yeah, now that Bucky was close enough, he could see the fine stress lines around those blue eyes. "I think I'm gonna start mainlining coffee right into my bloodstream soon if it doesn't slow down, but hey, sleep when you're dead, right?"

"Sure, but downtime's also a good thing." Bucky was a big fan of working hard and earning your stripes, but he was also a big fan getting quality time in his bed.

"Yeah, I should've said no to the second commercial, but I owed the producer a favor, so what can you do?" He spread his hands out. "Anyway, enough about me, how're you doing?"

"Same on the busy front," Bucky replied, holding up his coffee cup in solidarity. "Not that I'm complaining. Getting ready to head up to Sacramento to do a convention, and I'm prepping for a seminar I'm teaching at the end of the month, in addition to all the usual client chaos."

"Yeah, I had a few free minutes the other day and I Googled you and your shop, and the work you do." The look Steve gave him was frankly admiring. Not a look Bucky was used to seeing directed his way. "I had no idea you specialized in tattooing burn victims and injured vets."

"Anyone with extensive scarring, really," Bucky said, with a small shrug. He had no idea why, but he could feel his face start to heat up. "But, yeah, those are the majority of my clients."

"That's amazing." Now Steve was looking at him like he'd found the cure to cancer or something. "I, uh, I didn't even know you could tattoo scar tissue."

Bucky cleared his throat, happy to change the subject to something that wasn't him. The technical aspects of his job were a lot easier to talk about. "That's actually a pretty common myth. And it takes a pretty specific skillset – there's not a lot of us who specialize in it. But the work – and the
results – are pretty gratifying."

Steve cupped his chin in his hand. "How'd you get into it?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to deflect the way he always did, to give the same terse answer he always gave whenever anyone asked why'd chosen the career path he had. But something about Steve's riveted, yet compassionate expression changed his mind. Somehow, he just knew that he could trust Steve with the truth.

He held up his left arm, twisting it around a little so Steve could see the scar tissue under the colorful swirls of ink. "Almost got my arm blown off in Afghanistan, and...well, the recovery wasn't pretty. And I didn't feel like looking at the mess for the rest of my life, so, I did some research on how to tattoo over it. Got pretty fascinated with the process, and the rest is history."

The words came a lot easier than he'd thought they might. It was crazy, how easy it was to talk to Steve – even about the things he never talked about with anyone else.

"That's...that's really incredible," Steve said, his tone fond. Proud. "What you do is pretty important."

Bucky narrowed his eyes slightly. "Why do I get the feeling this is why you wanted to talk to me?"

Steve shrugged, but he leaned forward. "Not the only reason, but...I'd like to make a short documentary on the work you do."

"On...me?" Bucky pointed to himself. "You serious?"

"Absolutely. I think it's a great story. You're helping people reclaim their bodies." Steve gave him a full, sunny smile that had probably gotten him more than one yes from people too blinded by the force of it to think of any objections. "I promise, you'll get full veto rights on anything I shoot. I just wanna set up shop for a couple of days, interview you and a few of your clients – ones you personally vet out. What do you say?"

Normally, the no would have been out of his mouth before the other person finished their pitch. But Steve was...different. A friend. And he owed it to this new friendship to sit with it for a few days, weigh the pros and cons. It'd be great publicity for the shop, but Bucky didn't think he was ready to be in front of the camera. Especially if Steve was expecting him to talk about what had happened to him and his own scars and his own tattoos. Talking about it in private with Steve – someone he trusted, for whatever reason – was one thing. Doing it for strangers was something else entirely.

"Let me think about it," he said.

"No rush."

"Although, since you're here, I haven't really given your ink too much thought, sorry." Normally, he'd at least have a couple of sketches to show a potential client by now. Even if the client in question was a friend, he still prided himself on being a professional.

"Nah, it's fine." Steve waved him off as he drained his drink. "I've lived with this thing for twelve years. Another few weeks won't make much difference."

"You given it any thought?" Bucky asked. "On what you want, I mean?"

Steve let out a low breath, his expression pained. "A little bit. I mean, I drew out a couple of ideas,
but then I promptly trashed them."

"You draw?" This was a pleasant surprise. He didn't often get clients in who had an art background.

Steve nodded, pushing blond bangs from his forehead with a careless sweep. "Yeah, I took a few art classes when I was getting my film degree."

"You any good?" Bucky motioned at Steve. "You got any samples you can show me?"

"Um." Steve stared at him, nonplussed, then picked up his phone. "Yeah, I had a gallery showing a couple of months ago —"

"A gallery showing?" Now Bucky was seriously impressed. "Holy shit, Steve."

"It's nothing, I swear. I know the owner, and someone cancelled last minute, so she asked if I could step in...uh, here." Steve passed over his phone. "Just scroll through."

Bucky picked up the phone. And let out a low whistle. "Jesus, these are..." He widened the frame to get a closer look at the brush strokes. "Your colors are insane. Are these oils?"

"Yeah, I mostly work in oils. Some acrylics, but oils are...I guess I just like the weight of it." He sat back in his seat, but his spine was ramrod straight. Nervous, although Bucky had no idea why.

He scrolled through the rest of the folder – there was quite a collection. A few portraits, some scenic panoramas, a couple of nature scenes...but the *life* in them, even through the small screen of Steve's phone, was just incredible. Bucky didn't know a helluva lot about traditional art – he'd been to the Broad a few times and to LACMA for a couple of exhibits, and sure, he'd taken a couple of art history courses at college – but he knew talent when he saw it. And Steve Rogers was ridiculously talented.

He handed Steve back his phone, his esteem for the man across from him growing with every second. "I'd love to see these in person. Are any of them for sale?"

"Uh..." Steve bit at his lower lip. "Yeah, I mean, yes. Why?"

"Because I want the one of the woman in the flowered dress, if you're willing to part with it. The one dancing by herself on the veranda or whatever it is. She's incredible. I'd love to put up in my living room." He had the perfect spot already picked out for it.

"Um." Steve blinked at him out of wide eyes. "You really want to buy my art for your house?"

"Just said so, didn't I?" Bucky replied, starting to enjoy himself. He had no idea why, but making Steve blush was the most entertainment he'd had in weeks. Guy looked like the very definition of All-American super-jock, and yet, he had this whole bashful thing going on. The contrast was fascinating. Funny as hell.

"Well, okay. I'll, um...can I give it to you as payment for the tattoo?"

"I think your painting's worth more than what I'm going to put on your body, Steve." Bucky didn't know much about traditional art prices, but even he knew that oil on canvas works went for four figures easy.

"Well, it's my painting, so I guess it's up to me to decide its worth," Steve replied, with an impish smile, his equilibrium apparently returning. "Besides, maybe what I want you to tattoo on me will
be something crazy or difficult."

"You should draw something yourself to bring in."

Steve was shaking his head before the words were even all the way out of Bucky's mouth. "Everything I came up with was terrible. I couldn't –"

"Hey, you'd be doing me a favor," Bucky interrupted, with a serious look. "And I'm not looking for some masterpiece or anything. Just some ideas to help me figure out what'll speak to you. Besides, it's your body, so who better than you to help decide what goes on it."

That small blush was back on Steve's cheeks again. "Oh, well...okay. If you're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Bucky replied. "It'll be fun. I'm used to collaborating with my clients, so you're good."

"Okay." Steve gave him another small smile. "Well, uh, I guess I've kept you long enough..."

"Oh shit, yeah." Bucky looked down at his phone. He had five minutes before Hilarie showed up. He got to his feet, draining the last of his coffee in one sip. "So, hey, look, don't be such a stranger, okay. You got my number, right?"

Steve got to his feet, too. "Yeah, I mean...yeah."

"So come over for drinks sometime." Bucky gave the invite freely – he still wasn't sure why, exactly, but he felt a real connection with Steve. Like they really were close friends and could already talk to each other about anything under the sun. The last person he'd felt such an instant rapport with was Clint.

Steve looked back at him, a little stunned, but also pleased. "Okay, I'll, um, maybe I'll take you up on that as soon as I get a night to myself."

"Hey, you're part of the crew now, so the invite's totally open whenever. With or without Thor," Bucky added, because he wanted it clear liked Steve for Steve, not because he was seeing Bucky's neighbor.

"Thanks. That's...I will. Come by, I mean," Steve said.

"And if you get any ideas on what you want, ink-wise, send 'em over." Bucky fished one of his business cards out of his wallet and handed it to Steve. "Email or text or snapchat or, hell, look me up on IG, all the info's on my card."

"I will," Steve said again, and pocketed the card. "And you'll think about my idea for the documentary?"

"Yeah, let me sit down with Sam and Sharon, but I promise, I'll give it some serious thought." He knew they'd both be in favor of it, but he wanted to run it by them anyway. Sure, it was his name on the lease, but he trusted Sam and Sharon's judgement on anything having to do with the marketing end of things. And, starting to get the word out about the new and improved methods for working with scar tissue might be a good thing. Anything that let more people with any scarring or stretch marks know there were options out there for them was something he could see wanting to be part of, as long as it was done with respect.

"Sounds good."
The front door slammed open as Bucky strolled up the walkway to Peggy and Daniel's house, and a small whirlwind raced down the porch steps.

Eddie barrelled right into Bucky's legs and clung tight. "Daaaaaaaad!"

"Oof, jeez." Bucky grunted, took an exaggerated stumble backwards, and raised a hand to Peggy in welcome where she was standing at the top of the steps. "You're like a bowling ball there, buddy." He picked Eddie up over his squeals of laughter, and then pretended to drop him. "What's your mom feeding you, rocks?"

Eddie snorted noisily and shook his head, his mop of curls bouncing in the slight breeze. "I don't think rocks would taste very good."

"Probably not," Bucky agreed, and nuzzled Eddie's neck. Soap and sweat and kid. The best combination on the planet, as far as he was concerned.

"Tickles," Eddie said, and squirmed, giggling, until Bucky stopped. "Hey, Dad, guess what?"

"What's that?"

In answer, Eddie opened his mouth and pointed at one of his front teeth. "Ish loosh," he said, wiggling said tooth back and forth with his tongue.

"Sure looks like it," Bucky agreed, light, although his heart contracted in his chest. His little boy, growing up, getting his adult teeth. He wasn't ready. Felt like just yesterday that Eddie was taking his first wobbly steps, and gurgling out his first words. "Guess the tooth fairy'll be coming your way soon."

"Dad, Dad. Daaaaad." Eddie tapped Bucky on the arm several times. His eyes were big and very solemn. "What if the tooth fairy wants all my teeth?"

"I don't think that's how it works, kiddo."

"'Kay, but what if?" Eddie insisted, patting at Bucky's face. "What if I wake up n'the tooth fairy is there with those snappy things and starts yanking out all my teeth and then plants them in the yard and they grow into monsters that eat people?"

His kid had an imagination on him, alright. Where did he think up these things? "Your mother would never let anyone steal your teeth, and neither would I," he promised, matching Eddie's solemn look with his own. "And we'd never trust anyone with your teeth who use them to make monsters."

"You promise?"

Bucky held up a pinky. "I solemnly swear the tooth fairy will not take any teeth other than the ones under your pillow."

Eddie curled his own pinky around Bucky's. "'Kay," he said, with a decisive nod. "Do I still hafta wear a suit?"

It took Bucky a second to change gears. "For Sam and Natasha's wedding?" Bucky guessed,
pleased when Eddie gave an emphatic nod. "Yeah, afraid so, bud."

Eddie glanced at Peggy, who was still watching them both with an amused smile, then back at Bucky. Those big brown eyes scrunched in disgust. "My shoes itch."

Bucky smothered the laugh, and gave his son his most solemn look. "I feel you, but we all need to dress up for their special day. And you've got a really important job carrying the rings, so you need to look extra special good for it."

"Oooookay, fiiiiiiiinnnneeee," Eddie sighed, dramatic and long. "You wanna go play Legos now?"

Bucky gave Eddie a loud, smacking kiss. Cherished the fast heartbeat against his chest and the sour breath on his neck. If he could bottle up this feeling right here, he wouldn't need anything else in the world. "I sure do."

***

Gabriela had suffered first and second degree burns along her neck and upper chest from a kitchen grease fire, and wanted a series of stars and vines across her collarbone and decolletage, right over the worst of the scarring. Bucky was shading in the blues on the last of the stars, chatting amiably with her about her two kids and his own, when the front bell dinged.

"Hi Steve," Sharon called from the back printer, where she was copying a design for a stencil for Wanda's appointment. She had to pitch her voice to be heard over the Modest Mouse song blaring from the speakers. "Be right up."

"Take your time," Steve said, and waved at Bucky with one of those sunshine smiles. "Hey, Buck."

Buck.

His nickname apparently had a nickname. He kind of dug it, though – it sounded natural. Like Steve had always called him that.

He returned the grin with a lazy wave. "Hey, man, good to see you. You can come on back if you want."

"Boyfriend?" Gabriela quietly asked, with an appreciative glance Steve's way.

"Uh no," Bucky replied, chuckling. "Just a friend."

"Shame. He walks like a man who knows what he's doing in bed."

Bucky'd never really thought about it, but he guessed the loose-limbed, confident stride Steve had suggested that he knew how to assert himself between the sheets. Too bad he ruined the illusion by blushing at the drop of a hat.

Bucky smirked at her, then bent back to his needle. "You want me to give him your number?"

"Pedro's all I need, but there's no harm in looking," she replied, then her smile grew at least three sizes when Steve stopped beside them. "Hi there."

"Hi," Steve replied, giving his own smile. "Those are pretty."

"You talking about my tits or the tats?"
"Oh. Um."

Bucky laughed, even as he kept shading the stars. "I don't even need to look at you to know you're red as a beet."

Steve let out a low chuckle. "Shut up."

"Hey, it's not my fault you can't handle it when a pretty girl flirts with you." He glanced up, waggling his eyebrows. "You want some tips?"

"Yeah, no, you'd probably just try to steal all the girls for yourself."

"I would never."

"You totally would," Gabriela told him, then turned her attention back to Steve. She nodded slightly at the empty rolling stool next to her. "Go on and sit. I don't mind if you watch."

"I'm not saying a word," Steve replied, but took the offered seat and scooted in a little closer to watch Bucky's progress. "Wow, that's incredible. How do you get those different colors to blend in like that?"

"Well, it's all in the size of the needle and how you move it and the pressure you use when you press down," Bucky said, and moved to the next star. "It's just like using a pencil when you're sketching, just...noisier and more permanent."

"He's got a real gentle touch, too," Gabriela said. "I've gone to some places where they press so deep I've bled."

"See, hearing shit like that pisses me off." Bucky inched in closer as he got to the smaller stars on her throat. "Stay real still, okay," he told her, then continued: "You don't need to press that hard to get under the epidermis – besides, if you do, you just create more scarring and then the ink doesn't stick and you need to get touched up in a few years and that's expensive as shit and totally unnecessary."

"You sound like a man who has some opinions," Steve said.

"Damn right I do. I take pride in my work." Satisfied, Bucky straightened, his spine popping with the movement. "Okay, time for the pink. You need a breather or some water?"

Gabriela shook her head. "I'm good. I'd rather just power through it."

"That's my girl." Then he looked at Steve. "Can you hang out another twenty until I'm done here or...?"

"Yeah, I'm taking a break myself right now, so I'm good." He held up a beat-to-hell sketchbook. "Just brought by a few drawings, if you had a minute to look over them."

"Yeah, of course, I can totally squeeze you in once I'm done here."

"Oh, I don't want to put you out if you're –" Steve started, but Bucky cut him off.

"It's fine. You're a client just like anyone else."

"You're looking to get some work done?" Gabriela asked.

"That's the plan," Steve said, and tapped at the sketchbook. "Provided Buck likes anything I've
"Not the important thing," Bucky replied, rolling his stool to Gabriela's other side to get at his coloring cups. "It's not my body."

"Yeah, but –"

"But nothing. If you can dream it up, I can ink it on you, simple as that." He glanced up, gave Steve a quick grin. "I'm damn good at my job, okay?"

"I know you are." Steve gestured awkwardly at Gabriela's ink. "I mean, I'm sort of in awe just watching you right now."

Bucky thought about making a flip remark, but Steve sounded so damned sincere that it was all Bucky could do to not blush like some socially awkward teenager. Instead, he just mumbled out a thanks, and changed the subject as fast as possible.

While he blended in the last of the colors, Steve and Gabriela talked about the last season of Game of Thrones and who they wanted to take the Iron Throne (Steve was pretty passionate about the Dany/Jon alliance, and Gabriela thought Tyrion should take it then dismantle the entire system from within), and then Steve got up to go watch Wanda at her station.

After he left, Gabriela made a low, thoughtful noise. "You sure you two aren't a thing?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I'd know it if I was into guys," Bucky replied, wiping at the seepage on her chest with a cloth. "Why?"

"No reason," Gabriela replied, with one of those weird mysterious smiles women got when they were pleased about something.

Bucky just shrugged and finished up his work, then turned her over to Sharon, and stripped off his gloves. "I need to stretch my legs for a minute and grab some food," he told Steve. "You okay with walking with me to Rosa's?"

Steve stood, tucking the sketchbook under one arm. "Yeah, that's...yeah, okay. I was debating what to have for dinner anyway, so this saves me the trouble."

"Cool." Bucky grabbed his Dodgers cap and his wallet from his station. "Heading out," he told Sharon. "You or Wanda want anything?"

"Lemon chicken plate, please," Wanda said, over the buzzing of her needle.

"And the soft tacos plate for me," Sharon added, from where she was taping plastic wrap onto Gabriela's new ink. "Thanks."

"You got it."

He and Steve set off, dodging both the nighttime joggers and window-shoppers as they headed down the street. It had cooled off quite a bit since the sun had gone down, which meant everyone was taking advantage and getting some fresh air. "So, how's work?" Bucky asked.

"Insane, but it's coming along. I'm going over footage from today with my editor when I leave here, so another long night, but this is the fun part. Shaping the scenes into a nuanced story."

Bucky lifted his face to the breeze and rotated his shoulders, loosening some of the tightness. He...
had a tendency to hunch when he was working. "It's always nice when you like what you do for a living."

Steve laughed. "Yeah, it beats having a desk job."

"Amen, brother."

There was the usual long line at Rosa's, but Steve managed to snag them a small table near the window after they got their orders. Once they sat down, Bucky made a gimme motion at the sketchbook. "Alright, show me what you've got before I start inhaling my food like some caveman."

Steve handed the book over with a slightly sheepish look. "These are pretty rough, so, I mean, you don't have to –"

"Yeah, yeah, I've seen your work already. You don't have to act so modest." He flipped it open to the bookmarked page. There were several pages of sketches – some of the Brooklyn skyline from the perspective of the BK Bridge, a couple of the Bridge itself seen from DUMBO and the BK Bridge Park, a couple of the Wonder Wheel and Cyclone at Coney Island, and a few of –

"Is that Ebbets Field?" he asked, tapping at the last page. It had to be Ebbets – the lines were all wrong for CitiField, and it was too open for Yankees Stadium.

"Yeah, it is."

"This is...you're calling these rough?" he asked, tracing over the lines with the tip of his finger. "Steve, these are incredible." He looked up, sure his reverence had to be showing on his face. "You've got a great eye for composition and perspective. And jeez, the detailing...I'm a little homesick right now. I need a dog at Nathan's and a ride on the Cyclone and a jog around Prospect Park."

Steve fiddled with the cap to his water bottle. "It's nothing compared to what you and Wanda and Sam are –"

"Different medium." Forget covering up Steve's botch-job, the very first thing he was tattooing on Steve's body was a reminder to stop talking down his talent. "I mean, yeah, I've got a gift for body art, but I couldn't do an oil on canvas to save my life, y'know, and I can't make my sketches look like they've come to life on the page. It's different, sure, but it's art. And yours is awesome."

"Yeah, well," Steve said, with a pleased, almost shy, smile. "So's yours."

Bucky could feel the back of his neck heat up. It was one thing for him to defend his own accomplishments, but he never was all that great at accepting compliments. "Alright, well, I'm going to make copies of a couple of these when we get back to the shop if you don't mind and play around with them." He could feel the buzzing in his own fingers, that itch he got sometimes when there was really great idea he wanted to get down on paper.

Steve picked up his fork. "Knock yourself out." The smile was still there, curved the corners of that generous mouth, lit those baby blues up like fireworks on the fourth of July. It was a good look on him, Bucky decided. A really good one.

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Bucky didn't have a lot of time over the next few days, between work and prepping for his next convention, but he was able to put together a few sketches for Steve to look at, maybe get a few
more ideas flowing as far as what he wanted. Bucky preferred letting his clients steer the ship as far as design and placement – yeah, he'd gently try to let them know if he felt like they were gonna do something they'd regret, but for the most part, he liked the collaboration process. Tattoos were personal. A statement about who someone was, what was important to them, something that reflected a tiny bit of the core of what was inside every individual.

Steve had a pre-production meeting at the Sony lot in Culver City and said he'd swing by beforehand, so Bucky made sure he was at the shop early so they wouldn't miss each other. And just about wept in gratitude when Sharon let him into the shop, carrying a cardboard tray of large iced coffees. Steve was the goddamn best. Bucky might decide to erect a statue in his honor somewhere.

"I officially love you right now," Bucky stated, when Steve handed him one of the cups.

Steve chuckled, low and fond, even as he ducked his head. "Really, that's all it takes? Coffee?"

"Sure, I'm easy, ask anyone. Especially for coffee."

"Don't let Barnes fool you," Sharon said, accepting her cup from Steve with a smile of thanks. "He's holding out for Twu Wuv."

Bucky took a noisy slurp of his drink, hoping it would distract everyone from the blush he could feel forming on his cheeks. Trust Sharon to bring up a late night conversation right after he and Natasha had broken up and he'd been feeling particularly sorry for himself. Talking with your ex about your other ex was always a bad idea.

Steve cast him a thoughtful look, then shrugged at Sharon. "Well, it is the greatest thing ever, except for a nice MLT, when the mutton's nice and lean."

He did not just... Bucky put a hand over his heart. "Goddamn, I knew we were friends for a reason."

"Do not get Bucky started on quoting The Princess Bride," Sharon said. "He'll be at it all day."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Only because you don't have to work with him."

"Yeah, yeah, you love my quotes," Bucky replied, then bumped Steve's shoulder. "Come on back into my office, we can look over what I've done."

Bucky's office was always a mess but, these days, it resembled nothing so much as a disaster area. There were sketches and reference books, rolls of trace paper and pencils strewn all over the desk, and more art taped up around the edges of his computer monitor. "Sorry about the mess." Bucky shoved aside a few art books, and fished around his backpack for the right sketchpad.

"It's fine," Steve told him. "It looks a little like my office at home. I've got about four corkboards with index cards and storyboards all pinned up, and a ton of concept art and script revisions. Directing's a lot more chaotic than the industry wants you to believe."

"It's always looked like a lot of hard work from where I'm standing."

"Okay, keep in mind, these are pretty rough, and I think a few of them are maybe bigger than what you were initially going for —"

"Holy...are you...wow." Steve tapped the paper, tracing over the lines with a delicate, reverential touch. "That's...Jesus, Buck, that's fucking genius right there. I can't believe you turned my quick
little sketches into this...kaleidoscope." When he looked up at Bucky, his eyes were practically luminous. "It's like this...visual love letter to Brooklyn, I mean...you're incredible, you know that?"

"Uh, thanks. I...I was hoping you'd like that one." Bucky ducked his head to hide his expression, thankful he hadn't pulled his hair back. He'd gotten compliments on his art for years, from people of all walks of life, and never batted an eye. But, Jesus, there was something about the sincerity shining in Steve Rogers' eyes that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The way Steve was looking at him made him want to create the most amazing body art anyone had ever seen ever.

"It's stunning," Steve told him, that same reverence in his voice. "It's...really life-like. That's really something you can just...ink onto my body?"

"Oh totally, of course," Bucky replied, back on more even footing now. He could talk tattooing techniques all day long. "With the right shading to really get a forced perspective angle on it, yeah, I can totally make it look like the skyline, and Coney and Ebbets, are this beacon for everyone on the Bridge. Really put the Bridge at the forefront right there where your old tattoo is, then wrap the rest around your upper back..."

"Yeah, yeah, Brooklyn as home." Steve nodded, like he could visualize it himself. "I really like that. Although, this looks like it'll take awhile to do? I mean, it looks pretty big."

"Yeah, I'll have to do it in sections, and it'll stretch from shoulder to shoulder," Bucky confirmed, touching lightly at each point on Steve's body to give him a reference. "But the order I do everything can be up to you."

"This is way more work than my painting is worth." Steve's brows were furrowed and way too serious looking. "You gotta let me pay you."

Bucky wrapped an arm around Steve's shoulders and squeezed. Steve was fucking adorable – like Bucky would ever charge his friends money. "Fuck you, I don't have to do any such thing. You get art, and I get art. That's the deal."

"Buck –"

"Stop arguing and say thank you, Steve."

Steve let out a small laugh and relaxed against him. "Okay, okay. Thank you."

Bucky gave Steve's shoulders another squeeze, then dropped his arm. "See, that wasn't so hard. Now we just gotta work around our insane schedules to get you in here to get started, but it'll be worth it."

There was a rap on the door, then Sharon poked her head in. "Hey, Sarge, the guys from AT&T are here about the router."

"About time." Fucking internet had been wonky for days. "Tell 'em I'll be right out."

"You bet," she replied, and closed the door.

"Sarge?" Steve asked, with a curious look.

"Yeah, that was my rank when I got out of the Army. Somehow it got to be a thing, probably because I hate it, which means everyone else thinks it's hilarious." His friends were the worst of the worst, Steve excluded, of course.
"Because...you're the boss of them?" Steve guessed, looking confused.

Bucky scoffed. "Man, I wish. Actually, I take that back, I really don't. They're a handful even in the best of times. Besides, keeping everyone in line is Sharon's job. She's the real boss around here, and she knows it."

Steve chuckled. "So, you're saying you left the Army because you were shit at giving orders."

"Shut up," Bucky replied, but laughed himself. It was nice being around someone who knew what life was like in the military. "I probably outranked you anyway."

"Um, actually..."

Bucky groaned. "Do not --"

"Captain Steve Rogers at your service --"

"Goddammit, of course you were an officer." All of that politeness mixed with all that stubbornness -- it all made so much sense now.

"Sorry," Steve offered, not that he remotely looked it. Then his eyes narrowed slightly. "Sergeant James Barnes? That's...that's you?"

"So everyone keeps reminding me," Bucky said with a grimace. James, honestly, what the hell had his parents been thinking? "Although, no one calls me James except my mom, and Pegs."

"Right, no, of course, it's just..." Steve looked like he wanted to say something else, but abruptly stopped. "Um, anyway, I should get going. Traffic, y'know."

"Yeah, good luck with that." Bucky could sympathize. "If you take Hauser instead of Fairfax, you could probably shave about fifteen minutes off your time."

"Yeah, okay, that's...thanks." Steve got to the door, then turned and gave him another one of those slightly enigmatic looks. "Hey, um, you're good with getting gifts for kids, right?"

"I guess," Bucky replied. "I mean, my son never complains."

"I need to grab a birthday gift for my nephew. Well, I mean, he's not my actual nephew, but I've known Nick and Maria since forever and their son -- he's my godson, actually -- is turning five, and I'm a little lost on what to get him...I mean, I don't know any other kids, but I figured, since you've got one, I mean, a kid...and I'm totally fucking babbling right now, sorry."

Bucky had no idea why he was so amused, but he didn't bother to temper the grin. "Nah, it's fine. I think I can throw a few pointers your way."

"Seriously, if you can help me out, I'll buy you dinner or a case of beer or something."

Bucky would have helped Steve out for free, but he wasn't dumb enough to turn down either a meal or alcohol. "Alright. I don't come in tomorrow until six – got a client coming in after she gets off work for a pretty long job, so I'll be at the shop really late. But, um, if you're available, come by the house around one? That should give us plenty of time to bat around ideas and find something that'll work."

"Sure, sounds good," Steve said. "Looking forward to it."

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Chapter 7

Steve showed up the next day precisely at one, wearing frayed jeans and a black t-shirt and his Brooklyn Dodgers ballcap. Bucky answered the door with a hand on both Cap and Winter's collars, his greeting lost over the very loud and enthusiastic barks of welcome.

Steve waited until he'd stepped into the foyer and closed the door behind himself before he dropped to his haunches and let the dogs lick and love all over him. "Sorry about them," Bucky offered, although Steve seemed to be doing just fine. "Every time someone comes over, they think it's to play with them."

"Are you kidding?" Steve glanced up, all smiles and a light in his eyes that was pure joy. "I can't remember the last time anyone's been so excited to see me."

"Well, I promise, they'll greet you just like this whether it's been ten days or ten minutes since they've laid eyes on you." He buried his hand in Winter's fur, scratching him behind the ears the way he knew Winter loved best. Winter just whined a little and pressed against his leg. He didn't suffer from separation anxiety quite the way Cap did, but he had his moments sometimes. "I love both of 'em to pieces, but it's a good thing I didn't get them to be guard dogs."

Steve chuckled as he straightened back up. "I wish I didn't have such insane hours. I'd love to have a dog."

"You're welcome to come over anytime and hang out with mine. Trust me, they'd love it," Bucky said. "Let me get them in the yard, then we can head out. You got any place in mind you want to go?"

"Not really," Steve said, shoving his hands in his pockets as he followed Bucky to the deck, the dogs trotting dutifully beside him. "When Pete was super young, it was onesies or paying for diapers, uh, stuff like that. And last year, all he wanted was a fire truck that made noise and had sirens that lit up, so that was pretty easy – even if Nick and Maria both hated my guts for a solid two weeks after. But now, I mean, he's getting to that age where he's got a lot of different interests and ideas about what he wants."

"I know it well," Bucky concurred. He snagged two rawhide bones from the floor of the deck and tossed them onto the grass. The dogs went tearing off after them in a clatter of noise. "C'mon, before Winter thinks this means we're hanging out to play catch."

"I can think of worse ways to spend an afternoon," Steve said, walking with Bucky back inside the house.

"Trust me, I've spent hours doing nothing but that, but you've got a godson in need and I'm a dutiful friend," Bucky replied. He swiped his keys from the credenza and jammed his own Dodgers hat on his head. He set the alarm and locked the front door behind him, then walked with Steve to his car. "You wanna drive or...?"

"No, it's fine if you do," Steve said. "After my Sony meeting, I had to drive up to Thousand Oaks for another meeting, so I could use a break."

"You got it. So what's he into? Your godson, I mean," Bucky clarified, when Steve gave him a blank look.

"Oh, uh, well, he's way into all things Pokémon. And he's pretty obsessed with Zootopia at the
Bucky put his hand over his heart. He loved this Pete kid already. "I feel you. My son made me take him to see it five times in the theater. He's a pretty big Judy Hopps fan."

"Same with Pete. And I'm not sure he's old enough for a real rabbit –"

"Trust me, they don't make good pets for young kids." He and Peggy had talked about it for Eddie's sixth birthday, but after doing a lot of research, decided guinea pigs were a better first pet option. (Well, technically speaking, Cap and Winter were Eddie's, but they didn't exactly count.)

"I figured."

"But, hey, the nice thing is, at this age, they're still pretty simple to buy for. Maybe get him a BB-8 plushie or some Reptangles. Or take him out somewhere fun like Dave & Buster's and hang out with him for the day."

Steve blinked at him in confusion. "Dave and who?"

Bucky stared at him over the roof of his car, positive he hadn't heard Steve correctly. "Seriously? You've never been to D&B?"

Steve hadn't lost the confused look. In fact, he looked even more lost. Which was just wrong on so many levels. "Never even heard of it until just now."

There were many things Bucky could let slide – not everyone was raised the same way or with the same set of values or with the same advantages he had, and that was great, he was all for diversity and everyone coming to the table with something new and different to offer – but a man had to draw the line somewhere. And he liked Steve way too much to allow him to go another day without experiencing the awesome that was Dave & Buster's.

He pointed at the car door. "Get in the car, Rogers, we're going on a field trip. I hope you're a fan of air hockey."

Steve chuckled as he slid into the passenger seat. "I was in the Army and I lived in a dorm in college. What do you think?"

Bucky got in the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. "Good, because you're about to be schooled by a master."

"Oh I am, am I?"

"You're damn right you are."

The Hollywood & Highland Complex was always teeming with tourists, no matter what time of day or night, but there thankfully wasn't too much of a crowd when they walked into the cool interior of the restaurant. Bucky made a beeline for the games section in the back, calling over his shoulder: "I'll snag us a table, you grab the beer."

"Yeah, okay," Steve said, and headed to the bar.

By the time Steve showed up in the back with two bottles of Sam Adams, Bucky had snagged a table and was more than ready for a good match. He loved his other friends, but the only one of them that was remotely good at air hockey was Morita, and he refused to set foot near H&H on account of – in his own words – all the goddamn unwashed masses crawling around. Which, to be
fair, he had a point.

So, the possibility that Bucky might get to play more often and hang more with Steve in the bargain was a pretty fucking sweet one.

Steve set his bottle on the small table beside them and handed Bucky his bottle. "We playing for anything?"

"Normally I'd say beer, but I have work tonight, so this is it for me," Bucky said. "We can play for IOUs instead, if you want."

"Who said you'd be the one winning?" Steve asked, with a grin. He'd already flipped his ballcap backwards and was rubbing his hands in anticipation.

Bucky did the same with his own hat, and grabbed the puck, dangling it over the center of the table. "Oh, it is on like Donkey Kong," he said, and dropped the puck.

There was a mad scramble, both of them taking hard shots at each other, and it was clear pretty quickly that Steve was one of the most purely aggressive offensive players Bucky'd gone up against since his Army days. But he didn't believe in defending his net for dick, and wasn't above going after shots he had no business taking. Bucky admired it, even as much as he lamented the lack of strategy.

"You sure you've actually played before? Because this is terrible, man," he said, after he feinted one way, then used his paddle to send the puck right into the slot on Steve's side of the table. "I mean, I'm not saying you suck or anything, but my six year-old son could play better defense."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, just keep talking, I've got you right where I want you," Steve retorted, as the puck came back in play again.

"Sure you do, Steve. Sure you do," Bucky replied, when Steve went after the puck with the same reckless enthusiasm as before, and the same lack of self-preservation. It was a little like fleecing a busful of nuns, only way more satisfying. No matter what Steve did to try to compensate, Bucky was right there, defending his turf, and using the lightest of touches to send the puck past Steve and into the slot.

"How are you so fucking good at this?" Steve complained, after twenty minutes of intense play. The score was currently 10-1 in Bucky's favor, and Steve had only scored his goal on a lucky bounce.

Bucky just shot him a wide smirk. "Well, unlike a certain cushy officer I know, I spent four years busting my ass on the front lines."

"Them's fightin' words," Steve said, but the effect was ruined by the way he was grinning.

Bucky blocked Steve's next shot, and sent the puck careening down the sidelines. "I'm just saying all that combat training had to be good for something." It wasn't often that he joked about his time in Afghanistan, but he knew Steve would take it the right way.

"Yeah, okay, I can't believe I'm even saying this, but I'm tapping out before this gets even more embarrassing," Steve declared, and backed away from the table with his palms up in surrender. "C'mon, I'll buy you lunch instead."

Bucky nudged Steve as they headed into the main dining area. "You know, your surliness is kind of adorable."
Steve threw an arm around Bucky's shoulders to reel him in, then planted a loud, smacking kiss to his cheek. "All I'm getting out of this is you think I'm adorable."

"Yep," Bucky said, ignoring the way his skin tingled from Steve's bristles, "just like an officer to have selective hearing, too."

Steve let him go, just to flip him off. "Dick."

"Yeah, well, I'm a dick who kicked your ass, so don't forget it," Bucky replied, and tugged down at the brim of Steve's ballcap.

They slid into an empty booth. Bucky fixed Steve with his most serious look. "Steve, I'm giving you this warning out of friendship and love, but I'm way way better at skeeball than I am air hockey."

Steve nodded back, just as solemn. "I'll take that bet."

"See, I knew I liked you for a reason." And it really was true. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd ever bonded with anyone so quickly after knowing them for such a short period of time. "But seriously, as far as your godson's concerned, this place is catnip for kids—"

"Of all ages, so it seems," Steve said, with a grin.

"Of all ages, exactly. So bring the little guy here and let him run around and play games and eat all the hot dogs and hamburgers he can before sending him home to his folks."

"Speaking of, how are the burgers here?" Steve asked, perusing the menu. He'd taken off his ballcap, and his hair was sticking up in all kinds of crazy directions. It was sort of hilarious. Bucky really wanted to snap a picture of it.

Instead, he made a seesaw motion with his hand. "About on par with the wings at Hooters. Not bad, but if you want a really good burger—"

"Don't say In-n-Out—"

"I wasn't, although they are damn tasty burgers, especially for fast food," Bucky replied. "But I was talking about Republique in West LA."

Steve pursed his lips in thought. "I gotta go with Pono's in Santa Monica."

Bucky shook his head. "Never been."

"Okay, we'll do a comparison sometime," Steve said.

"You're on," Bucky said, just as their waitress came by to take their drinks order. She came back a minute later with another Sam Adams for Steve and a Coke for Bucky, and they both ordered the burgers, medium rare, all the trimmings, and fries.

"So, uh, you mind if I ask you something kinda personal?" Bucky asked, once she'd left again.

Steve lifted his bottle and took a long sip. "Sure." The smile on his face was one Bucky'd never seen before. Sort of nervous, maybe, or apprehensive, but also a little...expectant? Resigned? Bucky couldn't figure it out.
"How long have you and Thor been dating?" he asked, after taking a sip of his Coke. "I mean, it's not...I'm only asking because he said you were a friend, not boyfriend, when we –"

"– Oh, we're not. Um, dating." The tips of Steve's ears turned a vivid shade of pink. . "We just get together from time to time for, uh, y'know. Just sex. It's, uh, nothing like, um. We're not together like that, never have been."

Interesting. Steve didn't strike Bucky as the casual sex type. "I can't believe you made it out of the Army with that blush intact," Bucky teased. "How'd you get through Basic and OCS if you couldn't handle being razzed by your men about who you were banging?"

"Yeah, I know, right," Steve said, ducking his head with a self-effacing smile. "Give me a mission and a plan, and I'm solid, total hoo-rah through and through. But I never could learn the knack of talking about my exploits without looking like a lobster."

"So...you and Thor are, what? Fuck buddies, friends with bennys..."

"Both, kinda." If possible, Steve turned even redder. Fucking adorable. "More like when we're both single, we tend to gravitate towards each other. But, Thor's not...I mean, we get along, we're friends, but it's not. The chemistry between us isn't like that, I guess. And I'd kinda like my next partner – whether it's a guy or a girl – to be long term. That sounds pretty sappy, huh."

"Yeah, but that's okay." Bucky thought it sounded kind of amazing, actually. Like he wasn't the only guy in the world who was holding out for the real thing. "The world could use a little more romance in it."

Steve clinked his glass to Bucky's. "Yeah, it could. Here's to romance and wuv, twu wuv."

Bucky raised his in return. "That dweam wifin a dweam..."

"So tweasure your wuv..."

As one, they burst out laughing.

***
"I'm thinking of running for Governor," Tony announced, coming out of the back room where he'd done a set of nipple barbells for one of his regulars.

"What?" Bucky asked, already lost.

The announcement in and of itself wasn't unusual, as Tony was prone to off the cuff remarks. What was unusual was that he was considering working for the establishment. When Bucky pointed this out, Tony just shrugged.

"We're all working for the man in one way or another," he said, then bent his head to get a better look at the large phoenix Bucky was inking on his client's thigh. (His client, it should be noted, didn't blink an eye at the conversation.)

"Yes, but Governor? Why the hell would you want to run California?" Morita asked, without looking up from his own work.

"Because I can't possibly be any worse than the people who have attempted it in the past. And this way I can lead the revolution from the inside."

"You've been arrested more times than I can count," Bucky pointed out.

Tony jabbed a finger in the air. "Yes, but I've never been to prison."

"Well, there's a ringing endorsement," Sam remarked, who was at the front computer going through everyone's Spotify playlists. He finally chose one and hit play, and classic Stones started blasting out of the speakers.

"In this day and age, absolutely," Tony replied, raising his voice over the music.

Sam flopped on one of the lounge chairs in the lobby area. "You're about as clear as mud, you know that."

Tony preened like a peacock on full parade. "I do pride myself on being opaque."

"If by opaque, you mean oblique, then sure," Bucky replied.

Tony just gave him a Cheshire grin. "Not as dumb as you look."

"Looks aren't everything," Bucky said, and turned to Morita. "Hey, you got any spare number fives I can use?"

Morita lazily pointed at the drawers at his station. "Knock yourself out, man. I owe you for the eights the other day anyway."

"Thanks." Bucky shut off his machine, and gave his client, Lee, a smile. "If you need to stretch or go pee or take a break, now'd be a good time while I'm switching out needles."

Lee waved him off with a shake of his head, then laid it back on the table. "Nah, I'm good."

"Gimme all your lovin/oooh, you're safe with me..." Sam sang, his tongue tucked between his teeth as he flipped through the pages of his sketchbook.
"Dude, seriously, what the hell are you singing?" Tony asked, turning to face Sam with a mystified expression on his face.

Sam rolled his eyes, but didn't look up. "Uh, the song?"

"It's Can't You Hear Me Knockin'," Morita's client mumbled.

"What?" Sam asked.

Bucky sat back down and ripped at the packaging of the new needle. "The lyrics are 'can't you hear me knockin', Sam. It's also the name of the song."

"Huh." Sam nodded in thought. "I guess that makes more sense."

"Such a fucking heathen," Tony sighed, in his most aggrieved tone. "It's the Stones."

Sam just scoffed. "So says the man that doesn't know the words to Sexual Healing, only the greatest song ever put to vinyl."

"Okay, first off, no one knows the words to that song, because the only time anyone ever hears it is when they're having sex and they're not listening to the lyrics."

"I know all the words," Sharon piped up, as she came in from the back room.

Tony narrowed his eyes at her. "You do not."

"I do, too."

"Clint, did you bring your guitar to work?"

Clint, who'd been quietly hanging out at his counter up to this point, glanced up from his magazine and frowned. "Oh no, you're not dragging me into the middle of this."

"The hell I'm not."

"I work with actual children," Bucky lamented, as he made quick work of switching out the needles.

Tony whirled back around to point a finger at him. "You're the one that hired us."

"Thanks for the reminder."

"I'll pull up the lyrics, Clint, get your guitar, Sharon, warm up the vocals because it is on," Tony said, with a manic grin.

"I've got fifty on my girl," Morita said, because he was a smart man.

"I'm not getting out my guitar, so stop asking," Clint insisted. "But I'll bet twenty on Sharon."

"Put me in for fifty on Sharon, too," Bucky said, then flipped his machine back on. "You ready?" he asked Lee.

"Ready," Lee replied, with a nod. "But I'm not betting on anyone."

Bucky chuckled and leaned back in to get at the next section. "Probably a smart idea."

"Fuck you guys," Tony grumbled.
"Why're we fucking each other?" Steve asked, walking into the shop with Wanda at his side. Bucky wondered if he'd gotten dressed in a hurry or something – he was pretty much bursting out of his light gray t-shirt.

"Sounds like my kind of party," Wanda added, with a light laugh.

Bucky motioned Steve over with a big, welcoming smile. "Steve, man, thank God you showed up. Come save me from my infant employees."

Steve took the stool next to Bucky and raised his hand in welcome at Lee. "What're they doing to you this time?" he asked, then let out a low whistle. "That's genius, Buck. Using the wings to cover the scarring like that..."

"He's aces," Lee agreed, happily. "I waited six months for this appointment, and it was worth every day."

"Six months?" Steve blinked in astonishment. "People wait that long for tattoos?"

"When they want a certain artist or technique, yeah." Bucky's waitlist wasn't nearly as long as some other artists he knew.

"Well, hell, now I feel flattered."

Bucky gave him a quick wink. "Damn right you should," he said, then huffed in exasperation when a lock of hair escaped its holder and fell in his face. "Hey, you mind retying my hair for me? I don't want to reglove."

"Oh, uh, sure." Steve rolled closer, and Bucky leaned back a little to give him better access. Steve's fingers were gentle, but firm, as he scraped Bucky's hair from his forehead and made deft work of retying it. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks." Bucky shook his head side to side, but his hair didn't move. "You're really good at that."

"Oh, well, uh...thanks." Then Steve cleared his throat, his voice higher than usual. "So, what's going on?"

"With?" Bucky asked, distracted by trying to ink in the tiny swirls of feathers that made up the phoenix's tail.

"You said the guys were bugging you?"

Clint snorted, amused. "Nah, it's just the usual. Tony just bet Sharon she didn't know the words to Sexual Healing."

"Oh, in that case I'm in," Steve said, because he was a terrible friend, the absolute worst. "No one knows the words – it's a song you only play when you're getting laid."

"Thank you, Steve," Tony stated. "Barnes, your boyfriend has impeccable taste."

"Not my boyfriend," Bucky replied, over Steve's strangled, surprised burst of laughter.

"His what??"

"Well, what else are we supposed to think when you two are always – ow!" Tony rubbed at his side where Sharon had elbowed him. "What the hell?"
"Shut it," Sharon said, with a look Bucky didn't even want to try to decipher.

"I'll put some coin on Sharon," Wanda said, bringing the conversation back to the bet. "Besides, Morita would kick my ass if I bet against her."

Morita nodded once, decisively. "Damn right, I would."

"Yes, but I'd kick your ass even worse," Sharon said.

"Wait, so why does Steve get a pass on betting against you if Wanda doesn't?" Clint wondered.

"He's still new," Sharon said, like that explained anything.

"He'll learn," Bucky added, glancing up at Steve with a quick smirk.

"I don't know, I've been told I'm pretty stubborn," Steve replied, with his own smirk in return.

"Y'all always like this?" Lee asked, curiously.

"More or less," Bucky told him, because it really was pretty much a state of benign chaos around the shop most of the time. "And stop clenching up. You need a minute to catch your breath, let me know, but I need you to stop trying to move. I'm just gonna keep following you."

Lee let out a series of short breaths. "Yeah, yeah, okay."

Bucky got back to work. "So, hey, not that I'm not happy to see you, Steve, but aren't you supposed to be on set today?"

Steve sighed. "Show got cancelled, so my week cleared up."

"Aw, man, that sucks," Lee said. "You an actor or something?"

"Yeah, right, you'd think he would be, with all the muscles and that face, but my boy here's a director," Bucky said, proudly. "You should check out the video he did for Clint."

"I will."

"But, hey, since I've got a few days to work on other things, you given any thought to my proposal yet?" Steve asked.

"Proposing?" Tony asked, sounding delighted. "I feel obligated to point out I'm an ordained minister."

"The idea of you marrying anyone is the scariest thing I've heard all day," Sam said.

"The offer to officiate your wedding is still open, you know," Tony said, but Sam just shuddered.

"Not in a million years."

"Ignore Tony, he's secretly still a twelve year-old boy," Bucky told Steve.

"Twelve's too mature," Wanda observed.

"Hey!"

"And yeah, I've talked it over with Sharon and Sam," Bucky continued, over Tony's squawk of protest. "They think the documentary is a good idea."
"And what about you?"

"I think as long as it's respectfully done, and we set up a few guidelines, and it's something my clients agree to, then I'm in," he said, although he trusted Steve to make sure everything was done right and in a way that honored both the work Bucky did, and his clients.

Steve gave him a soft smile. "That's great, Buck. I won't let you down."

"Of course you won't." Like there was ever a question of that.

"So, are we putting Sharon to the test or not?" Tony asked the room at large.

"Not," Wanda said. "I need her to help me set up for my splash panel."

"Fiiniiine," Tony sighed, sounding exactly like Eddie when Bucky or Peggy told him no. "I've got an immigration rights rally in Little Tokyo I need to get to anyway. But we'll revisit this on Tuesday. And no looking up the lyrics in the meantime."

"I've got no reason to lie," Sharon replied, with an unconcerned shrug. "It's a deal."

"Splash panel?" Steve asked, as Sharon and Wanda started to set up Wanda's station.

"Yeah, some guy made an appointment to get Superman's death scene on his chest and stomach," Bucky replied, without looking up. "And Wanda's our best comics artist."

"She did my Wolverine," Lee said, nodding at his right forearm.

Steve bent to peer at the tattoo in question. "That's pretty cool looking. But isn't Superman dying kind of a morbid thing to want permanently on your body?"

"Depends on your definition of morbid," Bucky said, stopping for a second to shake out his cramping wrist. "We get all kinds in here, and it's all good. It's their body."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Hey, before I forget, what are you doing this weekend?" Bucky asked, bending back to get at the last of the tail-feathers.

"Um...all the laundry ever, actually," Steve replied. "It's getting pretty dire."

"I believe it with that smedium you're wearing," Bucky laughed. "You borrow it from your godson or you just trying to impress the ladies with your guns?"

"No, Jesus, I just..." Steve looked like he wanted to smack Bucky's arm, but thought better of it. "It's pretty much one of the only clean shirts I have."

"I feel you on that," Lee said, most likely using the conversation to distract himself from the pain. "You got a machine in your building?"

"No, I just take everything to the laundromat up the block and try to get some work done while I'm there."

Lee winced and, for once, Bucky didn't think it was because of anything he was doing. "Laundromats are the worst, dawg."

Steve let out an amused snort. "Tell me about it."
"Tell you what," Bucky said. "Bring your stuff up to my place on Friday night, do it there."

"Um, okay?" Steve gave him a confused look. "Is there a party or something?"

"Yeah, some of the guys are coming over to grill, but really it's because the game's at 1:10, which means the rest of the crew'll get there around 10 or so, so if you just stayed the night, it'd save you the drive in the morning. Plus, you could do your laundry for free, so win-win."

"Game?" Steve echoed. "What game?"

"I swear, you're the worst at explaining anything," Sharon cut in, from across the floor. "We're closing the shop Saturday to go down to Anaheim to see the Dodgers take on the Angels. Kershaw vs. Lincecum. And we have an extra ticket because somebody accidentally booked themselves a convention for this weekend."

"Hey, baby, come on, I told you I'd make it up to you," Morita said. She hmped, but it lacked true ire. "I know you will."

Steve's face cleared up. "Oh, okay, sounds like a good matchup. But, uh, wait. Why drive down to the OC? Dodgers Stadium is, like, twenty minutes from your house."

"Yeah, if there's no traffic, which, as we all know, is never. And as much as I love the Dodgers, I hate Dodgers Stadium and Dodgers fans," Bucky replied. "They're the fucking worst."

Steve gave a sympathetic nod. "I can't disagree with that."

"So I don't go to Dodgers Stadium to see them play unless it's the playoffs."

"That's, like, super weird," Lee commented. "Traffic on the 5 is terrible."

Bucky let out a laugh. "Yeah, I know, but it's a different sort of terrible."

"Artists," Lee said, like that meant anything.

"We also make the trek to San Diego and up to Oakland and San Francisco, too," Sharon supplied.

"And Phoenix once a year," Sam added.

"To see the Dodgers?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Bucky said, the back of his neck prickling under Steve's incredulous stare. "You in or out?"

"Are you kidding, this is the most hilarious thing I've ever heard," Steve said, with that deep-grooved, familiar grin. "I am so in. I'll be at your place Friday night."

"Excellent," Bucky said, and flashed Steve a quick smile in return. He was looking forward to it.

***
Just after eight on Friday night, Bucky's doorbell rang. Cap and Winter came pelting through the living room to slide to a halt at the front door, both of them barking loud enough they could probably be heard all the way down the street. "Jesus, guys, give it a rest," Bucky called, following them at a much more sedate pace. "You'd think I never had people over to the house."

In answer, Cap just danced around him, and barked again, insistent.

"Yes, I know," Bucky answered, laughing, "visitors are very exciting."

Bucky held onto their collars with a firm grip, and opened the door. Steve was standing on the steps, wearing a tank top (one that actually fit) and cargo shorts, with a full duffle bag slung over his shoulder. "Hey," Steve greeted, with a sunny grin and a small wave. "Thanks again for the invite."

Bucky gave Steve and his bag a disbelieving look. "Did you just bring over every piece of clothing you own?" he asked, motioning Steve to come inside so he could shut the front door.

"I did say the situation was dire."

"I guess you weren't kidding." Bucky finally let the dogs loose. They ran in ecstatic circles around Steve, their tails fanning up a storm. Steve crouched down to give both of them scratches behind the ears. They went into immediate raptures, because his dogs were the biggest attention whores on the planet. Not that he'd change a hair on their fluffy heads.

"If it's too much trouble, I can always --"

"No, it's fine. I'm just giving you a hard time," Bucky said. "Mi casa su washing machine, or however it goes."

Steve laughed. "I appreciate it. Thanks again."

"Well, I guess you can start throwing things in the washer now before the rest of the crew gets here."

"Sounds like a plan." Steve followed Bucky through the living room and into the kitchen, dragging the duffle behind him, Cap and Winter trotting along in their wake.

Bucky pointed to the door next to the refrigerator, and went to the sink to finish rinsing off the cucumbers for the salad. The dogs settled at his feet, like they always did, hoping for fallout. Even though Bucky was pretty sure cukes weren't exactly what either of them wanted. But, he figured, hope really did spring eternal when you had the memory and attention span of a toddler. "Laundry room's through there. Got beer in the fridge, and I'm barbecuing ribs. The sauce and the dry rub are my own recipe."

"Sounds great. I've been out of the house and going since five am, and food hasn't happened yet..." Steve trailed off, and came to a halt in front of the photo collage of Eddie that Bucky had hanging from magnets on the fridge. He tapped at a photo Daniel had taken of Bucky with Eddie and Peggy at Eddie's sixth birthday party, all of them huddled together and smiling over a Spiderman birthday cake.

"You know Peggy Carter?" Steve asked, in an oddly strangled voice that didn't sound like Steve at
"Uh, yeah." Bucky grabbed a knife from the block and a cutting board. "She's Eddie's mother."

"Huh, no shit."

Bucky set down the knife and set his hip against the counter. "Why?"

Steve gave him a sideways glance that he couldn't make out. "No reason, I just...I know her is all. She was embedded with my unit for awhile."

"Oh yeah?" He turned back to the cutting board. "That's pretty cool. I'll tell her you said hi."

"Yeah, please, that'd be great." Steve got a beer from the fridge, then walked over to Bucky. Winter glanced up at him hopefully, then let out a disappointed doggie sigh when it was apparent that Steve didn't have any food in his hands. "Sorry, buddy, I got nothing for you except barley and hops," Steve told him.

"Don't be, the rest of the crew spoils them enough, don't they, sweetheart?" Bucky asked, smiling down at Winter. Who gave an affirmative bark in return.

"Uh huh," Steve drawled, "I'm sure they're the only ones."

"Hey, I'm the model of a good parent," Bucky protested, with his best indignant look. "Although Pegs would probably argue the point on occasion."

"So, uh, you mind me asking how the two of you met?"

"Uh, after my, uh --" He nodded at his left arm "– I was at Landstuhl for my first two surgeries. And I ran into her after rehab one day – she was there visiting one of the men in her unit – Gabe Jones – you might even know him, I guess. And, well, you've met her. All of that swagger and class wrapped in that body...I mean, fuck me, you know?" Even now, after all these years, he could still vividly recall the first time he'd laid eyes on her.

"So, you charmed her into a date?" Steve asked. "I can see that."

"Please," Bucky scoffed. He threw the cucumbers into the salad bowl and moved on to the eggplant. "It took me a solid week to even get her number. But, you know how you just know when someone's worth it?"

Steve nodded, his look compassionate, but a little far away. Like he was remembering his own special someone. "Yeah. I do."

He knew Steve would understand. "Well, that was her for me. I followed her out here to L.A. after my discharge, and it was good for awhile until it wasn't."

"That's rough." Blue eyes softened in sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too." He didn't have many regrets, but the way their relationship had ended would always be one of them. Thank God they'd been able to work their way through it and salvage the friendship, and not just for Eddie's sake. He was really proud of how close they were, how they could count on each other, and how much of a solid unit they were where Eddie was concerned.

"But," he continued, finishing the story, "I was pretty messed up for a long time after my injury, had a lot of shit to work through, a lot of baggage and anger. It was, uh, one of the reasons we
never got married, even after we found out she was pregnant."

Peggy Carter, above and beyond being the mother of his child, was one of the most remarkable people Bucky'd ever known. She deserved a life partner who was just as remarkable. Which was why he'd been so thrilled Peggy had hit it off so well with Daniel when he'd introduced them. Daniel, with his innate kindness and sense of fair play, was every inch her match.

"Well, as tough as it was, it sounds like you guys made the right choice," Steve said, softly. "Which, hey, at least you're friends now, right? And your son is a cute kid, looks happy. He's got Peggy's smile. And her eyes."

"Yeah, and thank God for that, because he's got my crazy-ass hair and my Dumbo ears." Poor kid. Hopefully he'd grow into them.

"I don't know, your ears aren't that bad. And the long hair suits you."

Bucky just batted his eyelashes Steve's way. "Aww, you think I'm pretty, Rogers?"

Steve rolled his eyes affectionately. "Not exactly the word I'd use, no," he said, then shoved himself away from the counter. "And on that note, laundry awaits."

"Have fun with that," Bucky replied, smiling down at his knife as he went back to chopping vegetables for the salad.

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"Thought I'd find you both out here," Clint said, as he strolled onto the deck an hour later.

"Didn't know we were lost," Bucky replied. He and Steve were playing catch with the dogs, both of them taking turns tossing knotted ropes out into the yard. But it was too hot even for Winter, the reigning King of Catch, to muster up too much enthusiasm for the game. Although it didn't stop him from trotting back and forth, dividing his attention between the two men.

"Yeah, still not funny."

Bucky lazily shot him the finger. "Bite my ass, my jokes are hilarious."

"Your ass would be so lucky to get my teeth anywhere on it," Clint said, letting out an amused chortle.

Steve raised an eyebrow at Bucky. "I can give you two some time alone, if you want..."

"Nah, we're good. He never puts out anyway," Bucky replied, sighing his best lamented, put-upon sigh.

"Well, I might if you were into dudes," Clint replied. "Or if I was."

Beside him, Steve paused in the middle of tossing the rope. "Wait, so that's...huh," he muttered, low enough that Bucky thought maybe he might be talking to himself.

Clint wandered over to the grill and lifted the lid. A plume of white smoke drifted out, carrying with it the tantalizing, rich scent of barbeque spices and ribs. "How long've you had 'em on?"

"Only thirty minutes and shut the damn lid already. You know better."

Clint rolled his eyes, but obligingly did as ordered. "I see you took my advice and bought SLC ribs
this time."

Clint had definite opinions about anything having to do with anything involving the culinary arts, as everyone in the group well knew. "I did, because you whined about it so damn much, but I still think baby backs are just as good."

"And here I was happy that I didn't have to do any cooking," Steve remarked, tossing the rope again. Winter went clattering after it, but Cap just woofed at Steve once and trotted over to the deck to curl up in her doggie bed. Because Cap had the right idea about how Friday nights were supposed to go.

"I made you wrap the corn up and shred the romaine," Bucky said. "That counts as cooking."

"Shoulda put foil on the ribs," Clint said. "But whatever, I'll just keep an eye on 'em. Did you remember to pick up any Blue Moon for me?"

Bucky jerked a thumb at the sliding glass door. "Please, princess, like I'd ever leave you hanging like that. You know where the fridge is."

"You guys want one?"

"Yeah, if you're offering," Steve said.

"You shouldn't have to ask. And don't forget the orange slices in mine!" Bucky called, and was rewarded by Clint flipping him off as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Clint brought his beat up acoustic guitar with him on the way back out to the deck, and handed Steve his glass before setting Bucky's glass (with two orange slices floating on the top, because Clint was the best) on the table. He settled himself easily in one of the chairs, and strummed a few exploratory notes before nodding in approval.

Bucky flopped on the sofa, and bent to give Cap some head rubs. She whined sleepily at him and nudged into the contact. "Planning on playing for your supper?"

"Sure. I'll even stick to the classics, just for you." Clint started strumming Folsom Prison Blues, and Bucky laughed and sang along, because that's what you did when you heard Johnny Cash. But he was pleasantly surprised when Steve also joined in on the second verse in a clear tenor.

The second they finished the last notes, complete with a final guitar flourish, Clint gave Steve an approving nod. "I see we got another one to add to karaoke nights."

Steve pointed at himself, and backed up a step, almost tripping over Winter in the process. "Oh, I'm not –"

"Don't be so modest." Bucky picked up his glass and cradled it in both hands. "You've got a really nice voice. Not everyone can harmonize well, especially with a professional like Clint over here." In fact, Bucky wondered if Steve had had voice lessons or any other training.

Steve gave him an under the lashes, shy smile, and gestured his way. "Uh, well, so do you. Both of you, I mean," he added, hastily.

Bucky laughed, delighted. Making Steve blush really was way too much fun. "Yeah, I'm not sure I'm ready for a solo career, but I'll do backing vocals for you and Clint all day."

Clint, for his part, just shook his head. "Sharon was so right about the two of you," he said, and
refused to elaborate.

Bucky just shrugged at Steve, who shrugged back, then started playing catch with Winter again.

***

By the time Thor showed up with Sam and Nat and Wanda, with more beer and some of Sam's lime marinade infused chicken (his own special recipe), Clint and Bucky and Steve had managed to work through the six pack of Blue Moon, as well as most of Johnny's early tunes.

"I didn't know there was gonna be entertainment!" Thor said happily, and settled onto his chair with a Bud and a hopeful expression on his open, smiling face. "You taking requests?"

"Nope," Clint promptly replied.

Wanda curled in next to him on the chair, and pressed a kiss to Clint's cheek. "I can't even get requests."

"Every song I write is for you already, babe."

"That is sickeningly adorable," Natasha stated, and sank onto the other sofa, urging Sam down beside her.

"It's true," Clint stated, with a shrug. "Sides, Thor, I have standards on cover tunes, and you'd probably just request something by Zyan or Nick Jonas or something just to be a dick."

"I might, if I knew who any of those people were."

"Thor doesn't listen to the radio," Steve said, leaning against the back railing, his beer bottle dangling between his fingers.

"Neither do I," Bucky said, "but I still know who both those guys are."

"Sorry?" Thor replied, with a confused grimace.

"Don't be," Clint said. "Anyone whose ears have never been sullied by One Direction gets a free pass."

"Oh, well, in that case, Kings of Leon?"

"Coming up," Clint said, started playing *Back Down South*, much to Thor's pleasure. Bucky just exchanged an amused glance with Steve, pleased with his friends and the world and just life in general.

Thor clapped his appreciation when the song was finished, and cracked open another bottle of Bud before giving everyone another sunny grin. "So how's the wedding planning coming?"

"Ugh." Natasha groaned, resting her head on Sam's shoulder. "We're taking the night off."

Sam dropped a kiss to her hair. "I'm trying to convince her to run off to Vegas and be done with it."

"That is never happening." She patted Sam on the chest in emphasis.

"You deserve better than to be married by a drunk Elvis impersonator," Clint said.

"I don't know," Wanda mused, "I think it would depend on the impersonator. Viva Las Vegas
Elvis, not so romantic. Jailhouse Rock Elvis, on the other hand, would be kind of hot."

Natasha laughed. "Careful, Clint, she might leave you one day for a man in leather pants and a pompadour."

"Nah, I got no reason to worry." Clint waved Natasha off. "I look great in leather pants."

"True," Wanda said, with a mischievous grin. "He does have an exceptional ass."

"Still not getting married in Vegas," Natasha said. "No matter how nice our Elvis impersonator's ass might be."

"Besides," Bucky said, heaving himself out of his very comfortable position on the sofa, "Eddie's excited about being a ring bearer. Well, he's not so excited about the shoes, but he is excited about wearing a bow tie."

"Aww, that's so sweet," Natasha said, holding her hand to chest. "I can't wait to see him in his little suit."

"You sure we can't just elope and have a big party after?" Sam asked, with a hopeful smile Natasha’s way.

"Nice try, but no."

Bucky lifted the lid of the grill and picked up the bowl of sauce and brush to re-baste the ribs. "Quit while you're ahead, Sam."

"I had to try." Sam nodded at Natasha's wine glass. "You want another?"

"Please."

"You're spreading it too thin, dude," Clint observed, as Sam got up to go into the kitchen.

Bucky ignored him and moved onto the next rib. His eyes were watering from the smoke. "No backseat chefing or grill mastering."

Steve walked over to stand beside Bucky, and held out his sunglasses. "Here."

"Oh." Bucky looked down at them for a second, then let Steve slide them on his face, the tips of his fingers barely brushing along Bucky's cheeks and ears. "Thanks, man."

The protection helped a little bit – the smoke wasn't killing his eyes nearly as much – but it was the thoughtfulness of the gesture that got to him. Steve was just a genuinely nice guy, and a damn good friend.

"You're still coming to my opening, right?" Natasha asked, murmuring her thanks to Sam when he handed her a full glass before sitting back beside her again.

"You kidding?" Bucky asked, "I wouldn't miss it."

"Opening?" Steve glanced between them. "You're an artist?"

"Photographer, yeah," Natasha replied. "Mostly commercial shoots, but I've got an exhibit of some of my personal work opening at M+B."

Steve looked suitably impressed. "Wow, congratulations."
"You should come." Satisfied, Bucky set down the bowl and brush and shut the grill lid. Another twenty minutes, and he could put the chicken on. "She's got an eye for composition and capturing color in motion like you."

"Oh, I..."

"Shut it, already, everyone knows you're amazing." Bucky nudged Steve's shoulder, stopping him before he went too far down the modest My art's not all that hole. It was crazy, as talented as Steve was, that he had no idea how to take a compliment. Not that Bucky had much room to talk, but it was different. "You can ride over with me, that way you can drink all the free wine. Plus, you'd be giving me someone sane to talk to."

"Subtle, Barnes, real subtle," Clint remarked.

Sam shook his head sadly. "You do know me and Clint'll be there, too, right?"

"Like I said," Bucky told Steve, and handed him back his sunglasses. "Someone sane."

Steve toyed with the handles for a moment, then glanced up at Bucky through partially lowered lashes. Bucky couldn't get a read on his expression at all. But, after a few moments, Steve just smiled, soft and kinda sweet. "Sure, Buck, I'd love to come. Thanks."

"Alright, I'm getting a cavity listening to you two, so question time," Clint said, strumming a few idle notes on the guitar. "Best cinematic Batman ever?"

"Does Kevin Conroy count?" Steve asked.

"More importantly," Bucky added, "does Batfleck count, because you can all say what you want about the Batman v Superman film, but Ben was amazing."

"Yes to Kevin, and no to Ben," Clint decided. "There hasn't been enough time to sufficiently judge Batfleck against the others."

"Then that's easy. Christian Bale," Sam promptly stated, and bumped fists with Clint. "And don't even speak George Clooney's name in my presence, he almost ruined the franchise."

"Disagree," Thor countered. "He made an excellent Bruce Wayne."

"Man, I got two words for you – rubber nipples." Sam ducked out of the way of the napkin that Thor balled up and threw at him. Wanda and Natasha just exchanged long-suffering looks.

"Everyone knows Keaton's the superior Batman," Natasha said.

"Are we just forgetting the great Adam West?" Wanda asked.

"Adam was a fine Batman, but Clooney had that extra aura about him."

Sam made a pained face at Thor. "Just admit you've got a hard-on for Clooney and be done with it. How many times've you seen Ocean's 11?"

"And who was it that dragged me to see all of Christian Bale's films and has all of the songs from Newsies memorized?"

Natasha just moved out of the way when Sam launched himself at Thor and they started wrestling, much to Cap and Winter's delight. The dogs eagerly trotted over to the two men, and started barking their enthusiasm, both of them trying to wiggle their way into the fun.
Steve just shook his head. "They're worse than the dogs."

"My babies definitely have way more sense," Bucky agreed, then turned to Clint. "You need another beer, cupcake?"

"Aww, thanks sweetheart, I'd love one."

The second Bucky started towards the sliding glass door, Clint promptly stood and walked over to plant himself at the grill, which was probably what he'd wanted all along anyway. Steve dodged out of the way of the dogs and the wrestling match to claim an empty spot on the sofa. After a few minutes, Sam pronounced himself the victor of the wrestling match and hopped to his feet, looking disheveled, but not too worse for wear. "Did someone say beer?"

"I figured that'd get your attention," Clint said, grinning, as Thor rolled to sit cross-legged on the ground.

"You cheated," Thor accused. "Tickling someone is against the rules."

"Payback for last time," Sam countered.

Bucky walked back out on the deck, and set Clint's beer down on the small table next to the grill. "Can I have my grill back?"


"I left to get you a beer."

"Semantics."

"Fine, have it your way," Bucky replied, and sank into the space next to Steve, their arms brushing, warm and familiar. "Just make sure to put the chicken on in ten, and don't over-baste the ribs, either."

"Yes, Mom."

"Screw you, Barton," but Bucky smiled as he said it, and scooted down until he was splayed completely out and comfortable, his knee knocking against Steve's.

***

Morita and Sharon showed up after closing the shop, with even more beer and chocolate ice cream cake from Scoops for dessert, and the rest of the evening passed in a blur of great food, great conversation, and a couple of raucous sing-alongs led by Clint and Sam. It was well after midnight by the time everyone started to head home, after banishing Bucky to the backyard with the dogs so everyone could clean up the deck and kitchen. Which suited him just fine. The dogs loved having his full attention, and he was able to relax and enjoy the crisp night air and the incredible array of stars overhead.

He was lying on the grass looking up at the sky, Cap and Winter both curled up next to him, when Steve dropped, cross-legged, to his other side. "Thought you could use a refill," he said, and handed Bucky a bottle of Sam Adams.

He took it with a murmured thanks, but just rested it on his stomach. "One of the reasons I bought this house – other than the yard was big enough for having a kid and dogs to run around in – was the view."
"I can see why," Steve commented, craning his own head back. "I can barely see any stars from my place in WeHo."

"I used to do this every night in Afghanistan." Bucky didn't know why – maybe it was the lateness of the hour or because he was pleasantly buzzed or maybe it was just because it was Steve and Steve already knew the worst of it – but he couldn't help but notice how easily the words flowed out of him. How easy it was to talk about his time over there. "Lie out on my bedroll for an hour after my watch and just...marvel at the vastness of the universe."

Steve straightened his legs in front of him, and lowered himself back on his elbows. "I remember my first night on patrol," he said, his voice quiet. "I mean, you know what it was like growing up where we did, all the lights from the skyscrapers, all the pollution – I had no idea there were so many stars in the sky."

"My pops used to take me and my sister out to Staten to the observatory there sometimes when we were growing up." Bucky tilted his head up just enough to take a sip of his beer, then settled back on the grass. "I've been obsessed with space ever since I was a little kid – the way my mom tells it, I skipped the dinosaur phase altogether and went right to the astronaut phase and never left. I wanted to be the next Buzz Aldrin so bad."

"I'm pretty sure I got your dinosaur phase. I can't even tell you how many times I saw Jurassic Park as a kid."

"So that's why you wanted to be a filmmaker," Bucky teased, glancing over at him. "To take over the Jurassic franchise and be the next Spielberg."

"Sure, if they'll have me. I can think of worse careers," Steve replied, with a fond laugh that crinkled his eyes. "So what happened to your dream of working for NASA?"

"Oh well, that's simple. I hate math." Bucky leaned up to take another swallow of his beer, letting the crisp taste linger on his tongue. "I loved the science, but all that math – all the endless calculations and theorems and memorizing – it was too much. Plus, I realized, no matter what, I was never gonna live long enough to roam the galaxy on a starship, which sort of ruins the romance of it. Unless something drastic happens, we probably won't even make it out of our solar system in our lifetime."

Steve's teeth gleamed white in the dark when he grinned over at Bucky. "So what you were really interested in was being Captain Kirk and going to strange new worlds and getting into adventures with your friends."

Yeah, Steve got him, alright. "More Han Solo than Kirk, but only because the Falcon is cooler than the Enterprise –"

Steve clutched at his heart. "Blasphemy –"

"Fight me. You know I'm right. Besides, what kid didn't want to be captain of a starship?" Bucky asked. "I mean, c'mon, didn't you play Star Wars with your friends or space pirates or pretend to be Klingon warriors taking over the galaxy?"

"Not really." Steve let out a soft sigh. "I didn't exactly have any friends growing up."

"What?" Bucky turned his head and stared at Steve in shock. "You're kidding, right? You're amazing. Everyone loves you." Half the time, Bucky was pretty sure his friends liked Steve better than they liked him, and he couldn't say he blamed them. Steve was a great guy. And rapidly
becoming one of Bucky's best friends.

"They didn't when I was a kid." Steve shrugged like it was nothing, but the tension in the line of those wide shoulders told a different story. "I was pretty scrawny back then, terrible at sports, always with my nose in a book or off in a corner drawing...I wasn't exactly into all the normal kid stuff."

"You were bullied," Bucky guessed, thinking back to his own childhood, and the way most kids had picked on the quiet little guys who couldn't fight back. The hairs on his arms rose as he thought about his own kid, small and artistic and with a heart bigger than the Grand Canyon. There was nothing he wouldn't do to protect Eddie from anyone out there who threatened him, in either body or spirit.

Steve shrugged again and motioned at Bucky's beer. Bucky handed it over without a word – he figured Steve probably needed it more than he did. After a long sip, Steve spoke up, his voice sandpaper-rough. "Let's just say I got beat up a lot for mouthing off to the wrong guys."

Fuck. Bucky's heart went out to child-Steve, who'd probably been an amazing kid, and deserved a much better childhood. He wanted to go back in time and take on anyone who'd ever made Steve feel unwanted or like he wasn't good enough. "You didn't have anyone in your corner?"

"Not really."

"That sucks. I mean, I wasn't Mr. Popularity or anything, but I always had a few good friends, and I always had my sister. Even when we fought, we still had each other's backs." Bucky tried to think of the talented, assured, and brilliant man beside him as some sort of social pariah, and couldn't. Tried to imagine anyone looking at him and not thinking he was someone worth knowing. "If I'd known you back then, I'd have totally been your friend."

Steve's eyes were warm and shaded silver by the light of the moon overhead, and his smile was that small, gently curved one that was like someone had bottled up pure sunshine and poured it on Steve's lips. "Thanks, Buck. I would have been honored to play space pirates with you."

Bucky laughed as he finally rolled to a sitting position, jostling the dogs, who both just whined a little at him for interrupting their beauty sleep. "Well, maybe you'll direct a space pirates movie someday and I can be an extra in the background."

Steve nodded, like he was already trying to figure out how to secure funding for it, and held out his fist. "You've got yourself a deal."

Bucky bumped his own against it, and they finished sharing the beer before heading inside to play Cards Against Humanity with Clint and Wanda.

***
Chapter 10

Thank God for Clint, Bucky blearily thought the next morning, once he'd stumbled out of the bathroom and pulled on a pair of sleep pants. The tantalizing aroma of freshly ground beans teased him all the way down the hallway, Cap and Winter trotting along beside him.

"I know, guys, I know," Bucky mumbled, when Cap bumped into him and gave him that liquid puppy stare of hers, "but Daddy needs coffee first before outside. You know the drill."

Cap just barked at him, unimpressed. He couldn't say he blamed her – he wouldn't be too happy if anyone made him wait to go pee, either.

When he walked into the kitchen, it wasn't Clint he saw on coffee-making duty. Instead, Steve was leaning heavily against the counter, wearing a pair of blue pinstriped boxers and nothing else, sporting some seriously epic bedhead, and deep sleep creases lined all across his face.

But it was the series of thick white raised scars cross-cutting all along his right side and across the chiseled line of his hip that stopped Bucky dead in his tracks.

Steve blinked at Winter's quiet woof, his smile softening in welcome. "Hey, Winter. Morning, Buck."

"Um. Morning." Bucky wasn't trying to stare, but he'd had no idea...

Steve glanced down at himself, then up at Bucky, the smile morphing into a shuttered, wary look that dropped the temperature in the room by several degrees. "Yeah, I know. They're not exactly pretty."

"I've seen worse." Bucky's own scars, in fact, covered almost all of his left arm and shoulder, and bled down into his chest. Most people just couldn't see them because of the tattoos.

"Yeah, I guess you would have, in your line of work." Then he gave Bucky a searching look, almost shy. Kinda nervous, if Bucky had to label it. "I got them during a rescue mission in Afghanistan."

"Oh. I didn't know you were there." For some inexplicable reason, Bucky's breath shortened in his lungs. It was an effort to keep his voice even. "I thought you were...in media relations."

"No." Steve huffed out a laugh, but there was no humor to it. "Rangers."

"Wow, uh. That's...huh." Not only was Steve not some cushy officer who'd ridden a desk, he'd been infantry. Elite infantry, humping the front lines, just like Bucky. He'd seen combat, like Bucky; killed people, probably even lost someone like –

Steve took a step forward. "Yeah, I – Look, Buck, there's something I need to tell –"

They both jumped, startled, when Clint stumbled into the kitchen, yawning and scratching at his chest. "Bless your fucking light, man, is that coffee?" he asked, making a beeline for the cabinet that housed the mugs.

Steve halted, and held Bucky's gaze for a long, fraught beat. Bucky couldn't get any kind of read on him. Then he gave Bucky a tiny, sad smile and nodded. "I just...it's nothing, okay, just...forget it. I'm, uh, gonna go throw my last load in the laundry."
Bucky stared after his retreating back, frowning. Cap pressed herself against his side, her warmth a solid comfort. Clint walked up beside him, noisily sipping his coffee. "What the hell was that about?" he asked.

"No idea," Bucky replied, but he had a feeling he'd missed something. He just had no idea what.

***

It was a perfect day for baseball. Warm, but not unbearably hot, sunny, but breezy, and Steve had either moved past or gotten over whatever it was that was bothering him earlier, because he'd been relaxed and talkative ever since they'd set out for Anaheim. It probably helped that Bucky and Steve rode down with Sam and Natasha, who spent most of the ride regaling them with horror stories about some of the other brides and grooms-to-be they'd encountered during their wedding planning. After hearing a few of them, Bucky thought Sam might have had a point about running off to Vegas. If Bucky did ever find anyone he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, he was going to lobby pretty hard for having the ceremony in his backyard with the dogs as witnesses, and grill some steaks for the reception.

They made pretty good time to the stadium, and everyone managed to park and load up on food and beer while both teams were still doing warm-ups. Steve let out a low whistle as they made their way down the aisle. "Whoever it is in charge of getting tickets for the group has my respect," he remarked, while everyone was filing into their seats. They were in two rows, twelve rows back between first base and the foul pole, with a perfect view of home plate.

Sharon gave him a pleased grin. "That'd be me. If it was up to the guys, we'd be stuck in the outfield in the all you can eat section."

"Unlimited hot dogs would be pretty sweet though," Clint countered, then oofed when Wanda elbowed him in the side.

"Such a pig, I have no idea why I put up with you."

Clint waggled his eyebrows. "I can think of a few reasons."

"I do not need to hear about your sex life," Sam declared. "Now or ever."

"So you're the big baseball fan of the bunch, huh?" Steve settled in beside Sharon, leaving Bucky to take the aisle seat next to him.

"Her and Buck," Clint confirmed, from the row behind them. "Although Sharon kills it every year in our fantasy league, so be prepared to lose money if you join next season."

"Numbers nerd," Sharon said. "I also write a column for SB Nation on the Dodgers."


"Not just a pretty face," she replied, with a light laugh.

"I never thought you were." Then he bumped Bucky's shoulder, companionable. "Okay, I can't be the only person who thinks it's weird to be at a Dodgers game without a Dodger Dog, right?"

"That part does suck," Bucky agreed, and held up his paper-lined basket. "But at least we have short-rib grilled cheese sandwiches and curly fries."

"True." Steve took a nibble from the corner of his own sandwich and hmmed thoughtfully.
"They're not as good as your ribs from last night, though."

"Thanks, man. It's the dry rub." Everyone in the stadium stood as they announced the performer for the National Anthem, and Bucky took the opportunity to lean in and murmur to Steve: "Hey, everything's okay, right? I mean, this morning, you just seemed..." He trailed off, unsure how to continue.

He couldn't get either the scars or the apprehensive way Steve had looked at him out of his mind. Or the knowledge that Steve had gotten injured in battle, just like him. It wasn't a kinship he'd wish with anyone, let alone someone like Steve, who was the epitome of a nice guy.

Steve glanced at him, and nodded once, quickly. "Yeah," he murmured back, swiping off his ballcap to hold against his heart. "I'm good. Don't worry about it."

He didn't sound too convinced by what he was saying, but Bucky didn't press the matter. If Steve wanted to open up to him, he would. Until then, Bucky would respect Steve's desire to not talk about it. God knew Bucky would be the last to judge.

They all sang along with the performer, then retook their seats as the pitcher took the mound for his warm-up tosses.

"Alright, Rogers," Bucky said, determined to kick back and enjoy an afternoon of his favorite sport with some of his favorite people, "who's your favorite Dodger of all time not named Jackie Robinson or Sandy Koufax."

"Pee Wee Reese," Steve replied promptly, and chomped on a mouthful of fries. His grin was greasy-bright.

"Really?" Bucky totally would have pegged Steve as a Roy Campanella or Don Sutton fan, although he couldn't say why. But Pee Wee, while being one helluva player, just didn't seem to fit what he knew about Steve.

"Well, like I told you, I was a shrimp growing up." Steve said, after he'd swallowed. He grabbed a napkin from Bucky's stash to wipe the sauce off his mouth. "And Pee Wee, y'know, he was a little guy for a player, but he could rake. And he was a shortstop, which is what I always wanted to play. I guess I always felt like I had a lot in common with him."

Bucky nodded and stole a handful of Steve's fries, because they were already drenched in barbequed goodness. "Mine's Mike Piazza. You wanna talk guys who could rake, and Jesus, he was tough to bowl over at the plate. Caught a lot of great games."

"You two are so ridiculous."

Bucky leaned across Steve to look at Sharon. "What'd we do?"


The first three innings passed in a pleasant whirl of catcalling the Angels players when they stepped up to bat, cheering on the Dodgers when they took the lead on a pair of singles and a bases-clearing double, and everyone chowing down on rib sandwiches and fries and their weight in peanuts. During the break between the third and fourth inning, Sam and Clint and Natasha all went on a beer run for the group, while Wanda and Sharon left to go find some Dippin' Dots. Given the crowd and the sluggish way the concession lines were moving before the game, Bucky figured he and Steve would be lucky to see any of them before the fifth inning.

"You ever take Eddie to any games?" Steve asked, as Mike Trout stepped up to bat.
"Oh yeah, Pegs and I took him to his first game when he was still just a baby. He loves coming to
the ballpark, although his favorite player is Jose Altuve, so I got my work cut out for me getting
him to root for the Dodgers." Bucky scooted forward in his seat, willing Kershaw to get a
strikeout. Mike was a threat to homer every time out, but on a day like today, with the wind
carrying the balls to right field, it was almost a sure thing he was gonna hit one out of the park if he
got the right pitch. Bucky would just prefer he do it without men on base.

"You can thank me for that, by the way. Peggy liking baseball, I mean," Steve clarified, when
Bucky shot him a puzzled glance. "The summer she was embedded with us, the Dodgers were in a
pennant race, so a bunch of us were constantly talking about the schedule and the games and pretty
much living and dying on Matt Kemp's every at-bat. And you know Peggy, she wasn't about to talk
about any subject unless she knew something about it, so she taught herself the rules."

"That's cool. You know, she mentioned that once, that she got into it when she was –"

He registered the crack of the bat and the screaming whistle of the foul ball headed right their way,
and had his left hand up before he even had a chance to think about it. The ball smacked right into
his palm, hard enough he knew he'd have a nasty bruise and, over the roar of the crowd around
him, and everyone watching the replay on the Jumbotron in the outfield, he met Steve's wide-eyed,
shocked gaze.

Bucky had caught the ball two inches from hitting Steve square in the face.

Belatedly, Steve lurched back in his seat, his breath chugging out locomotive quick. "Fuck me."

"You're good, man, you're good." Bucky's heart was pounding so hard he could still feel it
knocking against his ribs. His hand was tingling all over; he shook it to get rid of some of the pins
and needles. He could already tell it was going to start hurting like a bitch in a little bit. People
around them were still applauding and a few gave Bucky pats on the back, but it barely registered.

Jesus, that had come so close to – it could've – fuck.

He tipped the ball into Steve's hands and Steve's fingers tightened around it. When he looked at
Bucky again, his face was bloodless and drawn. "How did you even...?"

"No idea," Bucky offered, after another shaky breath to calm himself down. He could still hear his
heartbeat roaring in his ears. "Guess the, uh, reflexes are still there."

"Yeah. Um." Steve tried to hand the ball back to him. "Here."

Bucky closed his hand over Steve's, stopping him. Steve was still far too pale, but at least his skin
was nice and warm. "Keep it," Bucky said, trying to summon a reassuring smile. "You were the
one it almost hit."

"But..." Steve gave him an inscrutable look from under his lashes. "You sure?"

Bucky knocked his knee against Steve's even as he lifted his hand. His fingers were still tingling
from where the ball had struck. Thank God it wasn't his dominant hand. But at least his heart rate
had slowed somewhat. "Don't worry, it doesn't mean we're engaged or anything."

Steve barked out a surprised laugh, and finally seemed to snap out of his shock. "Did you just
quote *Aliens* at me?"

Bucky laughed, a little sheepish. "Maybe."
"Wow." Steve tossed the ball from hand to hand with a smile. "I knew there was a reason I liked being friends with you."

"Yeah," Bucky quietly replied. "Same here."

Wanda and Sharon returned a few minutes later with Dippin' Dots and nachos, followed by Sam and Nat and Clint with refills on beer. Steve left and came back with some ice for Bucky's hand, because he was a good friend like that, and it seemed to help with the swelling, at least. The Dodgers tacked on another run in the fifth, and the Angels managed to put a run on the board in the bottom of the sixth, but Kershaw looked to be on cruise control, so Bucky wasn't too worried.

"Clayton's curveball is almost unhittable," Steve commented, after Kershaw struck out Albert Pujols looking to end the inning.

"Yeah, his fastball's still got some pop to it as well." On the Jumbotron, the Kiss Cam was going strong, to the delight of the everyone, with a few couples hamming it up, no doubt thrilled with the attention. "Mattingly might let him go the distance."

Steve nodded. "It's too bad Seager booted that grounder or we might be looking at another shutout."

Sam tapped Bucky on the shoulder, and pointed, his look one of pure glee. "Hey man, you and the new BFF are up."

"What?" Bucky asked, confused.

"What?" Steve repeated, but by then Bucky'd already followed Sam's finger to the Jumbotron, where the camera was stopped right at himself and Steve. Everyone was already going nuts at seeing them. Guess the foul ball catch had made an impression.

Bucky twisted to Steve, unsure of what to say or do. "You, uh...?"

Steve gave a helpless shrug. "Uh...do you...?"

Fuck it. It was just a harmless kiss between friends, right? In answer, Bucky just ducked his head under the brim of Steve's hat and pressed their lips together, the kiss light and quick and chaste. Steve's lips were dry, but oddly soft, and Bucky's own were still buzzing when they parted, over the fresh roar of the crowd.

"You could have at least slipped him the tongue," Sam commented, sounding disappointed.

"This is a family environment, Wilson," Clint replied. "Gotta keep the R-rated stuff for the bedroom."

"You guys need a room?" Natasha asked, as Sharon added, "We're so putting that up on the shop website, by the way."

Steve let out a strangled laugh as Bucky rolled his eyes. "Hey, you can't leave the Kiss Cam hanging, right?" he said, his voice oddly husky. He couldn't stop staring at Steve.

"No, of course not," Steve replied, and offered a shy smile. The blush was back in full force, and his lashes were a black fan across the tops of his cheekbones, and his lips were still slightly parted. Bucky wanted to lean back in and see if they'd feel just as soft the second time around, wanted to nibble a little bit on that pouty lower lip, and then kiss him all nice and slow and –
Huh.

Huh.

He wanted to kiss Steve again. He...wanted to kiss Steve. Holy shit, he wanted –

"Hey." Bucky jerked his head around to see Natasha holding out a bag of peanuts. "You want some or not?"

"Oh. Uh, sure." He took the bag on autopilot, and turned back to the game, but his focus was a million miles (and six inches) away. All of a sudden, the last couple of months started to make a lot more sense. The immediate connection and rapport he'd felt from day one, the easy physicality between them, the ever-present awareness of Steve's body, that goofy feeling he got whenever Steve smiled at him...

Holy. Shit.

***
He couldn't get the kiss out of his head.

He'd tried everything he could think of the last couple of days – working longer hours than usual and even taking a couple of quick walk-ins (which he never did), but it didn't seem to matter. Out of nowhere, whether he was in the middle of a job or meeting with a vendor or going over potential designs for a client, his brain would flash back to the feel of soft, dry lips against his own, and the warmth shining out of bright blue, absurdly-lashed eyes.

The kiss hadn't seemed to affect Steve at all – he hadn't acted any different the rest of the afternoon, and had still texted Bucky the next day to thank him for both the invite and the use of his washer and dryer. He'd even sent over a pic of the baseball sitting on a stand in a place of honor on his desk, and asked if Bucky could autograph it for him, followed by about a billion laughing emojis. And when Bucky got a last-minute cancellation and called Steve to say he'd be able to squeeze Steve in on Wednesday to get started on his tattoo, they'd talked a few minutes to set up a good time for Steve to come in. Everything between them was normal and friendly and exactly the way they'd always been.

Except for the way Bucky wasn't sure what he was going to say or how to act the next time they actually saw each other.

Even now, nursing his beer while watching Clint's band up on stage at the Silverlake Lounge, he couldn't stop from obsessing about it. The damn thing had lasted two seconds, tops. So why were his thoughts in such a feedback loop over it?

Wanda, sitting beside him in the booth, leaned against his arm. "Everything okay?" she asked, pitching her voice to be heard over the music.

"Yeah, I'm fine." The reply was automatic.

Wanda didn't look convinced. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm...you ever have some tiny little thing happen to you that shouldn't be a big deal, but then it kind of is a big deal? Or maybe it's only a big deal because you're making it one because you can't stop thinking about it?"

Throughout Bucky's little speech, Wanda's eyebrows climbed higher and higher. "That's...pretty deep for sober you."

"I'm serious." He started tearing at the label of his beer bottle. He felt bad not paying attention to Clint, but the crowd in front of the stage seemed pretty engaged, so maybe he wouldn't notice that his best friend and his girlfriend weren't paying him too much attention.

Wanda tucked her hair behind her ear, lips moued in thought. "It would depend," she finally said. "On what it was that happened."

"I'm serious." He'd kissed Steve is what had happened. Kissed Steve and liked it and wanted to do it again. Which made him...what, exactly? Gay? Bisexual? Bi-curious? Was he going to start hitting on all of his friends now? Wanting to kiss them?

He looked at the stage – at Clint, who was wearing skintight leather pants and a snug mesh shirt and sporting eyeliner – and felt...nothing. Sure, Clint was a good-looking guy and a great friend,
but Bucky didn't want to make out with him or anything. Couldn't imagine wanting to make out with Sam – also a damn good-looking dude and a damn good friend – or Morita or Tony or anyone else in his social circle. Just Steve.

Steve, with his wide, welcoming smiles, and the way he got Bucky's sense of humor, the way he listened during their conversations, instead of just waiting for his turn to talk. Steve, who'd also served and had scars and still had a seemingly bottomless capacity for compassion, who looked at the world and saw beauty and light. Steve, who'd had a shit childhood and still opened himself up to new people and new experiences.

Which meant...well, he had no idea what it meant.

"I don't want to kiss Clint."

He hadn't realized he'd said it aloud until Wanda let out a snort. "Non-sequiter much?"

"I'd still kiss you, though," he added, because it was the truth and that also had to mean something.

"Yeah, we went down that road already," she replied, and picked up her drink.

"No, I mean...I still want to kiss girls."

"And I'm sure all the available girls in the world will rejoice at hearing it," Wanda replied, with an impish smirk.

Bucky just thunked his head on the table. He had no idea why he even bothered.

***

He was still mulling over the stupid kiss and how he felt whenever he was around Steve and what it all meant when he flew up to San Francisco for a quick day trip to meet with Eddie's teachers to go over his course load for the upcoming school year. (Which, the less said about the idea that upcoming second-graders needed a course load, the better. He wanted his son to have the best education possible, but he was also a firm believer in letting kids be actual kids.) Peggy was waiting for him outside the school when his Uber driver stopped to let him out, and the second she saw him, her smile of welcome turned into a frown of concern.

She met him at the base of the steps, ignoring the other parents hustling inside to get to their own appointments. "What's wrong?"

"That obvious, huh?" He didn't even try to deflect. He knew better. She'd always been able to read him better than anyone on the planet, outside his mom and sister.

She shook her head and stepped up to him, smoothing out the wrinkles between his brows with her thumb. "Eddie gets that exact same furrow, you know. It's like seeing you, only in miniature."

"Poor kid." He snagged her hand to lace their fingers together, and gave her a small smile. "Would you believe me if I told you I think I...met someone?"

Her eyes widened. "James, that's wonderful. You haven't had a serious relationship since... Well, it's about damn time."

"Hey, you're a hard woman to replace, you know," he told her, partially to see her blush, but mostly because it was the absolute truth. Peggy Carter was one in a billion.
"Quit it." She batted at his arm, but her tone was fond. "So, who is she? Has the rest of your motley crew vetted her out to make sure she's worthy of you? Do I need to fly down to L.A. to put the fear of God in her?"

"God, no," he replied, with a shudder. The last thing he needed was Peggy going off on Steve in full-protective Mama Bear mode before he'd even had a chance to see if there was anything worth pursuing. Or if what he was feeling was an actual attraction or just some strange anomaly. "Plus, um. She's, uh, not a she," he admitted, speaking to their joined hands. "I mean, it's a, um...it's a he, actually. The person I'm interested in is a guy."

Just saying it out loud made it seem a little more...tangible. Definite. He was interested in Steve. In seeing if maybe all of those shy smiles and intimate moments and shared laughter meant something more than just two friends who enjoyed each other's company.

When he risked a glance up, her eyes seemed to have widened even further. "I had no idea you were...that you...were interested. In men."

He let out a short laugh, and pulled her down to sit next to him on the steps. They may as well be comfortable for this conversation. Thank God they had a little bit of time before they were supposed to meet with Mr. Thompson. "I'm not into men," he said, choosing each word carefully. "That's just it. I never once thought of another guy in, I dunno, romantic or sexual or whatever terms. At least...not until now."

She smiled, her expression softening in understanding. "Well, it's not like you're the first person to experiment with your sexuality."

The laugh morphed into a rueful chuckle. "I just...I think I'm falling for him," he quietly admitted. Which was scary as fuck. What if Steve didn't return his interest? Just because Steve was into men didn't mean he'd be into Bucky. "Pegs, I have no fucking idea what to do about this."

She laid her hand over his, the touch cool, soothing. "Darling, you know exactly what to do. Enjoy it. Enjoy him and whatever this is. There's nothing wrong with discovering something new about yourself."

"Helluva thing to discover, don't you think? It's always been women." But, maybe she had a point. Maybe this was just a new aspect of himself he was discovering. Maybe Steve was a special case, or maybe it was some fleeting attraction that would burn itself out the second they were around each other again, or maybe it was just an intellectual or mental crush thing and he'd balk at the physical aspects of it – he had no idea.

"Well, don't quote me, but I'm pretty sure what you just described is called bisexuality." She bumped against his arm. "You might have heard of it."

"Yeah, yeah." He supposed he deserved that. "You think I should go for it, don't you?"

She leaned in to kiss his cheek, then brushed away the slight smudge of her lipstick. "I think you should do whatever makes you happy. It's what we'd tell Eddie, yes?" She smiled when Bucky nodded – of course he would; their kid deserved all the happiness in the world. "Then why would the rules be different for you?"

"You make a good point," he said.

"Don't I always?" she replied, with a sunny grin. "And if you change your mind about me flying down to make sure this man has your best intentions at heart, let me know."
"Let me see if he's even interested first. For that matter, let me make sure I'm interested first."

"Fair enough." She checked her watch, and patted his knee. "You ready to go be a parent?"

"Nope," he admitted, with a grin. "But I've been saying that every day since we found out you were pregnant. I figure at this rate, I'll be ready by the time he's graduating college."

She laughed and let him help her to her feet. "Probably not even then."

"No, probably not even then." But it wouldn't stop him from doing the best job he could in the meantime. He walked with Peggy up the steps and into the school, feeling a little bit better about his life and the world and his own burgeoning attraction for Steve.

***

Bucky showed up at the shop early the next morning, clutching his to-go cup of coffee like a lifeline and yawnning what felt like every three seconds. Normally, Bucky stayed the night whenever he flew up to see Eddie, but after the meeting and a family dinner with Eddie and Peggy and Daniel, Bucky'd taken the late flight back to L.A. so he could make his appointment time with Steve – and he was acutely feeling the lack of sleep.

He still had no idea what to say or how to act or how to broach the subject of seeing if Steve was interested in maybe exploring something more...physical...but he'd cross that bridge when he got there. And when he was an actual functional human being instead of a caffeine-deprived zombie.

It was odd being the only person in the shop – normally Sharon or Sam opened the place up and got it ready for the day, leaving Bucky free to concentrate solely on his never-ending list of clients. He was used to the buzz of the machines and the blaring of pop or rock or hip-hop through the speakers and the six or seven different conversations going on at once. But, without all of the distractions, he was able to quickly set up his station and get the stencils ready for application, depending on what Steve wanted to do to start with.

He heard the rap on the glass right at 8am, and saw Steve standing outside, his face shadowed by his ballcap, and holding onto what looked like the world's biggest iced coffee.

Bucky was already grinning when he unlocked the door and held it open. "You look as tired as I do, man."

"Was up until after two going over notes and the shoot schedule, and we're starting with night shoots because the fucking lead actor's a goddamn pain in my ass, so, I may fall asleep on you in the chair. Just warning you now," Steve replied, and held up a brown paper bag. "But I brought breakfast. Well, egg and bacon sandwiches from Blue Jam."

"Perfect, we can go over the stencils while we eat."

Despite the shadows under his eyes and the scruff on his cheeks and chin, Steve looked good. The bright blue of his t-shirt brought out his eyes and his jeans were molded to long legs, and Bucky wondered what stubbled lips against his own would feel like, if the scrape and burn would be pleasant or weird or what...and had to give himself a mental shake. It was way too early, for one thing, and this wasn't the time or place, anyway. Right now, he was Steve's tattoo artist.

"Thanks for coming in so early," Steve said, thankfully oblivious to the direction of Bucky's thoughts. "I need to head out around 11 to meet with my DP in Long Beach, so this...it's cool of you."
Bucky motioned at Steve to take one of the lobby chairs. "Happy to do it. Just don't let it get around that I'm willing to wake up early for people."

Steve fished out one of the sandwiches and handed Bucky the bag. "Your secret's safe with me. So...um, what're we – you, I mean – doing today?"

"Well, I thought we could at least do the Bridge and cover that godawful prison tattoo, but that's up to you."

"However you wanna do it," Steve said, with a small smile. "I trust you."

Bucky hid his blush by taking a big bite of his sandwich. The attraction was definitely not a one-time thing, then.

"But, uh..." Steve gestured at Bucky's hands. "Doesn't it hurt? I mean, with the bruising?"

Bucky glanced down at the fading bruise on his left hand, and shook his head. "Nah, I'm right-handed, so the tattooing part is fine. I just have to be careful how I pull at the skin with this hand – but it's fine. I'm not as quick as I usually am, but I can still do my job."

Steve nodded. "Well, for what it's worth, beer's on me for the next year. I owe you."

"Nah, you're fine. Couldn't let your face get all busted up, then I'd never know when you were blushing..." Bucky trailed off, inwardly wincing. That was totally flirting.

But Steve just laughed. "You're such an asshole."

And this, at least, was just like it always was. The two of them giving each other shit, the quips and retorts coming nice and easy. "Yeah, but I'm the asshole who saved you from a broken nose, so I'll take you up on the free beer."

They finished their sandwiches and coffee, then Bucky laid out the stencils on the table. "So, like I said, we can do whatever you want first..."

Steve gave him a quick glance. "This is really how everything's going to look on my back?"

"Yeah, once I'm done." Bucky pointed at each stencil, and how they all interlocked together. "It'll probably take three sessions – two to get all of the elements down and then another one to do all the fine-tuning with the shading and detailing – but yeah. If you want me to change anything, now's your big chance."

"No, I..." Steve huffed out a laugh, and swiped his hat off to run his fingers through his hair. "This is amazing."

Bucky fought back the urge to duck his head. Instead, busied himself by tying his hair back into its usual stub at the nape of his neck. "Well, that's the idea. You wanted Brooklyn, I'm giving you Brooklyn. So go ahead and take off your shirt and get comfortable on the table and I'm gonna go wash up and glove up and we'll get started."

He took an extra minute when he was done washing his hands to splash some water on his face and then walked out into the main room. Steve was shirtless and lying facedown on the padded table, and Bucky's fingers itched with the need to smooth them over the muscled lines of his back and the endless display of lightly-tanned skin. This was nuts. He'd seen hundreds of half-dressed or fully naked people in his line of work, some of them highly attractive, and he'd always managed to keep his shit professional.
What the hell was it about Steve Rogers?

He walked over to his station, then snapped on a pair of latex gloves, and picked up his bottle of green-soap and a paper towel. "You ready?"

"Mmm." Steve turned his head to face Bucky and he squinted one eye open. "Totally serious about falling asleep on you."

"We'll see how you feel once I actually start inking you," Bucky replied, and went about cleaning and shaving and prepping Steve for the stencil set. "Now flex your back for me then hold really still, okay." Normally he had his clients stand when he put on the stencils, but with the way this part was going to sit on Steve's shoulders and back, lying down would be easier.

"Flex, hold still, got it."

Applying the stencils was always the trickiest part of the process, but Bucky'd been doing it so long that he had it down to a science. As soon as he was finished, he eyed it critically, making sure all of the lines were perfect and that the body of the bridge would cover Steve's original tattoo, then he tapped Steve on the calf. "C'mon, you need to head to the mirror and tell me if you like the placement of it."

"Trust you," Steve replied, slurring the words on a yawn. He didn't so much as twitch a muscle otherwise.

Well, okay. Bucky chuckled, and grabbed another paper towel and his jar of Vaseline. "You're lucky we're friends and I've got a reputation to protect."

"Sure am."

Steve, it seemed, wasn't much of a morning person. It was pretty cute. Bucky could certainly sympathize – mornings weren't his favorite thing, either. Something else they had in common, and it was a little freaky, but pretty cool, how they were all adding up. He flipped on the machine, the buzzing unnaturally loud in the quiet of the shop, and rolled his stool over to the table, needle at the ready.

"Last chance to back out." In answer, Steve just gave him a quick thumbs up.

Inking the first line on someone – taking that first irrevocable step – was always a small thrill. There was something irresistibly intimate about the act. About putting his mark on another person's body, knowing it would be there for a lifetime. Knowing that he'd be with that person, wherever they went, whatever they did. But there was something extra special about this moment, this tattoo, this man.

Even if nothing happened between them – even if this was just some harmless crush or the start of a very early mid-life crisis on Bucky's part – for the rest of Steve's life, Bucky would be a part of it in some small, tangible way.

He wiped at the seepage, bent closer to get at the fine lines that made up the steel beams of the Brooklyn Bridge. "Hey, you awake?"

"Trying not to be, but some rude dickhead keeps jabbing at me with a needle."

"I did warn you, man." Bucky laughed, hoping it didn't sound as self-conscious as it felt, and took a second to try to phrase his question in such a way that it would come out as simple curiosity and not anything more. "So, um, can I ask you something?"
Steve turned his head to the side and squinted up at him. "I dunno, can you?"

"Smartass." No wonder he liked Steve so much. "Um...when did you know? That you were...into guys?"

Bucky wasn't sure how Steve managed it, since he didn't actually move, but his surprise was eloquently expressed just the same. "Oh God...um...does my teenage crush on JC Chazez count?"

JC Chazez? Really? "Um, does it?"

"I'm joking, I was never into 'NSync," Steve said, with a tiny half-smile. "But, um. I think I always knew I found men as attractive as I do women. I mean, the only relationships – like, serious relationships – I've had have been with women, but there've been...there've been guys. A couple I think maybe I could've had something serious with if things had gone that way. Why?"

The needle continued to buzz as Bucky finished the outline of the arches. He was thankful Steve couldn't really see the way his face was heating up. Subtle, Barnes, real fucking subtle. "Um...just making conversation."

Steve made a thoughtful noise, but closed his eyes again. "If you're trying to distract me from how much this hurts, you're doing a terrible job, by the way."

Bucky paused. "You need a break?"

"Nope, but since you're not going to let me sleep –"

"It's not my fault you can't sleep over getting stabbed at –"

"– You need to entertain me," Steve finished.

"I do, huh." Bucky shook his head as he got back to work. "I'm not singing for anyone this early in the morning and my hands are a little too busy to read to you like I do my son."

"That's okay, we can save the karaoke and storybook time for later." Steve shifted slightly, but Bucky rolled with it and kept going. "Talk me about Eddie. Whatever you want."

"Now that I can do." His kid was pretty much his favorite topic ever. He launched into a story about the day three year-old Eddie met Cap and Winter, both of them ten weeks old at the time, and the ensuing chaos of toddler versus puppies, and that story bled into one about his own childhood and the time he and his sister tried to steal the neighbor's dog because they thought the neighbor was being mean to it, and then Steve told him about the time he rescued a kitten from a dumpster only to find out he was allergic to cats, and before Bucky knew it, two hours had flown by and he was putting the final finishing touches on the base of the Bridge.

"I think that's gonna do it," he commented, and shut off the machine. He wiped away at the excess, and took a minute to check all of the lines were exactly as they should be. "You ready to have a look before I wrap it?"

"Yeah, are you kidding?" Steve sat up, wincing a little at the pull of sore muscles and skin, but the smile he gave Bucky was still beautifully, breathtakingly wide.

"Alright, stand there, lemme grab the other mirror. And no peeking!" Bucky left Steve standing with his back to the wall mirror, and grabbed the smaller one from the hook by the office door. He handed it to Steve with a small smile, hoping his nerves weren't showing. "We'll make more time for the next session so I can do the skyline and the Wonder Wheel, but for now at least, we..."
He trailed off as Steve lowered the mirror and gave him a look that radiated sheer, unmitigated joy. "Buck, this is...wow. I can't even see where the old tattoo used to be, this is... Holy shit, it looks just like the BK Bridge."

He wasn't going to blush, he wasn't going to blush. "Sooo...you like it?" he asked, trying to diffuse the moment with a little humor.

Steve just shook his head and clapped him on the shoulder, the touch warm and friendly. "This is...it's amazing. You're amazing. I...just...thank you."

Steve was standing so close. So close Bucky could see the tiny ring of hazel around the blue of Steve's eyes, so close he could see every laugh line around that smiling, generous mouth. It would be easy – so damn easy – to lean in and place an experimental kiss to Steve's lips. Just to see if there was anything there or if it was...

The bell above the front door jingled.

Both Steve and Bucky jumped back a step, Steve's hand falling from Bucky's shoulder. Sharon and Sam both waved as they walked in, Sharon locking the door behind her.

"Hey, I didn't know you guys were doing an early session," Sam said, then whistled once he saw Steve's back. "That's tight, man, real nice work."

It took Bucky a second to remember words. His chest felt super heavy. "Uh...thanks."

"Solid as always," Sharon commented. "Steve, you want me to wrap it and go over aftercare with you?"

"Um...yeah, I guess I...I probably do need to get going," Steve said, giving Bucky a quick, apologetic look. "I'll see you Saturday?"

"Yeah, you bet." Deep breaths, man, keep it cool. "Come up to the house around eight, we can drive down to the gallery together."

"Sure, sounds good."

Bucky watched as Sharon directed Steve to have a seat back on the table, then he headed to his office to go over the day's schedule with Sam. But it was another thirty minutes before his heart settled.

***
Chapter 12

Bucky's phone buzzed just as he and the dogs were jogging their way around the corner and up the hill to his street.

**Steve Rogers**  
*Here at the house. Where u at?*

He didn't bother to respond – he'd be home in the time it would take him to type up a reply. Instead, he urged Cap and Winter into racing with him up the hill and onto his drive, not that they ever needed much encouragement to run. Steve was standing on the front porch waiting for him, with perfectly styled hair and that sharp jawline, in well-fitted black slacks and an off-white polo, and yeah, this was going to be a problem. A big problem.

Bucky lifted a hand in welcome, acutely aware of the fact that he was shirtless and sweaty as all fuck. The dogs strained against their leashes, barking enthusiastically. Steve's smile was bright enough to power a city block as he walked down the steps.

"Hey...um...I guess I'm early?"

"No, I'm just running late." Bucky tugged at Cap and Winter's leashes when they both tried to lunge Steve's way again. He sympathized – he wanted to jump Steve himself (which, just, what was even happening to him?) – but manners were manners. "Sit," he commanded, pleased when they actually obeyed him. "Good puppies."

"You, uh..." Steve made a vague motion Bucky's way, his cheeks slightly pink. "Do you want me to, um, help?"

"Actually, yeah, if you could feed them then get them settled in the backyard while I shower, that'd be great. Or wait..." he said, wincing at Steve's slacks. "Cap'll just jump all over you, because food, and she's shedding like a –"

"Relax." Steve took the leashes, and bent to give Cap and Winter head scratches. "I can handle a little dog hair. You go on, I got this."

Bucky thought Steve was severely underestimating his girl's tendency to get her hair everywhere, but it was Steve's funeral. "Thanks."

Bucky let everyone in the house, then left Steve to get the dogs settled while he headed down the hall towards his bedroom. He normally left the door open when he showered so the dogs could roam in and out and check on him, but it felt weird with Steve there.

He washed as quickly as he could, aware of the fact that Steve was in his house while he was naked and wet and... yeah, okay, he really needed to think about something else before things got embarrassing. Which, what would it be like to share a shower with another man? With Steve? With pressing against that hard, muscled body as water sluiced over them, gliding his hands over slick skin –

**Stop.** Jesus, he needed to get a grip on himself.

He still didn't even know if Steve was interested in him like that, and here he was, having erotic thoughts about bathing together. Put your pants on one leg at a time, his grannie was fond of saying, and he needed to remember that. Once he'd sussed out if Steve was into him, then maybe
they could talk logistics and...other things.

He hopped out of the shower in record time and got dressed in a nice pair of black jeans and black tee with a dark-red button-down over it. Two minutes to find his belt and lace into his boots and pull his hair back into a stub, and he walked into the living room, satisfied he looked at least somewhat presentable.

Steve was looking at the collage of photos Bucky had hanging over the sofa, but turned his head when Bucky came to a stop next to him. "You know it's funny, I remember glancing over these the first time I ever came to the house, but it didn't register that Peggy was in any of them," Steve said, tapping at one of the frames. It housed a picture of Peggy in a hospital gown holding a newborn Eddie and looking down at him like he was a miracle come to life. Which, in Bucky's very biased opinion, he was. Best day of Bucky's life, no question about it.

Bucky chuckled. "Well, if I remember that first night correctly, I think you and Thor were a little too busy making out on my sofa to care about looking up at the pictures on the wall."

And, remembering that night, thinking how oddly beautiful they'd looked together, Bucky thought maybe he should have put things together on how he felt a helluva lot sooner.

Steve's lips curved up in a self-conscious smile. "I don't think I ever apologized for that."

"No need, man. Those cushions have seen a lot of action." In fact, Bucky really wanted to pull Steve onto them right now and see if they could get a little of it themselves. But Natasha would kill him if he missed her opening, and Bucky still wasn't sure exactly how to go about making a first move that wouldn't wind up with him making a total dick of himself.

"So, you ready to head out?" he asked.

Steve nodded and turned away from the photos. "Yeah, Cap and Winter are all good, I fed them and refilled their water bowls and gave them a couple of rawhide bones to gnaw on, so, yeah."

"Wow, you're better than my actual dog sitter," Bucky replied. "What's your rate?"

Steve smiled at him, wide and yet, somehow, soft. "For you and your dogs, no charge."

Bucky cleared a suddenly very dry throat. "I'll...uh...keep that in mind. Um, shall we?"

Bucky insisted on driving – it had been his invitation, after all – and after inching their way over the hill and Westside, they made pretty good time getting to the gallery. Natasha's works were on display along with two other photographers, so the place was pretty crowded by the time they parked and made their way into the main room.

"There's a lot of people in here," Steve observed, with an impressed look.

"Nat does really good work – she's got a pretty sizeable audience." Bucky snagged two glasses of red wine from a passing waiter, and handed one to Steve. "Here. It's probably cheap merlot, but at least it's something."

"Thanks." Steve took a sip, then pointed at the walls. "You wanna look around for a minute before we try to find everyone or...?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

This felt like a date. A first date even, which was a little hilarious. But it was true – Bucky had that
faintly nervous, slightly manic energy pulsing under his skin. He wasn't sure what to say or where
to put his hands or how close to stand, and he was super conscious of Steve's every movement. Of
the way he smelled – some nice, woody cologne that suited him – and of the way his slacks
hugged his hips and ass and thighs. Which, he'd never even thought about a man's body in that sort
of context before, but now it was like he couldn't stop thinking about it. About how those thighs
would feel rubbing against his own, about the way those big arms would feel wrapped around his
back, pulling him against that wide, muscled chest.

It was going to be a long damn night.

"That is a really incredible picture of Sam," Steve said, looking more than a little awed at the photo
hanging in a prominent place of honor in the middle of the room. "I mean, great composition and
framing, but wow. She made him look like a professional model."

Bucky tipped his glass in the direction of the photo. "Well, he used to be one, so you're not far off.
He still does from time to time."

Steve turned to him. "Wait, like, for real?"

"You've seen him. Aesthetically speaking, he's one of the most good-looking men I've ever met." And
yet, Bucky had never once looked at him and thought, I want to tap that. Whatever was going
on with him, it was a Steve thing and only a Steve thing.

"Yeah, okay, good point, although, um, well, never mind." Steve gave him a curious look. "So, is
that how they met? At a shoot?"

"No, they never worked together before they started dating. That was, uh..." This was going to be
awkward. "I may have introduced them."

"Okay." Steve drew out the word all slow. "I'm sensing a story."

"Nat and I may have been a thing for a hot minute," Bucky admitted, wincing. Nothing like
bringing up an ex in front of the person he was currently interested in getting to know better in the
Biblical sense. Although, in his defense, Steve had asked.

"Ah okay." Steve didn't look upset or anything – just curious. "And...how did...she move from you
to...? Sorry, that's probably none of my –"

"It's fine." Bucky didn't want Steve thinking there was any topic off-limits. They were still friends,
and close ones, at that. "And, well, it just seemed to me like she and Sam would be better suited for
each other, so I introduced them. They did the rest all on their own."

"Sounds kinda romantic," Steve replied, setting his hand on Bucky's shoulder. "Not too many
people would be selfless enough to do something like that."

"Yeah, well, it's kind of...I've gotten a lot of shit for it." Bucky's smile softened. He would be okay
if Steve kept touching him all night. If he slid his hand down to lace their fingers together. What
would it be like to hold hands with another guy, to feel hard calluses and a strong grip instead of
the softness of a woman's touch?

"For introducing them?"

"Uh, no." This was ridiculous. Here Steve was, trying to have a conversation, and he was off
fantasizing about holding hands like they were boyfriends. Christ. "I may have done that, uh, more
than once. Set my exes up with my friends, I mean."
Steve lifted an eyebrow. "How many is more than once?"

Bucky flinched, but ticked them all off one by one. "Well, you know about Nat and Sam. And I dated Sharon and then introduced her to Morita, and then there was Wanda and Clint, and, uh, Peggy and Daniel. Which, I think I mentioned, he used to be in my unit..."

"Wow, that is a pattern," Steve said.

"I know, it's..."

"Hey, I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. It's nice that you want your friends to be happy." Steve patted him again, then removed his hand, and maybe Bucky was imagining it, but it kinda felt like Steve's touch lingered a little. That was a good sign, right?

"How's the shoulder healing up?" he asked, as they moved to the next photo.

"Great except for the fact that I'm in the itchy stage now, which sucks. But no scabbing or bleeding and I promise, I'm keeping it out of the sun."

"Good." The wine really wasn't all that great, but at least it gave Bucky something to do with his hands. "And you're getting enough lotion on it?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah, it's sort of a pain, but I'm managing."

Bucky wondered if it would be too cheesy if he volunteered his services. Probably. Seemed a little junior high. *Let me rub that in for you...* Could he be more of a cliché?

"How's your hand?" Steve asked.

Bucky held up his palm, showing off the yellowish-green bruising. "Still sore, but not too bad."

"Good, that's...oh wow, Buck, *look* at this..." Steve stopped in front of another photo, this one of a group of children playing soccer against a backlit sky. "I wonder how she got that shot."

"Lots of patience," came a voice behind them, and they both turned to see Natasha standing there, wearing a killer little black dress and holding a half-full champagne flute. "Glad you boys could make it."

"Yeah, sorry, my fault we're late," Bucky replied, and brushed a kiss to her cheek. "You look great. Great crowd, too."

"Not too bad," she admitted, with a pleased smile, then directed her attention to Steve. "So you like this one?"

"Yeah, it's amazing." Steve gestured at it. "Just the way the light looks like it's prismsing through the trees right there – it's almost religious. And the way the kids are running around, laughing, enjoying themselves...I mean, I'm not much of an art critic, but the symbolism is pretty powerful."

"Oh, you *are* a keeper, aren't you." Natasha linked her elbow through Steve's and shot Bucky a wide grin. "Be careful, Buck, or I'm stealing him from you."

The back of his neck heated up. If only Steve was his to steal, and *fuck*, he had it bad. "Pretty sure you've already got your hands full with Sam."

"Uh, speaking of, where is everyone else?" Steve asked, looking around the room.
Natasha waved at the anteroom off to the side. "At the bar, probably. Sam's done his duty rounds, so I set him free to hide in the corner with Clint and Wanda. Although I think Clint wandered off to talk to some producer or another. Networking is everything."

Steve looked at Bucky. "You wanna say hi or keep looking around or...?"

"Actually, I need to borrow Bucky for just a minute, if you don't mind," Natasha said, transferring her hold from Steve to Bucky. "We'll catch up with you."

"Oh. Sure," Steve said, and held up his empty wine glass. "I need a refill anyway. I'll, uh, see if I can find Sam and Wanda, too."

"Five minutes," Natasha promised, then pulled Bucky to a relatively uncrowded corner.

"Did I do something?" Bucky asked, once they were alone. Yeah, he and Steve were a little late, but –

She smacked him lightly on the arm. "Why didn't you tell me you and Steve were a thing now?"

"Wait, what? We're not a – hold on. Panic licked up his spine. Was it that obvious? Did Steve know? Please don't tell me I'm – is –"

"Okay, stop." She peered at him, shrewd green eyes assessing him. "This isn't a date? You're not on a date with him?"

"No," he said, then continued, because apparently keeping his crush to himself was beyond him at this point. "But I want it to be, I think? No, uh, I know I do, I just...don't know how to ask."

"Oh my God, you're as hopeless as ever," Natasha lamented. "He's a man, not an alien lifeform. It's just like asking out a woman, and I know from very personal experience that you know your way around girls just fine."

"It feels different," Bucky mumbled. God, this was embarrassing. He felt like he had a neon sign on his forehead. Step right up, see the giant nerd crushing hard on his friend, only a dollar a pop. "I really like him, Nat –"

"Oh, honey, we all could have told you that –"

"But this is...I've never...what if he's not interested? I don't want to fuck up the friendship."

"You're a really nice guy," Natasha said, and patted his hand.

Bucky frowned a little and drained the rest of his wine. "You make it sound like a death sentence."

"It's only one to you," she replied. "I think you've forgotten that nice guys can get the girl. Guy. Person. You don't always have to be a supporting role in your own play."

He had no idea, really, what she was talking about, but he appreciated that she was trying to help. "That's very deep of you."

She hit his arm again, not so lightly this time. "I'm trying to be serious."

"I know," he said. He wasn't sure what it said about him that, so far, two of his ex-girlfriends were encouraging him to start something up with a guy, but it was pretty funny once he thought about it.

"You deserve to be happy, and before you say something all noble like, I am happy, I have a
"healthy kid and my business is booming, you know what I mean."

"I do." He brought her hand up and kissed the back of it. "And thanks. I appreciate it."

"Good," she told him and smiled. "Now go out there and get your man and stop worrying so much about his gender."

"Easy for you to say," but she was right, he thought. Guys asked other guys out all the time. And he already knew that he and Steve got along and had chemistry – it was time to see if that translated into something more.

Steve was at the bar when Bucky found him again, but he was by himself, no Sam or Wanda or Clint in sight. Which, if Bucky was looking for a sign, that was a pretty good one, right? "Hey, I was just –" Steve held up two fresh glasses of wine. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's..." Bucky took the offered glass and drained it in two big gulps.

"Woah, um..." Those blue eyes widened. "Are you sure you're – mmph."

Bucky'd moved before he could talk himself out of it. Pressed his lips to Steve's, the kiss quick and nervous and not remotely his best one, not by a long shot. Steve's lips were soft and slightly dry, just like Bucky remembered from last time, but they were unmoving against Bucky's own.

And Steve was unnaturally still.

When Bucky apprehensively pulled back, Steve was looking at him in confusion, his normally smiling face pulled into a slight frown. Which was not a good sign. At all.

"I just fucked up, didn't I?" Bucky asked, with a sinking feeling in his gut.

Steve blinked at him, still not moving. "What...?"

"Forget it." His face was flaming. He was afraid to look around them, to see if any of their friends were witnessing his utter humiliation. So much for chemistry and going for it. "It was...forget it, you're clearly not interested so..."

"No, that's." Steve blew out a short breath, and he finally moved enough to set his glass down on the bartop. "I thought...I thought you were straight. You...you said...you and Clint talked about how you weren't interested in men..."

"Well, I'm not into guys," Bucky told him, then quickly added, because he didn't want Steve to get the wrong idea, "except when the guy is you, apparently."

Steve punched out a short, sharp breath. "Oh."

"Yeah," Bucky agreed, wishing like hell he had another drink. He wondered if he could steal Steve's. "Oh."

"I, um...I think maybe we need to talk. Not here," Steve added, with a quick look around the room. "There are probably – definitely – a couple of things we need to discuss before we...do anything."

"Okay." Which sounded kinda ominous, but Bucky wasn't going to panic just yet. He fished out his car keys and dropped them in Steve's waiting palm. Sure, he probably could drive, but it wasn't worth the risk. "You wanna head up to the house? I'll text Nat later and explain, but she'll get it if we cut out early."
"You positive?" Steve asked, quietly, his fingers closing over the keys. Bucky couldn't figure out his expression. "These are your friends, you should –"

"Steve." Bucky took a chance, laid his hand over Steve's on the bar. Made sure to keep the touch light. Non-threatening. "Look, I know you said you don't wanna get too into it here, but you need to believe me. There's nothing that's more important to me than this."

"Okay." Steve nodded, then straightened. "Your place sounds good."

***
Chapter 13

The ride back was a million miles away from the drive there – both of them were silent, and there was this...tension in the air that Bucky didn't want to think about too much. Conversation with Steve had always come so easy, and maybe they'd only known each other a few months, but Bucky still didn't want to lose that. He hoped Steve felt the same way.

They were quiet when Steve pulled up into the drive, and it lasted while Bucky unlocked the door and let them into the darkened house. He turned on a couple of lights in the living room, and headed into the kitchen. "You want a beer or some water or...?"

Steve stood in the doorway, hands shoved in the front pockets of his slacks, like he wasn't sure of his welcome. "Water would be...I mean, I'd really love a shot of whiskey, but...I think I need to have all my wits about me for this."

Bucky grabbed two bottles of water and shut the fridge. He set one on the counter and clutched the other, willing himself to be a calm, cool, collected adult about this. He was a 31 year-old father, for fuck's sake. If Steve wasn't interested, he'd just pull on his big boy pants and go about the more important business of salvaging a friendship that had come to mean a lot to him.

"You know, if you're trying to let me down easy, you don't have to. I mean, this is my...I dunno, bisexual freak out or epiphany or whatever it is, and just because I've got feelings for you doesn't mean..." Bucky gestured helplessly. He was fucking this all up already. "You're a good guy, Steve. A genuinely good guy. There aren't too many of those in the world, let alone this town. You deserve someone worthy of that, I guess, is all I mean. So, it's cool if you're not –"

"I'm sorry, what?" Steve walked over to the counter and stood in front of Bucky. He swiped the bottle, almost like he was mad at it for something, then jabbed it in Bucky's direction like a fencing foil. "Are you, what, trying to tell me you're not a good guy? Because that might be the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life."

Bucky frowned. Steve didn't sound resigned or like he was trying to spare Bucky's feelings. He sounded pissed. "No, that's not –"

"You're amazing, you know that, right?" Steve let out a sharp, high laugh. "God, the first fucking moment I met you, I was so tongue-tied I'm surprised I got any words out. I mean...fuck, even beyond looking like pretty much every wet dream I've ever had about the perfect man...you were so cool that day. Inviting me to your house like we were already friends, and hanging out talking to me on the deck about shit that was really important to you...and you didn't even get pissed off when I was stupid enough to make out with another guy on your sofa."

"Well, no, I –"

But Steve wasn't finished. "Your...your talent is incredible, and your friends would all go to the mat for you any day of the week, and you're a great father and just...everything I've... We may not have been friends that long, but..." He set the bottle down with a thunk, and shuffled in, every emotion on his handsome face an open book for Bucky to read. "Buck, you're incredible. I think you're one of the most incredible people I've ever met."

He had no idea how to respond. The way Steve was looking at him – all but radiating sincerity and admiration – and Bucky tried his best to be a good person and a good father, but he wasn't this. Wasn't whatever...paragon or whatever it was Steve saw. And he still didn't know what any of
Steve's speech meant for them. Was he actually interested, or was he just trying to make sure Bucky knew he valued their friendship too much to fuck with it?

"I'm...I'm just a normal guy, alright," he managed to get out. "Nothing that special –"

"- No, you know what, you don't get to do this," Steve said, and pointed a finger Bucky's direction. "I was a fucking coward about this once and I'm not making that mistake again."

Bucky frowned again. "What're you –?"

"Shut up and listen, okay. Just...listen. I need to tell you this before we –" Steve raked his hands through his hair, spiking it up in tiny tufts. "I knew you. We met before that day in your shop. I knew you looked familiar, but I didn't know why until –"

"No, I told you, we've never –"

Steve shook his head once, sharp. "I was part of the Ranger team sent in to evac the 107th in Musa Qala."

Bucky blinked. The words weren't making any sense. "You were...you were there? In Musa Qala?"

"Yeah, Buck." Steve took a shuddering breath, then seemed to shore himself up. Like he was bracing for a blow. "You were pretty delirious when my chalk found your unit – you...Jesus, no wonder it took me awhile to figure it out, I mean, you were covered in blood and mud and your arm was a goddamn mess...and you still almost shot my head off when we came into the building. Still protecting your guys."

"That was you?" This was...this didn't... There was a buzzing in Bucky's ears, and his heart was beating double-time, knocking against his ribs. "You were...you...that was your team?"

"Yes." Steve's gaze was rock steady on his, honest and true. If this was a joke... But no, it wouldn't be. Steve would never joke about something like this. Not about Afghanistan. And not about that day. "I should've said something to you earlier, and I'm sorry for that. By the time I pieced it all together, I couldn't figure out a way to bring it up without it...well. But you needed to know before we...I mean, if you still want to..."

"That's how..." Bucky lifted his hand, gestured at Steve's side. Where he knew all the scarring was. "You were the one who pushed me out of the way when the –" His breath hitched, liquid in his throat. "When the grenade –"

"Hey, it's... C'mon, breathe with me, okay." Steve grabbed Bucky's shoulders, the touch firm, but so so gentle. "Just breathe with me."

In, then out. In, then out. Bucky matched his breaths to Steve, slow and deliberate and steady, and gradually, the spots disappeared behind his eyelids and he felt like he wasn't under imminent threat of having a fucking heart attack in his own kitchen. Thank God the dogs were outside, he thought. He didn't think he'd have any idea how to deal with their distress, too.

"You okay?" Steve asked, after a minute.

Bucky nodded. "It's just...a lot to take in."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not mad..." He wasn't completely sure what all he was, but mad wasn't it. "I wouldn't
have known how to tell you, either, if it had been the other way around."

"I still should have said something." Steve squeezed his arms, then took a half-step back. "But
once it all clicked, it all...you were...I never forgot the way you looked when I first saw you. You
were...like...this wounded mama tiger protecting her cubs. I'd never seen anything like it," he said,
regard and something else, something deeper, in his voice. "I never respected anyone like I did
you. Your men said you single-handedly kept an entire platoon at bay...saved a whole lotta lives."

Bucky's heart lurched again as a fresh well of grief swept over him. "Except you know better. Falsy
died on my watch..."

Steve inched back in, and rested his hand on Bucky's jaw. The slide of his thumb was so tender –
far more tender than anything Bucky deserved. "Your unit was outranked and outranked and
outmaneuvered from the get-go. And yet you kept everyone together and focused until
reinforcements arrived. If it hadn't been for you, a lot more of your men – and a lot of civilians –
would have died."

"I know," Bucky quietly admitted; it was the truth, but God, it still hurt. Even now, it was like this
gaping wound inside him that may have scabbed over, but would never fully heal. "But sometimes
knowing that isn't enough."

"Yeah, I know." And, Bucky could tell by the look in Steve's eyes that he did know. He knew the
horror that came from losing someone.

"Who was yours?" he asked, and placed his own hand on Steve's nape. Felt soft, warm skin under
his fingers. A physical reminder that this was real. They were, both of them, okay. Alive and well
and what happened in Afghanistan was a lifetime ago.

"Our munitions guy – his name was Dernier, but everyone called him Frenchy." Steve's lips tilted
in the saddest smile Bucky'd ever seen. "He was defusing a car bomb and, uh, he missed the
secondary device."

"Jesus." He ached all over for Steve, for his friend, for Falsy and every single person who hadn't
made it back. But he didn't try to stop the feeling of relief that he and Steve had made it. The
feeling of gratitude that Steve had been the one to save his life that day, that they had this extra
layer between them, another bond that tethered them to each other.

"We all have ghosts," Steve told him, and he was so close. Close enough Bucky could practically
feel the warmth of his skin through their clothes. "But you did the best you could and so did I, and
maybe there really isn't any such thing as fate or kismet, but I don't believe that. I think we
reconnected for a reason."

Bucky pulled Steve in until their foreheads were touching. His hands were shaking again, but this
was a good kind of nervous. "I really fucking like you, okay. And I have no idea how to go
about...I mean, doing this with a guy...but I want...I really want to see where this goes."

"Me too," Steve told him, and smiled, that small, intimate smile that made Bucky's knees weak. "I
want that more than anything, you have no idea."

Then he bridged the final distance between them, and laid his lips over Bucky's.

The kiss was a little like the ones they'd already shared – chaste and dry and over much too soon.
But when they angled their heads and leaned back in for the next kiss, this one was worlds away
from any of those. Steve urged Bucky's mouth open, slid his tongue alongside Bucky's like he
couldn't wait to taste him, and his lips were hot enough to melt steel.

Bucky's nerves were humming under his skin, a livewire that kept sending bolts of electricity all through his body. He moaned, a guttural noise deep in his throat, and pulled Steve closer, close enough he could feel that hard chest against his, the unyielding line of Steve's body a marked contrast to all of Bucky's previous partners. But the difference didn't seem to matter, not when Steve was kissing him like he'd never get enough, like Bucky's mouth was a delicacy he wanted to savor as long as possible.

And yeah, maybe the scrape of stubble against Bucky's lips was a little weird, and maybe being with someone who was the same height he was took a second to get used to, and maybe he had a what the fuck moment when he felt the hard outline of Steve's dick against his hip, but none of it was a deal breaker. And none of it made Bucky want to stop kissing Steve. In fact, Bucky never wanted to stop kissing Steve. Which would probably freak him out more if he wasn't so busy trying to suck the taste off of Steve's tongue.

Somehow, Steve had managed to move them so Bucky was trapped between the counter and Steve, and Bucky had his hands in Steve's hair, and Steve's hands were clutching at his ass to bring them into even closer contact. They traded angles again, slowed down to nibble and taste, and when Steve's lips moved to Bucky's jaw, then the sensitive skin just under it, Bucky would have been utterly embarrassed by the whimper that came out of his mouth if he had any shame left at all. His entire body was one big inferno of need and fuck yes and don't stop.

They were both panting like they'd run a four minute mile when Steve finally lifted his head. His hair was a wreck from Bucky's fingers and his mouth was lush and bruised and terrifyingly tempting. Bucky let out a shaky breath.

"Is it always like that with a guy?"

Steve groaned out a laugh, and shook his head. He kept looking at Bucky like he was the greatest thing since grilled cheese sandwiches, which was distracting enough in and of itself. "No," Steve answered quietly, "it's not always like that at all."

"Oh." Bucky nodded, although he had no idea why. He had no idea about a lot of things, except he wanted to dive right back into Steve's...well, his everything, basically, and not come up for air for a year or two. Which...yeah. Terrifying.

"Too much too soon?" Steve asked, seeming to sense a little of Bucky's thoughts. His thumbs were tracing small circles against the sides of Bucky's neck, and maybe he meant for it to be soothing, Bucky didn't know, but they were having the opposite effect.

"It's..." Bucky shrugged helplessly. "A big part of me wants to drag you down the hall and...that's just it, I don't know what's next. I mean, I'm not an idiot, I'm sure I can figure out what two guys do in the bedroom –"

Steve chuckled, fond and like Bucky had said something genuinely amusing. "It's really not that different. I mean, yes, it's different –"

Bucky glanced down between them – at Steve's very male body – then back up with a pointed look. "Yeah, no shit."

"Okay, different, you're right." His thumbs skimmed down to tease at the collar of Bucky's shirt. "But the touching and kissing and tasting and giving each other pleasure, that's still the same."
"Really making it hard not to start anything," Bucky groaned. Already, his lips missed the feel of Steve's like an actual, physical ache.

Steve gave him a light, soft kiss that didn't last nearly long enough. "I'm going to go home before we both do something we might regret."

"I didn't mean..." Bucky caught one of Steve's hands before he could pull completely away. "I mean, I still want..."

"Me too. Trust me on that," Steve told him, and squeezed his fingers. "But we still shouldn't rush into anything."

"Yeah, you're right." Bucky hated to admit it, but Steve did have a point. Just because he was horny as fuck and physically wanted this didn't mean he was psychologically or even emotionally ready. And he was adult enough to know the difference. Steve wasn't some itch he wanted to scratch or a one-night stand or some momentary lapse of judgement. He was a friend who had the potential to be a whole lot more. They should do this right.

"Good." Steve gave him another kiss, lingering and sweet, then stepped back. "So, you'll take some time to think about everything?"

"Just as soon as I rub one out, I promise to do nothing but think about things."

"Really?? You just had to – you are such a fucking asshole." Then Steve reeled him back in, the kiss open and carnal and sizzling every nerve in Bucky's body.

This time when they parted, they both groaned a little at the loss of contact. Bucky's head was swimming. He felt like a teenager again, all raging hormones and wild mood swings.

Steve's eyes were dark, but his voice was steady enough. "I'm leaving before I can't."

"I'm letting you leave before I can't," Bucky replied, and reached back to grab at the counter to keep from grabbing Steve.

"Call me or text me or...whatever, okay?" Steve took one step away from him, then another, but he didn't break eye contact.

"I will," Bucky promised. "Drive safe."

"You too...fuck. I mean, have a good night or...okay, I can't look at you anymore, your mouth is way too --" Steve broke off and pivoted so he was facing the archway. He lifted a hand. "G'night, Buck."

"Yeah, goodnight, Steve."

Bucky waited until he heard the slam of the front door and the start of Steve's car before he finally let himself let go of the counter. But it was another ten minutes before he thought it was safe for him to let the dogs in the house, and get ready for bed.

***
"Late night?" Peggy asked sympathetically, when Bucky logged onto Skype the next morning for his daily chat with Eddie.

Bucky groaned and took another life-affirming sip of his coffee to keep from actually saying anything. He wasn't nearly awake enough to have any filter, and he had no idea if Eddie was in the room. The last thing he wanted to do was emotionally scar his son for life by talking about how hot and bothered he was, and how he'd spent most of the night thinking about Steve's lips trailing over every inch of his body.

"Does your lack of answer have anything to do with a certain crush on a certain someone?" Peggy dropped her voice. "Is he there? He's there, isn't he."

Bucky put the mug down. "No, he's...no," he repeated, and ran his fingers through his hair. "Is Eddie around?"

"He's feeding Toast and Spidey."

"He named the guinea pigs Toast and Spidey?"

She shrugged, and lifted her own mug to her lips. "We did agree they were his and he could name them whatever he wanted."

"I know that, just...nevermind." He shook his head. It was way too early for any of this. "Anyway, the guy in question – " definitely not awake enough for the 'he's the guy that saved my life in Afghanistan and that's weird, right, I swear it's not hero worship' conversation " – and I are taking it slow."

Peggy opened her mouth to say something, Bucky wasn't sure what, but just then, he heard the stomping of feet off-screen, then Eddie's head popped into view on the camera as he clambered onto the chair next to Peggy's and waved, all energy and elbows. "HI DAD!!!!!!"

Bucky waved back. "Hey there, kiddo."

"I was feedin' Toast and Spidey. Uncle Danny was supe-sup..." He trailed off, frowning. "I don't remember the word."

"Supervising," Bucky supplied, with a smile. His kid was a goddamn ray of sunshine.

"Sup-er-vis-ing," Eddie repeated, carefully pronouncing each syllable, and beamed a gap-toothed grin when Bucky yawned, cracking his jaw. "Do you need a nap?"

"Probably," Bucky answered, over Peggy's chuckle. "Hey, I've got kind of an important something to tell you, okay?"

Eddie slouched forward and put his elbows on the table. "'Kay."

Bucky flicked his gaze over to Peggy, and caught her slight nod. Permission given. "So...your dad may have met someone kinda special."

Small dark brows furrowed in thought. "Like a girlfriend?"

"Like a boyfriend," he admitted, with another quick glance Peggy's way. This time, she was...
fighting back a smile.

Eddie chewed at his lower lip for a second. "A kissin' boyfriend?"

Bucky wanted to ask what other kind of boyfriend there was, but he figured that was a conversation for another time. "Yes, I think it's safe to say we'll be kissing each other." All the time, if Bucky had his way about it.

"Kissing's gross," Eddie stated, with a wrinkled nose. "Does he like dogs?"

Nothing like focusing on the important issues, Bucky thought. At least his son had his priorities straight. "He sure does. Cap and Winter both like him a lot." More like they were just as besotted with Steve as Bucky was, but his son definitely didn't need to know that.

"M'kay. Then I like him." Eddie sat up, and leaned back in his seat. "You wanna color?"

"Sure," Bucky answered, with another smile. As easy as that, he thought. God, to be six again and see the world in such clear terms.

Although, maybe Eddie was onto something. Maybe things were that clear, and Bucky was just muddying them up because he was overthinking it. Maybe he needed to take a page from Eddie's book and focus on the important thing: he really liked Steve, and Steve seemed to return the sentiment. Everything else was a distant second.

"Go on, get your crayons," Peggy said, and they both watched as Eddie climbed down the chair, then disappeared from Bucky's line of sight. The second they were alone, Peggy arched her brow. "Boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Boyfriend," he repeated. He wanted Steve Rogers to be his boyfriend. The thought didn't freak him out nearly as much as it might have a week – fuck, even one day – ago. "I just gotta get him to say yes now."

Peggy grinned. "Well, I happen to know firsthand just how persuasive you are, so I wouldn't be too worried about this particular man saying no."

Eddie came back a second later, waving his crayons and paper around enthusiastically, and Bucky spent the next fifteen minutes working on a sketch for a client while Eddie drew him a very colorful – and very surrealistic – picture of Spongebob Squarepants riding a two-headed dragon.

He couldn't wait to hang it up in the shop.

***

For all that Bucky'd spent the last eight years of his life, more or less, in Los Angeles, and had done ink for a lot of people in the entertainment industry, he'd never been on a film or TV set. But, for as close as he and Steve had gotten the last few months, Steve had always been the one to come to his place of business instead of the other way around, and it was high time Bucky changed that. If he wanted this thing with Steve to, well, be a thing, he needed to start by trying to understand the ins and outs of what Steve did for a living.

Luckily, the TV episode Steve was directing was shooting on location in Franklin Canyon Park, so Bucky was able to hang out behind the barricade security had set up and watch Steve work without Steve knowing about it. And Steve looked totally in his element – he manned the camera himself on most of the takes (which went a long way towards explaining his ridiculous build – those cameras looked like they weighed a ton), and was quick with a quiet word of direction or
encouragement for the actors, and seemed to have a handle on the rest of the crew and where they should be and what they should be doing at any given second. Being in charge of that many people had to be exhausting, yet Steve didn't seem to mind it.

It was, Bucky admitted, kinda hot.

When Steve was finally satisfied with the coverage, everyone hurried to break down and get set up for the next scene, and Bucky finally fired a text Steve's way.

**Bucky Barnes**

*Nice shooting. You almost look like a professional out there.*

He saw Steve fish his phone out of his jeans and look at the screen, then his head popped up as he craned his neck around. Bucky waved from where he stood, and Steve grinned, wide and welcoming, as he jogged over to the barricade.

"Hey, I didn't know you were coming by – I would've put you on the clear list if I'd known."

"It's fine. I was on my way to the shop and thought I'd see what it was you did all day. Well," he added, "that, and I had a question for you."

Steve ushered him around the barricade with a thanks to the security officer on duty, and walked him over to a quiet spot in a small copse of trees. "Well, I've only got a couple of minutes, but they're all yours."

Bucky wanted nothing more than to step forward and kiss Steve until they were both short of breath, but Steve was a) working and b) Bucky had no idea if Steve was even out in his professional life. He made a mental note to ask about it later.

"Um, well..." He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets, rocked back slightly on his heels. "I've got this, uh, dinner on Friday night. For, um, it's a fundraiser for a burn unit I've worked a lot with and...I don't suppose you'd want to be my plus one for it?"

"Like...a date?" Steve asked, carefully.

He could do this. He gotten this far already, right? They'd already had the most difficult discussion, and he'd done his thinking, and nothing had changed. He still wanted Steve, and everything that went along with it.

"Yeah," he answered, with dry palms and shaking nerves. "Exactly like a date."

Steve grinned, wide and full and as mischievous as hell. "I dunno, Buck, I've heard all kinds of stories about you. You're not gonna go out with me then try to hook me up with one of your friends, right?"

Bucky choked out an embarrassed laugh. His cheeks were definitely heating up. "No, I...uh...I promise. No matchmaking."

"Good."

Steve reached out, laced their fingers together. Which, Bucky supposed, answered the question about Steve's crew knowing that he dated guys. "Because then I'd have to tell you I'm already planning on going home with the hottest guy there."

Bucky wondered if his grin looked as goofy as it felt. "You were, huh?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's a fundraiser for a burn unit, so there will probably be some hot firemen
there, right?"

"Uh, well." Was Steve fucking with him? Was he serious? Did he think Bucky wanted something casual, like what Steve's had with Thor? Fuck, maybe he should have been more explicit about his expectations –

"Oh my God, you really should see the look on your face right now." Steve gave him another one of his seemingly endless supply of fond looks, and tightened his fingers over Bucky's. "Of course I meant you. I've been trying to figure out a way to ask you out on a date for months. Until the other night, I was convinced I had a hopeless crush on the hottest – and straightest – guy I've ever met."

"Oh. Well, uh...okay. Okay, then." That was...much better. He could definitely work with that.

The smile Steve gave him was part impish, and part the hottest thing Bucky'd ever seen. "Yeah," Steve said. "It's very okay."

Bucky needed to leave before he did something stupid, like dip Steve in his arms and kiss him like some sailor on V-Day. This was ridiculous. He was ridiculous. But Steve had said yes to going out with him – like boyfriends – so he couldn't find it in himself to care.

He returned the smile, and swung their hands a little, feeling like a hormonal high-schooler all over again. "So, I'll, um, pick you up at seven on Friday at your place? It's, uh, it's a fundraiser, so the dress code is, uh, kinda formal, so –"

"Wear a suit?" Steve guessed.

Bucky nodded. "I should, um." He didn't want to let go of Steve's hand. "You probably have a million things to do."

"Two million, but who's counting." Then Steve swooped in to place a quick, soft kiss to his lips. "And this is really something you want? With me?"

"Yep." He appreciated that Steve cared enough to ask, but he knew what he wanted.

"Well, okay. It's a date, then." Then Steve reluctantly looked at his phone. "Look, I need to –"

"Yeah, me too, I have an appointment in, like, twenty minutes, and, uh, traffic." Bucky finally nutted up and stepped back. Put himself out of immediate physical proximity. "Have a good day at work."

"Yeah," Steve replied, smiling all kinds of adorable and giddy. "You too, Buck."

***
Bucky wasn't nervous. He just felt like his tie was going to strangle him, that was all. And maybe he was sweating a little under the collar of his dress shirt. And maybe he needed a second to catch his breath before he knocked on the door to Steve's apartment.

Just because this was an actual date was no reason to be nervous. Just because they were really doing this, really going out together, was no reason to be –

Then Steve opened the door, and every thought Bucky had about anything ever sort of poofed out of existence.

"Wow. You...uh...clean up well." Very well, in fact. So well that Bucky was having a hard time concentrating on anything other than the way the cut of Steve's navy pinstriped suit jacket hugged those wide shoulders and the way the crisp white of his shirt stretched across his massive chest, and the way his slacks clung perfectly to those exceptional thighs. Bucky wanted to yank Steve to him by his tie and crush their mouths together and take.

"Yeah, so do you," Steve replied, in a strangled voice. His gaze raked over Bucky's body, hot enough that Bucky thought he might actually melt. "I was, uh, gonna invite you in for a minute so you could get your painting, but, uh –"

"Yeah, that's a terrible idea," Bucky replied, balling his hands into fists to keep from pulling Steve to him. "I mean, it's a great idea, but I sort of made a promise to some of my clients that I'd come tonight, so, I don't think..." He was, for real, going to die of a heatstroke right there on Steve's doorstep. "I mean, the painting can, um, wait."

"You're right, it's a...fuck, just...fuck," Steve repeated, then grabbed Bucky by the lapels of his jacket to slant their mouths together, the kiss hard and hungry and more than a little desperate.

Bucky was still gasping for air when they parted. His grip on Steve's hips was iron-tight. "What the...?"

"I want to go to my knees and suck you off so bad right now –"

He was burning up every single place they touched. And acutely aware that Steve had a bedroom just inside the apartment. "Fuck, Steve –"

Steve's eyes were blazing and sapphire-bright. He smelled all woody and clean, and he was so fucking close that Bucky was dizzy. "Invite me home with you after," Steve said, more of a command than an actual request. Which was also the hottest thing on the planet.

So much for taking it slow. Which was highly overrated, by the way.

"If you don't stop looking at me like that, we're not leaving your place." He was so hard he was shaking with it. He couldn't stop thinking about Steve kneeling before him, those full pink lips stretched nice and wide around his dick.

"I'm just gonna take that as a yes."

"It's a fuck yes, anything you want, but we really really have to leave right now or I'm gonna forget my obligations and I don't want to be that asshole." He was thankful as all hell he wasn't free-balling it under his pants, either, because he was still pretty embarrassingly hard, and they hadn't
even done anything.

"You're a good guy, Bucky Barnes," Steve told him, and leaned in for another quick kiss before Bucky could protest that he really wasn't. Then he backed out of Bucky's personal space and locked and shut the front door behind him. "Actually, you probably don't want to know what else I'm thinking right now, anyway. It's...it's a little...sappy."

Maybe it was the look Steve was giving him or maybe he was still riding the high from the toe-curling kiss or maybe the sensation that came from knowing that Steve seemed to want this just as much as Bucky did – but, Bucky embraced the reckless joy sweeping over him. "That sounds kinda promising, actually."

Steve just smiled and grabbed Bucky's hand as they walked through the apartment complex courtyard to the curb where Bucky's car was parked. "Maybe I'll tell you later, if you're lucky."

Bucky glanced down at their hands. This felt good. Holding hands with Steve felt really fucking good. Like, the kind of good he could get used to. When he looked back up, Steve was looking at him with that shy, under-the-lashes smile of his, and the words just spilled out of him. "You know I want this – us, I mean – to be a...I mean, if you're interested in – us," he finished, lamely. "Being a thing."

"Yes, totally, that." Steve nodded, his adam's apple bobbing. "I want – Jesus, Buck, seriously. I meant it when I said I've been wanting to date you since that day in your shop."

Steve wanted to date him. This night was already the best, and they hadn't even gotten to the dinner yet. Bucky bumped their shoulders together and held onto Steve's hand. "I told my son about you."

"Yeah?" Steve asked, with another smile. "What's he think?"

"He thinks kissing is gross, but you're cool because my dogs love you."

"As long as you don't think kissing is gross, I can live with it."

"I think you already know where I stand on kissing." He stopped at the car, and gave Steve a lingering one to drive the point home.

Steve kept him close when they parted, but his expression was serious, so Bucky didn't make the joke that was on the tip of his tongue. "Hey, so...you're sure you're sure about this?" Steve asked, quietly. "With...me not being a woman?"

Bucky's brows furrowed together. "Uh, yeah, I know you're a guy."

"No, I mean..." Steve blew out a short, sharp breath. "Dating. Are you okay with giving up women if we do this?"

Oh. Oh. Yeah, Bucky could see why Steve would be wary. That did kind of seem like it would be a big deal. Except for all the ways it wasn't a big deal at all.

"Well, let me put it this way," he said. "When I date anyone, I'm taking myself out of the dating pool no matter who it is. I wouldn't date a girl and go into it wanting to go out with other girls, y'know?"

"No, that's..." Steve let out a frustrated sigh, but he was still holding tight to Bucky's hips, so that was good. "Look, I know you know I'm a guy, but this isn't about... I just want to make sure you've really thought about this. About what it's going to mean to give up something you've always...God,
had access to, I guess...your whole life."

*Give up something you always had access to.* Bucky tried to picture it – really and truly tried to picture it. No women. Swearing off their soft, lush bodies, the way they smelled and tasted and looked, their musical laughs and mysterious smiles. It was a little like being asked to become a monk, except he was still, presumably, going to be having sex. Just...with a guy.

Except it still wasn't just any guy. It was Steve. And it...well, it didn't seem to matter much that Steve had...different plumbing. As long as Steve wanted to be with him, he was...yeah, he thought he could be okay with giving up women. Especially considering what – who – he was getting in return.

"I know I want to give this a fair shot, so yes." He placed another kiss to the corner of Steve's mouth, a promise. Then leaned back, his gaze seeking Steve's, and holding it. Blue locked on blue, nothing else between them. "You're worth it, okay."

Some of the wariness bled from Steve's face. "Okay," he said, still quiet, but it was softer now. Like he was returning the promise with his own. "Me too. I mean, with the giving this a shot and...you. Very worth it."

Which was the other best thing Bucky'd heard all night.

Then Steve gave Bucky a sly, flirtatious look. "So, now that we've gotten that out of the way, were you actually planning on taking me somewhere, or did you just want to get me dressed up because you've got a suit kink?"

"Well, I never even knew I had a suit kink until you opened the door looking like James Bond, but yeah, we're going." But Bucky stole another quick kiss before he unlocked the car doors. Steve didn't seem to mind.

They chatted amiably on the drive about their respective weeks, about Tony's latest run-in with the police, and Clint's upcoming gig at the Roxy, and it was...easy. Just like before, when they'd hung out as friends, only now there was this electric current between them. A physical awareness that was a little scary and a lot exhilarating.

Once they got to the Universal City Hilton, Steve pulled him aside just outside the main banquet room. "So, um, I know you said that you wanted...but, if you're not comfortable with anyone here knowing about –"

"Hey, this is a date." Bucky grabbed Steve's hand, their palms sliding together nice and easy, a perfect fit. "I'm not going to treat you any different than I would any other date I've been on. I mean, unless there are some unspoken rules I need to know about because we're both guys..."

Steve softly laughed. "No, no unwritten rules."

"Okay good." Bucky nosed his way in for a lingering kiss, then smiled. "So, expect a lot of hand-holding and kissing, because I'm not my six year-old son and I happen to love both those things. And a lot of flirting, because I like that too, and we haven't done that yet."

"I don't know, I think we've done a lot of flirting," Steve replied, allowing Bucky to tug him to the registration table.

Bucky handed over the invitation and pocketed the card with their table number. "There's flirting and then there's flirting with intent," he said, keeping a tight hold of Steve's hand as they walked into the ballroom. There was a full bar station set off to the side, and he made a beeline for it.
"Flirting with intent, huh?" Steve sounded amused and intrigued. "How's that work?"

"Well." Bucky squeezed in at the bar, and got the bartender's attention before glancing back at Steve. Who was crowded against him, close and warm and perfect, and yeah, he was going to enjoy the hell out of himself tonight. "It works a little like me saying that I really like the way your suit hugs your body, but I think I'd do a better job of it."

Steve's surprised laugh vibrated all the way down Bucky's spine. "Oh my God, that's the cheesiest line ever. Keep going."

"Nope, it's your turn," Bucky said, ordering two bottles of Sam Adams. He gave one to Steve, and paid before picking up his own bottle and smiling at Steve. "That's how flirting works. In case you've forgotten, since you can't seem to do it without going all red."

"Oh I see how it is." Steve snagged his free hand and pulled him even closer. "So, if I was to tell you that I love the suit you're wearing, but I hate not being able to see your tattoos...?"

Bucky gave him a smiling kiss. "I'd say you're welcome to look for them later."

"Now we're talking."

Bucky introduced Steve to a few of the nurses and doctors he'd gotten to know at the burn unit, as well as a few former clients who were also there as guests, and no one batted an eyelash when Bucky introduced Steve as his date. Steve charmed everyone they talked to, as Bucky knew he would, and even managed to get a few people to agree to appear on camera for the documentary. Mostly, Bucky just watched Steve work his magic with what he was sure was a totally smug and infatuated look on his face, but he didn't care. It was the truth, after all.

Steve kept a hand somewhere on him all through dinner and dessert and the incredibly boring speeches that were mostly thinly veiled pleas for more money. Stuck close by during the networking hour after dinner, and was unfailingly polite and attentive to everyone they talked to. It was probably the nicest date Bucky'd ever been on (except maybe his first date with Peggy, but that had been one for the ages). But he was just as happy when things started to wind down. As much fun as the night had been, he couldn't stop thinking about Steve's earlier offer. About getting Steve alone, and taking things further.

The nerves didn't start to hit again until they were in line for the valet. "You, uh, you still wanna...come over?" he asked, glancing quickly Steve's way.

Steve looked back, slightly guarded. "Only if you want me to."

Bucky wanted alright. He wanted a lot. But wanting and having a single clue about what he was doing were two different things. "I do, I just...don't want to disappoint you."

Steve brought Bucky's hand up to his lips for a kiss. "You're not going to, first off, and second, even if we just hang out on your deck and talk like we normally do, I'm good with it. Whatever you want, Buck."

"I want you to come over." That, Bucky knew, without a shred of doubt. "And, uh, maybe I can be the one to make out with you on my sofa for a change, if that works for you."

Steve laughed, quiet and fond. "I'd like that a lot."

The entire drive home, Bucky snuck glances to Steve's profile whenever he could – at the square cut of his jaw and the proud slope of his nose and the unreal length of those eyelashes. Bucky
knew several women off the top of his head who would kill for lashes like those, and Steve just sort of lucked into them. But, even without hitting the genetic lottery – even without the killer bod and angular face and perfect blond hair and those pretty baby blue eyes softened by those ludicrous eyelashes – Steve would have been beautiful. There was something about him, some intrinsic thing, that lit Steve up from within and made him shine like all of the stars Bucky loved so much.

He wondered what Steve saw when he looked Bucky's way. If he felt that same tug, that same visceral need. Sure, Bucky knew he was a good-looking guy – he knew how to use his own bedroom eyes and rakish smile and solidly muscular body to attract and keep attention. He knew plenty of girls that dug the tattoos and the scars and the long, dark hair and the aura of danger he had about him (although, he had a feeling some girls had been disappointed to learn he was no more dangerous than his dogs). But Steve wasn't a girl and this wasn't a normal hook-up and Bucky really didn't want to fuck this up by assuming the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing.

When he pulled into the drive, he shut off the engine, but didn't make a move to get out of the car. Just sat there for a few seconds, trying to muster...courage, maybe. Gumption. Moxie. Whatever it was.

Steve sat beside him, also not moving. "Second thoughts?" His voice seemed unusually loud in the confines of the car.

"Not really." Bucky took another calming breath. "Is it weird that I feel like I'm fifteen all over again?"

"I don't think so, no." Steve twisted a little so he was facing Bucky, his face hidden in shadow. "And I mean it, I'll go as slow as you want."

"I appreciate it." And he did – it was another in an endless amount of reasons why Steve was such a great guy. "But I'm not the only one doing this." He turned his head, zeroed in on the parts of Steve's face he could make out in the dark. The silvery glint of his eyes, the upward curve of his mouth. "So what do you want?"

Steve let out a low, rumbling laugh that sizzled through the air, and left the hairs standing on Bucky's arms. "That...is a loaded question. Let's just say it begins and ends with us naked on your bed."

Bucky had a sudden, very vivid, mental image of them rolling around on his sheets, him gripping Steve's shoulders, one of Steve's hands wrapped tight around his cock, both of them trading sloppy kisses. "Naked's good," he offered, shifting in place as his dick made its enthusiasm for that idea known. "Just promise you'll take it easy on me."

"I promise," Steve replied, and the next thing Bucky knew, they were out of the car and in each other's arms, kissing and stumbling up the stairs to his front door, laughing breathlessly with every step. It took Bucky three clumsy attempts to get the front door unlocked, and he tripped over Winter, then Cap, both dogs running around him and Steve in enthusiastic circles and barking up a storm.

Fuck, he must not have locked the door to the deck all the way. He'd been in such a hurry to get to Steve's place...

Steve bit at his bottom lip, his smile sheepish. "Please tell me I'm not about to get cockblocked by your super adorable pets."

"No, God, I'm sorry about them –" Cap chose that moment to go to her hind legs and press her
front paws to Bucky's chest while trying her best to lick at his face. "Yes, yes, I'm happy to see you too, baby girl," Bucky laughed, half-embarrassed by his own lack of coordination, and half-relieved that this was something they could laugh about.

"Guess she missed you," Steve said, burying his fingers in Winter's fur.

"Yeah, well, I missed her, too, but –" He finally got her to sit still, after a few more doggy kisses. "If I don't latch the sliding glass door just right, they've figured out how to get it open. Well, I think it's more Winter than Cap, but –"

"It's fine," Steve assured him, because he was pretty fucking awesome. "They're fine."

"Just..." He pulled Steve back to him to swipe at Steve's lip with his tongue, then suckled it for a second because he couldn't help himself. "Give me two minutes to get them settled. I'll, um, my bedroom's at the end of the hall."

"Two minutes." Steve let him go with another kiss, and then gave Cap and Winter a couple of head scratches (which earned him all the brownie points ever) before heading down the hallway and out of sight.

Bucky dropped to a crouch, and gave himself over to more licks and nuzzles and returned it with pets and scratches and cooed murmurs of praise. "You guys are the best pups ever, you know that, but Daddy's got company over and he would very much like to get laid, so you two are spending the night in the living room."

Cap just gave him another lick. Bucky took it as her approval of the change in routine.

He left them in the kitchen happily chewing on all the doggie biscuits ever, after promising to take them for a nice long run the next day to make up for kicking them out of the bedroom (maybe he could convince Steve to come with them), and quickly trotted down the hall while they were still distracted. He shut and locked the bedroom door behind him, and turned, giving himself a thumbs up for a job well done.

Steve had shed his jacket and tie and shoes, and was looking at the framed art on the wall opposite the bed. "Yours?" he asked, smiling in Bucky's direction.

"Yeah, mostly sketches for clients that I'm pretty proud of." He stalked forward, shedding his own jacket on the way, and stopped when he got to Steve, then curled his fingers through the belt loops of Steve's slacks to tug them flush against each other. Steve was hard and solid and real against him, and there wasn't a single part of Bucky's body that wasn't aching with want.

"These have got to go," Steve stated, loosening the knot of Bucky's tie and undoing the buttons of his shirt.

And hey, Steve was totally onto something. Shirtless was a fucking great idea. Bucky started attacking Steve's shirt buttons with gusto, and groaned at the sight of beautifully bare skin once he pushed the sides apart. "Jesus, your pecs are insane. What the hell do you bench anyway?"

"Um...240?" Then Steve let out his own small noise when he pulled Bucky's shirt down his arms. "You're one to talk about a nice chest..." He ran his thumbs along Bucky's collarbones, then dipped lower, the touches light, yet somehow still hot as hell. "Is it weird that I really want to trace every single one of your tattoos with my tongue?"

Bucky just grinned. He got that reaction a lot – not that it was any less sexy when Steve was the one saying it. "No, but it might take you awhile, not that I'd complain. Speaking of, turn around, let
me see how yours is healing."

He waited while Steve dropped his shirt to the floor and turned, and gave the tattoo on Steve's back a critical look. "Skin's a little dry," he remarked, tracing the lines with a light touch. "Remind me later, I'll rub some lotion on it for you."

Steve chuckled as he turned to face Bucky, and stepped right back into Bucky's personal space. "If you're coordinated enough to rub lotion on my back later on, then I'm going to take that as a personal insult."

"Confident, I like that in a partner." And this was good, too. This teasing and giving each other shit, and talking smack the way they always did. He put his hands on Steve's chest, ran them over hard, unyielding muscle, and this was very different than what he was used to, but the hitch in Steve's breath as his fingers drifted lower was familiar, and stupidly erotic. "Didn't you say something earlier about being naked?"

Steve jerked out a nod. "Naked's, uh, yes. I did." The flush on his cheeks had started to spread south to his neck and clavicle, and the sight was giving Bucky all kinds of thoughts about how far down he could get the blush to go.

Bucky wasted no time pushing him on the bed, then crawling over him until they were lying fused together. He couldn't get enough of Steve's mouth, of the low moans that spilled from it with every kiss, or of the slick slide of Steve's tongue along his own. Couldn't get over how different – yet amazing – it felt to rub his chest against Steve's, to feel the outline of a hard cock against his hip.

It took Bucky three tries to get the clasp and zipper undone on Steve's slacks, and when he dipped his fingers under the waistband of Steve's underwear to curl experimentally around his length, Steve's groan felt like it was hardwired to Bucky's own dick.

"Buck...you..." Steve cupped Bucky's nape, pulled him down for a messy, desperate kiss, then groaned again when Bucky rubbed his thumb across the precome pearling out of the slit. His voice was very low and aching with want when he spoke again. "You need to...naked."

Oh, right, naked. He wanted Steve naked. But it was another minute before he could force himself to stop touching and petting and kissing over every part of Steve's body he could reach. "You have ten seconds or we're doing this like we're in high school all over again," he said, and hopped back to his feet to strip out of the rest of his clothes.

Steve complied, hips leaving the bed as he yanked down on his slacks and briefs, and when he was finally – finally – naked and stretched fully over Bucky's comforter, it took Bucky a minute to swallow around the lump that formed at the base of his throat.

Steve was...he was fucking magnificent. Not an ounce of fat anywhere – just miles of sun-kissed skin stretching over well-defined muscles and sinew, every inch of him gorgeous and impressive and...Jesus.

"I..." He made a vague motion at Steve's cock. "I thought you said you weren't big enough for porn."

Steve looked down at himself, then up at Bucky, his eyes heavy-lidded with lust but sparkling with amusement. "I'm...not?"

Fuck, this was just...Bucky didn't even have the words for it. "Jesus, and you've been with Thor. Not real sure how I'm supposed to measure up."
Steve hooked an ankle around the back of Bucky's legs and yanked him down until he was sprawled over Steve, slotting them together perfectly, every point of contact sizzling white-hot. "Not a competition," he said, and rubbed their crotches together, slick skin against slick skin. "Besides, it looks and feels to me like you've got nothing to complain about."

"Well, no, but compared to –"

Steve leaned up to bite at Bucky's bottom lip. "Stop making this a thing. The only dick other than my own that I care about right now is yours, okay? This...you...us...this is all I want," Steve said, and the look in his eyes was just...

Bucky wanted to bask in that look for about the next decade.

"Jesus, yeah. Yeah, okay," he agreed – he would have said yes to anything right then. Anything Steve wanted, it was his for the taking.

"You got any K-Y or lotion?" Steve asked, between more drugging, slow kisses.

K-Y...

Bucky froze. Okay, maybe not anything. "Um, I don't think I'm ready for...that."

"What do you mean you're not...oh...oh my God..." Then Steve started laughing, his shoulders shaking so hard he jostled the bed and Bucky along with it. "I meant...for...handjob..." he managed, through wheezing gasps. "You...oh fuck..."

"Oh." Bucky could feel his face flame with embarrassment. Steve was still under him, the laughter subsiding into chuckles that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. But his hands were still splayed over Bucky's ass to keep him right where he was, so Bucky figured he hadn't fucked up that bad.

He felt a smile creep onto his own face – Steve's mirth was sort of infectious – but didn't say anything until Steve had managed to mostly compose himself. "You're a dick, you know that. You're supposed to be going easy on me."

"I am going easy on you. It's not my fault you're jumping to conclusions," Steve replied, still smiling so wide it was a wonder he wasn't hurting something. "And, hey, um...seriously – ow, I'm being serious, stop fucking hitting me – we never have to go full anal, so don't panic over...God, I can't...your face..."

He started laughing again, and this time Bucky decided to really fight back. He ground his hips down, rubbed their erections against each other, and the laugh abruptly lurched into a deep moan. "You done?" Bucky asked, dipping his head to get at Steve's lips.

"God no," Steve mumbled, parting his legs even more so Bucky could start moving again – short, slow thrusts that felt amazing, singed every nerve from head to toe with way too much sensation. "Got so many plans for you..."

Bucky smiled into the next kiss, and patted blindly at the bedside table next to them, knocking over his alarm clock and the book he'd been reading, before his fingers closed over the small bottle of Lubriderm he kept for jerking off purposes. He slapped it into Steve's palm, then lifted his head with a smirk. "Pretty sure you just promised me a handjob."

"I did." Steve nodded, emphatic and a little like a bobblehead doll. "You, uh, mind if we switch places?"
"Oh, like...me on, um...Okay." Bucky rolled off Steve and onto his back, and watched, mostly turned on but a little nervous too, when Steve knelt between his legs and popped the cap on the lotion. "So, uh...how's this work?"

Steve smiled, a little wicked and yet still endlessly sweet, and draped himself over Bucky until they were once again touching from head to toe. Then he wormed a slick hand between their bodies and wrapped it around both their cocks.

"A little like this," he murmured, and yeah, yeah, okay, Bucky thought, as Steve's mouth slanted over his again, and he started to stroke up, this was going to work just fine.

***
Chapter 16

Bucky woke up to the rich scents of coffee and bacon and – was that pancakes? – drifting down the hall. He lifted his head, groggy and frowning, shaking it a little to clear out the cobwebs. Steve was still next to him on the bed, sprawled on his stomach, his face tucked pretty much under his pillow, and making these tiny sniffling noises that were, frankly, way too adorable coming from a man who could bench press Bucky without breaking a sweat. Part of Bucky – a large part – wanted to curl right back next to him and go back to sleep, then maybe see about repeating everything they’d done to each other the night before. But that left the small matter of why Clint – assuming it was Clint and not one of the other guys – was in his house. More specifically, why the hell would Clint be at his house making breakfast when he hadn’t crashed at Bucky's place the night before?

Fuck, this was going to require getting vertical. He rolled to wobbly feet and pulled on a pair of boxer briefs and staggered down the hallway and into the kitchen. Where Cap and Winter were patiently sitting with their tails furiously wagging at Clint and Sam's feet. Both of whom were bent over his stovetop, doing...something.

"Okay, you gotta pour the mixture on thin and even, just enough so it coats the griddle...there you go, that's perfect." Clint waved at Bucky without turning his head. "Coffee's on, babycakes."

Bucky leaned against the doorjamb, blinking furiously, wondering if he was in fact still asleep and this was a weird dream.

"Um, what're you doing here?"

"Clint's teaching me to make crepes," Sam replied, and flipped the crepe over with a surprisingly deft move.

"He wants to surprise Nat on their honeymoon with breakfast in bed," Clint added, still watching Sam with an eagle eye.

Bucky was sure that made sense to someone somewhere. Just not him. "And you...picked my kitchen why?"

Not that he normally cared if they used his kitchen for any reason, but, well, he normally didn't have someone staying the night. And while he wanted to get the word out that he and Steve were an item now, this wasn't exactly how he'd pictured the conversation starting.

Clint shrugged. "You have the most room."

"And besides," Sam added, "we heard through the grapevine that you had a hot date last night, and figured we could use you and mystery lady as guinea pigs."

"Oh God," Bucky groaned, barely refraining from thumping his forehead against the wall. Definitely not how he'd pictured this going.

"What, don't be shocked, man. We're just happy you finally got laid." Clint grinned. "It's been a few months."

"And judging by how relaxed you look, I'd say it was a good night."

It was the best sex of Bucky's life, but he was pretty sure neither Clint nor Sam needed to know
that. He shuffled into the room with Cap at his heels, and yawned wide enough to crack his jaw. "It's way too early for this."

"Who is she, anyway? Anyone we know?" Clint asked.

"Uh..."

"You gonna make us guess?" Sam asked.

Steve picked that moment to come stumbling in like a sleepwalker, blond hair spiked up in all directions, wearing his boxer briefs low on his hips and nothing else. There were faint scratches and stubble burns all over his neck and chest and stomach, and his walk was loose-limbed and utterly relaxed. He looked like a man who'd spent most of the previous night engaging in some pretty athletic and spectacular sex.

Which would be a very accurate description of what had happened.

Bucky wondered if his expression was as goofily smug as he felt, because damn, he'd done a pretty good job for a beginner at this whole gay sex thing. He wanted to drag Steve right back down the hall and to the bed, and start all over again, maybe add a few more things to their repertoire.

There was still the small matter of learning how to give a good blowjob, and Bucky had a feeling Steve would be an enthusiastic teacher.

"Mornin'," Steve croaked out, and brushed a light kiss across Bucky's shoulder in greeting. "Izzat coffee?"

"Yeah." Bucky leaned back into the next kiss – this one to his nape – and then turned in Steve's arms to nuzzle at the spot just under Steve's ear, where it was still sleep-warm and still smelled faintly of Steve's cologne. "Mornin'."

"Hey," Steve murmured back, and all but melted into his arms, the embrace nice and long and full-bodied and a pretty perfect way to start the day.

When he opened his eyes and finally let Steve go, it was to see Clint and Sam both just staring at him like he was an alien from another planet. Which was also not how he pictured them finding out about him and Steve, but, well, it was their own damn fault for just showing up at his house.

"You're a lifesaver. Hey guys," Steve added, and shuffled to the cabinet with the coffee mugs. "Smells good, whatever it is."

"Crepes," Sam replied, automatically, then stared at Bucky in what Bucky thought was supposed to be a meaningful manner. "Seriously?!" he hissed, as Steve stepped out the sliding glass door to the deck, coffee in hand.

"You're a lifesaver. Hey guys," Steve added, and shuffled to the cabinet with the coffee mugs. "Smells good, whatever it is."

"Crepes," Sam replied, automatically, then stared at Bucky in what Bucky thought was supposed to be a meaningful manner. "Seriously?!" he hissed, as Steve stepped out the sliding glass door to the deck, coffee in hand.

"Serious," Bucky replied, amused, then pointed at the stove. "Better take that off before it burns."

"What're you...oh, shit!" Sam hurriedly complied, then elbowed Clint in the ribs. "Dude, you're gonna catch flies if you don't shut your mouth."

"Right. Sorry." But Clint still looked shell-shocked.

"Your own fault for not calling ahead of time," Bucky reminded him, filling his own mug. "But thanks in advance for breakfast."
He left Clint and Sam at the stove and followed Steve out to the deck. "Sorry about them," he said, stopping by him at the railing.

"It's cool." Steve cast him a sideways glance. "Unless it isn't?"

"No, it's fine," Bucky assured him, with what he hoped was an inviting smile. "Of course it's fine – you're fine. They're just, uh, not used to, um..."

"Buck, it's okay. I already knew I was your first guy, remember?" Steve smiled, and seeing the grooves around his mouth eased the tight band around Bucky's chest. They were good.

He took a long sip of his coffee, watched the sun come up in prisms of light through the trees. It was nice, sharing coffee and the sunrise on his deck with Steve. Like something he could get used to.

"They were making breakfast when I walked in on them," he said, breaking the comfortable silence. "Something about Clint teaching Sam to make crepes to surprise Nat on their honeymoon."

Steve finished his coffee and set the mug aside. "Hey, if it gets me out of cooking, I'm happy they're here."

Bucky leaned his elbows on the railing, cradling his mug, and hip-checked Steve with a gentle shove. "Not too good in the kitchen?"

"I get by if I have a recipe. And I make some killer chili and excellent paella." He gave Bucky a sidelong glance. "I'll have to make it for you some night."

"I'd really like that."

"Good," Steve replied, then leaned in to brush a soft kiss across Bucky's lips. "Is it gonna sound weird if I say that I was sorry you weren't in bed when I woke up?"

Bucky smiled and shook his head. "Is it gonna sound weird if I say I was just as sorry?"

"No." Steve leaned in for another kiss that tasted faintly of coffee. One kiss quickly turned into two, then three, every one lazy and slow and sweeter than maple syrup.

Bucky finally set his own mug down so he could run his hands over Steve's chest and abs, along skin prickly with hairs and hotter than a furnace. When he got to the raised scars lining Steve's right side, he paused, letting his touch linger.

Steve made a pained noise, his lashes fluttering when he opened dazed blue eyes. "Buck..."

"You know, I don't know if I ever said it that day, but thank you," Bucky murmured, pressing a light kiss to Steve's slack lips. "For saving my life."

"Buck, I..." Steve faltered, his grip on Bucky's hips tightening. "I don't need..."

He knew what Steve was trying to say – Steve had been doing his job that day, same as Bucky, and they hadn't done it for recognition or thanks or any other reason other than it was their duty to look out and protect the person next to them. But he was still thankful – incredibly thankful – that it had been Steve.

"Hey, don't worry, I didn't sleep with you out of gratitude or anything," he said, with a quick wink.

Steve let out a breathless laugh, and the tension bled out of the moment. "Oh good, 'cause that
would be super weird."

"Nah, it's because you look like a superhero drawing come to life –" He looked down pointedly at 
Steve's absurdly buff pecs and the eight-pack abs "– and yet, you look at *me* like I'm the one who's 
something special."

"That's because you are." Steve's fingers carded through his hair, and the look on his face was 
gentle, as well. "You're a pretty special guy."

He didn't know about all that, but with the way Steve was gazing at him, he almost believed it.

"Food's on," Clint called, poking his head out the door. "You guys can make out later after you've 
reassured Sam's fragile ego that he doesn't suck at breakfast."

Bucky chuckled, and reluctantly straightened. "Yeah, okay," he said, and raised an eyebrow at 
Steve. "To be continued later?"

Steve nodded, then frowned and just as quickly shook his head. "Yeah, I mean, I'd love to, but...I 
actually have a couple of things to take care of this morning..."

"Okay." Bucky couldn't say he wasn't disappointed, but he got it. Sometimes being an adult came 
first. "You need me to give you a ride home or...?"

"No, it's...I can get Clint to give me a lift." Then he wrapped his arms back around Bucky's waist, 
his look hopeful and affectionate and heart-meltingly sweet. "But, um, I could drive back over later 
on, after I'm done? Bring over stuff to make paella? Maybe see if it's good enough to bribe my way 
into staying over tonight?"

Bucky nuzzled at Steve's jaw, his tongue scraping over stubble. "You've already got me, man, you 
really don't need to woo me with food." How was it he was already addicted to the taste of Steve's 
skin?

"I...uh..." Steve tilted his head back, allowing Bucky better access. "Want to."

He spent another long moment laving that spot, then placed another lingering kiss to Steve's lips. 
"Then sure, I'd love it if you cooked for me," he said, so happy he was certain it had to be beaming 
from him in waves. "We can eat, then spend the afternoon making out on the sofa here on the deck, 
and the evening making out on the sofa in the living room, and the night making out wherever the 
hell you want."

"That sounds like my idea of a perfect day," Steve replied, and laced their fingers together as they 
headed back inside the house.

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After an excellent breakfast (the crepes passed inspection, much to Sam's relief), Steve left with 
Clint to go run his errands and Sam left to meet Natasha for a cake testing. Which also didn't sound 
like a bad way to spend the afternoon, even though Bucky was partial to his own plans for the day. 
He put in a load of laundry, went through a couple of items on his never-ending list of repairs, then 
took the dogs out for their promised run, and made sure to spend extra time playing catch with 
them at the dog park and giving them a ton of attention.

He was in a pretty damn good mood when he logged on for his daily call with Eddie.

"Hey, Pegs," he said, once she came into view. "How's your morning going?"
"Your son decided to begin his morning trying to make muffins. Unsupervised," she added, with a frazzled sigh.

Bucky winced. He could already guess where this was going. "How bad was the mess?"

"Luckily not too terrible. But I sent him and Daniel out for breakfast so I could clean the kitchen in peace." She offered an apologetic smile. "I should have texted to postpone, I'm sorry."

"Nah, don't worry about it," he said, waving off the apology. Cap rested her head on his thigh, and he started carding his fingers through her fur. "Maybe I can read to him at bedtime tonight instead." They'd started *A Wrinkle In Time* a few days ago.

"He'd love that. You're much better at the voices than I am."

"It's a date." He'd have to take some time away from Steve, but he knew Steve would understand. He couldn't wait to introduce Steve and Eddie to each other. He had a feeling they were going to get on like gangbusters.

She picked up her coffee mug. "Tell me your morning, at least, has been better."

He could feel the shit-eating grin start to spread across his face. "Uh yeah. You could say that." Cap huffed out a bark, then trotted off to the living room, probably to go wrestle Winter out of his favorite chew toy.

"You are looking rather pleased with yourself," she said, with an impish smile. "I take it the date went well?"

"Very." He felt like every single part of his body was bursting wide open with joy. "He's, uh...he's fucking amazing."

She looked genuinely happy for him, if the soft smile was anything to go by. "Smitten's a good look on you."

"I am. Very smitten." Smitten was a great word, in fact. A perfect word to describe the top-of-the-rollercoaster swoop every time he thought about Steve.

"So, are you ever going to tell me his name?"

Oh. Hadn't he...? No, no he hadn't. "Uh, yeah, sorry," he said, with another wince. "It's...Steve Rogers. Captain Steve Rogers. From the 75th Ranger Battalion."

She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes widening. "Oh, well, that *is* a coincidence."

"Yeah, I know, small world," he said, with a shrug. Maybe it was weird, but he was really okay with it. "You know, I didn't even recognize him until he told me who he was. I mean, how fucked up is that?"

"Not very, considering everything that happened that day." She was the only person he'd ever told the full story to – not even his parents or sister knew the full scope of what had happened and how close he and the rest of his unit had been to getting blown to Kingdom Come. And God willing, they'd never find out, either. "By your own admission, you were pretty delirious."

"Yeah, you're right. Still kinda crazy to think about, though."

"No more than the fact that he and I worked together once," she said. "Maybe it's fate."
"Yeah, that's what Steve said. That us finding each other again was kinda like kismet or something." And Bucky really wasn't much for that sort of thing, but he was starting to think there might be something to it.

"Well..." She nodded once, decisively, then fixed him with one of her 'do-as-Peggy-says' looks that used to drive him insane back when they were dating, but these days just made him feel pretty special that she still considered him worth bossing around. "As I'm sure you're aware, Steve is a remarkable man."

"That he is." He was the best, in fact. Better than Bucky deserved, but he wasn't going to let that stop him from holding on with both hands.

"And so are you," she said. "I'm glad you two have found each other."

"Yeah, so am I," he said, with what he knew was a crazy-big smile. He was the luckiest guy on the planet, alright, and he didn't mind if the whole world knew it.

A second later, he heard the dogs barking, followed by the front door opening. "Hello?" Steve called. "Buck?"

"In the kitchen," he called back, winking at Peggy, who just shook her head.

Steve walked into the room, Cap and Winter prancing beside him, with a gym bag slung over his shoulder, and carrying a paper bag from Whole Foods. He set the bags on the counter, then headed towards the table, where Bucky was sitting.

"So, I got enough stuff to make paella for, like, an army or something, and I brought a change of clothes for tomorrow, I hope you don't..." He paused in the middle of giving a kiss to Bucky's hair when he saw Peggy on Bucky's laptop screen. "Um...hi? It's good to see you again, Peggy."

Peggy waved. "You too, Steve."

Bucky was barely aware of what either of them were even saying. Steve was wearing a very thin tank top and running shorts that were showcasing his thighs and calves, and all Bucky could think about was getting his hands and mouth back on all of that skin and marking it up even more.

"So, we'll, um...I'll call back later?" He didn't even look at the screen.

"Yes, I'll let Eddie know," and from Peggy's tone, Bucky knew she knew exactly what was going through his mind. "Enjoy your day. Both of you."

"Yep, you too," Bucky said, and wasted no time in shutting the laptop and standing, "One second," he told Steve, and let the dogs out to run around the back yard, because as much as he loved them, he had plans. The second he shut the sliding door, double-checking that it was securely locked, he pulled Steve into his arms.

"So...that was weird, right?" Steve said, with a concerned look. "That didn't seem weird to you?"

"Nope, we're good." Bucky started walking Steve backwards into the living room. "But I don't want to talk about Peggy right now."

"Okay, so what do – oof." The backs of Steve's knees hit the sofa and he went down, Bucky following to straddle his lap. Steve's hands went immediately to cup Bucky's ass. "Uh, what're you...?"
"So. It, uh, occurred to me –" He placed teasing kisses to Steve's lips between each word, then grinned at him, delighted and turned on and, yeah, smitten was a fucking great word. "There's something we didn't do last night."

"There's a lot we didn't – oh fuck," Steve breathed, as Bucky slithered to his knees between Steve's spread legs. "You...you don't have to..."

"Yeah, I know," Bucky told him, and tugged at Steve's shorts until Steve's cock bobbed free. It looked a little more intimidating this close, but, well, Bucky was good with a challenge. And he wanted to do this. He was going to want Steve to give him, oh, about a billion blowjobs from now on, so he needed to learn how to give one as well. And what better time than the present.

He lowered his head to give the head an experimental lick, tasting salt and skin and something indefinably Steve. Perfect. Already he wanted more.

Steve jerked under him, then threaded shaking hands through Bucky's hair, loosening it from its holder. "Well, as long as you want to, it would be rude to say no," he said, husky and low, those blue eyes boring into Bucky's with a mixture of want and affection that was flattering and sexy as fuck.

"And you are a very polite person." Bucky gave him another lick, and peered up at him through lowered lashes. Already, he was hard as a rock, and he hadn't even done anything. "Just, y'know, grade me on a curve or something."

"That won't be a...fuck..." Steve groaned, as Bucky lowered his head.

He flicked his tongue out again, licked up the underside of Steve's cock, and how had he gone his whole life without knowing this taste? He parted his lips, slid down as much as he could without wanting to gag, then dragged them back up, slowly, savoring the way Steve's grip tightened in his hair, the involuntary twitch of his hips. Not bad, so far.

"Just...that's...that's good, Buck, God, that's so good..." Steve kept up the litany of praise and instruction, gently guided Bucky on what he liked. Which turned out to be pretty much what Bucky himself liked in a blowjob – lots of attention paid to the head, a lot of tongue, and his fingers a firm grip at the base, twisting up with every slow slide down of his lips. He got into a nice rhythm after a minute, creating a tight, slick suction with every bob of his head, every flick of his tongue. And there was something almost hypnotic about it, concentrating all of his want and need and attention on Steve, learning what made him tremble, what made him moan.

He was sweating like hell under his t-shirt, and his dick was aching behind the zipper of his shorts, his balls so full it felt like he might come just like this, just from his mouth on Steve's cock. Just from the smell and taste of him, burning out everything else. When he popped off for just a second to get a breather and give his aching jaw a rest, he almost lost it again at the way Steve was staring down at him. His eyes were bright and yearning, his mouth bitten red, and his tank top was sticking to his chest – he was a wreck, all from what Bucky was doing to him. Gorgeous in a way that defied description.

"C'mere," Steve urged, and tugged at him until Bucky was back on his lap. "Just let me...

Their mouths met again as Bucky felt the tug on his zipper, and he moaned his relief in Steve's mouth when Steve closed tight fingers around his dick. He wrapped his hand around Steve's length, hoping like hell he could get Steve off first, but when Steve flicked his thumb right under the head of his cock, his grip faltered and his vision whited out.
He came on a wordless, broken gasp, his bones turning to liquid, his brain to mush. He slumped down, his forehead hitting Steve's shoulder, riding out the last pulsing waves cradled in Steve's arms. Safe, cherished in a way he'd never felt before, but was addicted to already.

"Gimme...jus'a'minute," he mumbled. As soon as his motor skills came back to him, he was totally returning the favor.

"M'good," Steve mumbled back, and when Bucky lifted his head, bleary and a little confused, it was to see Steve looking all kinds of blissed out.

"Did you come?" he asked, and waited for the nod, even though it was pretty fucking obvious.

"From...huh."

"Watching you was pretty hot," Steve said, nuzzling at Bucky's jaw. "And, I was mostly there anyway."

Bucky grinned, pleased with himself. He was going to need more practice, of course – not that he thought Steve would mind – but, hey, mission accomplished. "Soooooo, not too bad for a first time bj?"

"Not even close," Steve said, and they exchanged lazy kisses for a few minutes, until Bucky became uncomfortably aware of how sticky he was. Which meant Steve had to be a fucking mess.

He sat up and finally stripped out of his shirt, goosebumps prickling everywhere cool air hit overheated skin. "C'mon, let's go get cleaned up," he said, and got to his feet, kicking his shorts and briefs off along the way.

Steve let out a small protesting whine, but reluctantly stood, stripping quickly out of his own clothes. Which was a better look for him. "I should...I have groceries," he said, but pulled Bucky flush against him. "And I've got your painting in the back of my car."

Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve's waist. "Well, I hope you're not planning on going out to get it like that," he said, glancing down at their very naked bodies. "Not that I think anyone would complain at the view."

Right on cue, Steve's cheeks started turning pink. "No, I can...you're really distracting, you know that."

"I'm not sensing a downside here."

"There isn't one," Steve said, and pressed their lips together. "But I should put the groceries away before we do anything else."

"Fair enough." A shower could wait five minutes. He followed Steve into the kitchen, his appreciative gaze traveling up the curve of Steve's ass and the play of muscles in Steve's back with a satisfied smile. Lingered over the delicate black lines that made up Steve's tattoo – Brooklyn, home – and the smile grew. His mark, permanent, on Steve's body. It was a dizzying, heady thought.

"We need to get you in to finish your ink," he remarked.

Steve quickly unloaded the bag's contents into the fridge and shut the door, then walked right back into Bucky's arms. "Sure, just let me know when," he said, with a slow kiss that managed to scramble Bucky's brain cells. "But right now, I'd really like to get you into the shower."
"Oh, now you're in a hurry to get clean, I get it."

In answer, Steve gave him a wide, wicked grin. "No, I'm in a hurry now because I'd really like to get my mouth on your dick and maybe give you the best blowjob you've ever had in your life. If that's something you might be interested in."

Oh, well, that was completely different. "Why didn't you just say so?" Bucky asked, and dragged a laughing Steve down the hall.

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(Art by misspaperjoker)
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Six Months Later)

Sam and Natasha's wedding was everything a wedding should be. The bride was suitably radiant, the groom was suitably stunned, there was a lot of laughter and a few happy tears when the vows were exchanged, and Eddie (with a small assist from Bucky) did a perfect job as ring-bearer. All in all, Bucky thought, it was a damn good ceremony.

But the best part was the reception afterwards. Sam may not have gotten his wish for a cookout, but it was still a pretty informal affair. The DJ spun the requisite cheesy love songs, the catering passed even Clint's stringent inspection, and everyone was happy and relaxed and having a great time. Bucky'd even managed to get Steve out on the floor for a dance. Well, he conceded, it was more shuffling around in a slow circle than anything resembling dancing. But still, any excuse to get his arms around Steve while Steve was wearing a nicely tailored three-piece suit was a pretty fucking good one.

He looked around, smiling as he caught sight of Peggy swaying to the song with Daniel, and Sharon and Morita gliding around the floor like they'd danced together all their lives. Clint and Wanda were at the bar talking with Pepper and Tony (who'd managed to put on an actual suit for the occasion), and Sam and Natasha were holding court at their table, accepting well-wishes and congratulations from everyone.

But the most satisfying thing was seeing Jane and Thor seated at one of the corner tables, having what looked like a very animated discussion, with a lot of expressive hand-waving and taking turns scribbling on a sheet of paper. If Bucky had to guess, the subject was probably something incredibly scientific and technical and way above the heads of every other person in the room. Their kids would probably break MENSA and take over the world.

Steve noticed the direction of his gaze and shook his head, his sigh deep and fond. "You just couldn't resist, could you?" he asked, amusement crinkling the corners of those gorgeous blue eyes. "You could have a nice side-job as a matchmaker, you know that."

Bucky's shoulders lifted, but he didn't bother to deny it. There wouldn't be much point. "Maybe I just like making my friends as happy as I am with you, you ever think about that?" he asked, then winced as Steve's foot came down on his toes. "Ow, okay, I take it back, I have no idea why I put up with you."

"Sorry." Steve grimaced, and gave Bucky a quick kiss in apology. "I tried to warn you I have two left feet."

"It's lucky for you I know you've got rhythm elsewhere," Bucky joked, toying with the short hairs at Steve's nape. And, in truth, he didn't mind the slow pace they were keeping. It kept them in pretty close contact with each other, which was fine with him. Although, as nice as Steve's suit was, they were both wearing too many clothes.

"Buck..." Steve shot a meaningful look at the table where Eddie was happily playing with his toy
firetrucks under the watchful eyes of Bucky's mom and pops. "Your family is right there."

"Well, I'm pretty sure my mom already knows we're having sex –"

Steve's face was practically on fire. "Buck!"

"Alright, alright," Bucky conceded, with a grin. "Wouldn't want you to combust from blushing too hard."

Steve pinched his side. "Dick."

"Yeah, well, you love me – ow, okay, I'm done, stop pinching me," he laughed.

On their next turn, he threw a quick wave in Eddie's direction. Eddie waved back enthusiastically, then made a few exaggerated grotesque kissing faces at him and Steve, because kissing, in his son's not so humble opinion, was still gross. (Which was fine. Bucky was willing to take that hit for the team.)

Steve also waved Eddie's way, then returned his gaze to Bucky. His grin was brilliant, bright, a quasar lighting Bucky from within. "You and Eddie looked really good during the ceremony. Highly respectable."

"Them's fightin' words." Still, Bucky reeled Steve in closer for a light kiss, pleased with himself and Steve and life and everything in it. "You know, though, while I was watching Sam and Nat, it got me to thinking about a couple of things." 

Steve arched an eyebrow. "If this your not-so-subtle way of proposing –"

"– No, it's not a – Jesus, Steve, I'd never hijack someone else's big day like that –"

"– Okay, good, because otherwise it was going to overshadow my plan of asking if you wanted to maybe live together –"

"I mean, give me some credit...I, wait, what? Living together?" Bucky asked, as Steve's words caught up with him. He blinked at Steve, stunned. "You want to...you want us to...?"

"Too soon?" Steve asked, with a crestfallen wince. "It's too soon, isn't it."

Buck couldn't breathe. His heart was going a mile a minute. Steve wanted...he was ready to...

He tried to picture it. Living together. More of Steve's paintings on the walls, converting the garage into a studio so Steve would have a place to work and create, running errands together, walking the dogs together, waking up every morning to Steve's bad morning breath and tousled, epic bedhead and that soft, sleepy smile that still lit him up like fireworks every single time he saw it. Which, they were already doing most of that anyway, but to make it officially official – to know that Steve's home would be his home and vice versa –

He thought back over the last six months, on the happiness that seemed to be a permanent part of his psyche now, all of the fleeting moments and small instances that gradually layered on top of each other, building into something larger and lasting. How so many of Bucky's moments and instances now were tied to Steve and what they were building together. Steve, who was the second greatest thing that had ever happened to him, just behind Eddie.

Yeah, he thought. Living together would be pretty fucking amazing.
"It's not too soon," he finally breathed. He wondered if he looked as ridiculously happy as he felt. "It's not too soon at all. How soon can you move in? I mean, it's fine if it's my place and not yours, right?" Not that Steve's apartment wasn't nice. But Bucky had the dogs to think about, and he'd gotten a great deal on the house when he'd bought it.

"Yeah, that was the plan...wait. Seriously?" Now it was Steve's turn to look stunned. "I was... You really want to?"

Bucky laced their fingers together, and wrapped the other arm around Steve's back, dancing completely forgotten. "The dogs love you. My kid loves you. My mom and pops and my sister all think you're the greatest thing since the curveball. And my friends have already adopted you."

"Oh yeah?" Steve smiled, and nosed in for a soft, slow kiss that tasted like home and family and every good thing in the universe. "What about you? What do you think?"

One kiss turned into several, and through it all, Bucky waited for the bubble of euphoria in his chest to burst. But he wasn't at all surprised when it didn't. He knew he was wearing a totally cheesy, dopey grin on his face when they finally let each other up for air. But he still moved his hand from Steve's back to lift it in a seesaw motion.

"Eh, I mean, aside from being a totally awesome guy and my best friend and pretty fucking amazing in bed, I don't know what you've got to recommend you."

"Yeah, you're right," Steve replied, with a very solemn nod that was belied by the way he was fighting back his own wide, sappy grin. "Although, I should remind you that I can quote the entirety of both Aliens and The Princess Bride."

"Oh, well, that changes everything, then."

They both finally gave in to laughter as he brought Steve's hand up to place a soft kiss to each knuckle. "So, hey." He looked deep into those blue eyes, and saw every single one of his emotions reflected right back at him. They were in this together. "If you don't mind living with a totally nerdy, and slightly disreputable, tattoo artist and two highly excitable dogs, and having your space invaded by the whirlwind that is my son and the heathens I call friends..."

"I think that sounds like the best deal on the planet as long as I get you out of it," Steve replied, with another kiss. "I'm in."

"Me too."

Then, Steve gave him one of his sweet, deep-grooved, sunshine-bright smiles. And in it, Bucky could see the future – not a happy ending, but a happy beginning – stretching before them, golden and perfect and endless.

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Chapter End Notes

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And lastly, thank you to everyone who encouraged me to keep going and finish. You have no idea how much you helped. <3333

You can now find me on Tumblr. :)

Works inspired by this: [pod fic] Prince Charming by abovethesmokestacks

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